

# Political Correctness and Higher Education

## British and American Perspectives

John Lea

Foreword by  
Jonathan Zimmerman

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## Foreword

In Philip Roth's 2000 novel, *The Human Stain*, American classics professor Coleman Silk is drummed out of his college for using the term 'spook'. The word has a long and nasty history as an anti-black epithet, of course. However Silk used it in a non-racial context, asking his class if several absent students were spooks – that is, ghosts – or real. And as the reader knows – but Silk's antagonists do not – he is black himself. Born to African-American parents, Silk 'passes' as a white person until the bitter end.

And the end *is* bitter, for all of us. At the most basic level, *The Human Stain* is a tragic reminder of the many ways in which race continues to confuse, enrage, and divide American society. But it is also a more specific indictment of the American university, especially of the language that administrators, professors, and students use to talk *about* race.

In other words, it's about being politically correct. And it's about you, if you work or study at a university.

Are you PC? Of course not. As John Lea makes clear in this remarkable little book, political correctness is a label that's always applied to the other guy. Like body odor or accented speech, we notice it in our peers but not in ourselves.

And it's not just an American phenomenon. In the US, of course, we like to think that we invented the sun, moon, and stars alongside the frisbee, the hamburger, and the electric guitar. In the early 1980s, we probably did coin the term 'politically correct' to denounce certain left-wing behaviors and attitudes. But a similar trend was already underway in the UK, where media outlets led a high-profile campaign against the 'Loony Left'. By the 1990s, it had transmuted into an all-out assault upon something called 'PC'. In the UK as well as in the US, it seemed, political correctness was a problem.

What *was* the problem, exactly? It depends on who you ask, of course, and where. But most complaints about PC have focused upon language – that is, upon the way that our words have changed. Sometime in the 1980s, the story goes, left-leaning American and British professors made racial minorities into 'people of color', the handicapped into the 'differently abled', and older students into 'non-traditional learners'. The rest of us – both inside and outside the university – followed behind.

And along the way, to continue this bleak winter's tale, we lost our capacity to reason and judge. The new idioms symbolize a kind of intellectual group-think, a herd mentality that discourages dissent, discussion, and debate. To critics in the US, who stand mostly on the political right, PC allowed sanctimonious liberals and radicals to impose their favorite hobby horses – especially

affirmative action and multiculturalism – upon the unwilling and the unwary. In the UK, where anti-PC jeremiads often come from the left, critics complained that PC's insistent focus on language – ‘mere words’ – diverted attention from more pressing structural and economic inequalities. The net result was a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland chamber of horrors, we are told, where nothing means what it says – and nobody says what they mean.

If all this sounds a bit overblown, it probably should. Critics of PC ‘dominance’ and ‘conformity’ have somehow found their own language for attacking it, which suggests that PC might not be so dominant after all. Especially in the US, meanwhile, they also exaggerate the power and influence of the university itself. Consider affirmative action, which holds that certain races and ethnicities – or, less often, certain social classes – should receive special consideration in university admissions. The idea is so deeply inscribed at American universities – in our language, in our conversations, and of course in our admission policies – that it might fairly be labeled ‘PC’. But not in American society, writ large, where affirmative action is one of the most hotly contested political questions of all. In this sense, PC's reach far exceeds its grasp. If anything, the entire phenomenon underscores the irrelevance of the university to contemporary society.

And that should worry anyone who teaches or studies there, no matter where they might sit on the political spectrum. The more that we tailor our words and thoughts to meet the imagined demands of our institutions, the less we have to say to people who live outside them. In the UK, PC is disseminated by an intimidating array of quasi-state agencies with bland bureaucratic names, like the Learning and Skills Council and the Adult Learning Inspectorate. But in the US, we do it to ourselves! Compared to their British brethren, American universities enjoy an extraordinary degree of independence and autonomy. Just as Tocqueville predicted, however, this very freedom can foster its own brand of conformity. I can list dozens of key figures in government, the media, and business who have inveighed against affirmative action. But I can't name a single prominent American university leader who has done so. That can't be good news for the university or even for affirmative action, which could only benefit from the deep scrutiny of a true scholarly dialogue.

In the end, that's the real danger of political correctness: it further isolates the university, all in the guise of making it more ‘relevant’ and ‘student-friendly’. And it brings us back to *The Human Stain*, where Coleman Silk's attackers surely believed that they were defending the college's black students (sorry: people of color!) from his alleged slur. But they were wrong. The truly spooky thing about PC is that it removes entire words and subjects from debate, including the term ‘political correctness’ itself. Perhaps John Lea's fine book can provide a small remedy, sparking exactly the type of discussion that all of us need.

Jonathan Zimmerman  
New York University

# Preface

The more I became interested in political correctness the less I found myself looking for the truth behind the hundreds of stories about so-called ‘PC behaviour’, and the more I became interested in what the term itself invokes. This book is about the latter rather than the former.

Given the huge imbalance between what has been written about political correctness in the US compared with Britain it is difficult to conduct a simple comparative study. For this reason the first section of the book, on the US, is an attempt to reflect on some of the broad themes which have emerged from this huge literature base, and the second section, on Britain, is a more speculative account, which attempts to draw on some of the more implicit implications of cultural debate on that side of the Atlantic. Part of the aim behind this book was to try to give British readers a clear sense of what all the fuss has been about in the US, and because of this many American readers, perhaps already very familiar with that scene, might prefer to begin reading the book from Chapter 8 onwards, which focuses on British perspectives. In the book itself the word ‘American’ should be read as a reference to the US, not the continent.

The specific context for the book is *higher education*. The term, however, does not translate easily between the two national contexts. Whereas in the US it might be readily taken to be a reference to education beyond school, in Britain the term tends to refer exclusively to university education. For this reason I have chosen to use the term post-16 education when writing specifically about the British national context.

I am extremely grateful to all the people who took part in the interviews which feature in the book: John Searle, Robin Lakoff, Genaro Padilla, Philip Day, John McWhorter, Jonathan Zimmerman, Allen McFarlane, Todd Gitlin, Kathryn Ecclestone, James Tooley, Dennis Hayes, Frank Furedi, Tony Booth, Irfaan Arif, Ruth Silver, and Angela Milln.

The interviews and the surrounding discussion were invaluable in helping me to understand some of the subtleties and nuances in debates that surround such a controversial term. And particular thanks go to Jonathan Zimmerman, who kindly agreed to write the foreword to the book, and to Tony Booth whose advice on the interpretation of transcript data was an enormous help. I am also extremely grateful to Ashleigh Stewart who painstakingly transcribed all the interviews, and to Nicky Galer who helped compile the references.

