Political Correctness

Geoffrey Hughes

A History of Semantics and Culture

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To the memory of George Orwell,
who understood political correctness
in so many guises

Contents

Preface

This book aims to do three things. It studies the origins, progress, content and style of political correctness from the opening salvos of the academic debate in the United States to its recent global manifestations. These have proved to be protean, some would say "hydra-headed," covering all manner of agendas and linguistically embedded prejudices. For readers now familiar with these often dour semantic battles, I thought it would be interesting to bring in other dimensions. One is to show that political correctness of one sort or another has been a feature of English society for centuries, certainly since the English Reformation. The other is, broadly, to introduce the stimulating and varied evidence of culture, literature, thought, and images from "the absorbing past," as Lord Acton called it.

The campus debate showed academics with their gloves off, some of them defending unexpected corners. As the proposals for sanitizing the language, and therefore by implication the public mind, took on a Swiftian earnestness, a new (or supposedly new) species, the "public intellectual" emerged from the Ivory Tower to engage in, variously, the Battle of the Books, the Culture Wars, and the nature, function, and soul of the university. Several of these issues had, of course, been raised and debated by those Victorian sages Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, Cardinal Newman, and Thomas Carlyle. But now institutions of higher learning formulated speech codes, designed to suppress or inhibit offensive language. Contrary codes were also at work, in stigmatizing acronyms like the recycled *WASP* and the newer *DWEM* (standing for "dead white European male," thus both racist and sexist). Their currency remained unchecked. Double standards proliferated, especially in the matter of "difference": it was acceptable to publish research findings demonstrating racial differences in health or sporting ability, but not in IQ scores and college admissions. What was increasingly called "PC" seemed to be the kind of social engineering which springs from the best of intentions, but can bring out less healthy Puritanical impulses

in a society, as did Prohibition, the Communist witch-hunt and the abortion issue.

Who started it? Some, notably Doris Lessing, saw political correctness as the natural continuum of the Communist party line. Others saw "political correctness" as a label systematically deployed by those on the right to discredit views challenging the status quo. Who was right? Or were both right? Even more mysterious than the source was the efficacy and the acceptance of political correctness. Comparisons with "Orwellian" thought control and semantic engineering were made from the start, but where was the Politburo? Artificial formulas like *physically challenged*, *differently abled*, *sex worker*, and numerous other oddities, some being bureaucratic coinages, gained a certain official currency but proved unsustainable in normal discourse. Most strangely, even from the early 1990s when the debate was in full swing, virtually everybody disowned political correctness. It had become a code language without a visible champion. Since then it has been heavily criticized as "The most powerful mental tyranny in what we call the free world" (Lessing, 2004). Is this an overstatement by Lessing or a wise warning from an experienced combatant?

What about the world before it was "free"? Literature illuminates the topic in many fascinating ways. Our greatest dramatist wrote some plays which uphold traditional ideas of authority, but others which interrogate and even subvert this notion. "Family values" proves another highly problematic concept in his work, for his insights into sibling rivalry are deeply disturbing. Many of the agendas of political correctness surface in his plays, notably prejudice against the most conspicuous outsiders, Jews, blacks, the disabled, even the Puritans. A good case can be made for the view that from about 1600 Shakespeare seems intentionally to have written plays which deal with irresolvable moral and political problems. Nor was he alone: "I think hell's a fable" was just one provocative notion floated by Marlowe in *Dr Faustus*. The focus of criticism has also changed from the personal to the political: increasing emphasis on colonialism has radically reinterpreted plays like *Othello* and *The Tempest*. A recent production had the final words of Prospero's Epilogue, "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free," addressed not to the audience, as the context indicates, but to Caliban.

The time line and the global range can be extended. Two centuries before Shakespeare, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which was created in a supposedly harmonious social setting of "quiet hierarchies" (Robertson, 1963, p. 51), contains typical expressions of xenophobia, racism, sexism, ageism and lookism, even vestiges of the class struggle. A century after Shakespeare's death, Alexander Pope boldly criticized "The right divine of

kings to govern wrong," while Jonathan Swift satirized all manner of institutions. They have had many distinguished followers. The structure of the book accordingly accommodates these historical and literary dimensions. In addition, South Africa required some coverage, because the nation has been in a unique political and social time warp, only recently emerging from apartheid to deal with the issues of democracy, national identity, affirmative action and various forms of empowerment in a multicultural society.

