

Creature discomforts

Pat Kane

Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, Lawrence and Wishart, £15.99

At first sight, the image on the cover of this extraordinary yet flawed book is a strange, spattered smudge. Look closer and you see that each inky mark is actually a bird in flight, rising from some natural terrain. At the centre of the picture, the bulk of their number seems to have spontaneously formed the beginnings of an upwards spiral, perhaps even a helix. Yet there is also something ominous in the way each of these tiny entities become absorbed into the black massed shape in the centre. Your eyes keep straying to the individuals not yet assimilated, to their tiny and distinct wing shapes, their lines of flight. What would it feel like, to head towards that giant, seething shape? And then, to be swept up into it?

The cover of *The Whole Creature* expresses both the wonder, and the anxiety, that I felt upon completing its densely referenced pages. The wonder is that Wendy Wheeler has assembled an argument for what could only be described as classic socialism - that is, solidarity as the basis of social and economic order - out of a range of biological and philosophical resources that have rarely, if ever, been synthesised before, or as engagingly. Yet the anxiety is focused by that sinister, awe-inspiring amalgam on the cover. Wheeler's account of evolutionary process, as it manifests itself in human culture, points us towards a re-assertion of the 'social' and 'collective' over the 'individual' and 'atomised'. But why does her thoroughly 'naturalised' socialism feel so coercive in its normative implications?

In short, is a 'socialist biology' any more emancipatory and empowering than the sexist and hierarchist 'socio-biology' it supersedes?

Wheeler begins by returning to a voice who had certainly slipped from my mind, in the last decade or so of the dominance of technophilia, globalisation and consumerism in left thinking - that of Raymond Williams. She makes a convincing case that the often maddening abstractions in Williams's prose were actually examples of his anticipation of the new consilience between natural and human sciences, forged between complexity theory, consciousness studies and holistic biology. When Williams talks in 1961's *The Long Revolution* of 'the whole process of our living organisation', he includes non-human as well as human creatures in the 'systems of communication' that make this living organisation possible.

This emphasis on communication rather than competition as the driver of evolution in nature is the cornerstone of Wheeler's argument, the means whereby she can claim that human culture is human nature without the latter crudely determining the former. And it's a pretty unstable cornerstone. In order to break the mutual reinforcement between neo-liberalism and neo-Darwinism - both sharing as their agent of change the innately, inevitably competitive organism or human - Wheeler turns to those previously mentioned 'new sciences'.

She is correct to assert that the implications of complex adaptive systems theory, as Brian Goodwin has argued in these pages, is that science becomes more retrospective than prospective. A 'science of qualities', rather than one of quantities, accepts that *qualia* are the never-entirely-predictable results of specifically instantiated processes. Thus science becomes more modest in the face of human experience and history - able to describe small-scale actions, and large-scale emergent phenomena, but not able to absolutely predict, plan or guide outcomes from the second from the first. Towards the end of the book, Wheeler confesses that this is perhaps more supportive of a politics of conservation (even conservatism) than a 'modernising', neophilic politics, whether of the left or right. There are certain paces of change, certain 'natural' rhythms of social formation, which are violated by too rapid a pace of development. Would not Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott - or even David Cameron and his grouping of new conservative intellectuals - also thoroughly agree?

My biggest issue is with Wheeler's use of biosemiotics as the key discipline which can breach the human culture/human nature divide. For a start, an afternoon's websearch reveals a field of study that is far more contested and fledgling than

Wheeler's own confident citations ('all life is semiosis') suggest. And secondly, its core premise - that all vital entities signify in order to survive and thrive, from the enzyme to the entrepreneur - posits a kind of 'chain of being' which threatens to blur all analytic distinctions whatsoever (a line like 'it almost seems as though the cell had globalisation immanent within it' - due to its propensity to network with other cells - is an example of the potential for overreach here).

Biosemioticians claim that evolution is on a narrative towards ever-greater 'semiotic freedom', of which humans in their imagination and agency are the richest beneficiaries. Yet it sometimes seems as if 'semiotic karma' is more the effect. Wheeler also draws on Michael Marmot's epidemiological studies of how workplace status directly affects health and mortality - that is, the way we project and receive the signs of our relative power in the bureaucratic hierarchy has a material impact on the body of the employee. This has become a core text of 'happiness'/wellbeing scholarship over the last few years, led by New Labour peer Richard Layard. Wheeler hopes to show that the Buddhist ideal of 'loving kindness' is more than a spiritual longing. It is a psycho-somatic imperative, and an implicit (and perhaps legally actionable?) challenge to social inequality. As she puts it:

The 'freedoms' of the liberal subject must be constrained by a newer kind of knowledge in which acts and deeds, not just words, signify. In this, your liberal freedom to abandon concern for others, for example - as though 'others' were not intimately related to you in the natural and socio-cultural web - must be set against the material and emotional environmental damage your irresponsibility and unresponsiveness will effect.