John Lea  
February 2008

# 1

## PC world

### *Political correctness and the modern zeitgeist*

STAN (AS LORETTA): 'It's every man's right to have babies if he wants them.'

REG: 'But you can't have babies.'

STAN (AS LORETTA): 'Don't you oppress me!'

(from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, scene 7, 1979;  
reprinted with permission from Python (Monty) Pictures Ltd)

JUDGE TO CARTMAN: 'I am making an example of you, to send a message out to people everywhere: that if you want to hurt another human being, you'd better make damn sure they're the same color as you are!'

(from *South Park* season 4 (1) *Cartman's Silly Hate Crime*, 2000; reprinted with permission)

WHEELCHAIR USER (AFTER ENTERING A PUBLIC RESTROOM):

'There's one stall for me and you're in it!'

LARRY DAVID: 'You know, if you were here I would have given you first dibs. But honestly I haven't seen a handicapped person in the bathroom maybe ever. So I thought I could perhaps take my chances.'

WHEELCHAIR USER: 'A handicapped person? That's nice. Oh, that's nice. It's called disabled.'

LARRY DAVID: 'Disabled? Well, that doesn't sound so hot.'

(from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, season 5 (2),  
*The Bowtie*, 2005; reprinted with permission)

### **Overview**

The term 'political correctness' (PC) has become part of the vocabulary of contemporary life both in Britain and, more especially, in the US. It seems to capture an essential quality of the modern zeitgeist and incidents have often become *causes célèbres*. It has also been able to accommodate both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, people have been able to demonstrate

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their progressive outlook by reference to it, but equally, and increasingly, people have been able to use it to distance themselves from what they see as the ludicrous and the demeaning. Rarely has a week gone by in the past twenty years when the term was not used to describe an unwarranted intrusion into the status quo of everyday professional life. In all of this, what is perhaps a little surprising is that the term, although part of a huge academic industry in the US, is rarely the subject of serious scholarly scrutiny in Britain. First and foremost, therefore, this book is an attempt to produce an Anglo-American cross-cultural analysis of the term.

The book will compare and contrast the history of the use of the term 'political correctness' in the US, where it has been widely discussed in the intellectual media, and in Britain, where the term has been mostly used in the popular media. The specific context in which the discussion will be applied is post-16 education (for Britain) or higher education (for the US), defined simply as educational institutions whose student body is beyond the statutory school leaving age (essentially colleges and universities). An undercurrent running throughout will be the extent to which political correctness has contributed either to the reprofessionalization or the deprofessionalization of teachers within this sector. The sub-headings used throughout this introduction will signpost some of the more specific dimensions that will be explored.

### Playing the PC game

It is not difficult to demonstrate that the term political correctness has invaded almost every area of the cultural landscape of Britain and the US. On the occasions when the term itself is not used it is obvious where there is an intention that it should be invoked. Furthermore it could be argued that the term has gained such wide currency particularly in the popular media that it can often be used without any need for explanation. In the most extreme cases the term appears to have been granted general permission to be used whenever someone is looking for a shorthand term to distance themselves from decisions they find unpalatable, and very often this is accompanied by the phrase 'That's political correctness gone mad!'

There is little doubt that stories and debates which surround the term are hotly contested, and only a cursory glance would indicate that, more often than not, the *gloves are off* and the ensuing fight is almost always a dirty one. From the accusation in the mid-1980s that UK local government councils in London had banned black coffee, black bin (trash) liners, and the nursery rhyme *Baa, Baa Black Sheep*, all for being racist, to the ridicule heaped on US colleges in the early 1990s for having established demeaning anti-harassment codes of conduct, including in one case a 'dating etiquette', it is clear that the PC terrain is a minefield (Curran *et al.* 2005; D'Souza 1992). Dogged by counter-accusations of exaggeration and fabrication it is perhaps not surprising that it is difficult to



get to the bottom of all this, and seek the truth. It is important to signpost that this book is not intended to be read as a whodunit, that is as an attempt to uncover what is the truth behind specific incidents which have been labelled PC. Rather, it is much more literally *about* political correctness: what the term itself invokes, and the contexts in which one is most likely to hear the term. In this sense the book does not ask where are the facts in PC stories, but asks why are the stories told in the way they are.

One of the most striking features of political correctness is just how quickly the term *is* invoked. For example, consider how many people living in Britain or the US in the early twenty-first century would be able instantly to connect the term with the extracts from popular media reproduced at the head of this chapter. In 1991 the *New York* magazine asked its readers ‘Are you politically correct?’ (Taylor 1991, reproduced in Beckwith and Bauman 1993). Fifteen years later the UK-based *The Mail on Sunday* newspaper produced the headline ‘We are biased admit the stars of BBC News’, where a veteran BBC executive is reported as saying: ‘There was widespread acknowledgement that we may have gone too far in the direction of political correctness. Unfortunately much of it is so deeply embedded in the BBC’s culture that it is very hard to change it’ (*The Mail on Sunday*, 22 October 2006).

It is not a question of us all somehow having become PC in the intervening years, but more that as this perception has grown the more this seems to have prompted others to become avowedly non-PC. In this respect PC seems to encapsulate much of what James Davison Hunter implied in his use of the term ‘culture wars’, that the US is fundamentally divided on key questions of right and wrong (Hunter 1991). PC might not have the same kind of moral underpinning as the ‘orthodox’ and ‘progressive’ mindsets he articulates, but it is clear that a real division exists on matters which have become associated with the term. One way to demonstrate this is through a simple question and answer game.

Please answer yes or no to the following questions:

- 1 Would you be concerned if you saw someone vociferously dismissing the validity of the *Qu’ran* on a TV show?
- 2 If you hear someone use the word ‘handicapped’ when referring to another person would you rather he or she had chosen an alternative word that you felt was more appropriate?
- 3 If you read a newspaper article where a journalist or author was beseeching single/lone parents not to be so dependent on welfare payments, would your first reaction be to question whether he or she fully understands the social circumstances of many families?

If you answered *yes* to all three questions, congratulations you win the game, and are officially ‘PC’. If you answered *no* to all three, commiserations you lose the game, and are officially ‘non-PC’. If your answers were a combination of

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*yes* and *no*, *maybe*, or *not sure*, then you are officially a ‘waiverer on matters of PC’. Finally, if you object to me congratulating the winners, then you might be either ‘super PC’, or ‘super non-PC’, depending on how you read the virtues of winning such games.

