Borat as Battleground

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1 Nearly forty years ago, cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggested that to understand a culture fully, one must understand its sly winks and jokes. Though he does not mention Geertz in The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen: Politics, Parody, and the Battle over Borat, Robert A. Saunders combines the anthropologist’s maxim with Pierre Bourdieu’s insistence that “when one speaks of ‘popular culture,’ one is speaking about politics” to investigate what might be called postmodern global political culture (3-4). The “joke” or “sly wink” in question is the multi-faceted shtick of Cambridge-educated, British actor-comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Given both the popularity and controversy of Baron Cohen’s outré comedy, it is not at all surprising that the release of motion pictures centered on his parodic characters has stimulated work in popular press and, increasingly, in academia. An avid observer of contemporary racial politics, Paul Gilroy, recently suggested that Baron Cohen’s character Ali G is “at ease in the postcolonial city” and represents a start towards “a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness.”[1]

2 Saunders’ book seconds and elaborates on Gilroy’s point with an analysis that is part biography and part political. The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen targets the implications of parody for local, national, and global politics. The author enjoys recounting some of Baron Cohen’s adventurous exploits without setting forth “a paean” to the frothy, squirm-inducing comic. Instead, he provides a meticulously researched, thoughtfully conceived, and theoretically nuanced book on Baron Cohen’s “many faces” and the challenges he has manufactured for our most dearly held (and often poorly understood) assumptions concerning identity in both the private and political/public spheres.

3 In a hyper-globalized world, the various flows of immigration have made leaving home unnecessary when one emigrates. The shift of populations coupled with 24-hour satellite news cycles and the digital tools of personal information technology have severely limited the ability of the metropole to force its new arrivals to assimilate. That this has been a cause for alarm in countries that still grapple with the legacies of decolonization – most of Western Europe and particularly Great Britain – is not surprising. And it is the anxious phobias of the former colonial metropole that Baron Cohen so skillfully mines and manipulates. What the comedian scrapes bare for his own jest and the audience’s laughter, Saunders uses to bore down into the fractured but overlapping layers of postmodern global politics.

4 Despite the book’s relative thinness, for someone without an exhaustive knowledge of all of Baron Cohen’s exploits, it certainly seems nearly encyclopedic in its detailed relating of the high jinks of the “many faces of.” In fact, if there is a weakness in the work’s structure and flow, it is the almost obsessive drive to provide a complete breakdown of all of Ali G’s shows and every interviewee he embarrassed or otherwise
Jewish) comedy of ethnic humor. However, even in recognizing Baron Cohen’s white ethnic (perhaps Jewish) comedy bona fides, Saunders is quick to point to the shortsightedness of characterizing the comic as specifically one thing over another by also noting the commonality in comedic design he shares with contemporary African-American comics like Dave Chappelle. In making this connection, Saunders argues that the commonalities between Baron Cohen and Chappelle (among others) are not simply that they are both trenchant practitioners of well-worn humor based on racial stereotypes. Today’s ethnic humor is not that of earlier generations, dependent on the crass and “derogatory caricaturing” of others (and the “Other”), it has instead been honed into a tool to “reflect group pride” for the cultural subaltern.

Baron Cohen’s quasi-ethnic comedic styling and shading forms only part of the biography. Just as his “Jewishness” is attenuated and meshes with other ethnic identities, most commentators allude to his Cambridge education. For many, as Saunders notes by citing a 2006 Vanity Fair article, Baron Cohen’s educational pedigree makes the disturbing parts of his act at least somewhat acceptable. Because one knows that Baron Cohen is smart and educated, we surmise that his apparent racism is parody. As Saunders wittily remarks, “if [Baron Cohen] were under-educated he would just be a racist, but his Oxbridge degree affords him a greater level of tolerance among the culture police” (12). Indeed the actor’s background is impressive, both politically and educationally. Active as a teen participant in anti-fascist demonstrations, Baron Cohen sojourned on a kibbutz for a year before reading history at Christ’s College, where his senior thesis was on the “complicated relationship between blacks and Jews during the American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968).” The thesis won him praise from peer and professor alike and Saunders estimates that he could have continued in academia had he wished. As we’re all well aware, however, he “opted for a decidedly different path” (2). His subsequent comedic career also had its roots at Cambridge. An ancillary member of the institution’s famous Footlights theater troupe – where the core of Monty Python’s Flying Circus honed their craft as young performers – Baron Cohen was to say in a 2004 interview that at Cambridge “very little work gets done” but “it’s a great place to learn acting and comedy” (13).