Is the world "free" now, in terms of reasonable people without a clear political agenda being able to speak their minds on matters of public importance? Or has the notion of what is "offensive" or "unacceptable" or "inappropriate" or "racist" now taken on such broad and intrusive dimensions that open debate on contentious issues is an impossibility? Has political correctness succeeded in redefining morality by the introduction of the new concept of "ethical living"? Has it succeeded in eliminating prejudice? Or has it enabled some to be quicker to "take offense" where none was intended, forcing others into elaborate stratagems to avoid "giving offense"?

Political correctness is a serious matter, grounded in suffering, prejudice, and difference, and has certainly made everyone consider the plight of others, giving a new emphasis to respect. But it has also provoked a great deal of satire, irony, and humor, which have their place in a study of this kind. Some of it is unexpected: we have become used to Jews and blacks telling jokes about themselves and reclaiming ethnic slurs; but now we have jokes being told about cripples, by cripples who insist on using that designation. Consequently, the earlier tendency to see things in dichotomous terms of plain black and white is increasingly complicated.

The problem of finishing the book was similar to those faced in my previous attempts at a history of swearing, since history does not stop (obviously), and political correctness continues to influence our behavior in manifold ways, virtually every week bringing some new episode or outrage. I began to feel the force of Lytton Strachey's brilliant paradox in the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*: "The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it." Furthermore, mine was a "hot topic." Of previous books people would say, "How interesting!" Now several asked, "Will it get you into trouble?"

There was also the problem of what to call it. Most of the early PC titles were melodramatic, relying on "War" and "Police," words which have been rather overdone. Among many suggestions were: "The Rise and Fall of Meaning," "Shifting Agendas," "Conflicting Agendas," "Exploring the Unacceptable," "Zones of Controversy," "Mere Words," "Verbal Minefields," and "What Can One Say?" In the end a simple descriptive title seemed best.

I must express my gratitude to several people who helped shape the work. David Crystal shrewdly perceived a structure that was lacking in the somewhat inchoate first draft. Danielle Descoteaux has been an ideal editor, supportive, enthusiastic, but tactfully critical. Also in the Boston team, Julia Kirk gave excellent editorial support. The final text was greatly improved by the meticulous and sensitive editing of Jenny Roberts. I was greatly assisted by my good friend and colleague Peter Knox-Shaw, who read the first draft and made valuable suggestions; by the assistance of the indefatigable Tanya Barben of the Rare Books Department at the University of Cape Town Library; and by my dear son Conrad, who enlightened me in unfamiliar areas of popular culture. My beloved wife Letitia has, as always, been an endlessly patient reader and partner.

Geoffrey Hughes

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Epigraphs

Let her [Truth] and falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter? (John Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1644)

He nevere yet no vileyne ne sayde,
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
(He had never in his life said anything
Disrespectful to any kind of person.)
(Chaucer, *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, ll. 70–2)

MARIA: Sometimes he [Malvolio] is a kind of Puritan.
SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK: O, if I thought that I'd beat him like a dog.
SIR TOBY BELCH: What! For being a Puritan? Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?
(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II, 3, ll. 153–5)

He was the great Hieroglyphick of Jesuitism, Puritanism, Quaqerism [sic] and of all the Isms from Schism. ("Hercalio Democritus," *Vision of Purgatory*, 1680)

Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write . . . Let every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a-flowing. (John Adams, *Liberty and Knowledge*, 1765)

Clear your mind of cant. (Dr Johnson, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, 1791)

. . . the principle of free thought – not free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought that we hate. (Justice Holmes, *United States v. Schwimmer*, 1929)

The most powerful mental tyranny in what we call the free world is Political Correctness. (Doris Lessing, "Censorship," 2004)

True literature can exist only where it is created not by diligent and trustworthy officials, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics. (Yevgeny Zamyatin, "I am Afraid," 1921)

Part I

Political Correctness and its Origins

Chapter 1

Defining Political Correctness

Preamble and Rationale: Words and Ideas, Norms and Values

Political correctness became part of the modern lexicon and, many would say, part of the modern mind-set, as a consequence of the wide-ranging public debate which started on campuses in the United States from the late 1980s. Since nearly 50 percent of Americans go to college, the impact of the controversy was widespread. It was out of this ferment that most of the new vocabulary was generated or became current. However, political correctness is not one thing and does not have a simple history. As a concept it predates the debate and is a complex, discontinuous, and protean phenomenon which has changed radically, even over the past two decades. During just that time it has ramified from its initial concerns with education and the curriculum into numerous agendas, reforms, and issues concerning race, culture, gender, disability, the environment, and animal rights.

