

BORAT:
ORIENTALIST SATIRE FOR MAKE
GLORIOUS DEBATE WESTERN INTELLIGENTSIYA

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(This article was prepared in January-February 2007 in response to the December 2006 *Slavic Review* CFP (reprinted below) kindly brought to my attention by Mary Dakin, Ph.D., at Stanford. Alas, as I was informed in mid August 2007, my paper did not make the cut (indeed, as it was not accompanied by reviewer comments, and the editor mentioned that there were far more submissions than could be sent out for review, it may never have been sent out for review). Still, I enjoin readers to enjoy and ponder the issues it raises. The paper may be cited when accompanied by a full, proper citation, and I may be reached for comments and discussion at hallria@comcast.net. Those who find this paper of interest may wish to consult my "Images of Hungarians and Romanians in Modern American Media and Popular Culture" (91 pages) at <http://homepage.mac.com/khallbobo/RichardHall/pubs/huroimages060207tk6.html> for a broader discussion of issues raised here. Thanks to Jennifer Megan Hitchcock for thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of the Borat article, and as always to my brother Keith for posting to this webpage.)

Call for Papers:
Borat: Eurasia, American Culture, and Slavic Studies

Few recent works of literature or film have made Eurasia as central and, perhaps, as flagrantly irrelevant to the American experience as Sacha Baron Cohen's hit film, *Borat*. In many respects this movie touches on key aspects of our discipline and expertise, and it also marks the distance that "Eurasia" has traveled in the American mentality since the appearance of other epoch-defining films (*From Russia With Love*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *The Manchurian Candidate*). *Slavic Review* invites its readers to submit contributions for a cluster of scholarly essays on *Borat*.

Contributions may use the methodologies of any discipline so long as they relate in some substantial way to *Borat* and to interaction between Eurasia and the West. Length should not exceed 5000 words. Contributions will be peer reviewed and must be received by the end of March 2007.

BORAT: ORIENTALIST SATIRE FOR MAKE GLORIOUS DEBATE WESTERN INTELLIGENTSIYA

“Dzienkuje” Sacha Baron Cohen!

We were waiting for Godot, but you sensed what we really needed and instead sent us Borat! And Borat is if nothing else a moveable feast and a gift that keeps on giving. You managed simultaneously to offend Kazakhs, frighten Jewish anti-defamation groups, outrage the orientalism monitors, tee off hypocritically thin-skinned Americans, provoke laughter across the Beavis and Butthead, Southpark, and Archie Bunker generations, and last—but certainly not least—provide glorious opportunity for Western intellectuals for criticize and debate merit, meaning, and interpretation of celluloid masterpiece. Finally, thanks to you, we can now confirm that rumors of Yakov Smirnov’s death were greatly exaggerated. It turns out he is fine and doing well, having found gainful employment in great American city called Branson, Missouri (“Hours great...auditorium, career, and pockets less filling...but what a country!”...ok, bad example)! Slamma dunk, emission accomplished, and hiyya-fiyva, to you Sacha!

Talk about a movie that led to theatergoers being bombarded—even before they checked cinema times—with conflicting cues and instructions from cultural elites, trendsetters, and peers:

- 1) Go the movie. Laugh, have fun!
- 2) If you go to the movie, don’t laugh!
- 3) Go the movie, laugh, but later feign outrage!
- 4) Don’t go the movie—in part because you might laugh!
- 5) If you do go, there’s something wrong with you.
- 6) If you don’t go, there’s something wrong with you.

Borat!: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan can’t help but leave the impression that we may have become an over-scripted, over-programmed culture.

This article attempts to address some of the controversies and larger ramifications resulting from Borat the character and *Borat!* the movie (hereafter *Borat!*). It does so by tapping some of the wide-ranging film criticism, op-eds, and Internet postings that the film has spawned. An admission and disclaimer of sorts about the film seems in order before I begin: I went...I laughed...I wept ...(but because I was laughing, not because I went).

Is for make fun of Kazakh peoples!...*NOT!!!*

Let us begin with a question that has consumed so many keystrokes in recent months. In part we can do so because Sacha Baron Cohen’s intent (i.e. production/supply side) is so much more straightforward than is the question of how the movie is or has been interpreted and used by audiences (i.e. consumption/demand side).

Shortly after the American release of *Borat!* an interview with Sacha Baron Cohen appeared in the 14 November 2006 edition of *Rolling Stone*. Clearly, a lot of people don't know about the interview, haven't read it, or don't wish to, because on the Internet the debate about who Baron Cohen satirizes in the film rages on. While there can be, are, and will be many interpretations of who gets hurt as a result of *Borat!* (more on this below), Baron Cohen's comments to the interviewer Neil Strauss really eliminate much of the speculation about what Baron Cohen *intends* the film to do. That Baron Cohen may have realized too late that there was real value and power in keeping mum about his intentions with *Borat* is possible when you consider that, according to Strauss, Baron Cohen was bothered enough by the encounter that he called Strauss back a week after the interview to discuss it.

