

## PÁL CSONTOS

### IS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS POLITICALLY CORRECT? A TOUR ALONG THE ALLEYWAYS OF THE SHAMBLES CALLED POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

For a start, a word about the adequateness of the sub-title might not be amiss. Anyone who has been in the little meandering street in York, England, that is called The Shambles would associate with this term a meaning that not only refers to the original functional quality of the place but also to its similarity to a maze where one can fairly easily lose their way and become frightened by the condition of seeming “complete disorder or ruin,” to use the phrase offered by *The American Heritage Dictionary* as part of the first meaning.<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense that I thought ‘shambles’ might constitute a most appropriate term to denote the kind of ambiguity the issue of political correctness evokes in me. By the way, as the reader will have noticed in one of the previous sentences, for want of a more appealing choice, I use the plural third person pronoun when the gender of the general subject is not necessary to be made clear.<sup>2</sup> This might also hint at the fact that the present study is not going to be a hundred per cent politically correct. In fact, what I am going to do is simply pinpoint a

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<sup>1</sup> See meanings 3 and 4 in *The American Heritage Dictionary: Second College Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, n.d.): 1126.

<sup>2</sup> This reflects a decision I have made despite the availability of several recommendable ambigenic or epicene pronoun possibilities: one... one; s/he; etc. The one that might seem most appealing to some radical parties is ‘h’orsh’it,’ “an artful contraction of ‘he or she or it,’ offered by Joel Forbes in 1975 as a gender-free pronoun” (Beard 32)—a choice I understandably did not want to risk in the present study.

few aspects of the phenomenon commonly denominated as political correctness, raise certain questions concerning them and, finally, offer an approach to what possibly could be the right track towards potential answers. Far be it from me to pretend that I know the correct solutions to all the problems and dilemmas that can crop up during this brief inquiry or can satisfactorily take care of all the relevant concerns. That is not the aim of the present study. Rather, I intend it to be merely thought provoking and I would not prefer it to move beyond the level of generating further query into the nature of the issue. Having stated this much, I will start with a quick outline of the itinerary I plan to follow, before I get immersed in the details.

In the first section, I am going to concentrate on the potential sources and original meanings of the issue of PC, starting with the inherent sexist quality of the English language, and followed by examples from George Orwell's and Paul Fussell's respective critiques of certain other aspects of English usage. A brief look at the notions of affirmative action and multiculturalism will preface an assessment of Harold K. Bush's "A Brief History of PC, With Annotated Bibliography," one of the most useful introductions into the evolution of the phenomenon.

The second section will take a look at interpretations, implications and applications of PC. From a grammatical definition, through a look at the hazards of both the serious and the humorous approaches and a sample of Hungarian application possibilities, we shall finally arrive at the controversial question of sexual correctness in section three.

## I

"Every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved," state the authors of the first essay of Appendix B in Rosalie Maggio's *The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage*. They contend that one should not be surprised at how the vocabulary and grammar of English reflect attitudes that exclude or demean minorities and women since it evolved in a white, Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal society through most of its history (Maggio 187). Sexist language, i.e. language that "promotes and maintains attitudes that stereotype people according to gender" (165) assumes that male is the norm. Indicators of sexism in English include, for example, the

traditional exclusive usage of masculine third person personal pronoun forms [someone... he], gender-specific nouns [businessman; mailman], false generic terms [mankind; “all men are created equal”], the biased and unfair connotations attached to noun-pairs like [bachelor-spinster], etc. The term “sexism” was coined in the late sixties, and it was the first step in acknowledging the existence and extent of the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to eradicate sexist manifestations and to revise a sizable proportion of language rules and customs have been around since the same time, but have been on the increase recently, which I plan to illustrate further down.<sup>4</sup>

In order to demonstrate what hazards there might occur in the revision of certain language rules and customs, I will go back to

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<sup>3</sup> Mind you, Hungarian, despite its gender-free personal pronouns, is also sexist to a considerable extent. (Cf. collocations of the kind “férjhez megy;” “feleségül vesz;” “az ember...;” “Uramisten;” etc.)