Linguistically it started as a basically idealistic, decent-minded, but slightly Puritanical intervention to sanitize the language by suppressing some of its uglier prejudicial features, thereby undoing some past injustices or "leveling the playing fields" with the hope of improving social relations. It is now increasingly evident in two opposing ways. The first is the expanding currency of various key words (to be listed shortly), some of a programmatic nature, such as *diversity*, *organic*, and *multiculturalism*. Contrariwise, it has also manifested itself in speech codes which suppress prejudicial language, disguising or avoiding certain old and new taboo topics. Most recently it has appeared in behavioral prohibitions concerning the environment and violations of animal rights. As a result of these transitions it has become a misnomer, being concerned with neither *politics* nor *correctness* as those terms are generally understood.

Political correctness inculcates a sense of obligation or conformity in areas which should be (or are) matters of choice. Nevertheless, it has had a major influence on what is regarded as "acceptable" or "appropriate" in language, ideas, behavioral norms, and values. But "doing the right thing" is, of course, an oversimplification. There is an antithesis at the core of political correctness, since it is liberal in its aims but often illiberal in its practices: hence it generates contradictions like *positive discrimination* and *liberal orthodoxy*. In addition, it has surprising historical and literary antecedents, surfacing in different forms and phases in Anglo-Saxon and global culture.

Although this book is called a "history," it is not really possible to write a conventional sequential history incorporating all these themes, of which there are basically six: political, literary, educational, gender, cultural, and behavioral. This is a large, interesting, but unwieldy package. The choice of "semantics" in the title rather than the broader and more familiar "language" is intentional, mainly because much of the debate was and continues to be about the changing of names, what are commonly known as "Orwellian" substitutions, and many of the practices which – rightly or wrongly – have given "semantics" a questionable name in popular parlance. Semantics (the study of meaning) is, of course, a respectable branch of linguistics unassociated with this practice, and much of the book is taken up with analyzing the semantic changes undergone by individual terms and in the evolution of word-fields.

Any discussion of political correctness necessarily involves its inseparable obverse, political incorrectness, just as "A History of Manners" would perforce involve bad manners, and "A History of Propaganda" would involve not only the techniques employed by propagandists, but the reactions of those being influenced and the strategies of counterpropaganda. For, just as people are suspicious of propaganda and resist it, so the institution of new taboos, especially against referring to personal features of size, color, addiction, and so on invokes feelings, even charges of censorship. These pressures provoke a counterreaction of satire, opportunistic defiance, and outrages, especially in popular culture. These reactions are covered in chapter 8. For all these reasons, the topic cannot be simply reduced to the standard template of "a definition," a "story," and a "conclusion." This complexity in part explains this book's structure.

The origins are in many ways the strangest feature. "Political Correctness is the natural continuum of the party line. What we are seeing once again is a self-appointed group of vigilantes imposing their views on others. It is a heritage of communism, but they don't seem to see this." So wrote Doris Lessing in the *Sunday Times* (May 10, 1992), continuing in this vein in her trenchant essay "Censorship" (2004), which is quoted

among the epigraphs above. She was unambiguous and certainly right: political correctness first emerged in the diktats of Mao Tse-Tung, then chairman of the Chinese Soviet Republic, in the 1930s. But over half a century later it had mutated, rematerializing in a totally different environment, in an advanced secular capitalist society in which freedom of speech had been underwritten by the Constitution for two centuries, and in American universities, of all places. As Christopher Hitchens acutely observed: "For the first time in American history, those who call for an extension of rights are also calling for an abridgement of speech" (in Dunant, 1994, pp. 137–8).