Yet where does radical negativity, or harsh critique, figure in this enveloping web of intersubjectivity? I kept being reminded of the poignant old line from Brecht's *To Those Born Later*: 'Oh we/Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness/Could not ourselves be friendly'. As a journalist and editor, my favourite axiom was that my trade should not just 'comfort the afflicted', but also 'afflict the comfortable'. The BBC's Andrew Gilligan exercised his 'liberal freedom' to be 'not concerned about emotional environmental damage' in his exposé of the falsity of the WMD claims, through revealing his confidential conversation with a government civil servant, David Kelly - which had disastrous and fatal psychological consequences for that individual. If we assumed the ethics

of biosemiotics, could any investigative journalism - or indeed, any counterfactual endeavour of any kind - proceed with the kind of vigour and severity required? Does loving kindness always bring about loving and kindly times?

Another objection I have with *The Whole Creature* is in its identification of psycho-somatics as the best foundation for a more mutualist society. For example, Wheeler renders the idea of artificial intelligence as a 'patent absurdity' - yet reverse engineering is already creating the simulation of many human cognitive and affective skills. SF's vision of inhuman intelligences has been more ethically and politically diverse than the 'mad robot' cliché would have it. What of the thoroughly caring and androgynous future silicon creatures at the end of Spielberg and Kubrick's *A.I.*? Why should we presume that fleshly embodiment is the only possible enabling condition for a social ethic? Might not an inorganic yet sufficiently complex network entity emerge a consciousness that was inherently intersubjective and post-egoistic? This is one of the singular insights of Negri and Hardt in *Empire* - that a 'cyborg' consciousness might point to 'new determinations of the human, of living, a powerful artificiality of being'.

The Buddhist neuroscientist Francisco Varela once called for the establishment of 'sciences of interbeing', and I can well understand their attraction to a humane New Left socialist like Wheeler, looking to increase those 'resources of hope' that Raymond Williams once eloquently invoked. Yet I think we are much more strange creatures than whole creatures. My own research into forms of human play shows just how extreme - from cosmic overdetermination to egoistic anarchy, and most stages in between - our strategies for social survival and development can be. When both Dick Cheney's war room and a nursery school class can each legitimately describe themselves as in the business of 'game-changing', we face a social ontology of openness and change which simply cannot be subjected to any normative pressures of 'species-being' - and where the philosopher of choice might not be Michael Polyani, but Gilles Deleuze.

I leave as I began, with that inky swarm on the cover: a theoretically consistent representation of Wheeler's chokingly webbed world. But not only wouldn't I want to live there, I can't see how I could participate in changing it for the better - other than throwing myself into the mass, behaving like a coherent swarm-member, and hoping that what emerges is a good society. For this trenchantly argued and deeply thought-provoking volume, I must thank the author: she's made me realise what a liberal modernist I actually am.

Breakdown in the family of nations

Ryan O’Kane

Jennifer S. Butler, *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized*, Pluto Press £14.99

After the political euthanasia of Donald ‘lame duck’ Rumsfeld, and the end of John ‘Bruiser’ Bolton’s brief bout as UN Ambassador, only the most stubborn pub conspiracy cynic would suggest that the American neoconservative imperial experiment was still in good shape. The sense of relief and cautious celebration amongst progressive movements after the US mid-term elections was palpable and undoubtedly much needed. However, Jennifer Butler’s analysis of the deep conservative tides upon which the neocons surfed to power - and that continue to crash against liberal ‘orthodoxies’ in the US and across the world - is a timely reminder that these recent victories were, essentially, defensive ones.

Born Again focuses on tensions within UN forums between a liberal agenda based on the rights of women and children and the aggressive activism of American Christian Right organisations. Published by Pluto, the book talks directly to the left. However, Butler’s purpose is not to demonise the Christian Right as foaming-mouth bigots, or to ridicule them as gullible dupes of the ‘President of good and evil’. Expertly, and without either losing her strategic focus or retreating into the academic safety of postmodern neutrality, she uses her own experiences within the UN and interviews with participants to analyse the political dynamics, fractures and potential of the broader global resurgence of religious conservatism.

Jennifer Butler displays a particular kind of sensitive and principled pragmatism that is often found amongst faith-rooted progressive activists, who

(unlike many on the secular left) are more accustomed to tempering their beliefs with humility. Armed with the language and skills of 'community organising', Butler bravely immerses herself in the ideologically charged atmosphere of the UN, and in effect treats it as just another diverse and complex community to be 'organised'. This capacity to empathise with all sides in the 'culture wars', together with her credentials as committed, left-oriented activist and ordained Presbyterian minister, give her enormous interrogative flexibility as both 'participatory observer' and political bridge-builder.

