Unease over 'ethnicity' at conference in Germany

by Mark Burdman

Attempts to introduce into a German context, crucial features of the "political correctness" movement in the United States, met an unanticipated degree of resistance at a conference in Germany, held at the Loccum Evangelical Academy in the state of Lower Saxony. The conference, on Oct. 20-22, focused on an attempt to explore how the idea of "ethnicity," or the primacy of "ethnic identity," could be applied in the political, social, and cultural spheres, in Europe as well as in other parts of the world.

"Ethnicity" has become a key component of the ideology known as "deconstructionism," in this case part of an effort to "deconstruct" the sovereign nation-state, by strengthening particularist "ethnic identities." An entire academic industry of social and cultural anthropologists and ethnographers has been built up to promote the idea. Increasingly, "ethnicity" has become part of the strategic arsenal of eastern and western intelligence agencies, which are being staffed with "ethnic conflict specialists." The potential for manipulating targeted populations on the basis of artificial and mutually antagonistic "ethnic identities" has become a new form of crisis provocation and crisis management, especially true under conditions of physical-economic breakdown where desperate people are induced to compete for control over resources. The Russians are playing this game in the Caucasus and Transcaucasus, as they orchestrate bloody inter-ethnic confrontations, but western agencies are up to their ears in manipulating the "ethnic card" in Africa, the Balkans, and elsewhere.

Inside the United States, the promotion of "ethnicity" has laid the groundwork for the possible disintegration of the United States by some time in the 1990s. With such dangers in mind, not everybody is jumping on the bandwagon. One document circulated at Loccum was a recent review in a German newspaper of a new book by New York Sen. Daniel Moynihan, *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics,* in which Moynihan warns that the fixation on ethnic-based identities is destroying the social fabric of contemporary societies, and could rapidly bring the world to hell— hence "Pandaemonium," the word for "Hell" in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Back to 1933?

Often, discussions of the type at Loccum can be dull, but this one produced some unexpected sparks. In response to a provocative presentation by Dr. Christian Scherrer, an "ethnic conflicts" specialist from the University of Zurich's Institute of Ethnology who promotes the struggle of "ethnic groups" against "tyrannical nation-states," an elderly German participant expressed the fear that it all sounded like "1933 again," when the Nazis came to power. He recalled that the Nazis tried to redefine identity on the basis of ethnic group or race. Scherrer protested that the concept of "ethnicity" was fully "modern," but not everyone was convinced.

A similar criticism was made by Dr. Jonathan Webber, a Hebrew Center Lecturer in Social Anthropology and Fellow in Jewish Social Studies at the University of Oxford in England. Webber objected that the whole concept of "ethnicity" was an "artificial construct," the exploitation of which depended on who was using it, and for what purpose. He backed up his case humorously, by pointing to the example of the Jews, who were for 200 years beginning in the 18th century, defined as a "religion," then later as a "nation," and now as "an ethnic group." To much nervous laughter, he recounted how one motivation for such a definition among British Jews, was that under British "race relations" statutes, an "ethnic group" receives money from the government.

One further line of attack came from experts from Essen, Bielefeld, and other German cities. They pointed to the precedent of the United States, where "ethnic identity" had gone to such extremes that "homosexuals and lesbians" define themselves as "ethnic groups." Ostensibly, this is done so that they can come under the protection of various "anti-discrimination" laws, but the more general reason, these speakers stressed, is that this is part of the push for "political correctness" in the United States, which represents a total challenge to the concept of the American "melting pot."

True believers unfazed

None of these objections deterred the true-believers, such as Scherrer and his followers, or the committed ethnographers. In combination, these represented the majority of speakers at Loccum.

Scherrer's view is that virtually all of the current nations of Africa, and many of Asia, are essentially tyrannical constructs imposed on diverse ethnic entities. He foresees the breakup of various African nations, including Angola, Zaire, Ethiopia, newly independent Eritrea, and others. He also foresees the early disintegration of Pakistan, beginning with eruptions in the Baluchistan part of the country. Somewhat further down the line, India will be rocked by ethnic conflicts and disintegrate. The world will soon see a "doubling of the amount of nation-states it now has."

Scherrer's model of a "battling ethnic group" is the Mesquito Indians, who were able, marvelously in his view, to deploy 4,000 heavy weapons against the Nicaraguan government. When the question was posed, where the weapons came from, a colleague of his smiled and answered, "The CIA, of course."