Far from being a storm in an academic inkwell, political correctness became a major public issue engaged in by a whole variety of participants including President George Bush (briefly), public intellectuals, major academics, and journalists of all hues and persuasions. Some claim that the debate was a manufactured rather than a natural phenomenon, and that political correctness started as a chimera or imaginary monster invented by those on the Right of the political spectrum to discredit those who wished to change the status quo. These matters are taken up in chapter 2 "The Origins and the Debate." The fact is that the debate certainly took place. Exchanges were often acrimonious, focusing on numerous general issues of politics, ideology, race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, the curriculum, freedom of expression and its curtailment and so on. All of these will be discussed and developed.

This work attempts a detailed semantic analysis of how the resources of the language have been deployed, especially in forms of semantic engineering and the exploitation of different registers, both to formulate the new agendas, values, and key words of political correctness and to subvert them. A whole new semantic environment has come into being, through creation, invention, co-option, borrowing, and publicity: a representative sample of this new world of words includes *lookism*, *phallocratic*, *other*, *significant other*, *sex worker*, *multicultural*, *herstory*, *disadvantaged*, *homophobic*, *waitron*, *wimmin*, *differently abled*, *to Bork*, *physically challenged*, *substance abuse*, *fattist*, *Eurocentric*, *Afrocentric*, *demographics*, *issue*, *carbon footprint*, *glass ceiling*, *pink plateau*, and *first people*, as well as code abbreviations like *DWEM*, *PWA*, *HN*, and *neo-con*.

These are not simply new words, in the way that Shakespeare's *incarnadine*, *procreant*, *exsufflicate*, *be-all and end-all*, *unmanned*, *assassination*, and *yesterdays* were original forms four centuries ago. They are more like Orwell's artificial coinages in Newspeak, for instance, *thoughtcrime*, *joycamp*, and *doublethink*. Many are of a completely different order of novelty, opaqueness, and oddity, several of a character aptly described by the

doughty Dr Johnson two centuries ago as "scarce English." The reaction of the uninitiated, and many of the educated, to this strange new galaxy of word formations or, some would say, deformations, is like that described by Edward Phillips in his *New World of Words*: "Some people if they spy but a hard word are as much amazed as if they had met with a Hobgoblin" (cited in Baugh, 1951, p. 260). That was in 1658, when new words of classical origin were still not welcomed as potential denizens, but rather regarded with suspicion as dubious immigrants disturbing "the King's English" (as it has been called since 1553).

Language theoretically belongs to all, but is often changed by only a few, many of them anonymous. Resentment at interference or sudden changes in the language has a long history. It started in the sixteenth century with the Inkhorn Controversy, a contretemps about the introduction of alien classical vocabulary, or hostility at semantic innovation of the kind Phillips satirized. In the long run most of these "hard words" as they were originally called, have been accepted. But it has been a very long run. Political correctness is still a relatively new phenomenon, and the serious or general acceptance of these words is still a matter of debate.

Let us briefly consider a fairly recent focused linguistic intervention, the attempt by feminists to alter or enlarge the stock of personal pronouns and to feminize agent nouns like *chairman* in order to diminish the dominance of the male gender, traditionally upheld in the grammatical dictum that "the male subsumes the female." Proposals for forms such as *s/he* were successful in raising consciousness, but produced few long-term survivals. Forms like *wimmin* and *herstory* became objects of satire, while the extensive replacement of *man* by *person* aroused some strong reactions: "I resent this ideological intrusion and its insolent dealings with our mother (perhaps I should say 'parent') tongue," wrote Roger Scruton (1990, p. 118). Scruton's mocking parody "parent tongue" is a response we shall see replicated many times in reactions to politically correct language. Nevertheless, some new forms like *chairperson* and *spokesperson* have managed to establish themselves.

Another comparison can be made with radical political discourse. Communism attempted to establish a whole new ideological discourse by means of neologisms like *proletariate*, semantic extensions like *bourgeois*, and by co-opting words like *imperialist* and *surplus*. Hard-line Communists still call each other "comrade" and refer to "the workers," "the collective," "capital," and the "party line," terms which are regarded by outsiders (who now form the majority) with irony and humor. For the days and locales when Communists could impose semantic norms on populations have long disappeared.

There are three characteristics which make political correctness a unique sociolinguistic phenomenon. Unlike previous forms of orthodoxy, both religious and political, it is not imposed by some recognized authority like the Papacy, the Politburo, or the Crown, but is a form of semantic engineering and censorship not derivable from one recognized or definable source, but a variety. There is no specific ideology, although it focuses on certain inequalities and disadvantaged people in society and on correcting prejudicial attitudes, more especially on the demeaning words which express them. Politically correct language is the product and formulation of a militant minority which remains mysteriously unlocatable. It is not the spontaneous creation of the speech community, least of all any particular deprived sector of it. Disadvantaged groups, such as the deaf, the blind, or the crippled (to use the traditional vocabulary), do not speak for themselves, but are championed by other influential public voices.