The main focus for this book will be post-16 or higher education, and the game could be adapted for an audience of professionals in that sector, as in the second box.

Consider the following scenarios:

- 1 You work in a college and a colleague who is moderating some of your students’ work suggests that although your first marker’s feedback to students is accurate it could perhaps be a little more positive. Would you largely ignore this comment?
- 2 You work in a university and one day you receive an email from an Ethics Committee stating that, from now on, anyone who wishes to use surveys, questionnaires, and interviews with students in order to elicit information about their ‘student experience’, must first submit a proposal to the Committee to assess whether students could be harmed in the process. Would your first reaction to this email be rather scornful?
- 3 You are in a college committee meeting where a colleague suggests, in the interests of enhancing learner achievement, that wherever the word ‘fail’ currently appears on a student’s work, or transcript of work, it should be replaced with the term ‘needs development’. Would you wish that you could leave the room at this point?

The only difference this time is that the *yes* votes get the ‘non-PC’ label. Political correctness may elude a simple definition, but I doubt that there are many people who would not know that in answering these questions they were giving their views on it. However, the more difficult question to answer is what connects all the various strands of thought. One of the key purposes of this book is to try to explore and explain these connections.

#### **The parameters of PC**

Fired for consistently showing up late at work, a former school district employee sues his former employers, arguing that he is a victim of what his lawyer calls ‘chronic lateness syndrome’.

(Sykes 1992: 3)

Of all the thousands of examples of so-called PC behaviour, there seems to be something all-encompassing about this one. It seems to capture the essence of what many people see as increasingly problematic in contemporary society, and contains what appear to be three key ingredients in a PC scenario. First,

it is funny to the point of being ridiculous. Second, it appears to absolve someone of a responsibility that they once had for their own behaviour. And third, it produces a label for a form of behaviour which until now had not crossed anyone's mind as needing a label. Or, as in many cases, it produces a new euphemistic label with the intention that it should become a substitute for a more commonly accepted label. Thus, in the extreme, 'a fat corpse is a differently sized non-living person' (Hughes 1993: 20).

Many of these euphemisms are exploited for maximum comic effect in guides to PC in the US and in Britain (e.g. Beard and Cerf 1994; Garner 1994; Leo 1994; Midgley and Midgley 2005). My intention throughout this book is not to list the euphemisms, but rather to explore the broader political context in which this labelling has occurred, or, to put it simply, to ask what are the political beliefs which lurk behind these labels, both those which are produced with sincerity and those which are clearly produced with a large measure of insincerity?

An early example of this, indeed one from before the term became popular, was the invitation to think carefully about the use of words like 'man' and 'he' and to consider whether more appropriate words could be used where women were intended to be included in the usage (Spender 1980; Sarah and Spender 1980). In feminist circles this very quickly began a broader debate about whether 'wo-men' was an appropriate word at all, and that perhaps 'wimin' or 'wimyn' might be a better (PC) alternative, and in more popular circles whether British 'dustbin men' should be referred to as 'refuse collectors' and 'manholes' should become 'inspection covers'. In the US feminists began to question such terms as 'seminal text' and 'seminar', with one suggestion that the latter might become 'ovular', and 'ad feminem' arguments could sit alongside 'ad hominem' arguments (quoted in D'Souza 1992: 212). Indeed, to counter the contention that the discipline of history was largely one of documenting events which had affected men, this was counterposed with the suggestion that there should be more 'her-stories' (Morgan 1970).

It is not always clear whether the intention in such debate is that we should *literally* adopt these changes in language, or whether they intend simply to direct us to look at how language reflects power structures, or indeed, in postmodern circles, to demonstrate how to be more playful with language. Neither is it always clear whether the producer of these new words has ridicule as his/her aim. In this context, I have no reason to doubt the sincerity behind referring to animals as 'non-human persons' (Singer 1975), but equally I do have suspicions about some people's sincerity when referring to girls as 'young female persons'.

A detailed discussion of many of the implications behind language usage will be conducted in Chapter 4; suffice to say here that these debates have all the hallmarks of being a 'moving target'. First, in the sense that if the purpose behind the suggested change to language is largely 'awareness raising' (or in many feminist circles 'consciousness raising') then it could be argued that once

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this work is done the actual words themselves matter very little. And, second, to reflect the postmodern times, that it is now not so much a question of substituting one word with a more appropriate one, or indeed banning words because they are seen as offensive, but accepting that once the bond is broken between a word and the reality that it is intended to represent, any word is able to take on new and potentially multiple meanings. To take an extreme example, and one which will be discussed in detail later, it is no longer necessary to consider whether the word ‘nigger’ should be banned, because once it has been subject to a ‘linguistic turn’, and is freed from only having one meaning, multiple meanings thereby become possible. Indeed, it might even become a term of endearment. This argument might be taken one step further with the suggestion that far from banning offensive words, it would be much more politically astute to have people take back the language of oppression and thereby emasculate the original oppressor. Having said that, the emotionally charged nature of racial slurs, particularly in the US, will be a central feature of Chapter 4.

The question of euphemistic language is complicated by the fact that it is often not clear whether the euphemism has simply been created for the purpose of politeness, or whether it should be used exclusively, and subsequently policed, such that users of the more traditional terms could be reprimanded in some way. Clearly this raises the question of the *correctness* as much as the politics, and a major concern through the following chapters will be to try to highlight what exactly is *political* and *correct* about PC. A further significant development in the US has been to connect the policing of language with an unwarranted undermining of the First Amendment, and the right to free speech. In some cases this has resulted in PCers being castigated as somehow un-American. This theme will be explored throughout the book.

Although the term is most commonly associated with the use of euphemistic language, only a cursory glance at relevant literature, particularly in the US, would indicate that this is only one dimension. There are two other dimensions which are, arguably, more important, particularly in terms of their impact on higher education. The first of these is the steady rise in forms of ‘multi-cultural’ curricula, and the ways that these have challenged traditional notions about the content and purpose of education. In the case of content this has been most commonly associated with challenges to the traditional ‘canon’ of wisdom reflected by certain authors and texts; and in the case of the purpose of education, whether the emphasis in higher education should always be on the academic aspects of learning, or that this should be more balanced with the affective and self-developmental aspects of learning. These issues will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 5.

