

A Conversation with Antje Hermenau

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March 12,
2019

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.

TAI: 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?

Antje Hermenau: We are in the middle of a new debate about *Ossi* and *Wessi*, Easterners and Westerners. We had overlooked over the years the need to give people the chance to express themselves. Still today, there remains a difference in mentality between East and West.

Recent studies show that more than 90 percent of all the top jobs in eastern Germany—be they in media, culture and arts, higher education, or politics—go to people who had been 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.

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



AH: 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 into the pot to save the poor in southern states like Greece and Portugal, while Greece, for example, is paying off an average pension that is double what the Slovenian government can pay. So this has caused a stir. Here, the debate between Westerners and Easterners has reignited. A few years earlier, in 2005 or 2006, I thought we were through with it. Now the gap has opened again. The money question in 2008 was the first big one, and the immigration question in 2015 was the second.



Antje Hermenau

TAI: When these questions get talked about, some analysts impose a rigid divide between economic and cultural dimensions of the problem. How would you address that?

AH: It has of course an economic and cultural dimension. It always has. As I explained with the Greek pension example, there is of course a feeling of injustice as the Slovenes are paying in and the Greeks are taking out. But there is an issue of identity as well, which resurfaced in 2015 as people said they were not going to give in to mass migration.

The West European countries had their colonial history, people coming in from former colonies. But they proved too much to assimilate: think of the British Empire, or look at the *banlieues* around Paris, for instance. The eastern Germans think that western Germans consider themselves to be West Europeans, because they were on the side of the West

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.

TAI: 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?

AH: 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,

and not trusting the state, not obeying police, and so on. It's interesting. They're from totally different backgrounds, but neither is fond of democratic principles. They want to have a strong leader.

TAI: As a politician and a former member of the Bundestag, how do you respond to that? Does it concern you?

AH: I watch these trends with great interest. I think they show the need for a new balance in a new society. The easterners could bring to the conversation a healthy appreciation of the need for solidarity within society. That shouldn't go away within one generation. It's a value. It has to be delivered by a social market economy, one still based on competition and individual freedoms. People left communism of their own volition. They don't want it back. But turbo-capitalism doesn't match with Central European traditions.

These trends also show a growing gap between big cities and smaller, rural towns. This is seen throughout Europe, as we know from Brexit and from the Yellow Vests in France. This is new because it's not a divide about money only; it's about the place you live.

TAI: Does that mean that stronger governments are needed, or stronger communal norms? Because when many Americans look at these trends in Europe, they worry about a move toward more authoritarian governments, or "illiberal democracies" like Hungary and Poland. How do you see that playing out?

AH: Well, I think that democracy doesn't work if you overstretch the territory it is applied to. This is my wisdom about it. Democracy has to do with trust. Trust has to do with knowing one another and trusting one another. This is not a question of race or racism, by the way. The larger the group and the larger the territory, the more democracy loses its grip, because trust is lacking. The larger the group and the larger the territory, the more democracy loses its grip, because trust is lacking.

If you look at Germany, people come here because they think they can work here with a blue card if they are well-educated; they come because of our highly functioning welfare state and rule of law. They want to live in a society like ours.

In many ways this dynamic has been shattered, beginning with the financial market crisis in 2008. Then the migration wave in 2015 was like an earthquake to the social welfare system and to the rule of law, because Merkel made the decision herself, like a queen. If you have a social welfare system and rule of law, that keeps society together, even if it is 80 million people. But if this starts to come apart, then you need other glue.

This could be religion, in theory, but this is not a huge factor in the east; only 20 or 25 percent of the people are religious. So you are left with nationalism. Of course some people take advantage of this nationalist idea. Hungary, for instance, is a country that was three

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.

TAI: 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?

AH: No, not at all.

TAI: So where do you draw the line?

AH: 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.

This is a very Protestant attitude: Work is a central part of your life. If you join that model of society and pay your taxes, then you are accepted. This is a very Protestant attitude: Work is a central part of your life. If you join that model of society and pay your taxes, then you are accepted. It's not a question of color. The smaller the town is, and the more people see that newcomers are working and don't want to just take benefits and misbehave, then the more they are accepted. I know some black people, for instance, in a tiny town called Freital who are accepted. Everybody knows them. They may not look like everyone else, but everybody says, well, they're hard workers at the local factory. So this is fine.

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?

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

AH: 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.

I love my home region, Saxony. I feel absolutely at home here. I don't have to be shy about unwritten rules. I understand everybody. We speak the same dialect. We feel a sense of belonging together. I've noticed that even at the supermarket and in daily life, people still speak Saxon dialect with each other. They are much more polite with each other than with outsiders.

Something is happening at the moment. The Saxons are coming together. I don't know whether it's good or bad yet, but I see that the Saxons give themselves signals that they belong together. If I'm taking a vacation in Turkey, and there is another Saxon in the hotel, we notice that we are Saxons even if we're speaking English, because the dialect is so strong. Then we say to each other say, "come on, let's have a coffee." The feeling of belonging is strong.