In these respects political correctness has a very different dynamic from the earlier high-profile advocates of, say, feminism or black consciousness in the USA. The feminists of the second wave, such as Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinem, and Susan Sontag, were highly articulate, individual, and outspoken controversialists who did not always agree with each other, characteristics shared by Martin Luther King, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X. By contrast, the anonymous agenda-manipulators of political correctness are more difficult to identify. These features make the conformity to political correctness the more mysterious.

Paradoxically, political correctness manifested itself rapidly and most strongly, not in political parties, but on university campuses; not in the closed societies of Eastern Europe, but in free Western societies, especially in America, the only country in the world where freedom of speech is a constitutional right. Much play was accordingly made about the rights enshrined in the First Amendment, their "ownership" and their proper application.

In addition to these contemporary issues, it is important to recognize both a historical and a moral dimension, that is, to be aware that political correctness is not an exclusively modern manifestation. Accordingly, it is enlightening to consider some earlier forms of changing orthodoxies and their semantic correlatives, as well as the moral imperatives which these changing orthodoxies have generated. In many ways there has been a continuing dialectic between political orthodoxy and dissent since the sixteenth century, virtually since the invention of printing. Reflection shows that political correctness of one sort or another has been a feature of English society for centuries, certainly since the English Reformation, the first major political change which was not an invasion.

Furthermore, literature illuminates the topic in many fascinating ways. Our greatest dramatist, for instance, wrote some plays which uphold traditional ideas of authority and the Divine Right, but others which interrogate this notion. "Family values" proves another highly problematic concept in his work, for his insights into sibling rivalry are deeply disturbing. Very few love relationships are free of hostility, jealousy, or tragic interference. A good case can be made for the view that from about 1600 Shakespeare seems intentionally to have written plays which deal with irresolvable moral and political problems. Major issues are not buried in the subplot or in speeches of minor characters. No audience could fail to be disturbed or provoked by a whole series of resounding utterances, such as Hamlet's misogynist generalization "Frailty, thy name is woman," or Shylock's question "Hath not a Jew eyes?," or Falstaff's cynical view that "honor" is "a mere word," or by the bastard Edmund's dismissive comment on heredity: "fine word, legitimate!" A mere century later Alexander Pope was to mock "the right divine of kings to govern wrong," while two centuries before Shakespeare, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, created in a supposedly harmonious medieval social setting, contains biting satires of the ecclesiastical establishment and many unexpected expressions of xenophobia, racism, sexism, ageism, and lookism, even vestiges of the class struggle. Part IV accordingly seeks to accommodate these historical and literary dimensions.

In addition, the new South Africa offers a fruitful example of the semantic and social problems of "normalization" after the iniquities of apartheid. The nation has been in a political and social time warp, only recently emerging from the agendas of colonialism, white domination, and racial separation to deal with the issues of democracy, national identity, affirmative action, and various forms of empowerment in a multicultural society. These aspects are covered in this chapter, in chapter 5, and in the Conclusion.

What is Political Correctness?

This fundamental question has become increasingly difficult to answer as new agendas have materialized. Most people would frame answers along the lines of "It means not using words like *nigger*, *queer*, or *cripple*," or "It means showing respect to all," or "It means accepting and promoting diversity." These answers are adequate, but cover only the main issues, by means of proscription (the first) or prescription (the second and third). The emphases on offensive language, prejudiced attitudes, and insulting behavior towards the marginalized are central. The question is less easily answered in a comprehensive way, as the historical précis has suggested. Specific answers are supplied by verbal definition, by identifying role models,

by description of approved or bad practices, or assumptions about proper and improper behavior.

