Our Political Correctness Culture is as Bad as Any Tribal Taboo: Comments on Two Victims of PC – Peter C. Gøtzsche and Dieter Schönecker

I wrote in English for a change, as my topic addresses an international audience. Those who do not understand English well enough may be interested in a German abstract.

Political Correctness

Tribal taboos, like overstepping an imaginary boundary, eating the wrong type of food, etc. are ridiculed by us modern people. We think they are irrational and we do not need them. Wrong. We have an even worse version of taboo: political correctness (PC). The role and function of such a system of behavior can be illustrated by a nice story, which my friend and colleague Volker Sommer told me, who used to run a primate observation station in Nigeria

and has produced lots of data about the behavior of free-ranging primates like bonobos, chimpanzees and gorillas [1].

He observed the behavior of two tribes of chimpanzees, living in close proximity, except they were separated by a river and thus had developed different cultural rituals that served to distinguish them from others: One of them used to poke sticks into an ant-heap and then lick the ants, while the other tribe did not do that. Licking the ants, Volker explained to me, was not particularly funny, as they exude their typical acid that burns and pricks, and for food purposes the ants were not really very useful, as the chimps had plenty of food.

So the only reason for this ritual was distinction against other tribes of chimps. The meaning of it was something like "We are the ones that dare eat ants and others don't. They are cowards." Out of such rituals, one can extrapolate, taboos grew. They have, among others, the function of delimitating an unseen border between "us" and "them". The territory that must not be overstepped, the behavior that must not be practiced, etc: All this serves the purpose of social cohesion and makes others outsiders, who do not know or abide by those unseen rules.

> *We are the ones that dare eat ants and others don't. They are cowards.*

We pride ourselves in being modern, having left behind irrational behavior and superstition. This, I find every now and again, is far from true. We are just as tribal, shortsighted and irrational as our ancestors and as the great apes that were among the first to introduce rituals that served no other purpose but in-group and out-group definition. Our modern kind of ritual of cohesion or post-modern taboo is "political correctness". Dare to violate PC and the tribal wrath is going to be poured out over you. PC is, shortly described, the self-imposed abiding by unseen, unspoken and unwritten rules of social behavior.

I saw a man at Berlin-Ostkreuz the other day with outside temperatures around 4 degrees, walking barefoot. Everyone, including myself, avoided him. It is totally not PC to not wear shoes in winter in our culture. In the middle ages this was the sign of begging monks who were called mendicants – beggar monks – for that reason, Franciscans and Dominicans. But after they had come across the Alps, they stopped that behavior, at least in winter, because of frost bites. Someone who does that today we either see as mad, or ill, or stupid, or the like. He is putting himself outside the conventions.

PC is something similar, except it does not refer to normal social conventions, but to conventions of higher, intellectual conduct. Who defines those rules? Well, good question.

We don't know. Presumably the majority of those rules is defined by the post-modern channels of priesthood and shamanism like TV-shows, newspaper articles, etc. Important and often seen TV presenters present their shows nowadays with open collars and suddenly it becomes non-pc to wear a tie for public events. Only old-fashioned people still do that occasionally.

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We have PC in science and academia as well. Here it is the presumed assumption of the majority view-point that defines PC. The closer it gets to the core of a discipline, the harder PC is being used as a weapon. We can see that in two current cases concerning professors, both highly prominent, one in medicine, one in philosophy, Peter Gøtzsche, whose case I have previously written about, and one in philosophy, the case of Prof. Dieter Schönecker, a case that was new to me and which I would like to discuss here as well.

Case 1: Professor Peter Gøtzsche

Peter Gøtzsche is well known to readers of this blog and to everyone who works in medicine: he is one of the founders of the Cochrane collaboration, one of the most prolific writers in this area, having published over a hundred or so papers in the big four journals (New England Journal of Medicine, JAMA, Lancet, BMJ). He is highly respected by his peers and the whole community. His violation of PC was threefold, but only the final one was lethal. The first two were his reviews of the role of the pharmaceutical industry in engineering efficacy, where none was there or where it was much less than supposed, taking into account deaths as a known side effect, first in medicine in general, second in psychiatry [2]. The first one was received without as much as a whispering. The second one led to a complaint of the local psychiatric association, but had no effect.