<sup>4</sup> Let me just refer here to the *Newsweek* article “Religion: God Gets the He-ho” and a reader’s response it elicited. In the article author Kenneth L. Woodward, in a seemingly rejoicing tone, announces that “readers who find the Bible sexist, racist, elitist and insensitive to the physically challenged, [should] take heart” because OUP’s new inclusive language version of the New Testament and Psalms has “cleaned up God’s act.” In the new version, “God is no longer ‘Father’ and Jesus is no longer ‘Son.’ The hierarchical title of ‘Lord’ is excised as an archaic way to address God. Nor does God (male pronouns for the deity have been abolished) rule a ‘kingdom’; as the editors explain, the word has a ‘blatantly androcentric and patriarchal character.’ darkness has been banished in connection with evil because the editors fear it may remind some of the readers of ‘darkies.’ Even God’s metaphorical right hand has been amputated out of deference to the left-handed.”

The uneasy feeling one is left with about the further examples Woodward cites is that he might or might not be quite earnest in stating that “[t]he King James Bible never looked so good” (52).

The Reverend J. Steven Reynolds letter to the editor in the October 9, 1995 issue of the same magazine opts for the former choice and purports to put things into the right perspective when it contends that this “is another example of political correctness gone amok.” In it the reverend reasons that “[f]irst of all, Jesus was male. Being God in human form, he had to come to earth as one sex or the other, and it just so happened that was male [*sic*]—just as his mother was female. Second, the term ‘darkness’ has nothing to do with racism. The concept of light and dark are major themes in describing the spiritual realities of good versus evil. Light was used in representing good because one could see and was more prone to tripping over the effects of evil. This has nothing to do with the color of a person’s skin” (10B).

George Orwell. His dystopic prophecy about 1984 did not fully materialize, yet one can certainly recognize its relevance concerning the language aspect of the emergence of PC.

*The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least as far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. (Nineteen Eighty-Four 257)*

The following quotation is also from Orwell, but it is not an apprehension of an imaginary future state of affairs any more. It is a reflection on how one actual segment of the English language can deteriorate when it is used for dubious purposes:

*In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. .... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemisms, question-beggings and sheer cloudy vagueness. .... Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, 'I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.' Probably, therefore, he will say something like this: 'While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.'*



*The inflated style is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. ("Politics" 173)*

For some reasons, these were the words I involuntarily kept recalling when, as the initial stage of a first-hand experience, I was browsing through the entries of the *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*, and also later, when one of my colleagues called my attention to another related publication called *Are You PC? 101 Questions to Determine if You Are Politically Correct*. The instruction on the back cover of the latter "processed tree carcass" reminded me of the author of *Animal Farm* again. It goes, "Answer the following questions as honestly as possible. There are no right answers, but some are more correct than others."

It seems obvious that these two publications do not carry the label 'Humor' in their Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data for nothing and, because of that, they are supposed to be appreciated in like fashion. Nevertheless, I started wondering about the "early-warning" function of literature and, gradually, all sorts of related questions emerged in me, and I could only conjecture about the answers.

However, before I launch into listing these questions and queries, there are a few other issues I hope to clarify, or at least recapitulate. First of all, I will concentrate on yet another source that can illuminate to us why the development of certain patterns in (American) English usage can cause concern. The author's name is Paul Fussell. In *Bad or, the dumbing of America*, the chapter on "BAD Language," as one of 31 chapters seconding the statement that "nothing will thrive unless inflated by hyperbole and gilded with a fine coat of fraud," offers an insight into how in BAD language there must be "an impulse to deceive, to shade the unpleasant or promote the ordinary to the desirable or the wonderful, to elevate the worthless by a hearty laying-on of the pretentious" (101).

From the simple examples of "discipline" used for "field" or "subject," or "motion sickness" used for "nausea," through "vice president, merchandising" used for "salesman," Fussell demonstrates

the hazards of the inclination towards multi-syllabic pretentiousness and euphemisms.<sup>5</sup>

Fussell's invective is lashed out against quite a few other examples of "updated" usage that seek to impress through the sheer increase of syllables. Yet his stance is mentioned here not only because he represents a radical view about formations like "developmentally delayed" (for "retarded") or "African-American" (for "black") but also because his approach is fundamentally similar to that of Orwell's. Both of them would most probably disagree with the practices exercised and strongly recommended in the usage of English by the staunch adherents of PC.

