

DOSSIER

It's Impossible to Talk to You, Anyway

Maybe it is not impossible after all! Bastian Berbner attempts to argue constructively - with a member of the Green Party, a conspiracy theorist, and even a neo-Nazi. Can that be successful without compromising one's values?

By Bastian Berbner
English Translation by Philipp Sebastian Ruppert

"Start with a party you have voted for before," I think, as I enter a garden in Berlin-Schöneberg on this late summer night's eve, feeling a mix of familiarity and anxiety. There are approximately 30 young people spread out among the elevated vegetable patches filled with tomatoes. Many wear T-shirts, some are barefoot. On the grill are tofu and vegetable skewers; like at every event of the Green Youth Berlin, only vegan foods are served at this summer party. I am not registered as a guest, but the description on Facebook said that anyone could come.

Everyone seems to know each other; the conversations seem friendly. Considering the good mood all around, I feel bad. After all, I didn't come here to bask in mutual agreement, but to argue politically. The first to meet my gaze is a young woman. She is blond, and her left foot is immobilised in an orthopaedic splint. She smiles. Oh, a journalist from DIE ZEIT, how nice, a warm welcome. Her name is Jana, she says. To her it is clear that we are on a first name basis.

I ask about Jana's foot. Strain fracture. Caused by wearing the wrong Birkenstock sandals. We laugh about how this is possibly the most common of all Green Party clichés. I ask what type of people have come. Mostly Green Youth, says Jana. The Jusos (youth from the Social Democratic Party) and the Solids (Die Linke) are invited as well. The Conservative Youth? Of course not. The Young Alternative, the youth organisation of the Alternative for Germany (AfD)? No, there is no interest in dealing with Nazis.

That was fast. I have been here for only 2 minutes and am in the thick of it already.

I tell Jana that the editors have sent me on a political journey around Germany. That I am tasked to find out where there is a readiness to

engage in conversation, and to find out how much tolerance there is for people who think differently across the country.

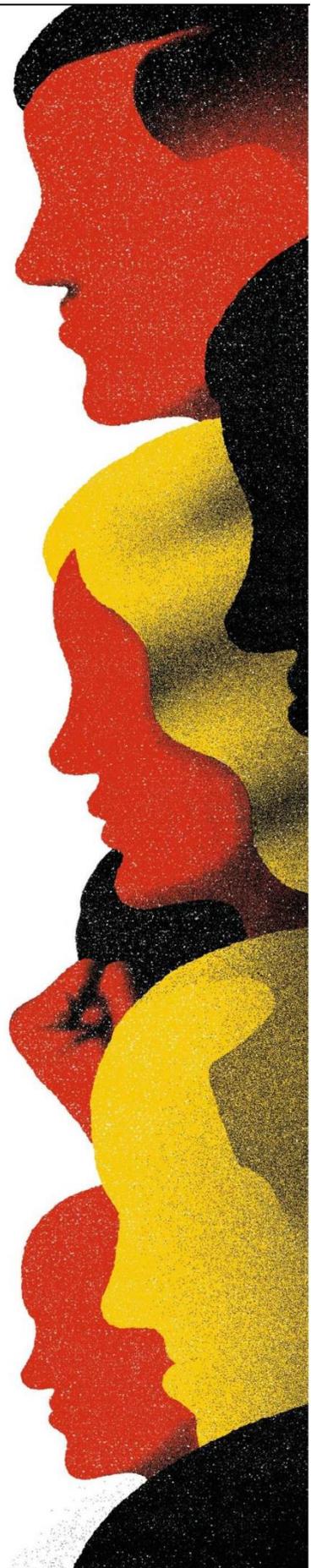
I ask how many members of the Young Alternative she has spoken to before she had reached the Nazi judgement. None, she says. Why? She knows that party's politics. She has seen AfD speeches in the Bundestag, it is bad enough that they are represented there.

I too, am scared by the attack of right populists on our liberal democracies. But I am also scared by something else. The sentence: "Talking to them is pointless." That is something that can be heard from both the left and the right, and describes a new unwillingness to communicate across difference, which appears dangerous to me.

Is talking really pointless? Or is it just more convenient not to?

