

What do Berliners think about social cohesion?

“What keeps people apart? – What brings people together?” These were the key questions the Humboldt Residency cohort asked Berliners spending their free time in Treptower Park on a late sunny Tuesday afternoon. Whether they were just passing by, playing with their dog, or having a picnic with friends, we tried to engage in conversation with as many of them as possible.

We wanted to know what people in a more informal setting think about social cohesion. But we hardly ever used the term itself. Unlike the two initial questions, asking about “social cohesion” in an abstract way does not seem to spark ideas and trigger associations in the same engaging and emotional way. The same holds true for us as a cohort. Even after discussing the topic intensively in the last two months, we started to realize, more than ever before, how ubiquitous the concept is in theory, while being quintessential to our daily lives.

At first, we were hesitant to interrupt people’s activities in the park. It is hard to approach complete strangers and ask them to talk about a concept that is – at first – difficult to grasp. So, we teamed up to support each other in looking for opportunities to meet people and start conversations with them. Our colleague Richard Mole summed up his feelings about the situation quite sincerely:



“As a British person, walking up to complete strangers and engaging them in conversation is not something I would normally do and was not something I was looking forward to doing. Thankfully, I was paired up with a South African who had no such qualms, which made the task much easier!”

Richard’s team partner was Christa Rautenbach, who immediately walked up to the nearest group of people with her typical energy and passion for trying out new things. They turned out to be a team of young soccer players, accompanied by their coach. To our surprise and great pleasure, they answered our questions with openness and curiosity. Christa later described the moment:



“Speaking to a group of schoolboys playing football was an eye-opener. As soon as they overcame their shyness, they volunteered several typical things that bind them together, such as school, education, friendship, sport, and similar interests. On what kept them apart, they were initially hesitant to respond, but then they remembered a few things, such as conflicts over girls, the obsession with brand names of clothing and shoes, and computer games that kept them in isolation in front of their computers. It is interesting to note that social cohesion on their level was not linked to politics at all but to things that were important in their stage of life, making friends and having fun!”

During our visit to Treptower Park, we talked to many locals and tourists of different genders and ages, diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Apart from a kind smile and our best intentions, what mattered the most was the language we used to approach them. As Meili K. Criezis noticed:



"It was interesting watching the various ways people initiated a conversation and what especially stood out to me was how receptive others were if we could speak with them in their own languages. I think language offers a special bridge of connection and opens pathways for deeper connections."

In contrast, the replies we collected did not suggest significant differences between individuals.

So, what is it that keeps us apart?

Most people thought of politics and ideology, religion, war and violence, racism, xenophobia, ageism, social inequality, and discrimination. It might not come as a surprise that the Covid-19 pandemic emerged as one of the most frequent causes. On a more personal level, people mentioned miscommunication, mutual misunderstandings, language barriers, prejudice, and insincerity among people.

And what is it that brings people together?

Love, culture, arts and music, food, and having a drink with friends, in particular! People also think that education, reading, knowing languages and good communication, in general, help. They would also appreciate more public space, "reclaiming the squares," as someone said, to allow for better and more meaningful encounters. Berlin, the city itself featured as something that keeps people together, a great place to live in and meet other people and cultures. And finally, the two things everyone loves: babies and animals, of course! 😊

Summing up our experience in the park, Lea Kuhar stated:



"Our visit to the park has confirmed one of the paradoxes we've been discussing in our meetings. Most of the social bonds we form among ourselves – be it through practising religion or playing computer games – are not simply good or bad in themselves, but have the potential for both, social cohesion and disruption."

Text by Nikola Tohma (Karasová)