Affirmative action, my next point, is an issue that has been around since the late sixties–early seventies, and should sound familiar to most of us. Nevertheless, just a quick recapitulation of the basic concept could possibly be of some help at this stage to illustrate why it has been a key prompt in the emergent awareness of the necessity of PC.

The original idea was first introduced in government programs that covered colleges, universities, and companies receiving public funds, and the overall goal was to make up for past inequality by giving special preference to members of minorities seeking jobs or admission to college. The programs oftentimes resulted in setting quotas of minority students and workforce to be admitted or hired, and therefore, also in protests by many Americans (minority citizens included).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The fate of the word *salesman* exemplifies both the urge toward high portent and the normal American discomfort in facing unpleasant or demeaning things. Once, a *salesman* was a *salesman* as in *Death of a*, a useful person, to be sure, but socially low and inclined to make a pest of himself. Or herself, since women were admitted to the occupation, necessitating the welcome addition of a syllable as the word expanded to *salesperson*. In time, more class was felt to be needed, so in due course three syllables were expanded to five (*sales associate*) and then to six (*sales representative*). But this last, it was found, could be extended to eight syllables by designating this person a *merchandising associate*, and the former *sales manager*, a poor thing with only four syllables to his name, was verbally promoted to *vice president, merchandising*—eight syllables, and a nice bit of euphemism as well. (BAD 104)

<sup>6</sup> Asian American students, unembarrassed by any traditional group advantages in American society, vehemently reject the idea that they should suffer in order to

Multiculturalism, or the movement of the “multi-culti,” identified by Robert Hughes as “the obsessive subject of (...) sterile confrontation between the two PCs—the politically and the patriotically correct,” a “buzzword with almost as many meanings as there are mouths to utter it” (83) would hardly offer any useful points of departure.<sup>7</sup> A somewhat more specific definition, offered by Christopher Beard, on the other hand, will take us right to the core of PC:

*multiculturalism. A broad, pluralistic social movement that, through the celebration of ‘difference,’ champions a more tolerant, diverse, inclusive, and realistic view of America and (in the memorable words of the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee) ‘the peoples who person it.’ Indeed, ‘multiculturalism’ encompasses virtually the entire spectrum of views that have come to be known, not always without irony, as ‘politically correct.’ (46)*

While I am aware of the fact that a thorough investigation into the problematics of the phenomenon denoted as multiculturalism alone should cover at least as many sources as would be substantial to make up a smaller library, for various reasons (most of all, space restriction), I cannot extend the scope of the present study to include that as well. Instead, I will concentrate on an article that, concise as it may be, appears to be one of the best introductions into my immediate subject. It is Harold K. Bush, Jr.’s “A Brief History of PC, With Annotated Bibliography,” published in *American Studies International* in April, 1995.

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create space for underrepresented black and Hispanic groups who suffered no maltreatment or disadvantage at the hands of Asians. (...) Yet this may not be stated in public, partly because most universities continue to deny that they lower admissions requirements for select minorities, and partly because favored minorities would take offense at such ‘insensitivity’. (D’Souza 237)

<sup>7</sup> NB.: we should not judge the severe Australian social critic on the basis of this one quote alone. In “Multi-Culti and Its Discontents,” the transcript of his second lecture collected and edited in *Culture of Complaint*, he does provide a thorough and oftentimes quite vitriolic analysis of multiculturalism in the US.

In his essay Bush contends that “political correctness has emerged as a source of strong emotional feelings and serious public debate in 1990’s America, one that does not appear to be dissipating.” His observation is based partly on the fact that, by the fall of 1994, it had been included in three “prominent cultural creations” (1/ a “Beavis and Butthead” episode called “Politically Correct,” mocking left-liberal educational reform; 2/ Don Henley’s sarcastic critique of PC social values made during the MTV broadcast of the reunion tour of the legendary rock group The Eagles; and 3/ the publication of the bestseller *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* by James Finn Garner (42). Bush believes that “PC as a phrase seems to have originated from the Left as a term of disparagement towards radicals and extremists,” and “as an indication of the Left’s sense that it must regularly criticize its own excessive political stances” (42–43).