I ask this question along with approximately 20,000 Germans who recently bet on the opposite. As part of an initiative by ZEIT ONLINE, they answered seven questions on the websites of German media. Should Germany control its borders more strictly? Should meat be taxed more in order to reduce consumption? Should the centers of German cities become free of cars? Yes or no? Based on the answers, an algorithm calculated thousands of maximally divergent pairs. This Sunday, there will be meetings across the entire country: Proponents of migration with sceptics; vegetarians with carnivores; drivers of cars with those preferring bicycles. The event is called "Germany talks."

In the case of Jana, I realize how nice she is with me from the beginning, as though we were allies. That is comfortable, of course. I recognise the us-against-them-tone which I often hear in conversations about the AfD.



"Sad, how many of them there are now." That is a typical sentence in such conversations—comments like that simultaneously represent a check of identity and a closing of ranks. Usually I reply: "yes, that scares me, too." But today I intend to argue, so this time I say that the AfD is right in one thing: We can't accept everyone.

I feel as though Jana takes a step back in the moment of silence that follows. "What?"

Well, I say, the UN estimates that many millions of Africans could come to Europe this century. Of course no one knows for sure, and not all of them want to come to Germany, but shouldn't we be prepared? Would we accept, say, 200 million refugees?

Jana stares at me.

100 million? 50 million?

Let's see when you say stop, I tell her, admittedly provocatively.

Twenty, ten, five?

I don't know where the limit is either, I say. No one could know. That is something we could only come to an understanding about as a community. Shouldn't we?

Jana says she considers anyone who wants a limit to be inhuman.

Did she just declare some of her fellow citizens to be inhuman in the name of human rights? She remains silent. If one believes polls, I tell her, that would include approximately 50 percent of Germans. Then so be it, she says.



Jana from the Berlin Green Youth

Jana is 22, maybe it is the furor of youth that leads to her statements. Or it is the furor, that unwillingness to compromise, which has seemingly gripped our entire society for some time now?

Assuming I would have addressed Muslims as terrorists, women as sluts, or men as rapists, Jana would have cried out, with full justification: That is wrong, a generalisation! But can one address all

proponents of a limit on immigration as inhuman?

If one person denies another person's humanity, psychologists call it "dehumanisation." A society which displays too much of that tends to have a problem. The Greeks and the slaves, the Americans and the indigenous peoples, the Nazis and the Jews. Currently, western societies are once more experiencing a threatening level of dehumanisation.

People on the right dehumanise foreigners by using words such as "breeding," or "rammeln" (a German word meaning "mating like rabbits"), as if they were speaking about animals.

People on the left dehumanise people on the right by addressing them as "wilds" or "bloodthirsty beasts."

Jana dehumanises all who are in favor of a limit on immigration.

Psychological experiments show how dangerous that is. When we see that another person is stabbed in the hand with a needle, we experience pain ourselves. In the case of an enemy, we do not care. When we see a picture of an unknown, sad person, we suffer with him. If this person is an enemy, we experience joy. Even our saliva changes, scientists have found.

If someone had taken a swab from under Jana's tongue a few weeks after our conversation, when she saw the images of neo-Nazis in Chemnitz, it would have likely shown a heightened cortisol level. Psychologists have proven that the brain reacts in the same way to a threat to one's identity in the form of an argument or an image in the same way it would react to seeing a bear in the forest. It prompts the adrenal glands to produce cortisol, a stress hormone. The body prepares to fight.

My impression is that the cortisol level of our society is rising daily.

The good news is that there is a solution, and a simple one at that: contact.

If we look into the eyes of a stranger, we react mostly with empathy. From afar, a Muslim easily becomes a terrorist, an AfD voter easily becomes a neo-Nazi. Close up, however, these figures turn into humans, into cat lovers, Jazz aficionados, football fans, hobby ornithologists. The closer someone is to us, the more difficult it becomes to hate them. Even professional opponents have difficulty avoiding that.

In the American civil war, opposing soldiers fought on average ten meters from each other. Considering the accuracy they displayed at shooting ranges, a regiment should have killed more than 500 enemies per minute. The real figure is below two. According to the military psychologist Dave Gross, French soldiers near Weissenburg used 48,000 bullets to kill 404 Germans in 1870. Six years later, American soldiers fired 25,000 bullets on advancing Native Americans - and killed 99. In World War II only every fifth soldier in close range combat fired his rifle.