Leaving aside the theoretical and social aspects for the time being, let us briefly consider the epigraphs at the beginning of the book. It is striking that the oldest, from Chaucer's portrait of a medieval nobleman, describes a role model, an ideal of behavior (that of never saying anything disrespectful to anyone, regardless of status) which conforms with the best notions of political correctness. Chaucer evidently regards this aspect of his "verray, parfit gentil knyght" as both admirable and unusual. The exchange from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* shows us two very different knights, one idiotic, the other decadent. Although the comedy is set in Illyria, the issue is highly relevant. Sir Andrew Aguecheek's antagonism towards Malvolio as a suspected Puritan ("I'd beat him like a dog") has a contemporary edge of intolerance, which Sir Toby Belch's critical reproof rightly shows to be mindless: "For being a Puritan? Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?" Being tolerant towards the Puritans, who wished to impose their strict religious régime on all, who hated the theaters and eventually succeeded in closing them, required an act of considerable charity. But Sir Toby, for all his faults, has a balanced, *laissez faire* attitude. The kind of sectarian extremism which lay ahead is shown in the scathing references to "Jesuitism, Puritanism and Quaqerism [Quakerism] and of all the Isms from Schism" in the remarkable quotation from 1680. From a different perspective, the quotations from Milton, John Adams, and Justice Holmes show a faith, indeed an insistence, on open debate and in "the principle of free thought," attitudes which are often lacking from modern political and educational forums, a point which Doris Lessing argues strongly. Indeed "free thought" and "free speech" are often seen to be curtailed by political correctness. Dr Johnson's famous dictum reminds us that though "cant" is now largely obsolete as a word, the plausible hypocrisy which it denotes still thrives, and is too often encountered.

The question could be put another way: what do speech codes, Chairman Mao, eating foie gras, the letters of Philip Larkin, *Tintin in the Congo*, George Orwell's *1984*, wearing fur, shock jocks, McCarthyism, Borat, AIDS jokes, Christmas cards, the films of Spike Lee, ethnic slurs, and *The Simpsons* have in common? At first sight, not much. Discussion of these topics will show that political correctness and its obverse, political incorrectness, are more easily recognized than defined, and that both appear in manifold forms.

Yet even this list is by no means exhaustive. A survey of instances culled from the British National Corpus (BNC) shows the phrase being applied to an extraordinary variety of entities, namely to individuals, culture, children's literature, musical bands, the mixture of ethnic groups, even a lasagne, as well as to language. Many of the quotations come from press

reports and analyses, some from book reviews, from novels and interviews. "Politically Correct movies are fairy tales" was an early comment in 1984 by Joel Schumacher, a film producer, in *The Scotsman*. Most of the quotations in the BNC date from the early 1990s, for instance references to "Glenda Jackson, the Politically Correct actress" and to "Politically Correct feminism" (both from the *Daily Telegraph*, 1992). Another report comments: "Politically Correct language was the order of the day at the BASW [British Association of Social Workers] conference as the debates centred on gender issues" (*Community Care*, 1993). An interviewee in the *Daily Express* comments: "I have a very good Politically Correct feminist side and a very glamour-oriented attention-getting whorey side, and they clash." These last three quotations show an equation of political correctness with feminism, an identification we shall encounter frequently. There is also, in British politics, an assumption that political correctness is a feature of the Left, seen in many quotations, such as: "Labour would preside over the entrenching of Political Correctness in the classroom" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). Many similar comments are recorded from 1992, the year of a general election. Socialist assumptions certainly seem to lie behind this item: "Another ruled that a grassy lawn was politically incorrect on the grounds that not all children have gardens" (*The Scotsman*).

Environmental issues appear, but in unexpected places: "Complaining that a recent photograph showed him with an unrecyclable styrofoam coffee cup, he denounced it as 'politically incorrect'" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). Benny Hill is described as "the politically incorrect comedian" (*Punch*, 1992), while an observation is made that "The culture is politically incorrect, so violence gets cheered" (*The Scotsman*). A comment from *Pilot* magazine concludes: "but you have to be politically correct these days!" (1992). Others are less concessive: "Terms such as 'faggot' may be unacceptable to polite society, in this age of Political Correctness, but clearly nothing has altered what goes on the privacy of the popular conscience" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). In similar tone: "Even in an era of 'Political Correctness', and hypersensitivity over racial slights, Eskimo Pie has retained its name and its logo" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992).