However, in the Reagan years, PC was slowly but steadily taken over by the Right as a rhetorical tool, with the meaning that “one was ‘out of the mainstream of not only American life but also of university life’” (43). The term emerged simultaneously with a “sustained critical examination by a number of critics, both academic and popular, of American educational institutions, including higher education” (43).

The representative titles listed by the author in chronological order include *A Nation at Risk* (the 1983 doomsday govt. report on American education), Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (the surprise bestseller of 1987), and Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, at which I am going to take a closer look further down.

Thus it seems that the so-called PC-wars were restricted to the critique of ideas about education, yet Bush argues that they should be seen as “a manifestation of a much broader cultural struggle as well” (44). The desired effect of this much broader cultural struggle has been “to re-define through public negotiation the central ideas of American myth and ideology” (44). The primary battlefield still appears to be higher education in America, viewed by the public as an expensive failure given over to much of radicalism. As James Davison Hunter put it in the title of his 1991 book, these conflicts fought out

between Left and Right are actual “Culture Wars,” that can be traced ultimately and finally “to the matter of moral authority.”<sup>8</sup>

Struggling to define the meaning of America, the two opposing sides are very often talking past each other, each snug and comfortable in its own preconceived position (44). With the original battlefield (discussions concerning education) widened and extended to such diverse areas as entertainment, politics, news coverage, the media, and the arts, PC has become largely “an empty container of meaning” (45).

As a dangerous rhetorical weapon used by the Left and the Right alike, political correctness has acquired a status of a commonplace feature in political rhetoric. Some commentators have already tried to prove that it is already fading into the past. But PC, the author argues, is more alive than ever (45).

The selected bibliography completed by Bush in April 1994 lists 148 sources, 61% of which came out in 1992–1993. His contention is that PC is “a representative phenomenon of the American social scene,” and its supposed demise has been “vastly overexaggerated (...) by those who wish that the term would go away” (47).

## II

“The cult of ethnicity has reversed the movement of American history, producing a nation of minorities—or at least of minority spokesmen—” states Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in “The Decomposition of America,” a chapter in his *The Disuniting of America*, and adds that these representatives are “less interested in joining with the majority in common endeavor than in declaring their alienation from an oppressive, white, patriarchal, racist, sexist, classist society” (112). In his view, a “peculiarly ugly mood” appears to have settled over the arena of colleges and universities, which made it necessary for higher education administrators “to adopt regulations to restrict racist and sexist speech. More than a hundred institutions, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, had done so by February 1991” (114). Schlesinger seems to be worried that “what began as a means of

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<sup>8</sup> See also *Campus Wars: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference*, edited by John Arthur and Amy Shapiro.

controlling student incivility threatens to become, formally or informally, a means of controlling curricula and faculty too” (115). The examples he discusses raise a number of concerns, leading him to the conclusion that the PC movement, as “contemporary sanctification of the group” can create a situation in which “the old idea of coherent society” is put to stake, because “[m]ulticultural zealots reject as hegemonic the notion of a shared commitment to common ideals” (117).

Schlesinger is not the only observer who has his doubts concerning the ultimate potential outcomes of PC taken seriously. However, others seem to be a lot less alarmed by the impending “cultural tower of Babel” (Hughes 89), as the following definition might illustrate:

*“politically correct. Culturally sensitive; multiculturally unexceptionable; appropriately inclusive. The term ‘politically correct,’ co-opted by the white power elite as a tool for attacking multiculturalism, is no longer ‘politically correct’” (Beard 100).*

Thus, political correctness can be viewed in two, if not diametrically, yet nevertheless opposed, fashions: the serious and the humorous. What for a roughly 5–6 year long period might have appeared to the uninitiated as mere play on words, creating a multitude of adverbially premodified adjectival lexical units,<sup>9</sup> has turned out to be an effective double-edged weapon defending the traditionally defenseless.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> as the “most frequently used linguistic form in the construction of culturally appropriate language” (Beard 4)

<sup>10</sup> i.e., for example, minorities [**“minority groups.** Members of the world’s majorities; emergent groups; traditionally underrepresented communities” (Beard 97).] E.g.: **“Jew.** Jewish person. ‘Some people,’ say the Fellows [sic] of the University of Missouri Journalism School’s Multicultural Management Program, ‘find the use of Jew alone offensive,’ and, therefore, it is to be avoided” (Beard 94); or women [**“woman.** Wofem; womban; womon; womyn; woperson; person of gender” (Beard 107).] E.g.: **“seminar.** Ovarium; ovular (especially when women are among the attendees)” (Beard 102), etc.