The writer George Orwell, who fought in the Spanish civil war, describes a similar experience: "a man presumably carrying a message to an officer, jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him.... I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists,' but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist,' he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him."

From a distance, it is easier. Consequently, it is not surprising that Jana has never spoken to someone from the Young Alternative. Even with the upper limit on migration, she had so far mostly been confronted from a distance. But now I am standing right in front of her. Does she consider me to be inhuman?

Before I can ask that question, one of Jana's friends joins us: "you are talking about an upper limit? I am completely in favor - when it comes to salaries!" The conversation moves away from the topic and after a while, Jana has disappeared.

On my way home, I wonder how difficult the communication between two people can be despite them thinking so similarly - we are both in favour of gay marriage, immigration, the right to abortion. If a single difference in opinion is enough to erase all commonalities, then what happens if entire groups of people hold many different convictions?

Three out of four Germans said in a poll conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation that they considered the lack of social coherence at least partially at threat. The chancellor says that the country is divided. Televisions, newspapers, and Facebook timelines all blare hatred and limited understanding. Unlike anything I have seen in the twenty years I have been actively thinking about politics, the country is actively struggling to define its identity. What keeps our society together? What is the cement that creates a people from 83 million individuals, a "we"? Does it still exist?

We can't find an answer. How could we? The only ones who could do that are, after all: all of us together. All major groups would have to take part in a societal summit: Jana; as well as her opponents from the Young Alternative; the ones shouting "we are the people"; as well as those who shout back "no you are not"; the migrants and the old white men. Instead there are daily calls for bans on speaking - and not just from those on the right shouting about the "lying press." Also on the other side: Some people demand that the AfD, a party voted for by millions should not get invited to talk shows. That the party should get boycotted in the parliaments. I sometimes imagine what it must feel like to be one of the people who voted for them. Of course I would feel like my vote was worth less. That is a feeling that should never be experienced by any citizen in a democracy.

During a recent visit to my former university in Paris I heard that students had blocked

a speech by a Front-National politician by lying down in front of the lecture hall. The politician left and later said in interviews that the students had been afraid of debate, an unfortunate circumstance especially at a university, a bastion of free thought and free speech. I believe he is right (and am asking myself at the same time how far I would go myself - would I let Björn Höcke speak at a university?).

The French students who opposed the speech argued that Front-National politicians could use such forums to advertise for themselves. But the real reason not to ban speech, neither at university, nor in talk shows, nor in parliaments, is this: it doesn't work.

In the 1920s, the USA prohibited alcohol. Did the people stop drinking? No, they ended up drinking illegally, some even took boats out into international waters to get drunk. It is the same way with political ideas. If you prohibit them, they will still find a way - that is one of the reasons why the prohibition of political parties is problematic, why a democracy will do almost anything to avoid it. In the past, political ideas, even unwanted ones, were discussed around the pub, today they are spread on social media. In a democracy, there is only one way to suppress an idea: to defeat it in open debate.

Unfortunately, the attempts at open debate so far have been pitiful. "Cunt" (a protestor in Heidenau in Saxony) is followed by "rabble" (Sigmar Gabriel), "bird shit" (Alexander Gauland) is followed by "pile of manure" (Martin Schulz), "we will hunt them" (Gauland again) is followed by "Hatred makes ugly" (Johannes Kahrs). It is as though we left the most important political discussion in years to a band of school yard bullies.

How is it possible to improve on that? How do I manage to argue constructively the next time, maybe to persuade my opponent - or maybe even to be persuaded? My conversation with Jana was civilized, but at the same time - not an actual dialogue.

In a brick building at Columbia University in New York sits a man in a cramped office who can likely answer that question better than anyone. He looks a little like George Clooney, but the sign at his door reads: Peter Coleman. Coleman has in fact been an actor before, but then studied psychology. Today, he leads the Difficult Conversation Lab, a laboratory that is the first of its kind in the world and researches how to disagree constructively.

