

Gut Feminism

By Elizabeth Wilson

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Stephens

IN THIS IMPORTANT AND HIGHLY ANTICIPATED NEW BOOK, ELIZABETH WILSON EXAMINES how the gut can help us rethink the relationship between the biological, psychological and social by recognising these as overlapping and mutually constitutive categories. Wilson is particularly interested in how the biology of the gut and recent pharmacological data about its function, taken together, have valuable insights to offer feminist theory. Readers of Wilson's earlier book, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurobiological Body* will be familiar with her general position here. In *Psychosomatic*, Wilson focused on how research in the neurosciences could contribute to contemporary feminist theories of embodiment. *Gut Feminism* extends this by considering what the biological phenomena of, and scientific data on, the gut, contribute to feminist theories of subjectivity. In so doing, Wilson 'turn[s] critical attention from the center (brain) to the periphery (gut)' (99).

This shift from the cerebrum to the viscera produces one of the richest and most rewarding lines of thinking in *Gut Feminism*. Wilson's argument 'is not that the gut contributes to minded states, but that the gut is an organ of the mind: it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends' (5). In this way, Wilson proposes a radically decentralised model of psychology and subjectivity, in which perception, sensation and cognition are not understood as merely neurological phenomena but as distributed processes that are also visceral.

Wilson's critical methodology in *Gut Feminism* is consistent with this approach: rather than a unified theory of the gut or linear argument about it, what *Gut Feminism* offers is a rumination, a sometimes slightly bitter one, that takes into account the multifaceted complexity of the gut's 'entanglements of affects, ideations, nerves, agitations, sociality, [and] pills' (2). In examining this through a close but critical engagement with the biological phenomena of and pharmacological research on the gut, Wilson builds on the ground-breaking work

of scholars in the flourishing field of feminist science studies, such as Donna Haraway, Eve Fox Keller, Anne Fausto-Sterling and Catherine Waldby, who have shown ‘how the gene, or the neuron, or the hormone is from the beginning a biologically impure object. There are no entities or events, they argue, that can legitimately lay claim to being biological and not also cultural or economic or psychological or historical’ (28). In a similar way, Wilson shows how understanding the relationship between viscera and mood requires proper recognition of the complexity and contingency of specific configurations of biology, psychology, and culture. A central aim of *Gut Feminism* is precisely to show how this approach to the biological can enrich feminist theory by providing new conceptual models and interpretive frameworks drawn from biology and the biological sciences: ‘One thing feminist theory still needs, even after decades of feminist work on the life sciences’, Wilson argues, ‘is a conceptual toolkit for reading biology’ (3).

If such a toolkit has not yet been developed, Wilson contends, it is a product not simply of oversight but of a profound anti-biologism that characterises contemporary feminist theory. Citing Gayle Rubin’s call to ‘get rid of sexual anatomy’ in ‘The Traffic in Women’ as a foundational moment in feminist theory’s anti-biologism (35), Wilson argues that feminist theory is missing the benefit of potential insights that would stem from a greater attunement to the biological. ‘There is a powerful paradox in play: anti-biologism both places significant conceptual limitations on feminist theory *and* has been one of the means by which feminist theory has prospered’ (4; original emphasis). The most productive and yet the most constraining of these limitations, Wilson argues, has been this foundational understanding of the biological and cultural as distinct and autonomous systems.