Two reports, both from *The Scotsman* in 1992, relate to children's literature: "A survey of children's authors by the writers' group PEN suggests that publishers are not content merely with encouraging writers to be politically correct, but are actually censoring anything they feel to be politically incorrect." The second reports: "Indeed publishers told PEN they were under pressure from schools, libraries and local authorities to be politically correct." This aspect is discussed further under the "Censorship" section below. Fiction is a frequent candidate. "*The First Wives Club* is a very American book . . . in its fashionable Political Correctness: having taken

revenge on their rich, white, middle aged husbands, the ex-wives find true love with, variously, a lesbian, an impoverished Puerto Rican lawyer, and a younger man" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). This last comment contains a clearly ironic observation on the "rich, white" husbands getting their just desserts, since the betrayed wives seek adventurous lives outside the bourgeois norms.

These topics are related to the previously listed aspects, namely: political, literary, educational, cultural, gender, and behavioral. Perhaps because many of the instances come from the early 1990s, they do not put much emphasis on later key aspects of political correctness, namely animal rights, colonialism, the environment, and AIDS. Many quotations identify an aspect of political correctness without defining it. It is merely asserted, for example, that various groups ". . . want a Labour win in order to impose Political Correctness" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). This practice clearly assumes that even then political correctness was recognizable in some way. We also notice that in all the early instances both "political" and "correctness" are capitalized.

What constitutes politically incorrect behavior? The characterization is not as simple as one would imagine, as the following table of "inappropriate" activities shows. These range from the serious to the trivial, covering linguistic modes, behavioral patterns, and lifestyle choices, and are designated by means of the symbols ✓ (yes) or ✗ (no) or ? (uncertain):

Inappropriate activities	**Politically incorrect**
using ethnic slurs	✓
religious swearing	✗
sexual swearing	?
pedophilia	✗
rape	✓
chauvinism	✓
sexism	✓
homophobia	✓
pornography	?
blasphemy	✗
racism	✓
domestic violence	?
cruelty to animals	✓
smoking cigarettes	✓
smoking cannabis	✗
wearing fur	✓
eating veal	✓
eating beef	✗

Even granted that the simple categorization of "yes" or "no" is obviously somewhat crude, and that not everybody would agree with all the allocations, the degree of inconsistency is extraordinary. It shows a feature which we shall encounter in different categories and locales, that of double or variable standards. Thus in the category of swearing, only ethnic slurs qualify unambiguously. Religious swearing generally does not: a recent survey showed that the name of Jesus was familiar to the majority of British children, but as a swearword. Sexual swearing is divided along gender lines: *bitch*, *cow*, and *cunt* definitely qualify, although not in all cases, while *fucker*, *bugger*, and *prick* do not. Indeed, the British celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay, especially notorious for his copious use of the word *fuck*, have achieved royal recognition. Feminists regard pornography as demeaning to women; most males do not. Under the category of blasphemy, *The Life of Brian* (1979) and *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (2005), grossly satirizing the life of Jesus, provoked protests, but not banning. Rejecting a subsequent appeal by Christian Voice against the Springer show, the Law Lords ruled that the appeal "does not raise an arguable point of law of general public importance" (*The Times*, March 5, 2008). Less comprehensible was the attempt to invoke the blasphemy law against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1989), discussed further in chapter 5 under "Islam." It failed on the grounds that the law covers only Christianity, its personages and articles of belief. While it is understandable that homophobia should be regarded as politically incorrect, it seems extraordinary that pedophilia is not, certainly not with the same detestation. And where to place treason? Who knows?

A number of the listed "inappropriate activities" are illegal; some are merely bad manners. But their correlation with what is regarded as politically incorrect is not simple. Thus smoking in nondesignated areas or using ethnic slurs are punishable by law. Similarly, religious swearing or farting in company are unacceptable breaches of manners or decorum. Political correctness occupies a behavioral space between the two. As has been mentioned, it inculcates a sense of obligation to conform in some areas (such as chauvinism or wearing fur) which, some would argue, should be matters of choice. This creates problems in a free society. At the same time, no one is obliged to be politically correct. Consequently, charges of censorship or fascism, which are often made, have to be analyzed closely.

