The Sensitive Kind

The expression "politically correct" is often used in the media to mean "silly over-reaction." For example, it could be argued that the African people who object to the way African children are represented in the old children's story "Little Black Sambo" are taking the book for children too seriously. The female newscaster, who complained that she was fired because of a perception that she had become too fat, might be accused of being "too" politically correct.

One strange thing about the term "politically correct" is that although it is sometimes used to label certain people, no one ever seems to admit that they themselves believe in the philosophy of political correctness. The term is exclusively used in a negative sense and is often used as a means of avoiding serious debate about a particular issue.

Another problem is that a blanket condemnation of all attempts to be more sensitive to the feelings of others by calling all such attempts "political correctness" risks grouping genuine problems with seemingly ridiculous complaints. "Politically correct" has developed such a negative connotation in the minds of most people that it might be best to abandon the expression entirely. This would leave us free to judge the complaints of minorities on their merits and demerits. One useful rule to have might be: "If the person we are talking about objects to the words we use to describe them, then we had better not use those words."

However, there is a problem with trying to satisfy everyone. It is possible that by trying not to offend everyone, our conversation may become over-serious and humorless. Here the Japanese may have something to teach the world. In formal business situations and meetings the Japanese often strike other nationalities as being too serious. There is some truth to this but it does sometimes help them to avoid misunderstanding and offending others. This is particularly true in cross-cultural situations when it is easy to offend unintentionally. However, as no one can be serious all the time, the Japanese really let off steam with friends at parties. At such times the taboos and restraints of formal situations seem to completely disappear. The Japanese may have solved the problem of political correctness by placing great importance on context.

1. What is wrong with the idea that the Japanese have solved this problem?
2. How would you feel if Japanese were always portrayed in movies as the mafia?