Ninety-five percent of all conflicts are easy to solve, says Coleman. Who does the dishes? Pasta or pizza? Buy or rent? Sit down, talk about it, that's it. He is interested in the other 5 percent, those conflicts that are so intractable that they barely appear solvable. Tantalus, the figure from Greek mythology, is a good example.

Because Tantalus dismembered his son and fed him to the gods, they cursed his family. They banished him to the underworld, petrified his daughter, and killed 14 of his grandchildren. Two of the survivors, Atreus and Thyestes, first

murdered their half brother, then one seduced the wife of the other and stole his golden fleece. At the make up dinner, Atreus served his brother his own children. Generation for generation it continued; murder, cannibalism, incest, and on the side, the family drama caused the Trojan War. All because one person made a mistake. The conflict almost led itself. Just like some marriage feuds. Just like the conflict in the Middle East.

Imagine if any one of Tantalus descendants had said: Stop! We are going to sit down now and talk about this. The way that can work is what Peter Coleman researches.

Coleman smiles when I tell him that some in Germany say that one shouldn't talk to politicians and voters of the AfD. "Who else are you going to talk to solve political conflicts? Your friends?" he asks. "And beyond that", he says, "the oldest rule in the end, whoever knows their opponents, wins. And for that, you have to talk to them."

Hundreds of times, Coleman has let political opponents argue in his lab—about abortion, about euthanasia, about capital punishment. Many conversations become personal very quickly. Some escalate. But others proceed surprisingly constructively and end in an agreement. Coleman and his team noticed that in the latter conversations, more questions were asked. The subjects were curious, put themselves in the shoes of their opponent. Sometimes they asked: "one moment, just to make sure I got this right, what you are saying is..." then they repeated the opponent's position, and if they had misunderstood something, refined their understanding until the opponent said: "yes, exactly."

Who are these constructive arguers? What makes them more tolerant than others? Coleman found similarities.

A person has many identities. Let us imagine a woman not unlike Jana. The woman lives in a major city, is vegan, is politically active for the green party, is a feminist, and is a proponent of same sex marriage. All of that fits together nicely, her identities align well.

Let's imagine another person. She is a lesbian, but against gay marriage, she supports Seehofer, but is also in favour of open borders, she is a Muslim, but also puts up a Christmas tree each year. That does not fit together, her identities do not align. Coleman calls this "high complexity."

The most important finding of Coleman's lab is this: The more complexity one has in their life--cognitively, emotionally--the more tolerant the person is and the more constructively they will argue. People who don't neatly fit into buckets themselves are more hesitant to put others in narrow categories; they don't judge people as quickly. While others often assume hostility, these people are more likely to find commonality.

Which begs the question: Is this something that can be learned?

A colleague of Coleman's, Dr. Katharina Kugler, conducted an experiment. She divided conversation partners who came into the lab to argue, into two groups. She asked one group to read two texts about abortion; both were phrased like briefs by sharp tongued lawyers, one arguing in favour of the right to abortion, the other against. The language was aggressive, the tone confrontational. The conversation pairs in the other group were given only one text. It contained the same arguments, but this time, they were intertwined, the language was balanced, the tone moderate.

After their reading, the subjects were asked to discuss abortion. The brief-pairs turned out to be more aggressive, while the nuanced-pairs were more constructive. The psychologists had turned them into better arguers.

Then the scientists discovered something else: the pairs that read the nuanced text about abortion were more ready to find common ground even when they were asked to discuss something else, such as capital punishment. Cultivated on a small scale, complexity colors one's nature just like a few drops of paint would a tub of water.

When I ask Coleman how I can make my life more complex, he tells me to meet strangers. To get out of my bubble, the more foreign, the better. Why not openly seek commonalities with my biggest political opponent? I consider whether to meet an AfD voter. But Coleman tells me: the more extreme the experiment, the better. Be courageous in what you do.

A restaurant in Wismar. On the terrace sits a bald man with a full beard and a colourfully tattooed, powerful body: the neo-Nazi Sven Kruger. I shake his hand. He smiles. "You've come all on your own?"

All I know about Kruger is that the slogan of his demolition business is "We are guys for rough jobs," that he is 44 years old, has three children, that he has been convicted before, and that he served ten years in prison as well as two on the county council for the NPD (far right party in Germany). Sven Kruger is considerably further right than Jana is left. He positions himself far beyond my political red lines.