Here is what Baron Cohen said that should—although probably won't—once and for all dampen speculation about his motivations in making *Borat!*. Baron Cohen was reacting to news that the Kazakh government was thinking of suing him and placing a full-page ad promoting the country in *The New York Times* (they eventually did the latter):

I was surprised, because I always had faith in the audience that they would realize that this was a fictitious country and the mere purpose of it was to allow people to bring out their own prejudices. And the reason we chose Kazakhstan was because it was a country that no one had heard anything about, so we could essentially play on stereotypes they might have about this ex-Soviet backwater. The joke is not on Kazakhstan. I think the joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist—who believe that there's a country where homosexuals wear blue hats and the women live in cages and they drink fermented horse urine and the age of consent has been raised to nine years old.¹

Thus can end much of the debate about Cohen's intentions. It's about the people *Borat* interviews—in the film, Americans—not about Kazakhstan and Kazakhs. The film is designed to be about Americans.

Certainly, this was what Ryan Gilbey of London's leftist weekly, *New Statesman*, took away from the film. An article introduced as "Sacha Baron Cohen's exposure of crass Americana" and "The Kazakh ace reporter uncovers uncomfortable truths about the US" summarized the film as follows:

The violence that *Borat* encounters on the New York subway after trying to greet male strangers with kisses is frighteningly real....There's an aging cowpoke who requires only the mildest of prompts to endorse the murder of gays and Muslims. Others indict themselves as much by what they don't say as what they do. A redneck rodeo crowd shows no compunction about cheering *Borat*'s gung-ho speech about Iraq, clearly not realizing that what he actually said was: "We support your war of terror!" And it's shocking to witness the tacit acceptance with which *Borat*'s ghoulish requests are greeted. Trying to find the ideal car for mowing down gypsies, or seeking the best gun for killing Jews, he encounters

only compliance among America's salespeople. The customer, it seems, is always right, even when he's far right.²

An April 2003 article by Lucy Kelaart in the British daily *The Guardian*, suggests that some Kazakhs—at least those with some exposure to the West—understood this about Borat even back then (based on his British television show visits to the US). Most of Kelaart's interview subjects on the streets of Almaty were unamused, rather than really offended, and thought Borat was just plain stupid:

Ainura, 25, recently spent a year living in the US. Does she think Borat is giving Kazakhstan a bad name. "Borat's not making fun of Kazakhs, he's making fun of Americans," she says. "They are gullible. Not one of them said, 'No way - that can't be true.' The show describes a US stereotype, not a Kazakh one. It lays bare the American attitude towards foreigners: strong accents, loud voices, stupidity, male chauvinism."³

Of course, as I stated earlier and we shall see, were Baron Cohen's intentions the be-all and end-all of the criticism this article would be far shorter than it is. Particularly in the age of post-modern criticism, the audience and any real or potential sub-audiences take center-stage.

The "Full" Sacha Baron Cohen: Beyond Borat

Lest Americans who see *Borat!* think in ethnocentric terms that we are Baron Cohen's principal target in his work, it is instructive to look at the "Full" Sacha Baron Cohen, or at latest a broader array of the characters he has played on television and in film.

In Baron Cohen's other signature role in Hollywood films in 2006, he played Will Ferrell's foil and antagonist in the movie *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. Baron Cohen's character, Jean Girard, is a French "Formula Un" driver who takes the NASCAR circuit by storm. He is a walking embodiment some might say of the "freedom fries," "red(neck) state" American stereotype of the French—a snobbish, effete, espresso-sipping, opera-listening, *L'Etranger*-reading (adding insult to injury all while he drives!), Perrier-sponsored homosexual (his longtime partner played by Conan O'Brien's one-time latenight sidekick Andy Richter).

It is hard to see this as a role in which Baron Cohen is somehow exploiting the American audience, other than that by playing a stereotype intended to be maximally offensive he is in a sense condescending that audience and its intelligence. Rather, his role as Jean Girard seems quintessentially English (a la Benny Hill), and in that sense sheds light back on Borat, as we learn from his *Rolling Stone* interview that Baron Cohen grew up idolizing Peter Sellers and loved Sellers' infamous French stereotype, Inspector Jacques Clouseau:

Baron Cohen's future was set when he was roughly eight years old by two significant events. The first was seeing one of Peter Sellers' Pink Panther movies

at a friend's ninth birthday party—setting off a lifelong admiration of the British comic actor's work. The other was when his older brothers snuck him into a theater to see Monty Python's *Life of Brian*.⁴

Certainly, Baron Cohen's most famous character—and the one whose success probably was responsible for Borat getting a chance over the long-run—is the faux “gangsta” rapper Ali G.. Indeed, it is instructive to note that in Ali G.'s first full-length feature film in 2001, *Ali G. Indahouse*, instead of an epic quest for Pamela Anderson, Ali G. is in pursuit of the supermodel Naomi Campbell. Much of the criticism of “Ali G.” sounds in fact remarkably familiar when we see allegations about Baron Cohen's insensitivity to Kazakhs. Within the UK, Ali G. precipitated comments like the following from Felix Dexter, a comedian on a British television series. Substitute “Kazakhs” for “black street culture” and one could get a characterization similar to what we see in the wake of *Borat!*: “But a lot of the humor is laughing at black street culture and it is being celebrated because it allows the liberal middle classes to laugh at that culture in a context where they can retain their sense of political correctness.”⁵

Tell It to the Kazakhs!...Nevertheless, Why Exactly Kazakhstan?