The other dimension concerns access to higher education, and the ways in which admission and participation are managed and monitored. In the US this is commonly associated with the term ‘affirmative action’, and although this

term is rarely used in Britain, it is clear that allied terms like ‘positive’ or ‘reverse’ discrimination often act as the appropriate British equivalents. Furthermore, although in the US the term affirmative action is most often found in literature which discusses the ways that black, or African-American, participation in higher education might be expanded, the debates in Britain about how to increase the participation rates of, so-called, ‘non-traditional learners’ (which itself might be taken as a euphemism for ‘working class’) are not dissimilar. That said, it is clear that the question of whether universities and colleges in the US should use, or indeed have used, quotas for racial groups in their admissions procedures is a much more politically charged question than any similar questions that have been asked in Britain. This question of the advocacy of quotas will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 6, and the companion arguments in Britain can be found in Chapter 10.

### **The politics of PC**

A significant thread running through all the following chapters is a careful consideration of what exactly the word *political* means in the term PC, and what are the politics of those who would use the term. As will soon become clear, one of the most intriguing questions to have emerged from debates concerning political correctness is: ‘Who’s to blame?’ Put simply, is PC an orchestrated campaign from the political right designed to discredit everyone and everything which challenges the canons of right-thinking people, including affirmative action, minority rights, relativism in knowledge, and, in general, theories connected in some way with Marxism? Or is it the product of those on the political left who see themselves as guardians of the path which will lead us all to a future society which is both just and humane and centred on a *real* equality between people, as opposed to the political rhetoric which currently masks fundamental social inequalities?

A significant aim of this book is to seek to carefully unravel the various strands of PC-related thought from across the spectrum of political ideology, as well as to analyse the wider complex interplay between not just political forces on the left and right but also more general social and intellectual forces, most notably the rise of a postmodern sensibility throughout, particularly, the humanities and social sciences, and the concurrent demise of general social theory. Far from trivializing intellectual and public educational debate, as opponents of PC have often argued, these contexts can be used to highlight that there are extremely important issues at stake. Chief amongst these are: a thoroughgoing social constructivism running throughout intellectual disciplines (Choi and Murphy 1992); a rise in forms of postmodernism centred on anti-foundational thinking (Fish 1994); and a steady accommodation of psychoanalytically informed clinical ideas in cultural analysis and ‘identity politics’ (Frosh 1991; Giddens 1992). Given this broader context, this book will also

address whether the traditional left–right political spectrum is an adequate conceptual tool for discussing contemporary political debate.

### **The self-policing PC college**

There is a sense in which, at least in professional life, ‘we are all PC now’. Most professionals, including teachers, social workers, doctors and nurses, will be used to the term, and might be reminded from time to time by colleagues that what they just did or said ‘wasn’t very PC’. This might be a whispered comment in a meeting, and one which might prompt the thought that the person doing the whispering was being ironic. However, in response, it’s best if one does not make too much of an issue of it, just in case other colleagues in the room can’t see, or don’t want to see, the joke. Furthermore, although one might not hear the actual term it is perhaps instructive to remind ourselves that, often, the execution of power is at its strongest when we do not immediately register its existence. That is, political correctness is now so much part of the taken-for-granted of public sector professional life that one instinctively knows what should be said here, and not there, what needs to be done to satisfy this requirement without compromising that, and so on. And, as in all such cases, it is a brave person who decides deliberately to rock the status quo, particularly if one is untenured, as is often the case in the US, or on a short-term, or fractional, contract, as is often the case in Britain.

This might also be taken as evidence of how successful the campaign against political correctness has been. Not that it has stopped people continuing to embrace the causes most often associated with term – the use of enlightened language; the promotion of multicultural forms of curriculum; and forms of affirmative action – but in making the term itself a wholly derogatory one it has made everyone feel that they should avoid it, and distance their behaviour from its connotations. In this context, consider for a moment the proposal to refer to someone as ‘differently able’ in a college prospectus or catalogue, and how this might, at one and the same time, court some support, disdain, or even bewilderment amongst a group of post-16 educators. Furthermore, imagine a college that decides to rethink the way in which it will collect its student cohort monitoring data. One suggestion might be that students, rather than being asked to tick a box indicating whether they are male or female, could be given a blank space to self-report their gendered status or sexual orientation. Imagine further a discussion in the senior management team of the college, where one group opposes this on the grounds that the college should only record what regulatory bodies require (i.e. male or female), and another group who opposes it on the grounds that it may be construed as an intrusion into the private affairs of its student body. However, imagine a further group who accept both of these points, but want to use the opportunity to widen the monitoring of minority students, to include sexual identity, the first step towards which will need to be

the identification of the categories under which students might wish to be classified. Finally, imagine a fourth group in the room, who smell the scent of political correctness and who fear the ridicule that will be heaped onto the institution by the local press!

### **PC in the British and in the US contexts**

The final and equally important theme of this book is to compare and contrast the ways in which the term has come to be understood in Britain and in the US. It is not a traditional comparative study that seeks to look at how the same 'object' has fared in two different national contexts, but one which looks at whether the different cultural contexts have produced distinct versions of the same 'object', or perhaps better how the 'object' itself has been manufactured by those cultural contexts. The 'object' here, of course, is PC and the question is thus whether it means the same thing in the US that it does in Britain, and furthermore whether PC should be listed alongside McDonald's, Starbucks, and iPods as one more example of a significant export from the US? Or, as I will argue in the final chapters, are the roots of PC, in reality, much deeper in Britain? The more substantial point I wish to make in this context is that PC in Britain is probably much closer to the original meaning of the term than the one that was popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the US. The precise contours of the original meaning will be discussed at the end of this chapter. The term as popularized in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s will be discussed in Chapter 2, and the relationship between both and their significance for UK PC debates will be a central theme running throughout chapters 8 to 11. Overall, the book has two clear sections: a historically based first section which centres on how the term 'PC' has fared in the US from the early 1980s onwards, and a more comparative second section which centres on raising the analytical profile of PC in a UK context.

One of the most significant points that I hope will emerge from chapters 8 to 11 is that because teachers and academics in Britain are subject to much more stringent regulation from central state sources compared with the US, this has had a marked effect on the way that PC debates have been conducted on the British side of the Atlantic. As a preface to this it is important to understand that the public policy framework within which UK post-16 education takes place is much more regulatory and more tightly controlled by the state and its quangos – technically defined as quasi autonomous non-governmental organizations – that is, agencies that are run independently of the state but report directly to the state.

It is debatable whether some of the following agencies are *technically* quangos. However, my point here is not a technical one, but to consider, through their effects, some of the consequences of this regulatory framework for UK post-16 education, and the significance of this in the context of PC.

