

Implications of Sacred Pleasure for Cultural Evolution

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COSMIC KITSCH OR HOLISTIC VISION

In Kathy Ferguson's *The Man Question*, feminist theory is divided into three: linguistic feminism concerned with deconstructing male texts and "relinguaging" gender; cosmic feminism focused on recovering the mythic Gaia in women, the gods that existed before Male religion became dominant; and, praxis feminism committed to changing women's inferior class and economic position in the world capitalist system. Ferguson sees Eisler as part of the cosmic gaia movement.¹ However, as Ferguson is a poststructuralist, who does not believe in essentialist arguments of gender, class, and ethnicity—and rather argues that these categories come into being based on the historical creation of otherness—she finds fault with Eisler's cultural transformation theory.

Ferguson sees it as kitsch, not heavy-duty critical postmodern theory.² Equally one can find weaknesses in the lack of empirical data for such grand macrohistorical claims. That is, how do we know that initially there was partnership and then patriarchy and now by the force of history and through human agency we are moving into a partnership society, where institutionalized violence will disappear. One can also argue that Eisler's theory is merely the return of linear evolutionary theory: simple stage-like processes without any notions of cycles, pendulums, or spirals, without any recovery of the richness of pre-modern temporality. Ferguson is also worried that Eisler creates early Europe as the ideal and non-West European, i.e. the Indo-European hordes, as the evil force in world history.

While certainly it can be argued that in *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler did not appropriately engage with critical theorists and their concern for the reification of social categories, in the stunning and brilliant *Sacred Pleasure*, Eisler responds to postmodern critics and does her share of deconstruction as well.

But her primary focus is sexuality. In *Sacred Pleasure* she argues that in dominator societies sexual pleasure becomes blocked, either leading to repression or distortion. "The natural bonding of the give and take of sexual pleasure and love between"³ women and men is lost sight of.

Pleasure and pain are thus foundational. Eisler hopes to rescue the sacredness of sex, as in traditional Indian and Hawaiian cosmologies, from its dominator violent history. Indeed, she reminds us that even as Foucault gave us a genealogy of sex, he did so within the episteme of pain and domination, he could see no avenue for sacred pleasure.

KNOWLEDGE FOR TRANSFORMATION

In *Sacred Pleasure*, Eisler also helps us understand criticisms such as Ferguson's better. In a section titled, "What are we teaching our daughters" she deconstructs classic stories such as Cinderella and Snow White. These stories teach girls to be passive, to not trust their own abilities and to hope that a rich strong man will save them. But these are more than stories, they are central to the pedagogy that maintains dominator systems. "I had never realized how part of [our] training [was] to fit into the prince's slipper—in other words, to meet the specifications for the kind of woman that makes a submissive wife."⁴ Not only do they construct women as second class, they teach women to not trust each other. Moreover, in such stories the elder woman is not the wise woman or the wise crone to use Barbara Walker's term, but the scary witch, the devious aunt to be feared. Through such texts women rarely work with each other to create what Eisler calls transformative knowledge, that is, theory that does not exist for "intellectual extravaganza", to use the words of Indian philosopher Sarkar,⁵ but theory that changes empirical human conditions, theory that is useful in reducing suffering.

Theory then for Eisler, as with Marx and Sarkar, while based on the empirical world, must be fundamentally about changing the world. For Eisler then theory must be emancipatory.

But perhaps what is at heart missing for Ferguson is irony, an attempt through humor to be critical of one's own grand narrative. But if ironical, can then a theory have the motivating power, yes the Grand narrative to change social conditions? Can theory provide the telling myth that leads to inner commitment, that allows one to sacrifice the routine of the present for the reward of the envisioned future?

Moreover, there must be some truth claims made if the episteme is to change, one cannot live simply in a virtual discourse. An episteme based on irony, as Pitirim Sorokin warned us years ago, cannot lead to an integrated society, a coherent story of past and future.⁶ Thus while linguistic feminism can undo male language domination it cannot create new worlds. As Eisler writes: "Merely substituting detached irony (the battle cry of postmodern discourse) for detached objectivity (the battle cry of modern science) is hardly a new approach to scientific inquiry."⁷ Moreover Eisler is unwilling to abandon the category of gender—as radical postmodernists would argue—of woman, even as she is careful to assert that in terms of her theory—dominator as male and partner as female—she is referring to stereotypically masculine and feminine values.