The third violation of PC was lethal: Peter Gøtzsche and his team attacked a Cochrane review coming out of his own stable. Never attack a rider that wears your own colours, rule number one of scientific PC. The review was on human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination as a potential prevention of cervix carcinoma, and it was positive and recommended the vaccination [3]. Gøtzsche's team published a critique of that review on the grounds that the review missed half of the relevant studies. [4] Moreover, authors of the original review had conflicts of interests and had received money from the industries involved in manufacturing the vaccines. The third point was that it had neglected side-effects of the vaccination.

Followed by even more points of criticism.

One should add: the vaccination is highly contentious because studies so far have only documented that the vaccination is sometimes successful in preventing the infection. Whether vaccination is also successful in preventing mortality is something that is assumed, but not proven by data, because there is a long time span between vaccinating a girl at, say 12, and overseeing the potential age, when a cancer would develop at, perhaps 50 or 60. There are no studies around that have looked at a period as long as that. Plus all vaccinations also have side effects; not often, but if they do, they can be very severe.

> *Never attack a rider that wears your own colours, rule number one of scientific PC.*

Attacking vaccination in general, no matter on what grounds, is utterly non-PC. Vaccination is assumed to be the parade horse of medicine, and theoretically speaking it is. Understanding the immunological basis of disease and engineering the immune system to produce antibodies without the respective disease is a clear step towards medical progress. It has helped eradicate smallpox and – nearly – polio as well. It is so PC to assume vaccination is good, that any critical argument is being shut down even before the speaker might think of it. Hardly any scientist dares to even utter such criticism. But there is a clear arena for debate here: every now and then some individuals suffer from severe side effects. They mostly are derived from the additives of the vaccines that are used to either preserve them, so as to make larger batches possible (this is, in my view, profit mongering, which could be easily avoided), and sometimes also from particular substances added to make the vaccines active in the first place.

Side-effects are not frequent, but if they occur they are often serious (for instance „31 infants dead after vacc?„). Every now and then data emerges, pointing out that those vaccinated have less immunity than they should. Altogether at least in some cases it is unclear whether the benefits outweigh the risks and the downsides. In addition to that we have not at all considered the ecology of all bacteria and viruses in the larger whole of human well-being. I am not saying vaccination is bad. I am saying: there are many unsolved questions and it would be useful to have a much more open debate. But going against vaccination in any form, today, is utter, utter political non-correctness, no matter how good the arguments are and how strong the data is.

So in Peter Gøtzsche's case the CEO of Cochrane, which has developed from a network of

collaborators to a charity with administrative structures, accused Peter Gøtzsche of violating communication rules and first had him expelled from the governing board of the Cochrane collaboration, with much noise, as four other co-chairs resigned. Then the CEO seems to have gone behind Peter Gøtzsche's back and has asked the employer of Peter Gøtzsche, the Rijkshospital in Cogenhagen, to sack him. An international appeal has rapidly raised more than 8.000 signatures on Peter's behalf, still he is now fighting his expulsion with legal means.

The relevant documents for those interested can be found on his website:

- His statement on the treatment by Cochrane
- His commentary about his dismissal:
- The points about investigating the procedures of the board

The scandal has fanned out to the international community; even the most highly cited medical writer, John Ioannidis, has published an editorial about this crisis [5].

What I admire about Peter is his utter determination. Far from being bullied into submission he has now started his own institute and is celebrating the opening with a symposium on March 9th with a multitude of world-renowned public speakers. The program can be found here and early registration is recommended.

I don't know whether my interpretation is correct that the attack on Cochrane's own HPV vaccination review was the final violation of a taboo. It might be the mix. There may have been some personal issues between Peter and the CEO of Cochrane, Mark Wilsom. But whatever it is: it seems to me that a violation of PC, the post-modern taboo, is at the root of the matter.

Ancient tribes were cruel with taboo breakers. The Australian aborigines used bone-pointing, a process of condemnation and spell which led to the death of the taboo breaker; a process that enticed Cannon to study nocebo effects [6]. We are more refined, nowadays. What happens is just the
social murder. But it is none the less cruel. It deprives the victim of his or her affiliation to the virtual community.