PC has been applied to a range of fields, from education<sup>11</sup> through weatherforecasting to personal computers. Just to illustrate its diverse applicational possibilities, a sample of the list offered by Harold K. Bush, Jr. includes articles that relate PC to children's literature;<sup>12</sup> mathematics instruction; literary anthologies; graduate education in English; academic research; general cinema; western films; house construction; ecotourism;<sup>13</sup> the business of selling sweaters; gift-

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<sup>11</sup> Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* is considered to be by many the most widely read and discussed book dealing with the issues of PC on campus. D'souza, regarded as the chief spokesperson on PC for the political right, discusses in his book a number of conspicuous educational policies at different major American universities. Although D'Souza focuses upon important educational issues and provides an impressive amount of research, his book has been—deservedly, Bush contends—attacked “for careless analysis, hasty generalizations, and some overtly uninformed opinions” (51). For example, the author uses the term “politically correct” only once, in the section of the last chapter called “New Racism.” Even these are not his own words. He quotes Donald Kagan, dean of arts and sciences at Yale, who contends that it “is common in universities today to hear talk of politically correct opinions, or PC for short” (239). (See also John C. Chalberg's review in *Eger Journal II*)

<sup>12</sup> One related, although undoubtedly humorously intended, publication in the field is James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, published in New York by Macmillan Books 1994.

*Modern Tales for Our Life and Times* contains updated versions of 13 classical fairy tales, including *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *The Three Little Pigs*. As retold by Garner, they surprise us by unexpected twists in their plots and the new features championed by their protagonists, all this in the spirit of PC. The politically correct little pigs, for example, “set up a model socialist democracy with free education, universal health care, and affordable housing for everyone” but the readers are asked to note that the wolf in the story “was a metaphorical construct” and that “no actual wolves were harmed in the writing of the story” (12). Whether this is in all good faith, judge for yourselves... (For an analysis, see András Tarnóc's essay in *Eger Journal*, Volume II)

<sup>13</sup> A look at the table of contents of The PC Committee's *Are You PC? 101 Questions to Determine if You Are Politically Correct* can prove to be fairly educational. After a brief introduction, the readers get multiple-choice questions broken down to various fields or walks of life where PC is applicable (is there anywhere it is not?) The questions sometimes read as if they were asked in earnest, sometimes they are downright funny if you do not take them for their provocative value. The answers speak for themselves.

***Environmentalism QUESTION #52***

***How many of the following steps have you taken to conserve water?***

*(1) I shut off the water while brushing my teeth.*



giving at Christmas; museums; and even personal computers ® “the advent of the PC of PCs” (46).<sup>14</sup>

Before offering an evaluation of the authors’ effort displayed in *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*, I will move back to my original query:

Whose concern really is PC? Is it the all-powerful media, or the government, maybe the administration, or all of them intertwined in a unison of common interests? Could it be the vast and allegedly all-encompassing middle class that wants to shed one of the last vestiges of diversity by attempting to conform to yet another set of idiot-proof but Procrustean precepts on the road from insecurity of all sorts to evolving into a smily, happy people?<sup>15</sup> But why can it not be just normal healthy individuals aspiring to be more sensitive about their overall environment? Why? Good question... Maybe because ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ by themselves are suspect in PC as examples of ableist language that can serve the purpose of “oppression of the differently abled by the temporarily able” (Beard 3). But surely, there must be an honest desire in most of us, caring human animals, to think and behave in a manner apt to improve our chances to survive in a brave, new, cruelty-free, environment-friendly, etc. world—or is there not?