The important quangos are Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) which oversees the professional standards for teachers in mainly the further education sector, and which sits alongside the inspection arm, the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted); and in higher education the equivalent arms are the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Although clearly separate, higher education also has a quality assurance regime for research known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). On top of this, central state funding to both sectors is tightly regulated, for further education by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) along with its 47 regional offices and by the Higher Education Funding Councils, with one for each of the four nations in the UK. This framework has been the subject of much academic debate and discussion in the UK (Kogan and Hanney 2000; Lucas 2004). The point in this book will be to consider how this has impacted on the ways in which teachers and academics in the UK have accommodated to the quangos, or arms of the state, and the extent to which they 'toe the party line' accordingly. As I hope to demonstrate shortly the idea of 'toeing the party line' is an important strand in the aetiology of the term PC.

### **The aetiology of PC**

The term political correctness has a long history and its meaning has changed several times. Also, particularly in the contemporary context, it has begun to be used in a number of different ways, and it has thereby developed multi-dimensional qualities. Indeed, given that it appears to have been granted a free reign to encroach almost willy-nilly on all aspects of the cultural landscape, we probably should be as much concerned with how this has come about, as with trying to track down any precise meanings. The final parts of this introductory chapter will outline key themes in the term's aetiology, and raise awareness of the need to read definitions with a view to uncovering their more covert political meanings.

Several authors have attempted to trace the first use of the term 'political correctness' (Levy 1991; Perry 1992; Ellis 1992, 2002). What is clear in these discussions is the way in which it has changed its meaning over time, indeed to such an extent that it might even be said to have reversed its meaning in the process. It is often said that it emanated originally in left-wing communist circles to refer to comrades found guilty of doing what was *politically* correct, but because it was being done slavishly, in an unthinking way, they might be castigated for it. Straightaway we can see that this might be contrasted with a more literal usage, which is that if one is 'politically correct' then one's thinking must be in line with the Party ideology:

Stalin's real enemy was the non-communist left, social democrats, progressives, and liberals. In this he only had to follow Marx and Lenin.



Non-communist leftists were not only ‘insubordinate,’ and ‘rebellious,’ they, and they alone . . . could slow and perhaps defeat the ‘inevitable revolution.’ By improving the workers’ lot, they counteracted the ‘immiseration of the proletariat’.

(Drucker 1994: 59)

In this reading we can see that these reactionaries and enemies are simply those who do not understand History, they have not read ‘the materialist conception of history’ correctly, and in consequence they have come to an incorrect political assessment of the situation, that is of how to bring about a truly communist future. However, it is equally possible that one might follow the Party line without really understanding it or, perhaps worse, simply by paying lip service to it. When one considers that an extended stay in some remote part of Siberia was a very real possibility for any comrade during much of the period of Stalin’s leadership of the Soviet Union (1928–1953) it is easy to understand that one might quickly have to consider what the ‘politically correct’ position was, regardless of whether one understood it, or even believed it.

This second interpretation is much closer to the variation of its usage in Western left-wing circles, when the term was used in mocking, ironic, and essentially light-hearted ways, to indicate that it is common to *know* what is the right thing to do, but one does not always do it, or, put simply, ‘to err is to be human’. In this context, those on the political left might castigate themselves or others where words and deeds don’t correspond: ‘to comment ironically on their . . . inability to live up to their ideals, their acknowledgement of the complexity of human beings, and the limits of any cherished beliefs’ (Feldstein 1997: 6). But an important historical shift seems have occurred in the 1980s when the term increasingly came to be used by the political right, particularly in the US, to refer to those who were seen to be challenging the fundamental tenets of the American Dream – individual rights, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, and, for some at least, the idea of Universal Truths (Bennett 1984; Cheney 1992).

This interpretation of meaning very quickly came to be further associated with a form of Orwellian doublespeak, which overtly espoused the cause of liberty but covertly represented a totalitarian tyranny. Although it could be argued that the term has always had derogatory overtones these clearly became central in this use of the term.

This is a Kafkaesque world in which, more often than not, you do not know the rules until you have violated them. And woe betide the violators, for the wrath of the offended ‘victims’ will descend upon them – aided and abetted by an army of committees and administrators.

(Fox-Genovese 1995: 10)

Here, a liberal notion of justice has been replaced by a more radical, egalitarian, and un-American one, and it was being policed by a new army of cadres, who

wittingly or unwittingly were undermining the professional integrity of their colleagues. And thus, in the space of fifty years, we clearly see a return to a Stalinist world, albeit this time a metaphorical one, where the Party line is everything. As we will see later, this is a significant emphasis in meaning because it invokes a Cold War, McCarthyite rhetoric, with a distinct sense of there being an un-American ‘enemy within’, and one against which we should all be on guard.

It is from this context that the term began to be used to label (and castigate) a political opponent rather than be applied to a political ally, or indeed oneself. It is for this reason that the term is used, more often than not, as a derogatory epithet – to label what one is opposed to rather than label what one espouses. And, of course, the more successful this derogatory association becomes the more one might want to distance oneself from the term even if one supports the causes to which the label has been applied. In much the same way that Wilson (1987) began to question the use of the term ‘the underclass’, seeing it as having been hijacked by the political right, perhaps, by the mid-1990s, much the same could be said about the term PC. Couched in this way, it becomes increasingly important always to engage in a political reading of literature on political correctness.

### **Deconstructing definitions**

Political Correctness refers to matters of inclusive speech, advocacy of nonracist, nonageist, nonsexist terminology, an insistence on affirmative action policies, avoidance of Eurocentrism as reflected in a ‘traditional’ canon of literature, acceptance of multiculturalism as a valued feature of American society and dismantling hierarchy as controlled by a white male power structure.

(Hoover and Howard 1995: 964)

This sentence neatly summarizes the causes with which PC is most commonly associated. Rather than seeing PC as a definition, this seems to work better by seeing it as a demarcation of territory and offers some clues to the nature of its rocky terrain. However, it is not clear from the sentence whether any of the causes are either good or bad or what is actually political or correct about being in favour or against them. This is not intended as a criticism of the authors, but is just a way of highlighting the importance of understanding what actually is implied by the words *political* and *correct* in the term PC. In this section I will use some common definitions of PC, taken mainly from academic literature in the US. My general point is a relatively straightforward one: the term is never neutral in its usage. Not only does it refer to many aspects of thought and behaviour (as reflected in the above quotation), but also below the surface of all its uses lurks deeper ideological commitments. With this in mind I offer here not so much a list of alternative definitions, but some deconstructions of

meaning. This will serve as the preface to a fuller discussion of the broader political and ideological contexts in the chapters that follow. An excellent example of this ideological undercurrent can be gleaned from the following:

Political correctness turns out to be a subunit of the larger transformation of society reflected in the ascendancy of psychological over political terminology. What began as an attempt to politicise psychology (and psychologise politics) has led to the swallowing of each by the other and the emergence of synthesis: therapeutic politics.