Apocalyptic 'clash of civilisations' frequently dominate discussions relating the Christian Right to US policy on the Middle East, and this has led many on the left to dismiss them, either as too irrational to be engaged, or as irrelevant and credulous pawns of the neoconservatives. But by sensitively probing beyond the Christian Right's mobilisation in support of US conservatives, Butler shows how they are not merely imperial stormtroopers organised by a cynical political elite. Instead they are themselves effective and sophisticated organisers, successfully developing a politicised, 'right-wing ecumenicism' with international allies. Most of these allies are from countries in the global South, people whom anti-imperialist progressives have long assumed to be *their* comrades.

Written from within a progressive movement that has been repeatedly out-manoeuvred, out-organised and shocked onto the defensive by the Christian Right's aggressive tactics, *Born Again* is driven by a crucial question - just how far can they go? Can they really succeed in exporting America's culture wars to a global market at a time when US ideological stocks appear to be at an all-time low?

Butler approaches these questions from the assumption that the emergence of religious 'fundamentalism' is bound up with global processes of economic change and modernisation. This uncontroversial sociological analysis lends support to the idea that movements drawing from widely divergent (even 'clashing') ideological and cultural contexts may overlap. Indeed, Butler's work shows that successful, and surprising, alliances often tend to coalesce around protecting the rights of 'the family' (as opposed to those of children or women) from the supposed assault of 'liberalism'. For example, at the 2000 UN Women's Conference, the American Christian Right successfully organised a caucus of countries to block liberal advances. In addition to the Holy See, this strange bloc included such 'evil-doers' as Sudan, Libya, Syria and Iran. Although only

lightly touched on in this book, the juxtaposition of global rifts caused by the War on Terror and international ties being forged at the level of social policy is fascinating. The complex and contradictory dynamics of religious right alliances are meticulously unravelled throughout the book.

We might perhaps say that one of the left's mistakes has been its blindspot for such complexity, and the tendency to dismiss all religiously framed reactions to social change as in themselves reactionary. Perhaps more serious - at least strategically - has been the left's deep-seated complacency, not only about the unstoppable march of liberal, secular values, but also about its own unassailable position as 'friend of the oppressed'. Butler's book dramatises this process effectively, although it can tend to bypass important historical and international aspects of the larger picture.

The conservative cooption of 'family values' is not new. Since Engels declared the consolidation of patriarchal property rights within the family as 'the world historical defeat of the female sex', the right has successfully characterised progressive demands for economic and social justice not only as a threat to the public order, or to private property rights, but also as a direct attack on the most intimate site of human experience and identity - the family. By contrast, the progressive left in the west has tended to view the family unit as an obstacle to more equitable, communalist or socialist forms of social organisation. In their distrust of family structures, they have had much in common with modernising liberals seeking to drag the 'developing world' into a globalising capitalist system. First introduced as policy under the Kennedy administration, the 'modernisation theory' of development explicitly identified traditional kinship cultures as an obstacle to development. And despite its origins as a liberal doctrine, it became part of the so-called 'Washington consensus'; for many years Republicans supported such policies abroad, as long as they promoted US interests.

Left relatively unexplored by Butler, this theme is important. The global South's distrust of American liberals, with their private disdain for traditional cultures and family values, has emerged not only from religious doctrine but also from the widespread critiques of development orthodoxy that have spread through the south since the 1970s, through the works of writers such as Edward Said. Indeed, the philosophy behind Khomeini's Islamic Revolution explicitly mirrored the language of modernisation theory by defending indigenous culture

as a foundation, rather than an inhibitor, of development.

These echoes of the neoconservative critique of liberalism are not coincidental. American neoconservatism is a distinct counter-liberal trend that, like religious conservatism, has its ideological parallels, and potential allies, in different political cultures across the world. If Butler's analysis is incomplete, it is because any prediction of the global future of the religious right must also explore the depth and complexity of the relationships between these movements and international 'neoconservatisms'.

One cannot help but share Jennifer Butler's awe at the speed and scope of the achievements of this energetic yet inexperienced political movement. Unlike many progressive Christians, who have resigned themselves to their place in the dustbin of history, and some secular liberals that have been panicked out of complacency by an unexpectedly resurgent religious patriarchy, Butler is not a fatalist in her analysis. For, despite their political skills, and the potential leverage of their rhetoric, the Christian Right's advantage has been won mainly through exploiting the organisational lethargy and ideological rigidity of the left. And, despite portents of doom on both sides, history hasn't ended quite yet.