

Source: *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 4, 2020

Controversy about “Maischberger’s” guest list

A last-minute invitation – that didn’t make things much better

A program about racism without those affected? That was originally the plan for “Maischberger.” A Black woman was ultimately given a chance to speak, but not about her concerns.

Whom does one invite to a political talk show in order to discuss the protests against racist police violence in the United States? The editorial staff of the ARD [German broadcaster] program “Maischberger. The Week” published its list of five guests on Tuesday, one of whom was the Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas (SPD – Social Democratic Party) and the journalist Jan Fleischhauer. Not represented on the list: a single person who themselves was affected by racism and could speak from this perspective.

On social media, many reacted with incomprehension and anger. An online petition with the title “Frau Maischberger, why do you invite five white people to talk about racism?” was signed by more than 26,000 people.

Sandra Maischberger reacted on Wednesday evening in her show without a single word regarding the massive public criticism. Through her show, she most notably revealed one thing: the institutional racism that still exists in Germany too.

The problem is not new. In 2019, the New German Mediamakers [*Neuen Deutschen Medienmacher*innen*] awarded the “Golden Potato” to the four big political talk shows, an anti-award for “abysmal reporting.” The jury justified their selection based on, among other things, the “lack of diversity” of guests, a feature that was “impressive” in many programs.

An analysis from the blog *Bliq* revealed that, of the talk show guests in 2019, about 93 percent were white and only seven percent were “not white.” Of the 728 total guests, three talk show guests were Black.

An African-American at the roundtable after all

The Maischberger editorial staff was eventually compelled to contact Priscilla Layne, an African-American Professor of German Studies, and on Wednesday she was introduced as the sixth guest. A brief eight of the 75 minutes of airtime were given Layne, who was brought in from North Carolina via video.

Maischberger announced that they wanted to talk about racism, but she ultimately asked very little about this. Instead, Maischberger wanted to know from Layne whether the community was, in fact, aware of how counterproductive the looting could be and what she thought of American president Donald Trump’s theories that these were organized by radical left-wing groups like Antifa.

“A Black guest was a last-minute thought”

Layne herself sharply criticized the program just shortly before. “The reason they reached out to me is because A. Having a Black guest was a last-minute thought for them. B. When they think

of racism and police brutality they mistakenly only think of the US,” wrote Layne. In fact, there are many Afro-German experts who could have spoken on the topic.

“I recognize now how this invitation actually displays a lot of the bullshit Black Germans have to deal with,” Layne wrote on Twitter. It is about being left out of important conversations. She announced that she wanted to speak for all those who were not invited.

But nothing came of these plans, since Layne was only given a chance to talk about the situation in the United States. In doing so, she emphasized that she herself has had negative experiences with the police and that Trump’s rhetoric has made an already bad situation worse.

“Profit and businesses are not as important as human lives”

Layne sees the looting as protestors’ desperate attempt to bring attention to their issues. Many Americans will only pay attention when it is about money. “Profit and businesses are not as important as human lives,” said Layne.

She pointed to several peaceful protest attempts in the past that all failed. She sees the kneeling of many white police officers as more of a performance. “I will believe that something is changing once there are structural transformations,” concluded the professor.

Maas: “An old racist wound torn open”

Maischberger sometimes showed herself to be almost surprised by the situation in the United States. “It looks like something has exploded there,” she analyzed. Even Heiko Maas spoke in his interview repeatedly that an “old, racist wound” in the United States was “torn open again.” When this wound was supposed to have ever been healed remained an open question.

Maas emphasized that racism exists in other countries as well—including in Germany. He mentioned Hanau and Halle as current examples. He did not want to describe Donald Trump as a racist, but he said that it is a populist strategy to mobilize one’s base through polarization and that Trump was pouring “gasoline on the fire.”

Fleischhauer: Accusations against Trump “strange”

Fleischhauer, who wrote columns with titles like “Nazis, Come In!”¹ for the magazine *Der Spiegel* and now works for the magazine *Focus*, did not even utter the word “racism.” Instead, he spoke of “marauding gangs” that would roam through New York at night.

According to Fleischhauer, Trump is not responsible for this and the accusations against him are “strange.” If the same were to take place in Germany, one would also call for a “heavy hand” through the deployment of police and military.

The topic of American racism checked off after 30 minutes

The ARD stock market expert Anja Kohl and the news anchor Dirk Steffens put up some resistance. Kohl emphasized that racism in the United States is based on vast social and

¹ This provocative title is a play on the anti-fascist call for “Nazis raus,” meaning “Nazi’s out!” Fleischhauer uses this slogan as part of an argument for reintegrating members of the far right.

economic inequalities. This was one of the few moments in the show in which structural problems were thematized at all.

After thirty minutes, the topic was checked off and the program continued with other central issues of the week: travel warnings, economic stimulus packages, and the development of a corona vaccine, a subject on which the virologist Helga Rübsamen-Schaeff was invited to speak. She tempered hopes for the swift arrival of a vaccine but explained that it is possible to recover from the virus using medication, as was also the case with HIV.

Many more television programs about racism are needed

On Twitter, the editorial staff of Maischberger initially used the week's other topics to justify not inviting any PoC. In doing so, they implied that—in their eyes—there are apparently no PoC in Germany who could competently speak on these subjects.

Both the program itself and its reaction to the criticism demonstrated that Germany is in urgent need of more political talk shows on the topic of racism—and perhaps with a diverse guest list from the get-go.