Central to Eisler is the task of reconstruction. In this sense, Eisler's work can be read as a new vision of the future, a call for a partnership ethic, where women and men are not degraded by ranking, who is above whom, but uplifted by partnership. Thus, while Eisler goes to very impressive lengths to draw from anthropology, genetics, sociology and archaeology to present evidence that we have moved from partnership to dominator and now are making an evolutionary jump to a new level of partnership, her value is much more than developing a theory that corresponds to the empirical, rather she is important in that she gives us new categories to see the world. She sees a different world and her scholarship provides the possible, suggestive—not conclusive—evidence for it.

While others in the New Age and New Science literature have focused on humanity's spiritual rebirth and the crucial image of

sudden transformation that complexity and chaos theory give us, it is Eisler that gives us gender theory as transformation praxis. And she does so in terms that praxis, poststructural and cosmic feminists would be happy with (Ferguson, I am sure would find *Sacred Pleasure* quite responsive to her criticisms of *The Chalice and the Blade*).

MACROHISTORY IN AND OUT

But would the macrohistorian? It is here where a dialogue between her work and others can enrich us all. In our own *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*, Johan Galtung and myself have attempted just that.⁸ Focused on twenty macrohistorians—Ssu-Ma Chien, Augustine, Ibn Khaldun, Gambatista Vico, Adam Smith, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim, George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin, Arnold Toynbee, Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar, Rudolf Steiner, Teilhard de Chardin, Riane Eisler and the Gaian View—we have identified factors for a general theory of grand social change.

But before we articulate general principles, let us be clear on Eisler's theory. In her words:

The cultural transformation theory ... proposes that history is neither linear, cyclical nor purely random, but the outcome of the interaction of two types of movements. The first is the tendency of social systems to move from less to more complex forms of organization largely due to technological breakthroughs or *phase changes*. The second is the movement of *cultural shifts* between two basic models for social and ideological organization, ... the *dominator* and *partnership* models—or more specifically, *androcracy* and *gylany*.⁹

For Eisler, the dominator model has institutionalized violence based on rank ordering, with the weakest, usually women, suffering the most. Partnership models are based on linking, on relationship, on traditional feminine values of caring and nurturing. Eisler is careful to point out that what is under discussion is not innate biological gender differences but historical gender-specific socializations processes. Eisler gives examples of both and places them historically.

In addition, Eisler brings in varied theoretical perspectives. In this sense, she is authentically a polymath and this accounts for why she has managed to theorize what has obviously been in the conscious and unconscious mind of many. As she writes,

Cultural transformation theory also introduces a new approach to the study of history. It is based on a multi-disciplinary study drawing from fields ranging from sociology, anthropology, archaeology, history, economics, political science, biology, linguistics, and the study of folklore and myth to systems theory, chaos theory, and nonlinear dynamics. Perhaps most critically, unlike conventional approaches that focus almost exclusively on what has accurately been called "the story of man," it draws from a data base that includes the whole of humanity: both its female and male halves. In addition, it draws from a data base that includes not only history, but prehistory.¹⁰

It thus deals with the whole of history and the whole of humanity, prehistory and both genders.¹¹

What also separates her from New Age kitsch is her view that while in the deep past there was violence and in the future there will be violence, it was not and will be not institutional violence. Killing of nature, women, the elderly will be not structurally sanctioned. To use Galtung's phrase, structural violence will dramatically decrease. It is a eutopia, a good, possible society that Eisler argues that we are heading toward not a perfect or contradiction free scenario. This is crucial, for theories that strive for perfection do so at a cost. The cost is often the elimination of difference. In the hope of the perfect society, all differences especially those dramatically Other are found as problematic and thus must be either homogenized (the American method) or converted (development theory) or simply murdered (colonialism). But a search for a good society allows for difference. It is this that separates Eisler from New Age accounts that try and convince that perfection to be around the corner.

Now let us return to our theory of macrohistory. The first factor we have identified is the episteme that shapes thinkers. For Eisler this is quite obvious. She speaks from feminist theory and from the futures paradigm, one that has recently been enriched by chaos and complexity theory, by perspectives that argue that in times of

turbulence transformation is possible. Attractors can change the direction of history. For Eisler there are two attractors: dominator and partnership. We have tried the first and failed. The second is emerging. It is this larger episteme that informs her. By framing a thinker in episteme, it places their work within the subjective objective, in an epistemology that does not deny history, culture or society, that embraces the values and worldview that allow for inquiry into the objective.