(Sykes 1992: 164)

In this thesis PC is associated with the much broader social trend, which has turned movements for civil rights and state entitlements into a culture of dependency and victimhood (Samuelson 1995). Read literally, it would appear that any number of people from both the traditional left and right of the political spectrum could find a significant intellectual purchase here, that is that political struggle has been turned into a branch of a burgeoning therapy industry. This clearly has a long tradition in Marxist literature, dating back to Marx's own criticisms of Hegelian philosophy, that it sought to reorient individuals to their social contexts, through acts of the mind, rather than seeking to transform that context, the true political act.

However, as soon as one introduces the notion of dependency we find ourselves being able to move very quickly from a Marxist stance to a more libertarian plea for individuals to be seen to be taking responsibility for their own actions, and that poverty and deprivation have more to do with one's *own* cultural identity (Murray and Hernstein 1994). And this is in strict opposition to the view that disadvantage is caused by one's *structural* positioning in a society rooted in endemic income, wealth, and political inequality, a view much more popular on the political left (Wilson 1990). In this reading, although the notion of 'therapeutic politics' might resonant with many on the political left, its roots, in the US at least, might be said to be much more clearly found on the political right, with the intention that it should be used to discredit egalitarian policies aimed at redistributive justice.

This dilemma in having to read carefully the political ideology behind an attack on PC can also be seen in British-based literature on PC:

Through the prism of the culture of abuse, people have been rediscovered as sad and damaged individuals in need of professional guidance. From this emerges the diminished subject; ineffective individuals and collectivities with low expectations. Increasingly we feel more comfortable with seeing people as victims of their circumstances rather than as authors of their lives.

(Furedi 1997: 147)

Since victims are supported not because they are right but because they are vulnerable, critically questioning them is seen as attacking them, and

those who do so are vilified as oppressors. In the world of PC, victims can say anything or ask anything, not because they are right or deserve it, but because they are safe from public scrutiny or objection.

(Browne 2006: 13)

At one level both authors can be viewed as writing within the paradigm of ‘a nation of victims’ and the quotations could easily appear as logical extensions of the same argument. But, at another, although they may have very similar views about PC, we need to ask whether both authors actually share the same political ideology and fundamental beliefs about human nature.

### **Ironies and contradictions in utopian thinking**

Although there is much evidence that people on the right seek to use PC as a means to discredit left-wing ideas, the term clearly has its critics on the left also. In Britain, Furedi may be considered to be a case in point, and in the US this view can be found in the works of several authors (e.g. Gitlin 1995; Scatamburlo 1998). For Furedi the question has become whether left and right are conceptually able to do justice to more fundamental beliefs about humanity (Furedi 2005a), but for Gitlin and Scatamburlo it seems to be a simpler question about PC being a misguided form of left-wing thinking. Put simply, it is not left wing enough! This issue will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. For others on the left however, it is more a question of irony:

Politically Correct is an idea that emerges from the well meaning attempt in social movements to bring the unsatisfactory present into line with the utopian future . . . Politically correct behaviour, including invisible language and ideas as well as observable action, is that which adheres to a movement’s morality and hastens its goals . . . the ideology of political correctness emerges in all sorts of movements, applying to behaviour, social institutions, and systems of thought and value.

(Dimen 1984, quoted in Richer and Weir 1995: 57)

The phrase ‘well meaning’ is instructive here, for it alerts us to the awareness that, as in all social movements which promote change, it is possible for worthy ends to be associated with unworthy means, made manifest as ironies or contradictions, or simply unintended consequences. Thus, in a variation on the adage that one should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water, it is perfectly possible to maintain a vision of a ‘New Jerusalem’ or ‘Promised Land’, and see PC behaviour simply as the misguided means to a better society. In this reading of PC we need to be careful to distinguish between those whose aim is solely to discredit the means, and those who do this because their real (perhaps disguised) aim is to discredit the end – an egalitarian, socialist society, as opposed to a free enterprise, capitalist one.

The essence of political correctness is not the specific beliefs and ideologies disliked by conservatives. It is rather, the way in which (conservatives allege) liberals and radicals hold and act on their beliefs: namely, narrowly, dogmatically, unfairly, intolerantly, self-righteously, and oppressively . . . I define political correctness as an ideological narrowing, intolerance, and silencing of dissent, commonly attributed to the left by the right.

(Cummings 2001:10)

This definition highlights two important facets of PC debate. First, although the politics behind certain causes may be troubling to a whole range of commentators, an equally important element is the way in which those causes are pursued. Here, the emphasis is put on the correctness rather than the politics. However, in deconstructing this notion we need to be careful to consider whether the correctness is really as troubling as the politics, that is are some people very keen to emphasize the correctness in order simply to smear the politics? And second, to what extent might it be possible to argue that many on the left know that the right tend to do this, and, therefore, so as not to give further ammunition to the right, they always seek to underplay forms of correctness? More generally, such definitions begin to alert us to the fact that whenever any political creed finds it difficult to tolerate any form of dissent in pursuing its causes there could be a case for an accusation of political correctness. This theme will be explored in detail in the British section of the book (Chapters 8 to 11).

### **The PC straw men**

The myth of political correctness has made every radical idea, no matter how trivial or harmless, seem like the coming of an apocalypse for higher education, complete with four new horse people – Speech Codes, Multiculturalism, Sexual Correctness, and Affirmative Action.

(Wilson 1996: 2)

A theme amongst some left-wing theorists is that PC really is a myth. It is not a question that some progressive equal opportunities strategies in some universities and colleges have been misguided, and right-wing critics have seized on this, but that organizations on the right have been engaged in an orchestrated campaign to manufacture a notion of PC, which they have then systematically imposed at every opportunity. Thus the metaphorical horse people are polemical straw men, manufactured from *real* political causes in order to discredit them. Wilson can thus be identified with the left but not those on the left who oppose PC, but those on the left who oppose those on the right for using the term PC to discredit the left! It is clear from the context in which the following is taken that a horse person of PC has ridden into town:

Test scores and grade point averages are mere measurements of achievement, which are necessary to register how much intellectual progress is being made. They provide a common index for those who seek to improve themselves, regardless of race, sex, or background. High standards do not discriminate against anyone except those who fail to meet them. Such discrimination is entirely just and ought not to be blamed for our individual differences.