Taking these cords of Baron Cohen’s biography – his ethnicity of various kinds, including his public irreverence and private observance, and his Cambridge education, both in the classroom and on the stage – Saunders is able to detail the comedian’s development into a penetrating, if borderline offensive, cultural commentator and critic. Saunders tellingly observes that Baron Cohen’s particular genius relates to his skills as a “minstrel.” Minstrels parody and amuse; they sing and dance; they can be offensive without offending because everyone knows they are joking; they are clever but generally lower class; hence, upper- or middle-class audiences take what might be biting critique lightly.

From biography, Saunders moves to political analysis, focusing on the deftly nuanced and pitch-perfect (if unsubtle) layers of Baron Cohen’s comedic shtick. Saunders demonstrates that Ali G’s “post-imperial, racial ambiguity” has become a “referent to elucidate the generational difference in defining Englishness” and more generally a “powerful symbol and frequent cudgel in the debate over Britishness and minority identity within Britain” (69). In an interesting aside that pushes further the issue of ascribed and manufactured identities, Saunders also points to the fact that for commentators outside of the UK, the contest over Ali G is far less evident as the post-British straw man” does make clear, says Saunders, that seeing “‘Britain without non-white people’ has become unimaginable” (69). The crude media savvy of Baron Cohen’s characters – particularly Ali G – allows Saunders to make another important point. We are in a transnational, geopolitical moment when the ebbing divisions between “real” political actors, the media, critics, and entertainers [becomes] more evident with each passing year as political candidates build their brand by appearing on the talk show circuit . . . making movies . . . inviting voters into their homes . . . and even subjecting themselves to the iniquities of reality TV (58).

As the stakes of political division have become all the higher by way of social fracture, politics has become all the more intensely subjective and emotive, driven by personal
history and private motivations. The old saw about politics (from Tip O’Neil, “all politics is local”) has been moved from the geographical to the personal; what is important is how it resonates with our individual or subjective experience or with personality. Consider, for example, Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of Britain and a politician who perfectly “epitomized the . . . personalization of politics.” Blair was up for the Lisbon Treaty position of President of the European Council, a post almost wholly dependent on the personality of the politician holding it.[2]

Even this, however, does not really get at the heart of Saunders’s analysis of the current state of postmodern politics. That comes with his examination of the relationship between the fictional Borat and the government of Kazakhstan. The author’s succinct and thorough chapter on the political and cultural history of the “massive, landlocked central Asian republic of some 15 million people” is itself a study of how such things should be done. Saunders’ tying of the heartfelt – sometimes visceral – reaction of the Kazakhstani state and people to the first appearance of Borat on Da Ali G Show to the messy process of the creation of a post-Soviet Kazakhstan identity is both novel and revealing.

In the first instance, the calls of foul, and demands that the show be cancelled by the young nation’s government seemed to elevate the actions of a “two-bit comedian with an obviously satirical shtick” to the level of a diplomatic imbroglio (99). When members of the government publicly suggested that Baron Cohen might be a political agent taking orders from somewhere, the actor responded as Borat on his “official” web site (borat.kz, hosted on Kazakhstani servers) saying I have “no connection with Mr. Cohen and fully support my government.” The subsequent removal of this site from the .kz domain elevated the dispute to even more surreal political levels (102-103). Still, according to Saunders, though the “fragile state of Kazakhstani national identity” was certainly a factor in understanding the country’s reaction to Borat, equally important was the need to direct the marketing of “the country’s global brand in the postmodern political system” (98).

Saunders builds on the work of foreign policy and international relations scholars like Peter van Ham who have suggested that image and reputation have become vital parts of any state’s strategic capital in the world of global politics and business.[3] In the end, while Baron Cohen’s Borat may have wounded the country’s pride, the parody actually served to bolster its brand by putting it in the heads of Western youth if nothing else. Even if his garish characterizations of the Kazakhstani people are “on many levels, indefensible” according to our author, the country has “entered into a querulous but symbiotic relationship with Borat’s creator” (113). Saunders’s discussion of this peculiar relationship serves as a useful primer on the very idea of nation brand building and maintenance, something he distinguishes from “national image” by way of its active, rather than passive, nature: “In short, nation branding is the practice of brand management applied to a country’s national image” (114).

If Saunders is right in affirming the emerging view that “branding is gradually supplanting nationalism,” then his book should soon become an important introductory text for navigating the shoals and eddies of postmodern political culture. Taken as a whole, The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen delivers a new approach at the juncture where international relations, culture, and political science meet. In Baron Cohen, Saunders has found a powerful analytic lever to separate the layers of communal political identity as they spiral out from the individual actor to the nation-state and finally the relations between nation-states. When the demands on political actors often amount to little more than coherence and consistency of personality rather than reflection and concern, and when the default position of most observers and actors has become wry irony and self-deprecating humor, Saunders subtle understanding of all of the above – embodied in his analysis of Baron Cohen – is a model that others could profit from.

Notes


