

## MUCH ADO ABOUT BORAT

Review of: Robert A. Saunders, *The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen: Politics, Parody, and the Battle Over Borat* (Lexington Books, 2008).

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A thorough survey of the short but prolific academic career of Robert A. Saunders exposes the three axes of his intellectual passions: media, identity politics, and the global East, a region that stretches from the Near East to the confines of China, occupying both post-Soviet spaces and the Muslim world. A random slice of Dr. Saunders's work thus far includes subjects as diverse as Russian counter-terrorism, the European branding of Transylvania, the contours of Ukrainian identity post-Orange revolution, the politics of international adoption, China's soft power, Albanian nationalism in cyberspace, the nationalist overtones of the Muslim *ummah*, and the impact of the Internet on minority Russians and Romania's Hungarians. They all deal with at least one – though in most cases all three – of the abovementioned axes, as does *The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen: Politics, Parody, and the Battle Over Borat*.

I am perhaps ill-suited to write this review. I am at once too appreciative of Robert Saunders's academic writings and too dismissive of Baron Cohen's comedic project. The author displays razor-sharp analysis, masterful use of the English language, and encyclopedic knowledge all the way through the endnotes. The book is, at its core, a cultural and political analysis of the three characters that elevated Sacha Baron Cohen to world fame and the multiple reactions that they have elicited.

But in that journey, the author takes his readers through polished disquisitions on British identity, the contemporary landscape of humor and hoax TV, debates over multiculturalism, the origins of American neo-conservatism, the emergent media trends in a postmodern and globalized world, and a concise history and political culture of Kazakhstan that rivals any of the new publications on this Central Asian republic. All of this peppered with pertinent references to popular culture and a welcome ability to shift from lowbrow jokes to highbrow erudition.

A great deal of the book describes Kazakhstan's six-year struggle against this media phenomenon and the trials and tribulations of Ali G ("a wannabe gangster from a middle-class London suburb"), Borat ("an anti-Semitic, Gypsy-baiting journalist from Kazakhstan"), and Bruno ("a gay Austrian fashionista with a Nazi fetish"). But the highlight of the book is the well-researched profile of the very private Sacha Baron Cohen himself. The author's investigation reveals an extremely brilliant – and, interestingly, devoutly Jewish – student of history. In an exquisite exchange with Niall Ferguson, a former professor of Cohen's at the University of Cambridge, the author asked him if he knew back then that his pupil was destined for greatness. Ferguson's rebuke is both amusing and profound: "That you call greatness? If only he had followed my advice, he

could have been a serious historian.” Cohen even travelled to the United States to conduct field research for his thesis, which he completed in 1993 under the title “The Black-Jewish Alliance – A Case of Mistaking Identities.” His first incursion into American territory coincided with the Crown Heights riots, supporting Cohen’s controversial conclusion that the Black-Jewish Alliance is a “misnomer.” And yet, his intellectual abilities were all too evident well before that, when he published an essay to the *Times Literary Supplement* as a very precocious eight-year old. The excerpt of the essay chosen by Saunders is so shockingly insightful for someone of that age that it deserves reproducing it here:

All sorts of things may have happened over the weekend. Russia may have invaded Afghanistan, England may have lost against the West Indies at cricket, and the price of Smarties has jumped up 5p. But in our maths lesson nothing has changed. One plus one still equals two. After Monday morning’s maths lesson, the world does seem a bit more reliable and less insane that it did on Sunday night.

And therein lies my frustration with Cohen’s comedy. Though political analysis of popular culture is an ever-growing and very necessary field of study, I sometimes wonder if Baron Cohen’s avatars deserve such a weighty and nuanced monograph. I suspect that

Dr. Saunders, who can easily answer that question, has had similar misgivings. On one hand, Cohen’s commercial success has broken all records. His first movie made a quarter of a billion dollars, and his second movie also promises to be a blockbuster. On the other, an outsize number of serious journalists, academics, political analysts and actual politicians have opined on Borat, confirming that Cohen’s character had broken the normal boundaries of simple pantomime. And finally, the sole fact that the ninth-largest country of the world took such pains to confront a fake persona represents a ripe case study for those students of global affairs interested in the asymmetric relations between nation-states and individuals that fall outside of the traditional edges of international relations. But Cohen’s endeavor is also part of an intellectual project to unmask bigotry and mock political correctness, and has been recognized as such by most of his reviewers. For many, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, was horribly revelatory of the ugliness of American society and its prejudices. One commentator even called it the most anti-American movie that he had ever seen.

And here is where I depart from the generalized consensus. Cohen’s movies are indisputably funny, but they are because Cohen himself is suitably gifted, and his comedy has enough boldness and

recklessness to separate him from the pack. I do not find anything especially revelatory in his interactions with unsuspecting victims all over the world. Borat, for example, finds bigotry and ignorance in the expected places, though nothing that is out of the ordinary. And yet, far more often, his outrageous behavior is met with natural shyness and even excessive politeness. Anyone that is familiar with the fake interviews conducted by Stephen Colbert, the “investigative reporting” pieces of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the work of Bill Maher, or the documentaries of Michael Moore, is already used to this face of America. Cohen’s ruse, in that regard, comes across as less effective, and dare I say it, less smart. In that sense, I am glad that Saunders put his emphasis on the politicized reactions to Cohen rather than focusing on Cohen’s ruse as a valid sociological experiment. For all we know, the puppeteer behind Ali G, Borat, and Bruno might only be interested in making money through senseless entertainment, but that puts him closer to the creators of *Jackass* than to Jonathan Swift.

Nevertheless, that only means that the book is highly enjoyable even for readers that are less than fascinated with the subject matter itself, and that is cause for celebration. This is, by all measures, a superb first book by a very promising writer, and one can only hope that it is followed by many more.