Wilson’s own work is exemplary of what sustained engagement with the biosciences—in a way that is critical rather than ‘credulous’ (49)—can contribute to contemporary feminist theory, through its study of depression as a visceral as well as neurological condition. However, it must also be acknowledged that framing *Gut Feminism* in this way, as a necessary corrective to a trenchant anti-biologism in feminist theory, Wilson is adopting a polemical stance—one designed to provoke a response.¹ That there is something slightly aggressive in framing her

¹ The status of the biological within feminist theory has recently been the subject of heated debate. While this is not the place to rehearse that argument, the key positions are neatly summed up in Elizabeth Grosz’s recent claim that feminists need to ‘return to concepts of nature, matter, life’ because ‘we have forgotten the nature, the ontology, of the body’ (2), and Sara Ahmed’s sharp response that: ‘you can only argue for a return to biology by forgetting the feminist work on the biological, including the work of feminists trained in the biological sciences. In other words, you can only claim that feminism has forgotten the biological if you forget this feminist work’ (27).

project in this oppositional way is not unintentional. Rather, the role of bitterness and bile within feminism, so often disavowed or ignored, is a central concern in *Gut Feminism*. In this respect, it constitutes an important new contribution to recent work in feminist affect studies that has focused particularly on the role of negative affect, or what I have termed feminism's critical genealogy of bad feelings (Stephens), such as Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). In focusing particularly on the role of aggression *within* feminism itself, Wilson draws attention to a form of negative affect that is difficult to simply reclaim as a positive, something that is a source of bad feeling or visceral discomfort between feminist scholars:

As well as attaching to things that are damaging to us (Berlant 2011), we are also trying to damage the things to which we are attached. I have been arguing that the politics of depression would benefit from more attention to the hostility generated by us and directed at our loved objects, ideals, and places. While there have been lucid articulations of the ways in which hostility is directed by others at certain kinds of persons (women, people of color, queers and perverts, the poor, outcasts, outliers and deviants of all kinds), the nature of our own participation in trends of sadism and hatred towards these objects—whom we love, with whom we may identify or collaborate, or to whom we may be sexually, economically, or politically attached—remains under-theorized. (85)

The debate about the status of the biological within feminist theory is one site at which such hostility is evident, and which is consistently the source of ill feelings—another visceral affect. *Gut Feminism* theorises feminist participation in aggressive tendencies as a form of abrasion, a sensation that accompanies reconfigurations of the relationships between biological, psychological and social. Together, these form a pharmakon-assemblage the effects of which may be either harmful or beneficial.

The critical potential of this approach is evident in Wilson's excellent critique of the data on the correlation between anti-depressant use and the increase in suicidal thinking, especially amongst adolescents. Wilson argues that suicidal ideation might constitute 'not so much a warning of a latent, undocumented threat to the well-being of those undertaking biological treatments as a sign of movement and reorganisation within the system, strongly colored by affectivity, where the difference between a remedy and a harm is constantly in play' (160). It is here we see the sort of original, multifaceted readings and new perspectives that might emerge if we look closely at the entanglements of biology, psyche, mood and pharmaceuticals. If neurology, gut, mind, words, and pills are always already

entangled, Wilson argues, then none of them has epistemological or ontological precedence over the others; rather, each must be understood as co-constitutive and examined in the particularity of its dynamic relationships.

Gut Feminism is a subtle and powerful book, and a significant contribution to recent feminist debates about the role of the biological and scientific data within feminist theory. But it is not a book that is easily digested: to open oneself to an engagement with the bitter and bilious is also to expose oneself to negative affects that can sometimes feel toxic or corrosive. To pay attention to the gut, to our visceral experiences and affects, has historically implied an encounter with a lower part of ourselves.

Just as Wilson does not want to do away with the negativity of particular experiences or moods, but rather to consider what that negativity might have to tell us about the specificity of that (re)configuration of psychology, biology, and culture, so does *Gut Feminism* resist the tendency to sloganise or unify its own findings. In this way, *Gut Feminism* exemplifies what rigorous work in this field can bring to key debates not just within feminist theory, but within contemporary critical theory as a whole, and does so with intellectual boldness and precision. The result is a substantial contribution to the feminist genealogy of negative affects and bad feelings, which recognises the constitutive value of the negative, but which is also likely to churn things up. As Wilson herself aptly notes: 'Such a theoretical stance takes up more room, it generates more possibilities (and thus more risks): it has more bite' (166).

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