

Politics of exclusion: On the de-funding of the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and mental health (IGPP) in Freiburg i. B. in Germany

Opinion

By the end of 2019 a most prestigious institute for research on phenomena on the boundaries of reality, the *Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health*, the *Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene e.V.* (IGPP) was defunded by notice of the Department for Culture and Religion, Youth and Sport of the provincial government of Baden-Württemberg in Germany. The institute is dedicated to scientific research on so-called para-normal and 'fringe' phenomena [Note: following the publication of this article the IGPP informed us that the defunding affects the institute for counselling on parapsychological experiences and phenomena, the 'Parapsychologische Beratungsstelle' which is associated with the IGPP, but is legally independent of it.]. Its board of directors comprises some of the most eminent academic professors in the natural sciences, such as theoretical physics, biology, psychology, medicine, social sciences, philosophy etc. in German speaking countries. It edits publications and organises conferences, also through its affiliated academic society, the *Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Parapsychologie e.V. (WGFP)* [*Scientific Society for the Promotion of Psychic Research*]. It coordinates research, provides lectures and expertise to medical doctors, psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, museums, cultural institutions, schools, media and other academic institutions. The programmes of the annual conferences are accessible online.¹

The IGPP was founded in 1950 by the medical professor Dr. Hans Bender, as an institute at the University of Freiburg in Germany. His presence in the media contributed much to the public interest and acceptance of this field of research. Bender saw to it that – apart from its activities of research and publications - the institute provided counselling to the public on an individual basis for anyone, who experiences paranormal phenomena. It has attained nation-wide importance. It is firmly established in public recognition. An overview of the institute's staff, scientific activities, counselling services and library is given on its website.² The IGPP states: "*The IGPP maintains a broad-based counselling, information, and education program for people with extraordinary experiences, a large special library and archive for parapsychology and frontier areas of psychology. One outstanding characteristic of the IGPP is its philosophy of neutrality and institutional independence. It is cooperating with numerous national and international universities and research institutes and is regularly involved in university programs for graduate students. It is financed by a private foundation. Today, the IGPP is the world's largest institution of its kind.*"³

After some years the institute was converted into an independent institution, supported by private endowments and by the province of Baden-Württemberg. Its body of staff runs the scientific and counselling activities, and maintains the unique specialised library. Here some important research in the field of modern cultural history, of paranormal research and Western Esotericism has been conducted,

¹https://www.parapsychologische-beratungsstelle.de/Jaehrlicher_Workshop/

²http://www.igpp.de/allg/struct_EN.htm

³Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health.

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such as by Egil Asprem.⁴ The institute publishes extensive bi-annual reports.⁵ In the edition of 2016-7 the two journals, edited by the society, *Mind and Matter* as well as the *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, are described.⁶ Thanks to private foundations and donations, the institute has attained a degree of financial independence. Presently it conducts about 3000 counselling talks annually, including answering written requests, per year, with individual callers seeking advice on para-normal experiences and phenomena. These are conducted, free of charge, on an individual basis, with confidentiality assured. The website registered some 60 000 annual calls. The counselling services have however been severely curtailed, when the funding of this independent institute by the government of the province of Baden-Württemberg has been cancelled after thirty years, at short notice. The annual state subsidies amounted to a modest € 100 000,- so far.

The spokesperson of the provincial administration demanded that the institute be transformed into an institute for counselling 'on sectarian activities'. Its future services to the public should be re-oriented accordingly, with close 'monitoring' i. e. with no confidentiality of talks by phone, e.g. possible any more. In a most cynical measure the provincial government offered, that it would almost double its financial support, if the IGPP institute would convert itself into an advisory institution for 'harmful sectarian activities'.⁷

The assault on this unique and eminent institution is alarming, for research in related fields too. The IGPP's research, applying new cosmological models in the natural sciences with meticulous empirical research on para-normal phenomena, as well as its interdisciplinary approach to them and their implications is attacked. A look at the background of this political move reveals an agenda of cultural politics that is of Europe-wide significance.

The defunding of the institute has been spearheaded by new members of staff in the department of Culture, Religion, Youth and Sports of the province of Baden-Württemberg. One of them is

⁴Asprem, Egil, *The Problem of Disenchantment – Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900 – 1939*, Leiden, 2014: Koninglijke Brill (Pb. 2018)

⁵http://www.igpp.de/allg/reports_EN.htm

⁶http://www.igpp.de/allg/Berichte/IGPP_BiennialReport_2016-2017.pdf

⁷Cf. Von Lucadou, Walter; N. Bauer; W. Wald and R. von Lucadou, (WGFP), [Public] *Memorandum Zur Institutionellen Förderung der „Parapsychologischen Beratungsstelle“* [...], Freiburg i. B. 20th January, 2020

a member of the: *European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects* (FECRIS)⁸. The FECRIS is, in short, an association of conservative Catholics and Orthodox, in association with hard-line Materialists, and some culturally conservative Evangelical Fundamentalists. It has numerous civil-society members of a rather 'reactionary' political and cultural outlook. Its main bases are in Poland, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Spain and France, as a list of its member groups shows.⁹ It is a most 'un-holy' coalition. Culturally it is enrooted in militantly Materialistic/ Positivistic milieus in Western Europe, in France, Italy and Germany, who have found common interests with authoritarian Catholic and Orthodox milieus and formations in Eastern Europe, and in Spain. The 'Un-Holy Alliance' gives the impression of being influential. Its stated objectives, allegedly focussed on the dangers of "sectarianism", include Esotericism, 'alternative world views' and appreciative research in these fields. Some quotes from its website show the cultural, social and political intentions. Its declaration of policy states:

*"The undersigned European associations, are united in fighting the effects of adverse sectarian practices and to assist the victims of such practices. [...]they recognize that it is the duty of public authorities. [...] FECRIS hereby affirms that: 1. To deny the existence of national, regional or transnational sectarian organisations, whether hidden or not under mask of philosophical or religious belief cannot but contribute to abuse public opinion and the authorities are refrained from taking action against the same. 2. We must not confuse 'spiritual seeking' [...] with sectarian groups whose practices impede the aspiration of individuals. 3. The philosophical or religious claims of a group does not entitle it to [...] unsettle social balance."*¹⁰

These statements indicate that one of the goals of the organisation is to suppress any new spiritual movements that could be perceived as 'unsettling social balance'. In Eastern Europe this is a code-word for any 'new' spiritual or religious form, ranging from Yoga through Pentecostalism, to Neopaganism and Esotericism. In short, it designates any unwelcome competition to the established secular orders and Churches. The cultural orientations of such new movements, to late 20th century counter-culture or to a search for cultural and spiritual 'alternatives' such as eco-spirituality, or gender issues, are keenly recognised and labelled as 'dangerous sectarian activities'. Research such as by the IGPP is targeted, identified to be vigorously combatted.

Thus the FECRIS declares its agenda in regard to scientific research:

*"Sectarian deviations are not static phenomena. Their outward signs are constantly evolving. [...] It is important to resist the pressure to place cultic behaviour on the safe ground of belief and religion. The discussion is a false one based on a superficial approach to the issues and incompatible with scientific analysis."*¹¹

⁸<https://www.fecris.org/>

⁹<https://www.fecris.org/members/>

¹⁰<https://www.fecris.org/fecris/common-declaration-of-the-european-conference-of-23-and-24-april-1999/>

¹¹Dott. Luigi Corvaglia, Member of the Scientific Committee: "Brief essay on the confusion between wives and hats." 24/08/2016.

A FECRIS' documents names 'alternative world views' and 'cultural relativism', as dangers:

*"There are those who mistake the defence of the oddest pseudo-scientific theories for democracy and anti-authoritarianism because, they say, there is a 'dictatorship of science' that does not guarantee equal voice to 'alternative' theories. [...] They do it out of respect for the 'culture of non-Western peoples'; the 'right to be different' and against 'cultural colonization.' [...] The problem is that the defenders of the right of cultures to be different have never been part of the progressive front. They adhere to ethnopluralism, a vision that opposes egalitarianism, democracy and essentially, modern society that was born of the Enlightenment. This takes the wraps off."*¹²

In view of the aggressive cultural-political agenda of this well-connected Europe-wide organisation, it is little wonder that the IGPP has been targeted as a prime victim.

The province of Baden-Württemberg is a 'hot-spot' of fundamentalist Protestants in Germany. Oddly enough the provincial government is formed by a coalition of the Green Party (Grünen), many of whose members are culturally progressive and of 'alternative' ecological orientation, together with the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), with many conservative Catholic members. It is remarkable that in his political constellation such an attack on the venerable IGPP institute was possible. The implications of this agenda are, that researchers in the fields of 'frontier research' in the natural sciences, as well as those on new spiritual movements, Esotericism, alternative world views, or on 'indigenous healing' have to brace themselves for such sustained attacks. They will be accused of 'unscientific' and socially dangerous, destabilizing movements ('cults', 'sects') that undermine the established order, and which should be repressed in spite of the principle of freedom of belief and of academic research. The eminent scholar of Western Esotericism, Wouter Hanegraaff, has called the history of his field as one of "excluded knowledge".¹³ The present attack on the IGPP however shows, that the issue extends further: to 'exclusion of epistemologies', of research on the boundaries of realities. The political attack on the IGPP should thus alarm researchers of Esotericism, of New Religious Movements, Alternative Spiritualities, non-Western forms of Spiritual Healing, or even theory in Psychology beyond the pale of Cognitivism, such as Psychoanalysis or Systemic approaches, in academia too.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

¹²<https://tarantula468.wordpress.com/2016/08/14/breve-saggio-sulla-confusione-fra-mogli-e-cappelli/> "

¹³Cf. European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) (eds.), *The Sixth International ESSWE Conference: Western Esotericism and deviance, 1-3 June 2017, University of Erfurt, Germany*, <http://www.esswe.org/Current-conference>