An ex-Green politician discusses the failure of German elites—and why shunning populists backfires.

Born in the East German city of Leipzig, Antje Hermenau entered German national politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall three decades ago. She became a member of “Alliance 90/The Greens” and served in the Bundestag for a decade (1994-2004). Her outreach to voters for Germany’s right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has stirred controversy and broken friendships. The 54-year-old entrepreneur, author, and political iconoclast—based today in Dresden—shares with TAI views from her new book, Views from the Center of Europe: How Saxony Sees the World, out this month.

TAI Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Gedmin and Peter Skerry—TAI contributor and political science professor at Boston College—recently spoke with Hermenau by phone. The following interview has been edited for clarity.

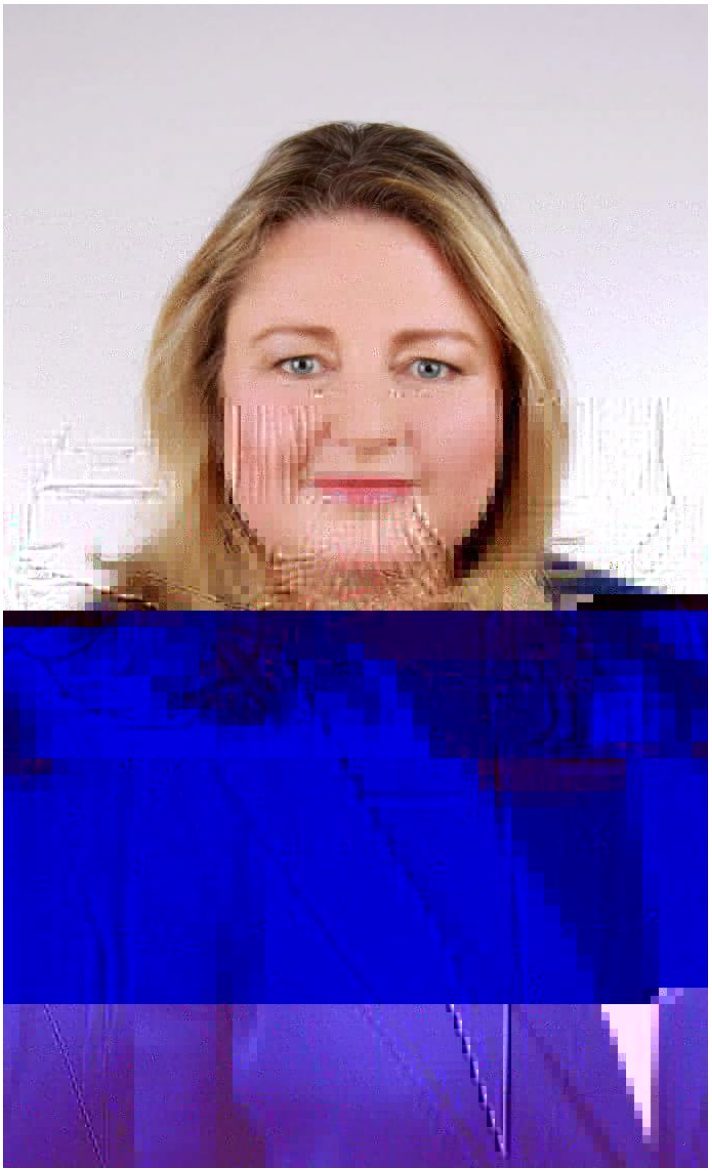
This November marks 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a native of Leipzig in East Germany, how do you feel about the changes and progress that have happened since unification? Where are we today?

We are in the middle of a new debate about Ossi and Wessi, Easterners and Westerners ϖ Ďj

born and raised in western Germany. They are Westerners, and so people in eastern Germany tend to think that those in power are those from over there, and that makes people here revert to identifying as Easterners. This has brought forth a very difficult and harsh discussion. National institutions are not broadly accepted in the eastern part of Germany, because they are in the hands of the Westerners.

Did you imagine in 1989 that there would be still be a significant divide between Ossi and Wessi, 30 years later?

No, I was struck by that myself. It started with the financial crisis of 2008. The idea for how to deal with the crisis was very different in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, especially regarding Greece. It was at this time that many people started to feel anxious and uncertain about the future. In the eastern part of Europe, and this holds true for my home state of Saxony as well, people think you have to work hard and get what you earn. For instance, Slovenians don't understand why they have to pay



Antje Hermenau

during the Cold War. But the West Germans were cut off from their centuries of historical understanding as being part of Mitteleuropa, Central Europe. They made themselves believe they were West Europeans, which they are not.But the West Germans were cut off from their centuries of historical understanding as being part of Mitteleuropa, Central Europe. They made themselves believe they were West Europeans, which they are not. This is why the intra-German debate is so crucial, from my point of view.

At the same time, many East Europeans are having a discussion about material wealth in their countries. Levels of prosperity in the East are not as high as they are in the West, so the economic question is less of a priority for West Europeans.

Remember also, the communist system always tried to minimize the individual ego, so that everybody would function like a little cog in the machine. This was all-important. The Western attitude is totally contrary, and they sometimes overdo it with emphasizing individualism and the ego. More and more people in the West are now giving up on the idea of social justice, a “solidarity system” for everybody. People can feel that, even if they cannot explain it.

It makes perfect sense why somebody who’s 50 or 60 years old would be mindful of that difference between having been raised in the East and the West. But how does that apply to a 20-year-old growing up in Leipzig? Would that person feel differently about the West?

They have done polls of younger people and it was a surprise. It turned out that in eastern Germany, there are more conservatives under 30 than in western Germany. I think this is due to what they saw when they were children in the 90s and 2000s. They saw their parents, their aunts and uncles, their grandparents struggle to get back on their feet again because times were harsh.