"Let's talk," he says. "But shall we do so on a first name basis?"

My first impulse: better not. On the other hand, I was on a first name basis with Jana. Interesting, how normal that felt, and how strange it is now when I can hear myself answer: "Okay."

I ask Sven, if it is OK for him that I call him a neo-Nazi. Yes, he says, even though he prefers "national socialist." Of course I immediately think of Auschwitz, and I think Sven notices, because he follows up by telling me that he does not mean the national socialism from the past, but rather a national Germany within its current borders, without territorial claims against its neighbors, a European nation under many,

with a government that cares for its people, and only its own people.

Who would be part of these people?

All Germans.

So including Blacks, Jews, Muslims?

Not really.

Why not?

Those are only passport Germans.

I swallow my anger and tell him about my black and Jewish friends. He argues with words like "Blood" and "Lineage." I ask him, what he would do, if his daughter had a black boyfriend. "I don't know, that would be difficult for me. I would not become violent. I just hope that it doesn't happen."

Sometimes I look around me nervously, there are constantly people passing. What do they think of me, sitting here with Sven?

Maybe this conversation is a mistake after all, I think. Almost everything that has been said so far seems repugnant to me. In me churns the possibly most German of reflexes: As a democrat, you have to fight Sven. At the same time, I can hear Peter Coleman's voice in my head: Exactly right, that is why you need to get to know him!

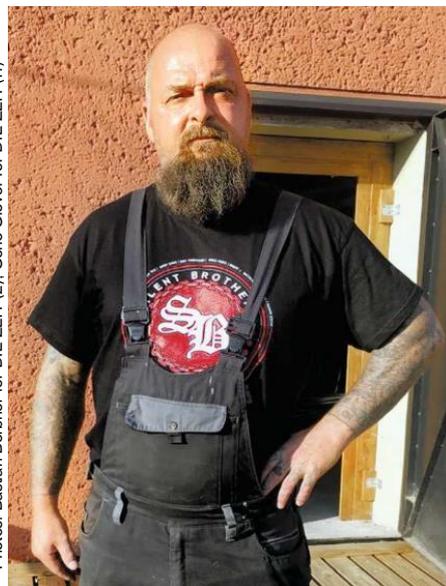
And that works disturbingly well. The conversation works, by all appearances, well. Much better than with Jana. Sven asks a lot of questions, maybe because he is an adept conversationalist. Or maybe because by now I think to myself with Coleman's training: Don't counter straight away, let him finish. He asks me: Why did I pursue Middle Eastern Studies at university? Do I feel safe walking through Hamburg at night? What does Europe mean to me?

I tell him of my studies in Paris. Of a friend who married a French girl he met during his exchange. Of one who married a Czech girl he fell in love with during Erasmus. Their children, I tell him, are true Europeans, and I feel like I am presenting at an awards ceremony, as corny as all of it sounds, but Sven nods and says, yes, it is great, Europe opens doors for educated people. In his daily life, he only gets to see how Poles come to work in Mecklenburg, while he, Sven, has to drive from Mecklenburg to Hamburg to find work, and the guys from Hamburg to the Netherlands, always following the money. That is expensive, pollutes the environment, and no-one got to eat dinner with their families.

Then something surprising happens. Sven tells me about a Syrian child that was recently run over close by. That distressed him a lot. Just like the fact that someone drew a swastika on the road next to the place of the accident and wrote: "1.0". His sadness seems genuine and I tell him that it surprises me.

He doesn't understand the refugee debate, Sven says. Of course it's imperative to give shelter to those fleeing a war, the Syrians, the Iraqis, that is an act of humanitarianism.

If we had to write a joint statement, that is where we could start. But we would quickly reach a point at which our opinions diverge. Sven wants to send everyone home as soon as peace returns to their home countries. No matter, how long they have been here. No matter, how well integrated they are.



Sven Krüger calls himself a "National Socialist." He says, "Let's talk!"

He had once been to Namibia, says Sven. A guy from Wismar, who had been annoyed that people on the left and people on the right kept chasing each other through the city, flew two Nazis and two lefties to the country. Sven had smashed a bottle of champagne on one of the lefties heads at some point before. Now they were trekking through the desert, and suddenly, by the campfire, those lefties turned out to be pretty nice guys. Sven also spent a few days hunting antelopes and fishing with the son of a Himba chieftain. All voluntarily.