(D'Souza 1992: 250)

Here, we need to engage in the most careful and potentially most conspiratorial political reading. Is this the position of someone who believes that the status quo actually delivers, or this someone seeking to defend a *vested* interest; someone who recognizes that PC causes (such as affirmative action) would end up undermining a status quo where certain people are privileged and replacing them with other groups? In the conspiratorial reading the status quo does not represent a form of social justice, but simply the vested interest of those who benefit most from it, ideologically supported by general myths (e.g. that society is meritocratic), and PC myths (e.g. that an intellectual *au courant* is out to undermine educational standards).

This leaves us considering whether PC is really little more than a smear term, simply an attempt to discredit undesirable political causes and, at worse, not from the point of view of what they envision, but the means employed to take us nearer to this vision. Although this argument clearly makes sense from the point of view of the right-wing critic, it holds little for those on the left who share an egalitarian vision, but are still anti-PC. This argument will be central to the next chapter.

'Politically Correct' was never a unifying political principle, and even as a slogan, it was rarely used to describe oneself or one's group, except in mocking self-deprecation. In seizing upon the term as the watchword of some new leftist movement, conservative alarmists and their liberal allies have rather spectacularly missed the joke. Political correctness is a spectre of the past the left itself has disavowed.

(Scanlon 1995: 9)

In this article Scanlon seeks not only to undermine the credibility of many conservative scare stories about PC, but also to articulate the democratic credentials of the literary theorists who were being accused of being PC at that time (this point will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5). However, for authors such as D'Souza and Bloom (see next chapter) these democratic credentials are simply veiled attempts to defend a general trend towards 'dumbing down' in all aspects of education. In this reading of PC, either one is a progressive promoter of a wide range of textual sources on the educational curriculum, or one is a conservative defender of a traditional curriculum centred on Arnold's 'the best that has been known or thought'.

### **Mind your language!**

Whether it is because of the undesirable nature of certain political causes, or the unacceptable zeal or pious way in which these causes are pursued, a common theme in discussions of PC is to associate those political causes with forms of totalitarianism. Sometimes a connection is made with American McCarthyism, and sometimes with Soviet Stalinism, but in all cases the message is a clear one: watch out because dissent will not be tolerated, and will be acted on by using ‘the favourite tool of the Thought Police: sensitivity training, which is a euphemism for directly applied thought control – a kind of modern-day nonsurgical lobotomy’ (Bruce 2001: 27). But how much should we read this as an attack on these means, or as Bruce’s own means to defend a particular political ideology?: ‘It’s time that we admit the failure of socialism and embrace the benefits of capitalism and competition’ (Bruce 2001: 241).

The most common definitions of PC focus on the need to be sensitive about language. For those who have promoted PC causes this is often connected to a broader philosophy about the relationship between words and the reality that they ‘represent’ (see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of this), and thereby the power of words to frame the ways in which we understand the world around us. For those who have been anti-PC this has provided a rich arena in which to engage in relentless ridicule.

We do not fail, we underachieve. We are not junkies, but substance abusers; not handicapped, but differently-abled. And we are mealy-mouthed unto death: a corpse, the *New England Journal of Medicine* urged in 1988, should be referred to as a ‘nonliving person.’ By extension, a fat corpse is a differently sized nonliving person.

(Hughes 1993: 20)

Here PC is castigated not for its tyranny but its triviality – changing words does not change the world. As Hughes goes on to say in the next paragraph, changing the word ‘nigger’ to something else is not what changes people’s attitudes to racism. Put so bluntly and, in the context of his whole argument, so eloquently, it is difficult to disagree. But, once again, we need to ask whether this should so easily seduce us, and the first step is to demand that we address the political ideology from which such authors write.

For many this monitoring of language has become a source of great humour and, as already mentioned, it has spawned several good books and cartoons. However, scratch below the surface and one often finds that there is more than a hint of the scurrilous at work here. For example, in the week that I write this I find that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in Britain has banned the use of the word ‘cock’ from its website. It turns out this is simply because the software filter that the organization uses automatically puts asterisks where it finds offensive words. And thus, although at one level it can be read as yet another example of ‘political correctness gone mad’, at another it is simply

an administrative problem caused by the purchase of a commercial software package. Of course, this leaves open the question as to why the designers of these software packages feel the need to engage in such censorship, but I doubt the answer to that would be anywhere near as good as newspaper headline stories which imply that the RSPB no longer have \*\*\*\*\*. Or as one newspaper put it: 'Cock bad, tit good, says RSPB' ([http://www.metro.co.uk/weird/article.html?in\\_article\\_id=51672&in\\_page\\_id=2](http://www.metro.co.uk/weird/article.html?in_article_id=51672&in_page_id=2) accessed 7 June 2007).

In the context of higher education, the 1990s saw the proliferation of 'speech codes' on many American campuses, and similar attempts to mirror this in some colleges and universities in the UK. This issue will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 4, but suffice it to say here that one needs to read very carefully the cases made both for and against such policing of language. It is one thing to say that a word has been banned outright, and another to suggest that staff and students become sensitive to the ways in which language can stifle or promote learning; and to recognize that words can have many associations, but that alerting people to this is not thereby an attempt to 'lobotomize' thought. However, in effect, there may be little difference between Big Brother and his more affectionate Nanny, but it is always possible to read intentions and effects differently. For example: 'It is helpful to use positive images of disabled people in case studies etc., in order to illustrate that disability is incidental to the activity being undertaken.' This sentence is taken from a UK university's equal opportunities guidance document. The question it raises is surely now an obvious one: How much is this really Big Brother (or his Sister), or his or her Nanny (or Grandmother, or Grandfather) at work, but, more importantly, what would lurk behind anyone's need to ridicule or undermine it?

### **Raising the postmodern stakes**

In the light of these political readings of PC it would not be surprising to see many on the left abandoning the use of the term altogether. However, some authors have clearly seen that there is really much more at stake:

What pc is about . . . is who will control social life. Will the traditional centers of power be allowed to hide behind the facade of neutrality, or will political discussion expand in such a way that options are not restricted by hierarchy, class antagonisms, racial or sexual discrimination, or other forms of repression? The question is, will democracy finally arrive, or will the current cycle of ineffective reforms continue?

(Choi and Murphy 1992: xii)

Here we see the authors unwilling to grant credence to the view that PC is either about control or tyranny, or trivialization. It is in fact diametrically opposed to the first two, and *very* serious. Forget the ironies and contradictions, which when highlighted by left or right will only give credence to these charges. These



authors seem determined to keep the PC debate on higher philosophical ground. To them, at heart, PC is about democracy and, fundamentally, about epistemology. Whenever the left or the right denigrate PC as the tyranny of Party lines, and the trivialization of everyday life, the view here is that we should raise the postmodern stakes and ask the protagonists what is their theory of knowledge, and, furthermore, ask who actually benefits from current conceptions of representative government, meritocracy, and canonical sources of truth?