Whereas young people in the western part, they have had a rather cozy life. Many expect to have a good inheritance, a flat in the big city. Their future looks much more prosperous at first glance. There’s a difference in their awareness of life’s difficulties, and that makes eastern German youth a bit more conservative.

There was another interesting finding: about a quarter of young people in both west and east would prefer to have a strong leader instead of democracy. Twenty-five percent, on both sides.

If you have a look at people under 30 who believe this, in western Germany 40 or 45 percent of them have a migrant background. In the eastern part, it’s nearly all Ossi. If that’s true, then you have a lot of Turkish people in the western part who are voting for Erdogan, for instance, and a lot of eastern Germans actually thinking the same way as them about family,

times larger just a century ago, but which lost territories after the First World War and now feels like it's had its limbs cut off. It was a country, too, that had worked hard to be worth inviting into Europe's first-class club by having low debts and a well-run treasury.

This is actually what has bothered nearly everybody in Eastern Europe—that the rules of the first-class club had supposedly been chiseled in stone, but were broken so easily when it came to the southwestern countries and their problems. So this was perceived as a double standard: The rules applied to the Easterners were not applied to the Southerners. This not only created a sense of injustice, but also raised the question of whether it was even worth aiming at being a member of the first-class club.

You made a point about how the bonds of trust can get too stretched too thin, perhaps under the influx of a large number of refugees. Does your analysis lead you to conclude that there should be no immigration to Germany?

No, not at all.

So where do you draw the line?

There are some people in the rural areas who say, "We are fed up with it, stop it, nobody else! We just want to die in dignity." But generally in small towns, villages, and big towns alike, you can easily discuss migration for skilled work. No problem at all, as long as they assimilate to our way of life and work.

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The point is that Saxony is a place with a long and proud history of work. The Saxons were known for making high-quality products and selling them everywhere. Our way of living has been tested by war; the Prussians came over, as did others, for our money and our gold. But in the end we have a system that works. Why should we give it up for something else?

Antje, related to all this, who are you? Are you a German? Are you an East German? A Saxon? A Central European? A European?

Well, there is a line of affiliations. First and foremost, I am Saxon. I am Saxon by history, by culture, by language, by dialect, and by way of life. Second, I am German. Third, I'm European. As David Goodhart might put it, I have both "anywhere" and "somewhere"

qualities.

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Innovation developed rapidly because of that high degree of competition. This is the stuff Germany has been made of for the past 300 or 400 years. This was the secret of its development. German Mittelstand [small, locally owned and d

To be sure, the Greens have had huge results in the polls and even in some elections—have a look at Bavaria last autumn. They are able to represent a certain lifestyle that is more urban, more female, and more well-off. It looks nice, it sounds nice, it smells nice, but I don't know whether it is fit for many Germans.

The western Germans are living on an island, whereas the whole of Europe is at sea, besieged by the high waves. The Wessis just don't get the message because they are still on the island and unshaken.

The irony is that because of Germany's particular economic model, rooted in the Mittelstand, the gap between poor and rich has not opened as widely as it has in countries like France, Great Britain, or Russia. And now spoiled Germans are sawing off the branch they are sitting on by demanding too much from the Mittelstand in the form of high taxes and red tape. The Greens, meanwhile, have embraced the idea that German history was the womb the Nazis came out of, thus discrediting all Germany's rich cultural heritage, like Beethoven or Goethe. Astonishingly, the communists in the GDR tried to do the same thing: cut off the East Germans from their centuries-long history and culture, with utopian promises of a new time and a "new man." This way of thinking is quasi-religious, and you see a similar attitude in the Greens' catastrophic alarmism regarding global warming. This is an important issue, but I no longer believe in the simplistic framework the Greens offer. Life is more complex.

When the Greens emerged out of a social movement in the 70s and 80s, they were marginalized by the established parties. Do you see parallels between the way the political elites tried to marginalize the Greens back then, and the way the elites are responding to the AfD, or the Freie Wähler [Free Voters, locally organized groups of voters who are not officially registered political parties –ed.] today?

Of course I do. I remember how the Greens were treated like that when the Iron Curtain was still up. I remember how the PDS—now Die Linke, formerly SED, the East German Communist Party—was treated like that. Frankly, I was nasty to them myself because we were on opposite sides during the communist era. But I now detect this attitude in the response to Freie Wähler and the AfD.

There are racists in the AfD, it's true. If the AfD were a clear-cut conservative party, it would take over the CDU.If the AfD were a clear-cut conservative party, it would take over the CDU. But since there are neo-fascists and racists among its ranks, including in leading positions in the party, the AfD cannot be taken seriously. The party has been unable to get rid of those people. Formerly they had been part of the NPD, the National Democratic Party, but they never did well at the polls. And then they just slipped into the AfD, as if by osmosis. This is the AfD's big problem.

On the other hand, there have been violent leftists wۿle ۻ ۜ

others. This is actually the Bavarian solution, with a local conservative party (the CSU) and Freie Wähler. Something like Freie Wähler is a necessity. Communities and municipalities should have a say. They should be given more money, and more decision-making authority. Municipalities have to be strengthened as the world is shackled by globalization. People need a home, or what we call here a Heimat.

It sounds like you're talking about what we in the United States might call decentralized democracy: bringing democratic decision-making down to a much more local level.

Yes, and it has to happen. This is inevitable. If people get a feeling that they don't have a say, they will just say no.If people get a feeling that they don't have a say, they will just say no.

Any final thoughts for us?tht JeĎtlę Ďj