Case two: Professor Dieter Schönecker

Another more recent example happened in Germany. It demonstrates the generality of the power of PC as a postmodern taboo. It is the case of Dieter Schönecker, professor of philosophy at Siegen university. Those interested (and able to understand German) can find information on his case that was published in the FAZ (top-tier daily newspaper) as well as

his reply on his website.

> *Ancient tribes were cruel with taboo breakers.*
> *Freedom of speech?*

In short, the following happened: Prof. Schönecker organized a seminar on freedom of speech at his university. As part of the discourse he invited – very non-PC for an intellectual community whose members presumably all subscribe to progressive, leftist values – Thilo Sarrazin and Dr. Marc Jongen.

Thilo Sarrazin, a former senator of Berlin and prominent member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) is known to Germans for his thesis that the influx of refugees with Islamic cultural and religious background is threatening the cultural and religious heritage of Germany.

Dr. Jongen is a member of parliament for the AfD, Alternative for Germany, a modern right-wing, or as some would even say: crypto-fascist or alt-right party.

Both are hate figures for the leftist press and intellectuals. Prof. Schönecker's argument was, that a seminar on freedom of speech should allow freedom of speech, especially for speakers who have opinions opposite to those that are politically accepted and in power. Or in other words, a seminar on freedom of speech should be a practice of freedom of speech as well. The university reacted harshly and disallowed him a budget to finance his speakers; a veritable scandal was breeding. His PhD students and postgraduates had to write an open letter testifying to Prof. Schönecker's liberal attitude, as if being not liberal would have been an anti-academic brand mark in itself. Prof. Schönecker on top of that had to resort to a public declaration in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and this important daily published a third of a page in its higher education column.

> *A seminar on freedom of speech should allow… …freedom of speech*

Someone violates PC, even only presumably or allegedly, and within the community all the instincts kick in. The alleged evildoer is sidelined, deprived of his implicit social status, cast out of the world of the living and real members of the community.

Postmodern bonepointing

Bonepointing is, as we see, not a matter of the past or of ancient cultures like those of the Australian aborigines. It happens all the time. We can only guard against it by actively inviting and welcoming criticism, by treating those who are opposed to our opinion as welcome corrections to our own blind spots or biases, whatever they may be. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a scion of philosophical hermeneutics, was asked by a journalist at the end of his life, how he would describe his teaching in one sentence. Gadamer said: “The other may be right.”

The gist and the threat of PC is that we deny others this potential right of having a point. They may be wrong. But without a fair hearing and an open scrutiny we will never know. And, in the end, we do not know whether they might not contribute to correcting our own biases. I am not at all a friend of the theses of Sarrazin or the political ideas of the AfD, on the contrary. But all those who make up their mind and speak out publicly might have some important message, even though we might disagree, or even though the way they present it may be completely distorted. I don’t think vaccinations are bad for humanity. On the contrary. Probably they did a lot of good. But that should not bar our view on those cases where serious side effects happened or on how we can create safer modes of delivery. Or where vaccination might have a different cause, or where it is better not to vaccinate at all. PC prevents us from differentiation and thus limits us to supposedly easy solutions.

> *The other may be right*

PC is the postmodern taboo in the form of a prohibition to think. Quite the contrary to the heritage of European enlightenment that was condensed by Kant into the phrase “sapere aude – dare to use your own common sense”. I reckon we should fight PC. We should trespass against PC to the purpose of disempowering PC. We should give sanctuary to victims of trespassing against PC. And we should avoid making the trespassers of PC our new heroes and making not-PC the new PC.

Therefore we need to sing, and practise, the praise of political incorrectness and strengthen those that violate PC. They render a service to us all, they are socially extremely necessary. They are the ones that point out the emperor’s missing clothes while everyone else, although seeing his nakedness, praises the new garment. They are the ones who point out that everyone is staying inside an imaginary boundary where there really is none. They are the trespassers who demonstrate that nothing happens if you go against an invisible law or

tread on supposedly sacred ground. They actually are the true bearers of the enlightenment torch. They are the guarantee for progress, even though mostly being fought in the name of allegedly progressive ideas – which more often than not turn out to be ideologies. And wherever an ideology takes over, the ideas of enlightenment, rationality, and freedom are at stake. Thus: let us praise political incorrectness.

Sources

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