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Interviews

Interview: Noah Sow

"Germany is a developing country in terms of racism"

By Erik Kambel
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She tells it like it is when it comes to racism. An interview with the German Noah Sow about her new book 'Deutschland Black & white. Everyday Racism'. She talks about her work as an anti-racism activist and about herself as a singer in a punk rock band. And for young people, she has a clear message too.

Noah Sow, born and raised in Bavaria Germany, is a moderator in radio and TV shows. She is also a radio play writer, author, speaker and producer. As a composer and singer she became well known with the band "Noah Sow & The Heimlich Maneuver." In 2001, she founded the organization der braune mob, the first anti-racist media watch dog in Germany.

Question: You founded the media watch organisation 'Der braune mob'. What does the organisation do?

Answer Noah Sow: Der braune mob is Germany's first and as far as I know only media watchdog that's concerned with issues of discriminatory and politically incorrect language, content or pictures, mainly in media and advertising. Our focus lies on educating about what public racial discrimination actually is. We have a lot to do, as Germany is a developing country in terms of racism. Most of the time the newspapers don't even know that for example referring to Obama as 'the coloured candidate' is wrong, so when we write to them they argue a lot. Plus, in Germany, the word racism is taboo. If you accuse someone of having used a racist expression, they will deny that it's racist even when the term the N-Word is said.

When skinheads beat a Black guy into a coma while calling him "N...r", in Germany the whole thing is actually not considered a racist or hate crime by the judge and the mass media. We have many many cases like this happening. So the public perception here is a little schizophrenic.

What does Der Braune mob mean?

'Brauner mob' is often used in reference to Neo-Nazi hoards or groups. So we thought we'd turn the colonizing of group/movement names around and name ourselves 'der braune mob', indicating that we are many, many people, and showing some sense of humour. The name's quite edgy, but it worked, we're number one on German Google and the Nazis aren't. Plus, the name inflicts questions and irritates.

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You wrote the book *Deutschland Schwarz weiss - der alltägliche Rassismus (Deutschland Black & white. Everyday Racism)*. When did you decide you wanted to write the book. Was there a special incident that triggered you?

To be honest, it wasn't my idea. A literature agent who had seen me in I think the documentary movie 'Black Deutschland' asked me if I wouldn't want to write some book about racism. At first I didn't like the idea too much. I thought: "I'm sure as hell not going to write my autobiography or something." You have to know that Germany's big publishing companies usually 'allow' for those topics almost exclusively in the form of autobiographies with the word 'negro' in the title. Or in the form of victim stories, literature 'about Africa' or literature written by white authors.



There are so many books about being black in a white society. What makes this book special?

From a German perspective, I guess, there are not even twenty books. However, my book isn't about being black, it's a mix between humour, education, how racism was 'invented' and what it serves for. It also about structural racism, like in sports, government, police and media. And it's about modern and new racist strategies and how to beat them, and also - what I thought was very important - ideas how to help end racism, for the future.

So it's not a book about being black. Actually it's almost the opposite. It's about the role of whiteness in perpetuating racism. Can be used for self-medication. From the feedback so far, white readers learned something new about themselves and black readers had a good time with the humour chapters, like 'List of stupid phrases we never want to hear again - and according answers'.

In June 2005 the German City Augsburg planned a African culture festival in a zoo. How could this happen? Some Africans didn't see any harm in the event. So why did you?

I guess this is pretty clear. One point is, the tradition of associating Africans with wilderness, versus civilisation. The organisers also wrote that they thought the zoo was "exactly the right place" for African traders, and the zoo director pointed out that if the idea of an 'African village' in a zoo would be wrong, then "coloureds" couldn't as well be "allowed" to "be seen at sporting events."

Let's switch to music. You are punkrock singer, but from a black perspective punkrock is more 'white' music. How does this relate to your views on black and white?

'White music' and 'Black music'? I know what the industry is marketing but I'm also musician and educated enough to know that "Black music" is a pleonasm. Besides, you bet whenever I open my mouth to sing, what comes out is Black music by definition. Seriously, I'm not going to do any pigeonholing or categorizing, just because this makes things easier for some other folks.

I sing, compose and produce whatever I want to and whatever feels good to me. I'm a singer and love playing punkrock and alternative. I'm versatile though. I also have a quite different side when I'm with 'Sisters', a group of female Afro-German solo-artists. The girls really make my soft side come out ... occasionally. The punk thing is good for my nerves. The Sisters thing is good for the heart. Both are important for my soul.

What do you know about the Netherlands?

I know a lot of German prejudices about the Netherlands: "they're more

democratic", "they're so open-minded", "they're very progressive". But I wouldn't know if that's true or not.

Do you have message for people who want to start a career in the media?

Don't think you know stuff or have the right to judge or define or explain something, just because you happen to have a microphone and your place in an editing room. If you really want to do journalism, never talk about people, have them talk instead. Don't ask "experts" about youth. Ask the youth. And refuse to lie or "stretch the truth" when your editor or station ask you to. Because they will.

If you're not looking to work in journalism but in entertainment: speak for yourself only, and on behalf of yourself. Stay yourself. Promote yourself. For girls especially: Know your business and don't take any bullshit from people pretending to act in your interest, because of course, they don't. Rely on yourself. This will make it hard, maybe even result in the opposite of 'career', but after all you want to be able to look at yourself and not hate that spineless person. There's not all too many people doing it like this, but they will find and recognise you. Then the fun begins. You'll be in excellent company.

- >> [Official Noah Sow webpage](#)
- >> [Germany Black White \(Eng\)](#)
- >> [Deutschland Schwarz Weiss \(Ger\)](#)

Burning me, video of Noah Sow & The Heimlich Maneuver