Adrian Ludwig Richter, "Mein Nest ist das Best" ("My Nest is the Best"), via Wikimedia Commons

TAI: If I read the German national press— take *Der Spiegel*, for example—there's a different portrait painted of Saxony.

AH: Yeah, the Saxons are those who are loudly defending their being Saxons, their being Germans. Some of us even use the phrase “east German” to identify ourselves. For some well-off people in the West, unfortunately, it is easy to avoid a serious debate on this topic of identity by just calling their opponents Nazis.

I think this is relevant to the cultural struggle between AfD and the Greens at the moment. It has something to do with the divide between “anywheres” and “somewheres.” Throughout Eastern and Western Europe, everybody is discussing identity, territory, regional belonging. Think of Catalonia, and now the Scottish and the Irish because of Brexit. Everybody is discussing this because everybody wants to know where he is at home. They understand the inner nature of globalization.

TAI: What do you make of AfD?

AH: They are very clever. These are smart people. They come from all professions. There are scientists, there are lawyers—these are not people with a low education level. They understand that the social welfare system and the rule of law will be damaged if globalization, or Europeanization, continues to be pushed through.

The Green leader Robert Habeck was recently quoted in *Der Spiegel* saying that if there is some *Heimat* [a German term for “homeland” suggestive of community and belonging -ed.], if there is some nation, it should be a European one. The Greens are not able to accept that Germans are a nation and that Germany has a lot of regions with a strong cultural identity. AfD understood that perfectly well. The Greens are not able to accept that Germans are a nation and that Germany has a lot of regions with a strong cultural identity. AfD understood that perfectly well. Then they made a different agenda out of it, not about celebrating identity but about rejecting migration. They put it in plain terms for everybody to understand—that they were simply against migration. But I think this is not good.

AfD has different agendas in east and west. In the west it’s actually a more conservative agenda. They want to bring back the conservatism of the 1960s and 70s. The eastern AfD supporters are more often people who want to be among themselves and are perhaps more racist than in the western part.

TAI: Could you differentiate a bit more between the focus on identity and the racist strain in the AfD? Many people would see those as very similar and I know you don’t.

AH: No, it’s definitely not the case. If you look at Central European history, you will see that it’s always been a tale of little tiny territories belonging to a local king, or an archbishop perhaps. They developed independently. Everybody wanted to have a little library and an opera house. Everybody wanted to be ahead of the curve with skills and innovation. The competition of little tiny entities made Central Europe great.

All of these statelets were competing to be the best, the most glorious, and the richest.

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 deeply rooted businesses – ed.] for instance, are a result of this: small entities with an understanding of themselves, who they are, and how they belong together, and everybody is supposed to give his best. There is social control because everyone knows each other. That limits moral hazard.

That's the identity part. And the AfD now is turning that into a racist thing. Not everywhere, and not everybody, but as a general trend. But on the other hand, they are being called racists by the Left so that the Left can stay in its comfort zone and not question its own assumptions. The Left cannot deliver anymore because it cannot decide what it wants. You can either have totally open borders or a high-quality social welfare system, but you can't have both at the same time. You can either have totally open borders or a high-quality social welfare system, but you can't have both at the same time. This is pure mathematics. They are getting brutally nasty about this dilemma, blaming others helplessly. Thus, people in the middle are pushed more and more to the right.

TAI: What would you say to people in the West who say that you can't return to those values from *Mitteleuropa's* past without leading to anti-immigrant sentiment and racism? You obviously see a different path.

AH: Well, the point is that we should have a strict immigration law. There has been one such proposal developed by the government on a federal level. This migration law would, first of all, make sure that we have a system to estimate the skills of people coming in, because we need a skilled labor force to keep our highly developed economy going. The second thing is to be strict with those who don't behave like guests when they come here. Something has to be done about it, because a lot of Germans feel exploited by migrants, even if they initially have a positive attitude toward them. Migrants have occupied streets in some neighborhoods in western German towns, and the police are underequipped to deal with the problem. So this has to be stopped.

If the state is able to regain power over people who think that they can behave however they want, then people will regain trust in our institutions, including the police. But if the politicians in Berlin try to explain to us that we have to learn Arabic if we don't understand what is spoken on the streets, that's another story.

So, there has to be a change in immigration law. There's no point in not having immigration. The point is to make it smart.

TAI: How will history remember Angela Merkel?

AH: Well, she hasn't given something to the people like Gerhard Schroeder with Agenda 2010 [*a series of labor market reforms widely regarded as necessary and successful* – ed.] or Helmut Kohl with reunification. For quite a while people thought she was handling the situation well enough; they thought she had things under control and we didn't have to take care. This worked for the first years of her chancellorship. But when the financial market crisis came in 2008, that trust was a little shaken. After the migration decision in 2015, it was shaken severely. I think Merkel will be remembered as the chancellor who was not able to understand what had changed within and around Europe during her time in office. I think Merkel will be remembered as the chancellor who was not able to understand what had changed within and around Europe during her time in office.

