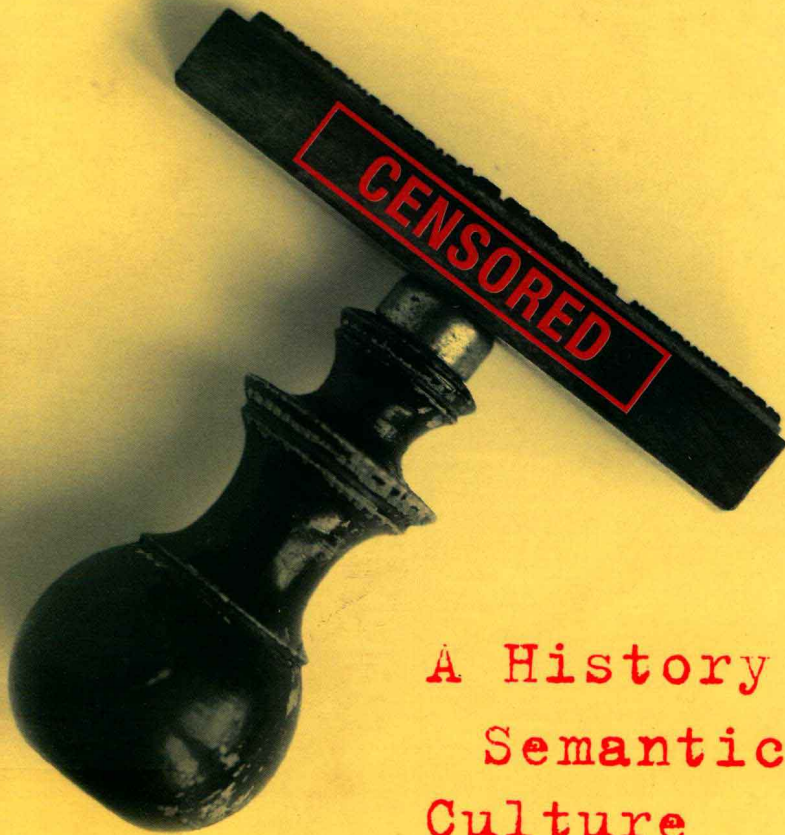# Political Correctness

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

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

Acknowledgments

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)

Contents

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.