

The Politics and Ethics of Sex

POLISCI 3335F

Wednesdays 12:30-2:20

Fall 2026

Course Description

This course examines the ethical and political dimensions of sex and how sexual behaviours and attitudes may impede or advance the struggle for social justice. The course covers the political and ethical implications of how we understand the nature of biological sex and gender identity and how sexual activity can be seen as an individual or political act. We will examine and critique the roles power and background injustice may play in individual sexual choices and how we should balance the values of individual freedom and equality through the study of topics such as sexual attraction, the sex industry, sexual violence, and the concept of consent from a variety of perspectives.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course students will be able to:

1. Understand the differences and relationships between sex and gender identity, how different feminist schools of thought understand them, and the political implications of these different interpretations;
2. Understand how sex can be seen as more than a self-regarding, private act and as a social and political act;
3. Understand and evaluate different arguments about the moral criticizability of different sexual preferences, beliefs, and behaviours;
4. Understand, read, and critique academic and non-academic sources on these topics;
5. Formulate and express considered judgements on these topics orally and in writing.

Classroom Expectations

Students are expected to attend all classes except when there are medical or compassionate reasons. You do not need to email me to let you know you will not be in class. At the beginning of every class I will give a lecture giving background and additional information about the topic we will be discussing that day. The rest of class time will be dedicated to small and large group discussion. This discussion is crucially important in developing your skills as a political theorist so you are encouraged to actively participate in class by asking questions or providing your view of what was said by me or your classmates.

Open dialogue is a vital part of learning. I am committed to creating a supportive environment where all voices are heard and valued and I seek to foster an atmosphere in which everyone in this class feels comfortable expressing their thoughts, perspectives, and questions freely. Disagreement is natural but must be respectful and constructive. No one should feel intimidated, dismissed, or silenced. Students are expected to come to class with an open mind and ready to listen, reflect, and engage thoughtfully with ideas that may differ from their own or ones they have previously been taught. At the same time, I realise that the topics in this course may be sensitive or 'close to home' for some students depending on personal experiences and backgrounds. Therefore, it is essential that all contributions are made in a respectful and considerate manner. Please do not hesitate to speak with me about any concerns.

All the readings have been carefully selected to give a balanced view of the issues presented each week. The vast majority are peer-reviewed and all are scholarly and considered in nature. However, given the nature of some of the topics covered, readings occasionally include expletives and occasionally graphic descriptions of particular acts. No sexist or racist slurs are permitted in class discussions. Students are permitted to use laptops/tablets to take notes during the lecture component of the class but all technology should be put away for the discussion component as they are simply distractions and not needed for this part of the class. Students who want/need to take notes during the discussion are welcome to do so with a pen and paper.

Assessments

In-Class Participation (15%) - Ongoing

This is not an attendance mark; however, in order to participate you need to be present. If you are absent from many classes, you should not expect a high participation mark. You are expected to actively participate in class during the lecture and discussions. This can take the form of asking questions, making points, responding to others' points, etc. Quality is prioritized over quantity. Quality contributions will demonstrate an understanding of and engagement with the readings and lectures. If you struggle to participate in class, you are welcome to send me discussion questions/comments in advance of class which I will read out to stimulate discussion. This is not a substitution for participation; rather, it is a way to make you feel more comfortable participating--you must still come to class and you will be encouraged to elaborate on your question/comment in small and/or large group discussions. Checking phones or using technology for non-class related purposes will reduce a student's participation mark.

Midterm Exam (30%) – November 11

1.5h exam held in class. The exam will be an in-class handwritten exam covering the lectures and readings.

Essay Proposal (5%) – due December 2 at 5pm

You must submit a max 250 word proposal outlining your proposed topic/question and your plan to address it. This includes your thesis (i.e., what you will argue) and a brief outline of the major arguments you plan to make. Essay topics must be directly related to the course material. **You are strongly encouraged to submit your proposal well in advance of the deadline.**

In Class Essay (50%) - December 9

You will have 1 hour 45 minutes to hand write the essay you proposed. No materials are permitted. **This assessment is not eligible for the absence without documentation. If you miss the in class essay, it may not be possible to arrange a make up until January.**

COURSE SCHEDULE

Readings not directly linked to can be found online through Course

Readings <https://ares.lib.uwo.ca/ares/ares.dll?Action=6&Type=61&Form=60&Value=132358> or through the library: <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/>

September 9: Introduction to the Course

What does sex (the biological category and activity) have to do with politics?