And since he already started listing things: three years ago he had been interviewed by the TV reporter Michel Abdollahi, whose parents came from Iran, someone who Sven would consider a passport German. Nevertheless: "Nice guy, that Michel." That was mutual, in his film Abdollahi said about Sven: "somehow, I quite like the guy."

The meeting shakes the image I have of a neo-Nazi. At the same time I ask myself: if I write that in my article, don't I play down the threat of Sven? A neo-Nazi and a Himba go fishing, doesn't that sound very cute? More like the start of a joke than the description of a racist?

On the other hand: to create an unbroken, evil image for a person about whom I know it to be not representative, would be bad journalism, it would be a conscious decision in favour of a cliché. And why should that be ok for a neo-Nazi, but not for someone on the left, a Muslim, a Jew, or a football fan?

Sven stands apart from society. He rejects the constitution. He tells me with pride how they chased foreigners out of the village with sticks in the 90s, that he was in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992, that he has

no remorse about his use of violence. They put up a way sign to Braunau am Inn in his village, to Hitler's birthplace. And when I ask him about his opinion on the Holocaust, he tells me he doesn't want to talk about it, he could end up breaking the law. (Denying the holocaust is against German law).

I ask myself how Sven can retain his racism despite his experiences with the lefts at the campfire, the Himba, and Michel Abdollahi. He himself gives me the answer. In his documentary, Abdollahi asks him, what he would do if refugees came into his village, and Sven says: "The problem is, when you really get to know them, you lose your ability to hate them."

Sven consciously dehumanises (and is therefore, in a terrifying way, smarter than Jana). He knows that he starts caring about people he allows to get close to him. And so he keeps them at a distance: returned from Namibia, he broke his contact to the lefts. He hasn't seen Abdollahi again either. He withdrew to his bubble. His neighbours, colleagues, friends—all neo-Nazis.

There is one thing Sven and Jana have in common: they protect themselves from too much contact with those they reject. The difference: Jana's rejection leads to silence. If one draws the logical conclusion from Sven's rejection, it leads to violence.

A few days after the conversation in Wismar, I meet a friend in a cafe in Hamburg. I tell her that I had surprisingly good conversation with a neo-Nazi. She looks at me as though I had lost my mind. She is Jewish, therefore it is particularly difficult for me to recount Sven's position, even if I am only quoting him. I am a bit disgusted by myself, because I notice that I have grown to like him. I went through the same experience as Michel Abdollahi before me.

My friend asks: why do you even speak with a guy like that Sven? I can hear the criticism in her voice: shouldn't you have shown some spine regarding your values?

That seems to be the character question of our time: either you talk, or you show some spine. As though the two were mutually exclusive: after all, before I can show some spine, I first have to understand what it is that I show spine against (or in favor of).

Following my conversation with Sven, I do not believe less in democracy, nor am I less against racism, I just know him better. I am also no less worried, on the contrary, now that I know that his obsession with race is paired with intelligence.

The result of my experiment is impressive nonetheless. After three hours on that terrace, Sven and I could have extended our joint statement: we both consider climate change to be the biggest issue facing mankind, we consider the PFAND on cans to be positive (a German system in which returning recyclable containers returns part of the cost), and we would both like to spend more time in the south of France. That might be very little in the face of our differences, but it is more than I had expected.

Assuming, every German spoke with every one of his or her 83 million fellow citizens and each pair wrote down their commonalities. Would the overlap of these billions of statements be the core of the German identity? The cement? The "us"?

And if that were the case, shouldn't we strive for this ideal, maximize the number of such conversations?

At this point I have come to believe that the result wouldn't be that painful. There has already been a meeting of ZEIT ONLINE readers for "Germany speaks" in the past year. The pairs were rarely as different as Sven and I, but they had generally all given different answers to questions they had been asked before. Following their meeting, hundreds wrote to the editors.

Good day, we had a surprisingly harmonious talk. The more nuanced one looked at the question, the more our commonalities became apparent. In some areas we weren't as different as we had assumed.

