

## PHIL470/POLS404: The Politics of the Body

### Critical question assignment: rubric and FAQs

Through the term you will be asked to motivate and pose *four* critical questions, each about *one* of the assigned readings (or section of a reading). In effect this is a short writing assignment that concludes with a question.

**Length: not more than 250 words**, or one double-spaced page. Please don't exceed the word limit, and note the number of words you wrote on your assignment. Assignments that exceed the word limit by more than 50 words will get a warning the first time, and one grade deducted (e.g. B- to C+) on subsequent occasions.

**Deadline:** each assignment is **due by 5pm the Tuesday before the class** in which we are reading your text and can be **e-mailed to me** as a Word attachment and/or included in the body of the message. If I receive your assignment after 5pm but before 9.30am on Wednesday then I'll deduct just one grade for lateness (e.g. a B+ becomes a B). If I receive your assignment any later it will get a 0; I'll be happy to assign you a new reading for a later week if you have a compelling excuse (e.g. sudden nasty illness, family emergency etc.). (I won't ask for any evidence of this but I'll just use an honour system. Computer glitches and general disorganization don't count as "compelling.")

#### What is "motivating" a question?

The assignment is designed to test your comprehension of the reading as well as encourage you to think about its strengths and weaknesses. So you need to show in a few linked sentences why the question you are going to pose comes out of the actual argument of the text. This will require quoting, citing, or paraphrasing the author's position correctly and fairly (with reference to particular passages or page numbers). You also need to show why there is a tension, problem, lacuna, elision, or omission in the text that the author would need to take seriously, and that will point towards a question the class can discuss.

#### What is a good critical question?

A good critical question emerges from your motivating comments, and picks up on a tension or lacuna in the text. It need not be hostile or negative, but it should be something that the text's author would think they needed to respond to. Often a good indicator of a successful critical question is that it provokes interesting class discussion, and indeed I'll sometimes introduce your questions to the class to test this criterion. A "question" is an interrogative sentence; i.e. one that ends in a question mark. It is not a statement.

#### What is a bad question?

A question that could be asked of any reading (e.g. "this analysis is all very well, but what course of action does [author X] recommend?," or "[author Y] makes some good points, but why didn't she discuss [another topic]?") are generally not very strong, unless something in your motivation makes them more specific. Questions that rest on a sloppy or inaccurate reading of the text won't do well: if the author could just respond, "but I wasn't arguing that," then obviously the question won't have legs. A question that can be answered with "yes" or "no" also generally doesn't have a lot behind it.

## Why is this a useful assignment?

Pedagogically, it tests careful reading and text comprehension, the ability to situate an argument in a larger intellectual and political context, and the ability to see problems with a position. There are lots of academic contexts where being able to motivate and pose a good question is a key skill—at public talks, in a seminar, just talking to someone else about a text, etc. It's also a totally transferable democratic skill: think about what it takes to ask a good critical question at a public hearing, in a court, or at a political meeting.

## Can you give me some actual examples of the assignment done well?

### Example 1:

Moi criticizes the belief that turning sex into more “multiple” categories will relax social norms, because this view, she argues, presupposes biological determinism (Moi 2000, 39). “If we are serious about denying that biology can justify social norms,” she says, “it follows that the question of how many sexes there are or ought to be has *no necessary* ideological or political consequences whatsoever” (40). So we can maintain in good conscience that there are, biologically speaking, only two sexes; and this allows, she says, for difficult cases—intersexuality, transvestism, transsexuals and others prove only that there will always be “ambiguous, unclear, borderline cases” (39). This seems like a simplification of the issue, especially in light of Moi’s reasonable view that our bodies have an impact on our way of being in the world (40)—in particular, Moi maintains that the body is deeply related to human subjectivity. But then isn’t it reasonable to think that how the body is indexed by science has an effect on human subjectivity and identity? An intersexed person or transsexual might think, since they are considered by science to be an “ambiguous, unclear, borderline case,” that the part of their identity that is informed by their bodies is misrecognized or not recognized by science, or by society at large (insofar as science has an impact on society’s ideas and norms). Can’t we legitimately find this to be problematic, and so challenge the idea that there are only two sexes, without presupposing in the way Moi suggests that biology *justifies* social norms? [256 words]

### Example 2:

Joan Scott wishes to articulate gender as an analytic category. To do so she says that historians need to “examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organizations, and historically specific cultural representations” (Scott 1990, 1086). In other words, we need to think about gender as it functions in particular contexts; it doesn’t exist prior to actual lived human experience. She says that gender (as an analytic category) provides us with a way to *decode* meaning and understand complex connections among various forms of human interaction. The symbolic template generated by our analysis of gender provides insight into intersubjective contexts where gender is not obviously at stake. In speaking about how the symbolic language of gender is implicated with power relationships, however, Scott uses the idea of “gender” to stand in as a code for those relationships themselves (i.e. “strong, ruling, overtaking, dominating etc.” are all “masculine” notions invested with power, while “diminutive, dominated, ruled, overtaken etc.” are all “feminine” notions which signify powerlessness). One of the important ways we are able to *read* power is through the conceptual lens of gender dichotomies, and these dichotomies reinforce these same systems of power. How can gender both be the symbolic meaning for social relationships of power, and the tool by which we can simultaneously decode social relationships invested with these meanings? Is there a tension here? [237 words]