Definitions

It is customary to answer the broader question with a definition. Here is a selection:

> Conformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive. (*Oxford Dictionary of New Words*, 1997)

> The most powerful mental tyranny in what we call the free world is Political Correctness, which is both immediately evident, and to be seen everywhere, and as invisible as a kind of poison gas, for its influences are often far from the source, manifesting as a general intolerance. (Doris Lessing, 2004)

> Political Correctness is a concept invented by hard-rightwing forces to defend their right to be racist, to treat women in a degrading way and to be truly vile about gay people. They invent these people who are Politically Correct, with a rigid, monstrous attitude to life so they can attack them. But we have all had to learn to modify our language. That's all part of being a human being. (Clare Short, *Guardian*, February 18, 1995)

As we can see here, and will see further in the argument, especially in chapter 2 and in Part II, there are various modes of definition. The first of these is authoritative and neutral, while the second and third are combative or tactical. Simply in terms of semantics, the first authority gives a balanced, referential account, using the key term "conformity," while the second and third use the rhetorical strategy of highly emotive terms like "powerful mental tyranny," "a kind of poison gas," "hard-rightwing forces," "truly vile," and so on. Their subtext is of a war going on. Yet on closer examination, the first definition fudges the issue in various ways, by using "liberal or radical," which have very different meanings, particularly in Britain and America; it also contains a series of begged questions arising from the terms *conformity*, *approved*, and *considered* – without identifying by whom.

Ideologically, the second and third explanations are, of course, diametrically opposed. Lessing derives political correctness from left-wing conformity which has bred "tyranny" and "general intolerance"; Short from a cynical right-wing stalking horse, "invented" to discredit liberal attitudes (*liberal* in the British sense of broad-minded, unprejudiced). But neither can truly identify the source, what Lessing in her previously cited quotation called "the party" and the "vigilantes" or what Short calls the "hard-rightwing forces," to whom they attribute this curious sociolinguistic phenomenon.

The two explanations are not, however, mutually exclusive, in that a strict form of orthodoxy may be initially acceptable to its hard-line followers, then be satirized by outsiders, and finally come to be denounced by the majority as an intolerant infringement of personal liberty. Thus Puritanism, often compared with political correctness, began as a worthy

reformist spiritual and doctrinal position within Christianity, before it became increasingly intolerant, satirized, and even regarded as un-Christian. Of many ironic quotations, this by the American Finley Peter Dunne on Thanksgiving (from *Mr Dooley's Opinions*, 1901) is one of the sharpest: "'Twas founded be [by] the Puritans to give thanks f'r being presarved fr'm the Indyans, and we keep it to give thanks we are presarved fr'm the Puritans." Lessing traces the development of political correctness as being similar to that of Puritanism:

> This began as a sensitive, honest and laudable attempt to remove the racial and sexual biases encoded in language, but it was at once taken over by the political hysterics, who made of it another dogma. . . . There could hardly be a conversation without it, and PC was used as often as the Victorians used "It isn't done", meaning socially improper, or to bolster the orthodoxies of "received opinion", or even to criticise the eccentric. (Lessing, 2004, p. 76)

"Fascism" has followed the same semantic pattern, being transformed from its strict Italian political origins to its broader sense of dictatorship and conformity. Roger Scruton has a notable essay on the topic in *Untimely Tracts* (1987). Today both "Puritan" and "Fascist" are, of course, highly critical terms. Paul Johnson defined political correctness as "liberal fascism" (cited in Kramer and Kimball, 1995, p. xii).

How adequate are the definitions so far offered? They are accurate, but only up to a point. What is obviously noteworthy about all of them is their lack of reference to what is really the most obvious semantic fact about political correctness, namely the emergence of a whole new series of artificial substitutions, some of them already listed, terms such as *abled*, *herstory*, *lookism*, *phallocentric*, *waitron*, and *wimmin*. Many other established terms, such as *challenged*, *Eurocentric*, *gay*, *homophobic*, *patriarchy*, and *person* have been given new meanings in the furtherance of particular agendas. Typically, politically correct language avoids judgmental terms, preferring an artificial currency of polysyllabic abstract euphemistic substitutions. Thus *drug addiction* is avoided, the preferred opaque formula being *substance dependence*; *visually impaired* is preferred to *blind*, while *sex worker* is the politically correct term for *prostitute*. Although *cripple* and *spastic* have become taboo, some formulas, such as *differently abled* for *disabled* have proved too artificial to gain real currency.

What is characteristic about the language? A detailed semantic analysis of the word field is to be found in chapter 4, while individual topics and forms are discussed under the various relevant headings in Part III. But in essence the language is unfamiliar and abstract, using high register classical