... We discussed our contrary positions and realised that we had more in common than not. We quickly realised that we had far more in common than there were things that separated us.

Even though she (long term member of the SPD) and I (new member of the FDP) come from different political camps, we could find a consensus on many topics.

I am going to give followers of the CDU and FDP more of a chance to explain their positions in the future :-)

We ended up not disagreeing as much as we thought, at least not as much, as opposing answers would have led us to assume.

The similarity of the letters made it seem like it had been arranged. How can that be explained?

The American political scientist Liliana Mason recently wrote a sentence about the US which I believe to also be true for Germany: "We act like we disagree more than we really do."

I believe we have a tendency to only see a twisted image of others, a negative stereotype. I am scared of that, because I ask myself: how long do you have to call a citizen on the right a neo-Nazi before he turns into one? Or, following the same mechanism on a different side of the conflict: how long does a society have to treat a Muslim like a terrorist before he turns into one? At some point, a rejected individual will embrace the group identity that has been offered to them.

One of the most famous experiments in the social sciences happened in the summer of 1954. Psychologists in Oklahoma chose 22 students in 5th grade, who were very similar: all boys, all white, all Protestants, all from middle class backgrounds, with similar grades in school. Eleven of the boys were taken to one camp, the other eleven

to a second camp not far away. After one week, the groups were told about each other.

The psychologists organised a series of sports games. The teams gave themselves names, the Eagles and the Rattlers. Even before the first throw, insults were hurled across the field. In the next days, the Eagles burned the flag of the Rattlers. The Rattlers invaded the camp of the Eagles, stole the leader's jeans, and used it as a replacement for their flag. The Eagles retaliated by invading the opposing camp and throwing dirt into the beds, then withdrew to their own camp, prepared weapons (stones in socks), and waited. When a fist fight ensued a little later, the psychologists ended the experiment.

Within one week, the boys had developed a group identity so strong, that they were using violence against people who were objectively as similar to them as their own teammates. Individuality ceased to matter; only the group did. The "us." The "them." The problems with the others was that they were "the others."

How much bigger is the problem when there are two opposing camps that actually have differences, say, proponents and sceptics of migration? And when there isn't anyone to end the experiment? Especially, when you consider another observation from the experiment: the boys lost track of reality.

The Eagles were bragging how they had chased away the Rattlers (they hadn't). The Rattlers were certain that the Eagles had put trash on their beach (they themselves had forgotten it the night before). They bent reality to suit their narrative.

Since then, scientists have proven the same phenomenon with each additional experiment: the stronger the group identity, the more its members choose loyalty to the team over being right. US researchers managed to make democrats support republican welfare policies by making them think it was their own party that supported the policies. The same worked the other way around.

In a society in which each bit of new information only provides ammunition to both sides, there exists only one remaining peaceful solution: to weaken group identities.

The "Germany speaks" attendees meet one-on-one, which makes it easier to see the other as a human and not as the carrier of a political label. In the past year, many wrote to us that they didn't talk exclusively about politics, but that they got to know each other, sought commonalities.

In a Munich beer hall, I sit across from Martin. I have wanted to have this conversation for the past five years, but have never gone for it, maybe because I assumed that it would be uncomfortable - even though, or maybe because, I like Martin. We met at a mutual friend's bachelor party in Mallorca. We rarely saw each other afterwards, but sometimes he

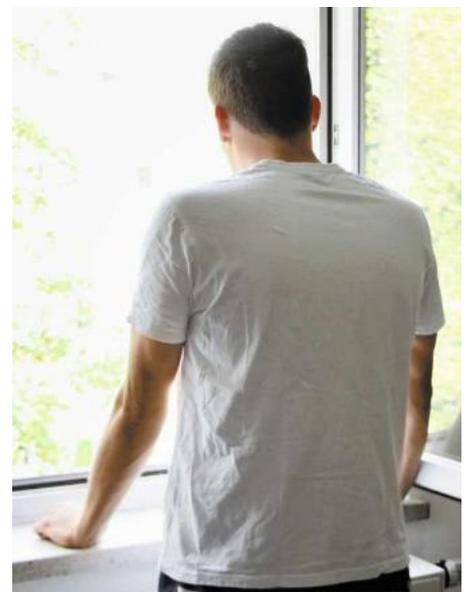
sends me links to websites about conspiracy theories.