I would believe that there should be. Nevertheless, we *cannot* always rest assured that we invariably make the right decision about which behavior pattern in a certain situation is correct for us to champion, or take the right choice in accepting or rejecting certain attitudes by others. If *you* feel that it is important for you to be politically correct or, in other words, if you want to abide by a code commonly shared by people whose opinion you think you should trust and accept, and if you want to be acceptable in your present niche in

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(1) I installed a low-flow shower head.

(1) I bathe less frequently.

(1) I flush the toilet less often (25).

The bottom line is that the reader is still left in two minds about the actual intentions of the anonymous authors. However, when we look at the names in the list of adjuncts their approach becomes quite clear.

<sup>14</sup> As far as the Hungarian applicability of PC is concerned, see, for example, István Kenesei’s article called “Kis politikai jelentéstan.”

<sup>15</sup> For an interesting opinion on this issue, cf. John K. Wilson’s “Preface: PC and Me” in his *The Myth of Political Correctness*.

society but you notice that “the times they are a’changing,” in order to feel safe and comfy you need reliable guidelines to be able to comply with the new rules. But pray, where do you get those surefire guidelines? This is just one of the first questions you come up against when trying “to survive in the be-sensitive-or-else nineties” (*Beard* vii) but the number of additional questions it generates is legion. The foremost concern is, of course, one of language.

Language, because it expresses attitudes, it communicates beliefs and, as such, it is “not merely the mirror of our society; it is the major force in ‘constructing’ what we perceive as ‘reality’” (*Beard* ix). When you are uncertain about what is all right to say and to whom, or what is not and why, when you are in two minds concerning what opinions and concepts are acceptable and which ones you want to discard, you need an authority to take you by the hand and show you the way. One such authority—as far as self-advertising goes—appears to be *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*. Authors Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf contend that theirs is a comprehensive and exhaustively researched reference work and, indeed, if we look at the source notes section of their book, we do find it impressive. While we should not, for a second, forget about the “Humor” label, we all the same have got to concede freely that the “Source Notes” section impresses us not just because of the sheer number of the items included but also because of the diverse and compendious quality they display.<sup>16</sup> The four parts of the *Handbook* cover an impressive array of items: “A Dictionary of Politically Correct Terms and Phrases” is supplemented by “A Politically Incorrect/Politically Correct

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<sup>16</sup> Ranging from other dictionaries and handbooks (like *A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk*, *Dictionary of Cautionary Words and Phrases*, *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, *A Woman’s Thesaurus*, *The New Words Dictionary*, *A Feminist Dictionary*, or *The Emancipated English Handbook*) through books and articles of a relevant nature (including Nigel Rees’ *The Politically Correct Phrasebook*, Amoja Three Rivers’ publication called *Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well-Intentioned*, *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study* by Paula S. Rothenberg, articles from newspapers and magazines like *The New York Times*, *Village Voice*, or *New York magazine*) down to handouts and pamphlets authored by college administrators (such as “Definitions” from Smith College or “How to Speak Post-Modern, Being a Glossary of Actual Post-Modern Terminology in Current Usage Made Sensible for the Un/informed and Semi(initiated)” from Princeton University).

Dictionary,” followed by “Other Suspect Words, Concepts, and ‘Heroes’ to Be Avoided and/or Discarded” to be wound up by Part IV, called “Know Your Oppressor: A Bilingual Glossary of Bureaucratically Suitable Language.” The late Mr. Orwell would probably be most outraged by this last one..

### III

Due to constraints of space, for illustrational purposes, I will select only two out of the more than 750 entries, and these with an eye to another concern of mine, namely, that of the *application*, i.e. the issue of what use or abuse PC might be put to. The simple reasoning for this is that, following a desirable course of events, anyone can probably visualize a better world to come out of the benefits of political correctness. In my mind’s eyes, I can see thousands and thousands of former Donna Ellen Coopermans, who “...after a courageous yearlong battle through the New York State court system, [have] won the right to be known as Donna Ellen Cooperperson” (Beard v). A worst-case scenario, however, seems to be quite eerie and appalling. Among the more radical potential consequences of a verbatim interpretation of PC precepts, let me just mention the “Take Back the Night” marches an appalled witness of which I myself was way back in 1991 as a Soros-fellow at the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers, or the meetings of the kind advertised in a fashion that can very easily create unease in some people.<sup>17</sup> I could probably offer you an impressive list of instances of how potentially dangerous a weapon PC might evolve into when it is used, or abused, for dubious purposes but let me restrict myself to a sample of “prisoners of PC” as cited by Kate Roiphe in an extract of her book *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*, submitted to and published in *The Sunday Times*.