Of course, for some, this postmodern assault on truth strikes at the heart of the matter. For to give up on truth and absolute authority will put us on the most slippery of slopes, down to mediocrity and ludicrous forms of radical relativism, where, for example, a child's painting can be mentioned in the same breath as the *Mona Lisa*:

Intellectual authority came to be replaced by intellectual relativism as a guiding principle of the curriculum. Because colleges and universities believed they no longer could or should assert the primacy of one fact or one book over another, all knowledge came to be seen as relative in importance, relative to consumer or faculty interest.

(Bennett 1984: 20)

And, in a further theme which will run throughout the book, there is much that many on the left and right can agree on here, fundamentally that there are Enlightenment principles at stake, concerning reason, truth, and the autonomy of the individual.

### **Individual freedom**

The importance of the individual in PC debates is double-edged. On one side a battle has raged largely in the Humanities departments of many universities about the 'death of the subject' and the ways in which literary theory has questioned whether any notion of an autonomous individual has much intellectual meaning, while on the other side there is a more overtly political battle about whether human agency can have much meaning in societies rooted in vast inequalities of income and wealth. As in the old Marxist adage, there is little point in being free to dine at the Ritz restaurant in London if one does not have the means to do so. This latter component has been carefully orchestrated by those who oppose PC in the US, by associating those who promote forms of redistributive justice with being anti-American: 'The campaign against political correctness has been so successful because it has portrayed the attempt to uphold the rights of disadvantaged groups as the infringement of individual rights' (Brennan, in Feldstein 1997: x).

The question of individual rights is also often connected with the further right to free speech, and, particularly in the US, this has been an extremely powerful weapon against those who promote PC causes. The point is a simple

one: if the First Amendment ('government shall pass no law that inhibits the freedom of speech') is a fundamental principle then anyone who would dare to interfere with it can be easily castigated as un-American. PC has been tarred with this brush on many occasions, and the irony that it is in universities where there have been the most reported restrictions on free speech has not been lost. However, some authors have sought to rise to this challenge:

racist slurs do not serve any First Amendment purposes: they contribute little to self-realization, to dialogue on important matters of public policy, or to the discovery of truth. Rather, they impair the growth of those who use them by encouraging rigid thinking and impeding moral development, they close off dialogue by insulting others, and they amount to a slap in the face rather than the statement or criticism of a proposition.

(Shiell 1998: 45)

Once again we need to ask what actually is being defended when one speaks in favour of a principled position on the First Amendment, when one argues for measured restrictions. Is the former simply giving credence to the manipulation of political arenas by the rich and powerful, and the latter simply giving equal credence to the perpetuation of 'a culture of dependency', where self-appointed welfare tsars make judgements about the harmful effects of some people's speech and behaviour on others? This theme is discussed in some details in the following two chapters.

## Conclusion

This chapter has served to introduce many of the causes and themes that are associated with the term PC. Chief amongst the causes are: the power of language to bring about political change; the importance of widening the content and purposes of higher education; and the case for widening access to higher education through forms of affirmative action. The chapter has also hinted at the fact that these causes have been granted a firm intellectual foundation through the increasing acceptance in academe of forms of postmodern and poststructural thinking, and that traditional forms of knowledge and educational standards are not objective, and thereby represent unacceptable vested interests. In opposition to this many others have found themselves wishing to defend more traditional notions, and have variously charged PC with having promoted new forms of cultural tyranny, the dumbing down of educational standards, and having created a victim's charter for those who have benefited from PC educational strategies.

The chapter has also served to indicate that although the term PC has become part of the language of everyday professional life it eludes precise definition, and because of this it has been able to grant itself permission to be used in a number of ways and, most insidiously, to indicate that a particular intellectual or political position is somehow unworthy, disreputable, unwarranted, or even sinister.

Furthermore, in professional circles, it seems to be able to suggest that there is an unwritten code of behaviour that one must learn, but because it is not exactly clear what it is, and what might happen if one contravenes it, it is able to produce a large amount of conservative self-policing.

However, the main intention behind this chapter was to raise awareness of the need to be sensitive to the fact that beneath the various uses of the term PC there are many competing political ideas and beliefs. Indeed, on the surface, the same view of PC might mask opposing political ideologies. Furthermore, the term might often be used as a form of smear in order to associate certain political causes unfavourably with the tyrannical and the totalitarian. Even amongst those who generally support some of the causes it is possible to detect a range of concerns about the term: from those who support the causes but would rather not be associated with the term, to those who freely recognize that undesirable consequences can follow from virtuous causes. For all these reasons it is important to be always engaged in a political reading of PC definitions and to deconstruct the meanings.

In what follow there are two main sections which are broadly split between a consideration of the way that PC has fared in the US, followed by a similar consideration for Britain. As might be expected, there is clearly a tone in some British literature that ‘what has happened in the US simply couldn’t happen in Britain’; that there is something about cultural life in the US which makes it ripe for PC, and something about cultural life in Britain which prevents it. This might be starkly exemplified by the case in the US of Stella Liebeck, who successfully sued McDonald’s when, in 1992, she was scalded by a cup of their coffee, which she had spilt on herself. When Sam Bogle (and others) tried to do the same in Britain ten years later it was dismissed by the judge along the lines that there is a normal expectation that coffee be served hot and one should take due care because of that fact ([http://www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk/judgmentsfiles/j1118/Bogle\\_v\\_McDonalds.htm](http://www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk/judgmentsfiles/j1118/Bogle_v_McDonalds.htm)).

Also, and as was indicated at the beginning of this chapter, it is important to remember that the term PC has a huge intellectual literature base in the US, which is made much more striking when compared with the relatively small amount that has been written in equivalent journals and books in Britain.

A key feature of the second section will be to argue that PC debate in Britain seems to be much more in keeping with some of the more traditional notions of PC – that is the politics and correctness involved in establishing orthodoxies. Indeed, one possible explanation of why the literature base on PC is so great in the US is because much of that literature is an attempt to redefine, or perhaps better, to reorient the term in order that it be marshalled to defend a particular kind of higher education and form of wider social solidarity. In this context the emphasis lay in ensuring that the term be associated with very particular political and social causes. The next chapter contains a detailed reading of some key American texts that signalled the nature of this reorientation.