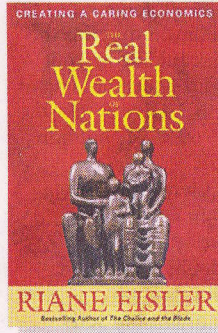


Is notion of 'caring economics' just pie in the sky?

Will the current economic crisis end in a remake of the global economy or simply fine-tuning of "business as usual?" The economy should serve the full range of people's needs and should be our servant, not the reverse. Eminent social scientist Riane Eisler says our economic model is the underlying cause of much of our current social and environmental angst, embedded as it is in "dominator" cultural values. Eisler's thesis is that the key problem is the primacy of dominator ideology, which assigns priority to winning and to penalising the losers. Her prescription for the future is greatly enhanced "partnerism", caring, empathy and nurture. Throughout history, both partnerism and dominator ideology have been present in all societies, but some have assigned much greater economic weight and value to the caring, nurturing and sharing role. For much of human history and across the world, men have taken for granted, and devalued, the



NON-FICTION

THE REAL WEALTH OF NATIONS: CREATING A CARING ECONOMICS.

By Riane Eisler. BK
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Reviewer: **BOB DOUGLAS**

contributions that nurturing and caring make to successful society. Because the nurturing and caring role was, in the past, largely a female function, and because masculine activities such as fighting, competing and winning were seen to be absolutely central to human survival, caring and nurturing were, and still remain, "soft" activities by contrast with "hard" objects like guns, tanks and computers.

Building caring for people and the environment into our human economy is Eisler's mission.

The author rejects the view that dominator behaviour is intrinsic to human survival as is proposed by some advocates of "the selfish gene" hypothesis. She shows how caring, sharing and empathy

are fundamental human attributes which light up the pleasure centres of our brains more than does winning and controlling. Furthermore, partnerism makes eminent economic sense and where it has been implemented in a serious way, it tends to produce better human and economic outcomes. It is the dominator culture which has influenced the design of the global economic system that now contributes centrally to our current dire predicament. The neo-liberal economic experiment of the past 30 years has radically reinforced this model.

Caring for children through their formative years is one of the most important things that humans do but it is not properly valued in our society. Growth in the gross domestic product (which incorporates measures of many things which are harmful in society, and ignores caring almost entirely), is our current deeply flawed measure of economic progress. It must be replaced by new indicators which reflect how the economy serves human wellbeing and the

realisation of human potential. Only then will the policymakers assign proper value to caring for people and the environment. Our values are shaped progressively from early childhood through family relations. Where the principal culture is dominator, people's life choices are constrained by fear and a lack of awareness of alternatives. When children are taught the normality of domination and submission and society doesn't offer an alternative, they are inclined to deny their innate capacity for empathy and consciousness. They in turn build family, educational, religious, economic and political institutions based on the principle with which they grew up. And so the cycle repeats itself generation after generation. In Eisler's view, we now need a much more complete map of the human economy that assigns economic values to caring for people and the environment. This includes building the economy of households as well as currently unremunerated community contributions into the economic calculus. To do that we will need

a raft of new economic instruments and will need progressively to build a culture of "partnerism". Is all of this "pie in the sky" or an exciting and realistic way forward through the current social and environmental turmoil? That, says the author, depends on how ordinary people respond to her challenge to engage in a new economic conversation about caring and question the all-pervasive dominator culture. For me her argument is compelling. Nurture of children and care of our environment are fundamental to our future survival and they have been pushed aside by a dominator-infected market culture that values guns over education, prisons over mental health and fashions over ecosystems. Having a more rounded vision for the future economy is an essential first step out of our current social, economic and environmental predicament and Eisler provides both the vision and a constructive way forwards.

Bob Douglas is a retired public health academic and chair of the Board of Australia 21.