

DRAFT

The Politics and Ethics of Sex

POLISCI 3335F

Wednesdays 2:30-4:20

Fall 2025

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 short 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. 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—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, 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. They are all scholarly and considered in nature. However, given the nature of the 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.

In-Class Writing Responses (21%)

At the end of every class students will write a short response to a question provided in class about the day's lecture and discussion. These will be written by hand so please ensure that you bring a pen or pencil to every class. I will provide answer booklets. You must be present for the entirety of the class in order to submit this work. These will be marked on a scale of 1-3 and feedback on the responses will only be provided if the work does not receive a 3. Each response is worth 3% and the best 7 will count. **Given the flexibility inherent in the top-7 policy, these responses are not eligible for absence without documentation.**

Midterm Exam (39%) – October 29

1.5h exam held in class. The exam will be an in-class handwritten essay style exam. You will answer 2 questions out of a choice of 5. Booklets will be provided. **This assessment is not eligible for the absence without documentation.**

Essay Proposal (15%) – due November 16.

You must submit a 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. You must also include 5 academic sources that you will cite in your paper (no more than 2 can be from the weekly reading list), and for each provide a paragraph (4-10 sentences) explanation of what each source argues and why you have selected it. For example, you may use the source to argue for your thesis. You might also use a source that argues *against* what you will argue. Or perhaps you will use a source that provides empirical data in support/against a position that you are analyzing. Whatever the case, you must clearly explain how the source will be used and why it serves the purpose for which you have selected it. The more specific (e.g., you might know specific quotes that you want to use in your paper) the better. I understand that plans can change in the course of writing, so you will not be held to the exact outline or even thesis that you provide in the proposal. However, the topic/question cannot be changed after the proposal is approved.

Critical Essay (25%) – due December 5

Write a 1500 word essay on a topic of your choice (related to course material). You may choose to answer a particular question or to critically respond to one of the academic articles/chapters in the reading list.

COURSE SCHEDULE

September 10: Introduction to the Course

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

September 17: 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) *Material Girls*, ch. 4 & 5.

September 24: 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.

October 1: Sexual Preferences: Race

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. Mitchell, Megan & Mark Wells (2018) "Race, Romantic Attraction, and Dating" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*

October 8: Prostitution

Does prostitution enhance or diminish prostitutes' autonomy? Should sex be for sale? 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 15: 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.

October 22: 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.

October 29 – Midterm Exam

November 5 – READING WEEK

November 12: 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 19: 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/>

November 26: 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 3 – Essay Conference

Bring your essay outline to receive feedback from the instructor and your peers.

Course Policies

Late or Missing Work

Late work will incur a penalty of 5% per day or part thereof^[1].

You must submit the essay to pass the course. This means that if you do not submit (for example) the essay, but do very well on other elements, you will still not pass the course.

Exams that are missed without accommodation will receive a mark of 0.

Extensions/Make Up Exams

No extensions or missed exam accommodations 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 get an extension if it is approved by Academic Counselling/Accessible Education, and it will be for however many days they approve. For example, if the essay is due on the 20th, and you have an extension from the 20th to the 22nd, your essay will be due on the 22nd. If you receive an accommodation that begins after the essay due date, you will be accommodated for those

days, but not the ones in between the due date and the start of your accommodations. For example, if the essay is due on the 1st and you have accommodation from the 3rd-5th, then you will accrue late penalties from the 1st until the 3rd. **If you are accommodated by academic counselling, you do not need to email me because instructors are sent an automatic notification.**

Students who have the “flexibility with assignment deadlines” accommodation from Accessible Education do NOT need to email me. You must contact academic counselling to have an extension approved and it will be for a maximum of 3 days. Longer extensions will not be granted (unless the counsellors see fit). Having the “flexibility with assignment deadlines” accommodation does not apply to the date you write the exams.

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 they 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.