No readings.

September 16: Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity

What is the difference between biological sex, gender, and gender identity? What does it mean to have a gender identity?

1. Kathleen Stock (2021) "What Makes a Woman?" *Material Girls*
2. Julia Serano (2017) "Debunking 'trans women are not women' arguments" <https://juliaserano.medium.com/debunking-trans-women-are-not-women-arguments-85fd5ab0e19c>

September 23: Political Implications of Transgender Inclusion

When, if ever, should we categorize/treat people according to their biological sex vs. their gender identity? Does treating trans women as women undermine women's rights?

1. Lorna Finlayson, Katharine Jenkins & Rosie Worsdale, "'I'm not transphobic but'...A feminist case against the feminist case against trans-inclusivity" <https://www.versobooks.com/en-ca/blogs/news/4090-i-m-not-transphobic-but-a-feminist-case-against-the-feminist-case-against-trans-inclusivity>
2. Holly Lawford-Smith (2023), "Women Only Spaces and the Right to Exclude" in *Sex Matters* (Oxford University Press), ch. 4.

September 30: NO CLASS (Truth & Reconciliation Day)

October 7: Racial Sexual Preferences

Do individual sexual preferences contribute to racism/racial inequality? Are they purely individual or reflective of a racially unequal society?

1. Robin Zheng, (2016) "[Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetish](#)" *The Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2(3): 400-419.
2. [Raja Halwani \(2022\) "Racial Sexual Desires" *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*.](#)

October 14: NO CLASS (Reading Week)

October 21: Prostitution

Does prostitution enhance or diminish prostitutes' autonomy? Should sex be for sale at all? Does prostitution rely on an unequal society to flourish? Would it exist in a fully equal/just society? Does the freedom/autonomy of individuals buying/selling sex outweigh the potential harm to society/women as a whole? Should the practice of prostitution be abolished, amended, regulated, or normalized?

1. Debra Satz (2010) *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale* (Oxford University Press), ch. 6
2. Scott Anderson (2002) "Prostitution and Sexual Autonomy: Making Sense of the Prohibition of Prostitution" *Ethics* 112(2).
3. Martha Nussbaum (1998) "Whether from Reason or Prejudice: Taking Money for Bodily Services" *Journal of Legal Studies* 27.

October 28: Pornography

Is pornography in opposition to women's social equality? Does the freedom to make/consume pornography outweigh the harms it causes? Does pornography perpetuate racism/racial stereotypes and contribute to racial inequality?

1. Andrew Altman (2019) "Sex, Speech, and Autonomy" in *Debating Pornography* (Oxford University Press)
2. Lori Watson (2019) "Sex, Equality, and Pornography" in *Debating Pornography* (Oxford University Press)
3. Gail Dines (2010) "Racy Sex, Sexy Racism" in *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality* (Beacon Press), ch. 7.

November 4: Midterm Exam

November 11 – What is Consent?

What are the 'grey areas' of consent? Does lying about details about yourself undermine consent? How does societal culture/pressure undermine the ability to consent? Does Canadian law adequately capture the concept or should it be broadened/narrowed?

1. Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person" *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017 <https://research-ebSCO-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/c/c5w5ss/viewer/html/u3ywmn5jz5>
2. Kate Manne (2020) "Unwanted: On the Entitlement to Consent" in *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (Crown Publishing), ch. 4.
3. David Boonin (2024), "Deception and Sexual Consent" in *Sexual Ethics and Problematic Consent: When does Yes Mean No?*, ch. 5.

November 18: Asymmetric relationships

Does power or hierarchy undermine consent?