Once he commented on a Facebook article I wrote that stated it had likely been a Russian missile that shot down the passenger plane MH317 over east Ukraine. Martin wrote: "Cui bono?" Who benefits? He believes: the Americans.

I recently read the so-called "Mitte" study and was shocked. In it, the University of Leipzig asks Germans about their attitudes toward right-wing extremism, but also about conspiracy theories. 34 percent say: "Most people don't realise to what extent our lives are controlled by conspiracies that are plotted in secret." 35 percent believe that politicians and other leaders are only puppets of shadowy powers. That there are secret organisations which exercise great influence on political decisions is believed by 39 percent.

Martin agrees with all of it. He rejects the label "conspiracy theorist." After all, he says, he doesn't speak about conspiracies, he speaks about reality. His core theory: no matter who currently governs, it is all show! The true rulers are the very rich, the type against whom Bill Gates appears like a child with some pocket money. Those people control the financial system, and therefore politicians, business leaders, the media.

I ask: Who exactly? How exactly? How, for example, do these people control Chancellor Merkel? He has an answer to none of that, says Martin. These people are too smart to expose themselves like that.



Photos: Bastian Berberer for DIE ZEIT (2); Gene Glover for DIE ZEIT (1)

Martin, an acquaintance of the author, believes conspiracy theories.

Martin has worked for two German financial companies, in a managerial position at one of them. He holds a master's degree in economics. He asks me if I had ever tried to find out who owns Allianz, Germany's biggest insurance company. Large parts are owned by Blackrock. Who owns Blackrock? A few banks. Who owns the banks? "No one knows the names. Doesn't that make you pause?"

It goes further and further into the vortex of conspiracies, CIA, Syria, refugees, government crisis, false flag operations, Ukraine, the financial markets. I get angry. We have to define terms, I say, discuss one topic after the other, I say, but he just mixes it all.

It is strange. When Martin and I speak about football (he is a Hamburg fan living in Munich, I am a Munich fan living in Hamburg), or when we arrange where to meet, there is no sign of problems with communication. But as soon as we talk about politics, we appear to be speaking two different languages. I tell him that he sounds like a religious zealot. He sees in me a blind servant of the system.

No one tells me what I should or shouldn't write, I explain to him. That wasn't necessary, he says, I was so brainwashed that I wouldn't even get the idea to write something that really challenged the system.

On my way back, I feel empty, a failure. I think of Peter Coleman: the success of a conversation is often visible only after a few

days, weeks, or months. Sometimes it takes time for seeds to take root.

I meet a second time with each of my three conversation partners. Jana, who has pink hair now, tells me that she does not consider me to be inhuman, that she just considers my position to be that. I ask myself if I have provoked her too much, if I was interested enough in her, if, unlike with Sven later, I was too focused on differences than on commonalities.

Sven, in a neo-Nazi meeting place with runes and torch holders on the walls, tells me he hadn't thought about the inconsistencies in his life as much as after our conversation in a long time. But he couldn't imagine ever moving away from National Socialism. He too, makes me think. How much of the empathy he showed in my presence was real and how much was the show of someone who knows how to handle media? On the other hand: isn't it surprising that a three-hour conversation like ours didn't escalate? And isn't it a promise of enormous potential for success for conversations with people who aren't as far beyond my political red line as

Sven, and even more for people who are on my side of it?

In retrospect, my conversation with Martin, who is closest to me personally, seems the most difficult. At our second meeting, we both notice with frustration that we didn't make the slightest dent into each other's worldviews.

I take comfort from an anecdote by Peter Coleman. He was recently at an international conference with some of the best peace and negotiation researchers from around the world in the same room. An Israeli and a Dutch colleague started to argue, the topic was the Middle East. Even though there were many professionals present who tried to mediate between them, they all failed, and in the end the Israeli stormed out of the room. The closer a topic is related to one's own identity, the more difficult it is to reach that person. In that case, even the highest complexity and tolerance are sometimes not enough. Even Coleman considers some conflicts to be unsolvable. Which ones those are can only be found out in a conversation.