The two selected entries from the *Handbook* are ‘acquaintance rape’ and ‘date rape,’ because they very neatly second the points made by Ms. Roiphe. Acquaintance rape is a term “defined by a Swarthmore College training manual as spanning ‘a spectrum of

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<sup>17</sup> What I have in mind is a copy of a poster advertising a “NO MEANS NO WEEK” that displays the quote “ALL MEN ARE POTENTIAL RAPISTS” as its leading slogan.

incidents and behaviors ranging from crimes legally defined as rape to verbal harassment and inappropriate innuendo” (Beard 3), while date rape gets the specification of “acquaintance rape that occurs during a prearranged social engagement” (15). The latter entry expression is further clarified through the following:

*Among the offenses specifically categorized as sexual assault in a landmark study on date rape conducted by Mary P. Koss of the University of Arizona is ‘intercourse as a result of intentionally getting the woman intoxicated.’ The Koss study found, perhaps not uncoincidentally, that 43 percent of the victims interviewed had not previously realized they had been raped. (15)*

Katie Roiphe’s extract also starts with concerns about the Koss report and contends that “measuring rape is not as straightforward as it seems” and that “what is being called rape is not a clear-cut issue of common sense” (8). Furthermore, she adds that the “so-called ‘rape-epidemic’ on campuses is more a way of interpreting, a way of seeing, than a physical phenomenon. It is more about a change in sexual politics than a change in sexual behavior” (8). She expresses her worries about date rape pamphlets as vehicles that call into question all relationships between men and women and about feminist definitions of rape that “do not exist in a realm completely separate from the law” (9). The most shocking revelation she lists, however, is the one about what we could term “delayed recognition.” Becoming an actual prisoner (out) of political correctness looms over the horizon for anybody who translates the anecdote about the novelist Martin Amis to their respective terms. When he spoke at Princeton University in 1992, Amis “included a controversial joke: ‘As far as I’m concerned you can change your mind before, even during, but not after sex.’” Roiphe states that

*the reasons this joke is funny, and the reason it’s also too serious to be funny, is that in the current atmosphere you can change your mind afterwards. Regret can signify rape. (...) Since verbal coercion and manipulation are ambiguous, it’s easy to decide afterwards that he*

*manipulated you. You can realise it weeks or even years later (11).*<sup>18</sup>

The above examples might shed some light upon how, in the awareness about PC, there has recently occurred an increase of such proportion that could perhaps be illustrated by far-fetched hypothetical comparison. Let us suppose such an extreme case of hypersensitivity as a Hungarian person being sued for having offered what used to be known by the commercial slogan ‘the chimney-sweeper of the throat’ (a piece of candy called ‘Negró cukorka’) to an African(-American) student studying in Hungary—taken for an act of unintentional discrimination...

It seems to me that one of the apparently salubrious approaches to the overall issue of exaggerated concerns about political correctness could be the one championed by Paul Fussell, whose rightful heirs Beard and Cerf in all good faith might regard themselves. In the last chapter of *BAD or, the Dumbing of America* professor Fussell propagates that the only recourse is *to laugh* at BAD and warns that if we do not laugh at it, we are going to have to cry (Fussell 201). Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf have proved to be good disciples and scored in this respect. What waits to be seen is if we are still not going to have to cry later anyway.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For additional insights into the debate about “sexual correctness,” see Sarah Crichton’s “Back of the Book” review-report together with Michele Ingrassia’s article, bearing the same denomination for the phenomenon in their respective titles, or Adele M. Stan’s compilation called *Debating Sexual Correctness: Pornography, Sexual Harassment, Date Rape, and the Politics of Sexual Equality*.

<sup>19</sup> In the meantime Beard and Cerf have brought out their new *The Official Sexually Correct Dictionary and Dating Guide* (New York: Willard, 1995), observations on which will make up a separate paper planned to be delivered at HUSSE 3 in January 1997.

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