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Racism Rears Its Head in European Remarks on Obama

Some Public Figures Display Open Scorn

By Craig Whitlock
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BERLIN, Nov. 10 -- Europe erupted in cheers to celebrate [Barack Obama](#)'s election as president, but the continent is seeing its share of insensitive racial blunders, too.

Over the past week, a number of European lawmakers and journalists have made foot-in-mouth comments regarding America's black president-elect, suggesting that some otherwise respected public figures in Europe are far from enlightened on racial matters.

The day after Obama's victory, a leading Austrian television journalist said on camera that he "wouldn't want the Western world to be directed by a black man." A Polish lawmaker stood up in Parliament and called the election result "the end of the white man's civilization."

One of the milder gaffes came from Italian Prime Minister [Silvio Berlusconi](#). On Thursday, during a visit to Moscow, he praised Obama for being "young, handsome and even suntanned."

Berlusconi's remark caused a stir in Italy, as critics chided him for sounding like a fool. But the prime minister was unrepentant. "What's the problem? It was a compliment," he told journalists the next day. Anyone who did not get the joke, he added, was an "imbecile."

Some racist comments have come from people who have expressed such views before. "Africa Conquers the [White House](#)," read a headline on the Web site of the National Democratic Party of Germany, a political party that sympathizes with neo-Nazi groups. In an accompanying article, Jürgen Gansel, a party leader and an elected lawmaker in the German state of Saxony, blamed Obama's victory on "the American alliance of Jews and Negroes."

Offensive opinions have also originated from the other end of the political spectrum. Die Tageszeitung, a Berlin newspaper that supports socialist and leftist causes, predicted Obama's election in June when it published a large front-page photo of the White House under the headline, "Uncle Barack's Cabin."

The reference was to "Uncle Tom's Cabin," an anti-slavery book written by 19th-century author [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#). But editors of the paper insisted they did not mean to imply that Obama would be an Uncle Tom, or a submissive slave. Rainer Metzger, a deputy editor, said the headline was satirical.

"I'm sure 99 percent of our readers would understand it correctly," he told the German magazine [Der Spiegel](#). "As for the rest, well, tough luck. You can't please everybody."

Yonis Ayeh, a board member with the Initiative of Black People in Germany, a group that criticized the Die Tageszeitung article when it was published, said racial prejudices are common, if not always blatantly expressed.

"Sometimes you have people or groups who say, 'We are the left wing, we are the good ones, we are not racist,' " he said. "But it doesn't matter if you are right wing or left wing. It's not just the neo-Nazis and the skinheads."

In Austria, Obama's win prompted a harsh, on-air reaction from a well-known journalist, Klaus Emmerich. "I think the Americans are still racists and they must be very badly off to so spectacularly -- and that has to be said, no doubt -- send a black man with a black, very good-looking and clever woman to the White House," he said Wednesday during a show on public television network ORF.

After saying that he "wouldn't want the Western world to be directed by a black man," he added: "If you say that is

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a racist comment, you're right. Without a doubt."

Emmerich, 80, was once based in Washington and has also reported for German television and newspapers over a long career. Given a chance to retract his remarks, he declined. In a later interview with the Austrian newspaper Der Standard, he said that "blacks are not as politically civilized." He also called Obama dangerous and implicitly compared him to [Hitler](#), citing his "rhetorical brilliance" and his ability to "appeal charismatically to people."

Emmerich did not return a phone call seeking comment. Rainer Scheuer, a spokesman for ORF, said that the comments were "not acceptable" and that Emmerich was unlikely to be invited back to appear on the network anytime soon.

In Poland, the lower house of Parliament heard a similar interpretation of Obama's election from Artur Górski, a legislator from the Law and Justice party.

In a speech Wednesday, Górski called Obama "the black messiah of the new Left" and a "crypto-communist" who would undoubtedly prove a "disaster." He added: "[Al-Qaeda](#) is rubbing their hands with glee that the new president wants peace, not war."

"This marks the end of the white man's civilization," he said. "America will soon pay a high price for this quirk of democracy."

The Polish government and Górski's party later apologized for the outburst. Górski did, too, but said his remarks were not racist, just "political."

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