The second factor is the stages of history, the patterns of change. Here there are two dimensions: the partnership—dominator—partnership pattern and technological evolutionism. In the first, the problematic issue is why stop at partnership? Why should history conclude with the partnership society? Will, as with communism, all dialectical relations end then? Won't there be forces within the partnership era that lead to some new system, or with institutional violence bred out will we have jumped to a new level of evolution. It is this latter explanation that Eisler prefers and in this sense she is indebted to general evolutionary theory.

Thus we are not dealing with Sorokin's pendulum moving back and from sensate to ideational civilizations, or watching the rise and fall of the *tao* or of *dharma*, ie this is not cyclical history we are engaged in. The historical jump is in the context of technological phase changes, which are basically a rehash of Herbert Spencer via Toffler and many other technological buffs, that is from agricultural to industrial to electronic phases. Fortunately by including structural violence and patriarchy within the linear dimension issues of linear fascism are avoided. This, of course, is Ferguson's concern that the hordes of the Orient are the ones that come in and destroy Europe's earlier civilization. But with a dominator/partnership theory that does not write a history against the victims of history, we escape the linearity of history. Evolutionary phase changes are not social darwinism.

It is a human history she writes. And while the transcendental (our fourth factor) plays a part, it is not a guiding force, a pulling force in history. There is no divine plan nor a Hegelian geist touching the blessed and creating wealth. Humans that are the experiential actors. God can be used to commit violence against others and the transcendental can be the source of the deepest

pleasure, of caring and sharing. Eisler's effort is to recover a transcendental that was lost in history as the dominators (the nomadic aryaans) swept through the plains of Europe and Asia.

But if it is humans creating history, what is the unit of analysis. For Toynbee it is civilizations. The creative response to dramatic challenges by a minority leads to civilizational growth. Otherwise civilizations transform into grand (over-extended) churches and states. Power continues to grow and fatigue sets in, the money-spirit takes over and there is a Spenglerian decline. For Ibn Khaldun as well, civilizations decline when over generations the unity—gained through struggle—is lost. Imitation results instead of inventive challenge. For Sarkar it is not civilization but *varna* or psycho-social responses to the environment that is central. For him, history goes through a Pareto-like circulation of periods of elite-rule of warriors, intellectuals (priests) and then merchants. Each era brings in the new but overtime oppresses the other proclivities. The oppressed people unite bringing in the end of the merchant era, but the warriors quickly centralize rule.

But Sarkar also has a gender dialectic, argues Towsey.¹² For Sarkar, as with Eisler there is first a partnership society. This then moves to a Matriarchy. With the invasions of nomadic warrior tribes patriarchy sets in (since strength and assertion of power, the blade, is more important in nomadic tribes). But the next phase Sarkar sees, as with Eisler, is a period of coordinated cooperation, working together to form new futures. But for Eisler her unit is gender itself. And this is her contribution to macrohistory. Just as only Sarkar, based in India, could have expanded Marx and seen the obvious of the fourfold pattern of history, it is Eisler as a woman who can see the centrality of gender. While Elise Boulding¹³ in the underside of history told us that women's views were not being told, their history was silenced, it is Eisler who takes gender to macrohistory.

In such macrohistory, when empirical evidence is often weak, i.e. there are so many cases to generalize, it is metaphors that help (our next factor). For Sarkar it is the in and out of breath and the rolling hills that describe his shape of change, for Sorokin it is the pendulum, for Vico it is the river, for Eisler it is the chalice and the blade. The blade represents the sword, violence, the chalice

represents openness, warmth. It is metaphor that gives potency to grand theories even if in their calling they do not exactly fit into historical writing. Indeed, Eisler is aware of the problem of over-simplification and thus argues for multi-linearity, ie that there were cultures that went along different paths. Some became more partnership oriented, others less. Thus, all of humanity did not exist entirely in each phase, some were dominator, some partnership. This is so for the future as well, not all will suddenly become partnership oriented, there will be separate evolutions. As she says:

More recently, I have expanded cultural transformation theory to incorporate this proposal into a new *multilinear*, rather than *unilinear*, theory of early human cultural evolution: one that proposes that it did not follow a single path, but rather a variety of paths—with groups in different environments evolving in different directions, some orienting primarily to a partnership or gylanic model and others to an androcratic model.¹⁴

However, with the rise of the West, including Islam, all have generally created a world dominator system.

But once inside her story of the past and future are there escapeways? Often grand theories create boxes of reality that once entered are exitless. As Ashis Nandy has reminded us, the visions of tomorrow once realized often become the nightmares of the present.¹⁵ Can a partnership society engage in a conversation with other civilizations? Most certainly yes. But can it deal with evil as in Hutu Rwanda, Serb Bosnia and Nazi Germany. While I am sure Eisler and others would argue that in partnership societies, peace keeping forces and activist women would have helped ensure that such atrocities did not occur and indeed that they occurred is only evidence of a world domination system, the question remains, how will such a future society deal with deep dissidence, deal with evil actors? Where will the warriors be that can struggle against such atrocities or will collective non-violence save the day? Can there be non-violent warriors, dull blades?