TAI: What about European parliamentary elections this spring? Will those be important as a signal of political trends in Europe?

AH: Well, we will have a slightly more conservative Europe than we've had so far. Leftist and Green activists understand that very well. Some have made sweeping predictions about what this means for the future of Europe. This is a bit overstated. People don't really know what the future of Europe will be in the next 20 or 30 years. Politicians seem unable to explain to the people what is going to happen or even what good options the Europeans have. As long as mainstream politicians are not able to explain complexity, strong leaders will be preferred.

TAI: You've now mentioned the Greens a few times. As a former member of Alliance 90, the proto-Green Party in East Germany, and then as a former Green in the Bundestag, how do you see them today? Where are they going?

AH: They still have a very strong leftish attitude. And this leftism is not a wing of the party anymore, or a factional tendency, it's an inner, dominant attitude. So all of the proletarians and workers have been drawn to the AfD because they didn't feel that the Greens would take care of their social situation, and it has become a daily struggle with migrants coming in for flats and low-paying jobs. The Greens don't seem to understand that. Or if they do they just don't care.

Being a leftist is supposed to mean you take care of the proletarians, but the Greens' leftism is something else. Being a leftist is supposed to mean you take care of the proletarians, but the Greens' leftism is something else. The proletarians didn't want to be taken care of by the Greens, so the Greens found someone else to take care of. These are the migrants—not those who can earn their money themselves, but poor migrants who have such a hard life. This is something that people here understand as an offense against them: they've been exchanged, so to speak, as the object of political activity.

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.

TAI: 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?

AH: 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 within the Green Party and Die Linke, and now there are violent people in the AfD. So I think this is actually the same phenomenon. Meanwhile, if you look at the oldest party in Germany, the Social Democrats, they are losing support every day. They behave like children, not adults. They betray people while looking straight into the camera. They aren't taken seriously anymore by people who understand what's going on.

TAI: Do you believe there has to be an alternative to the AfD and the SPD, then?

AH: Yes. The Greens have chosen a path that will not lead to them taking over the Social Democrats or even Die Linke. Maybe their idea of an unconditional basic income without any taxes will do the trick, but I'm not sure that will work. The Greens are taking care of migrants while neglecting proletarians. Those who live here—the taxpayers who pay into the social welfare system and who pay for politicians' salaries in the Bundestag—feel betrayed by them. Twenty percent of the people may look at the world like the Greens do: "We are cosmopolitan, and we don't have a nation, and we don't have a *Heimat*." But this is not the majority in Germany. And it's not the majority in Europe in general.

TAI: What's the political vehicle that can articulate the concerns and interests of these people who are being left out?

AH: Well, I mean, go back to the roots. Take care of the social welfare of the people you are surrounded by. That's why I'm supporting the Freie Wähler. This is not exactly a party but, in Saxony for instance, a loose association of 10,000 people organized in 900 different tiny groups, each one responsible for the particular place they live in. We have 100 people from all over Saxony forming a little quasi-party for one goal: to be electable to the Landtag, which is the regional parliament here in Saxony.

This is just a vehicle to get the Freie Wähler into the Landtag, since there is a law saying you have to form a party if you want to run. We have strong support from a lot of mayors. The business community is stepping up, too. The *Mittelstand* in rural areas, craftsmen, architects, and engineers are joining and helping with the platform, because they understand that the important thing is to make democracy work in the territory you are living in.

The people don't trust the elites on top anymore. This occurs from time to time in history if some people are too long at the golden table. The point is that we need other people you can trust. Brussels and Berlin are telling people in little tiny towns what they have to think. We turn it around and say to people in those towns: *you* say what you think, and you say what you need, and you say what you want and don't want.

We try to achieve smart political solutions on the *Länder* [*state - ed.*] level. If we have to discuss it on the federal level, we will do it in the Bundesrat [*Federal Council, Germany's second legislative chamber - ed.*], where the *Länder* work together, and seek support from

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*.

TAI: 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.

AH: 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.

TAI: Any final thoughts for us?

AH: It's important to remember that Germany has a different economic model than most places. It's the *Mittelstand* model. This means that you have a lot of skilled workers, and bosses taking care of tiny firms with fewer than 10 employees. They have a sense of self-awareness and self-reliance. They want to be full citizens in their community.

Now Germany has turned out to be the economic backbone of Europe because of its *Mittelstand*. It is an economic giant but a political dwarf. This was the case about 100 years ago as well, when the other powers were strong colony holders, and Germany seemed so weak after having formed as a nation only a few years prior.

Now the critical question is whether Germany can reach the status of adulthood as a serious, competent, and smart leader of Europe without putting others down. We have an overload of fallen empires in this little continent: the British, the French, the Russians. This is a very difficult situation.

Jeffrey Gedmin is Editor-in-Chief of *The American Interest*. **Peter Skerry** is professor of political science at Boston College and a *TAI* contributor. **Antje Hermenau** is the author of *Views from the Center of Europe: How Saxony Sees the World*.