1. Amia Srinivasan (2021) "On Not Sleeping With your Students" in *The Right to Sex*.
2. [Joseph Fischel \(2019\) "The Trouble With Mothers' Boyfriends, or Against Uncles"](#) in *Screw Consent*.

November 25: Consenting to Harm?

Is it possible to consent to actions that harm you? Is BDSM completely self-regarding? Does BDSM reinforce male/female power dynamics? What implications might the normalization of BDSM have for gender equality?

1. [Joseph Fischel \(2019\) "Kinks and Cannibals, or why we should probably ban American football"](#) in *Screw Consent*.
2. Elizabeth Sheehey, Isabel Grant & Lisa Gotell (2020), "The misogyny of the so-called 'rough sex defence' *Policy Options*, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2020/the-misogyny-of-the-so-called-rough-sex-defence/>
3. Meghan Murphy (2013) "No, being kinky does not grant you minority status." *Feminist Current* <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2013/03/05/no-being-kinky-does-not-grant-you-minority-status/>

December 2: Sexual violence

Is rape a political act or just like any other crime? How does rape/rape culture reinforce gender and racial inequality? Is rape a harm to women as a whole or just to individual victims?

1. Keith Burgess-Jackson (2000) "A Crime Against Women: Calhoun on the Wrongness of Rape" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 31(3).
2. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) "Assume the Position: The Changing Contours of Sexual Violence" in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (Taylor & Francis).
3. Sarah Clark Miller (2009) "Moral Injury and Relational Harm: Analyzing Rape in Darfur" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40(4).

December 9 – In Class Essay

Course Policies

Make Ups/Missed Work

No make ups will be granted by the course instructor. If you require an accommodation for medical, compassionate, or exam conflict reasons, you must contact Academic Counselling/Accessible Education. You will only be eligible to take the make up exam/write the make up in class essay if it is approved by Academic Counselling/Accessible Education. **If you are accommodated by academic counselling for an assessment, you do not need to email me because instructors are sent an automatic notification.** Make up dates/times will be decided after the standard exam/essay has taken place.

Grade Appeals

You must wait at least 48 hours after you receive your grade and then email me 2-3 paragraphs detailing why you believe your assessment deserves a better grade (not why you need a better grade)—e.g., things you believe were overlooked, misunderstood, etc. Note that this can also result in your mark going down. No appeals will be considered more than 1 week after the assignment feedback was returned.

Grade Requests/Extra Credit

I do not give ‘grade bumps’ or offer extra credit. I understand that many of you are seeking high marks to gain entry into Ivey, law school, graduate school, or for scholarships. However, I do not provide grade bumps, make-up work, or extra credit. These requests are not fair to those students who accept their grade and are competing for the same opportunities.

Missed Lectures

The instructor does not provide lecture notes for students who miss class and nor am I able to cover the material individually in office hours. If you have to miss a class, you are strongly encouraged to ask for notes from a classmate.

Email Policy

I do my best to respond to emails in a timely way, despite the high volume I receive. However, I do not routinely check my email in the evenings or on the weekends. You are welcome to email me at your convenience, but should not expect a response during those times (but there might be a welcome surprise if I do check). You’re strongly advised not to wait until the night before an assignment/exam to email with questions. If I have not responded within 48 business hours, feel free to send me a nudge with the following caveat. I do not respond to emails that:

1. Ask questions that are answered in this syllabus (e.g., “can I use an undocumented absence on the essay?”).
2. Ask questions that were already explained in a course-wide email (e.g., “I know you emailed saying that there is an extension on the essay but I just wanted to check that there’s an extension on the essay”).
3. Request grade bumps or extra credit (e.g., “I need an 80% average to get into Ivey, so would you consider rounding my mark up by 2%?”)

Grade Adjustments

In order to ensure that comparable standards are applied in political science courses, the Department may require instructors to adjust final marks to conform to Departmental guidelines. According to departmental policy, final marks ending in 0.45 or higher will be rounded up to the nearest whole number. Marks ending in 0.44 or lower will be rounded down to the nearest whole number.