Finally, who is the vanguard of the new society? For Marx it was allegedly the proletariats but we know well since his vision had no exits, it was the warriors/communist party that created the future.

Marx' linearity did not allow him to see that the system would end. Sarkar, of course, predicted it years ago knowing that what is repressed must come out in different forms, that totalitarian systems explode since they cannot maintain difference, since they do not allow humanity's deepest yearning for the Great to be expressed.¹⁶ But for Eisler it is women, ordinary women, and caring men who are the vanguard. Throughout history and in the animal kingdom there are examples of such cultures. We are today witnessing both—increased dominator anti-women fundamentalism and softer, taoist expressions of culture emerging, whether in parenting, whether in the success of Scandinavian welfare nations, or in the emerging global civil society movements.

Eisler says that we hunger for stories and she calls for the new Eves and Adams. By calling attention to ancient Western goddess myths, the Gaia hypothesis, as well as the softer partnership dimensions in all the world's religions, human agency can help create the new story. Eisler gives us many examples of individuals telling a new story, but her main argument is, echoing Kenneth Boulding, if it exists, it can be.¹⁷ That is, if there are examples of partnership societies either now or in history, we can create a global civilization based on such ethics and values. If it has existed, it can be. By returning to history, she reminds us that such cultures did exist. By foraging through the present and history, she tells us what went wrong, how our pedagogy, our daily actions, our children's stories, our scholarship, our theories all reaffirm the dominator myth. By envisioning an alternative future she helps create what can be.

Her work can certainly be strengthened by a closer reading of Sorokin and Sarkar, both of who would be friendly towards her work but bring in other perspectives. In addition, the causes of change, internal and external, the rise and the fall and the rise again, need to be further articulated. She also needs to clarify the relationship between the coming partnership society and the ancient partnership society. Are they related only metaphorically? Or is the future a spiral return to the past? And if an evolutionary jump to a new phase then is her theory merely the classic Western story of resurrection and return—the wait for the Messiah but now as collective women? In addition, while currently she sees the historical move from partnership to dominator as due to external causes, a richer

theory would investigate internal dialectics. This would also help provide an impetus for the move to a new partnership society. But of course for Eisler it is not structures that transform the future, it is humans. In her words:

During periods of social disintegration—[the chaos after the sensate era for Sorokin, the end of the merchant era for Sarkar, the final stage of the loss of royal authority for Ibn Khaldun, and the delinking of the tao and learning for Ssu-ma Chien] or extreme systems disequilibrium there is an opportunity for social and ideological change.¹⁸

The future thus is not certain, the partnership society is not destined. It has to be created through human actions. If not then clearly the dominator civilization can “co-opt some partnership elements while still preserving the same basic configuration that provides social and economic rewards for domination and conquest and idealizes, and even sacralizes, pain.”¹⁹ There is much more work to do, but Riane Eisler’s *Chalice and the Blade* and *Sacred Pleasure* by giving us a different map of history and a compelling vision of the future certainly make the task for all of us easier. We are certainly in debt to her. The best way to repay that debt would be to help create a partnership society.

Notes

1. Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.
2. *Ibid.*, 111–112.
3. Riane Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*. San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1996, 4.
4. *Sacred Pleasure*, 271.
5. Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar, *PROUT in a Nutshell, Part 6*. Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1987, 41.
6. Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. Boston, Porter Sargent, 1957.
7. *Sacred Pleasure*, 304.
8. Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians: Toward a General Theory of Grand Social Change*. New York, Praeger, 1997.
9. Riane Eisler, “Feminist Macrohistory: Cultural Transformation Theory” in Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*. San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1988, xxiii.

12. Michael Towsey, *Eternal Dance of Macrocosm*. Denmark, PROUTist Publications, 1986, 164–176.
13. Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time*. Newbury Park, California, Sage, 1992.
14. Quoted in Galtung and Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*.
15. See Ashis Nandy, *Tradition, Tyranny and Utopias*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987.
16. See Ravi Batra, *The Downfall of Capitalism and Communism*. Dallas, Venus Books, 1990.
17. In conversation with Elise Boulding. Brisbane, July 9, 1996.
18. *Sacred Pleasure*, 177.
19. *Ibid.*