The forefather and prototype for Borat was the character of a Moldovan television reporter, named Alexi Krickler, who Cohen played in the mid-1990s on British television. According to Cohen that character was based on a doctor he met at a free beach getaway in Astrakhan, southern Russia:

“...there was a guy there who was a doctor, and the moment I met him, I started laughing...I remember meeting him, and him saying, ‘You're English, yes, you're English—you say cock, but Americans, they say a cack. Yes, they say a cack. You say a cock and they say a cack.’ Within seconds, me and my friends were crying with laughter. He had some elements of Borat, but he had none of the racism or the misogyny or the anti-Semitism. He was Jewish, actually.”⁶

This is revealing inasmuch as that the personal characteristics are separated from the views he ascribes to his artistic creation, which some might complain is the essence of stereotyping.

It was as Alexi Krickler that Baron Cohen hit upon what Strauss terms “a tiny epiphany that would eventually fuel Baron Cohen's career”:

For example, when interviewing someone about the rugby team British Lions, he'd go back and forth with the interviewee for ten minutes, seemingly unable to comprehend that they don't have actual lions playing rugby. “I was struck by the patience of some of these members of the upper class, who were so keen to appear polite—particularly on camera—that they would never walk away,” Baron Cohen says.⁷

Of course, there was a difference that may have petered out over the years... at least in *Borat!*: originally, Baron Cohen heavily concentrated on the genuinely powerful, whether celebrities or those with money and power, but in *Borat!* he clearly started sliding toward “taking the piss out of” more average citizens. Perhaps this is where he “crossed the line.”

Greetings from “Post(card)-Commiestan”

The Borat of *Borat!* was still to have several incarnations from Alexi Krickler to the Borat Sagdiyev of today. After Alexi Krickler came an Albanian television reporter named Kristo. Only later did Baron Cohen’s “Borat” become Kazakh: first as Borat Karabzhanov, then as Borat Dutbayev, and finally in 2003 as Borat Sagdiyev.⁸ This is perhaps important for it suggests that although Sacha Baron Cohen and Kazakhstan have become inseparably intertwined, Borat’s “Kazakhness” was almost incidental. One is inevitably reminded here of mistaken intention sometimes conveniently read into retrospective analyses: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is today inextricably associated with Romania, yet *Dracula* apparently started out in Stoker’s imagination as “Count Wampyr” from Styria (Austria) and only later (like Borat) migrated eastward to Transylvania.⁹

Still, Moldova, Albania, and Kazakhstan have a clear common theme—they are all part of the post-communist world of the former Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union. And it is worth recalling here Baron Cohen’s own comments mentioned earlier: “And the reason we chose Kazakhstan was because it was a country that no one had heard anything about, so we could essentially play on stereotypes they might have about this ex-Soviet backwater.” In other words, a generic post(card)-Commiestan of sorts.

Baron Cohen has not commented specifically on why Krickler had to leave Moldova and change his name and why his television reporter is always from the post-communist world, but we can speculate. In this way not much has changed from Bram Stoker’s time: the need to find a setting that is simultaneously exotic and yet familiar, that acts as a prop but not distraction from the underlying goal of the artform. One wonders to what extent Borat’s migration from Moldova to Albania to Kazakhstan was dictated directly or indirectly by real world events—Albania certainly losing some of the “unknown” character that is key to this plot device, because of heavier news coverage surrounding Kosovo in the late 1990s (witness perhaps, the film *Wag the Dog*). Distance of course makes parody easier (witness the infamous Weird Al Yankovic song and video parody “Amish Paradise”—talk about a disenfranchised community who was unlikely to get upset!) But only up to a point: Go eastward young man!...but not too far east because then you become unrecognizable and your audience can’t relate and the power of the satire is lost!

Molvania, Romanovia, and Kreplakistan...Oh My!

This still leaves a key question unanswered: why has Baron Cohen sought to have his mock reporter come from real places...however fictionally-described? If, as Baron Cohen suggests, Borat is not from the real Kazakhstan, but from a fictional Kazakhstan

so absurd that “the joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist,” why choose a real country name to begin with? Mirroring the separation, reclamation of independence, and micro-state phenomena of the region itself during the post-communist era, recent years have seen an explosion of “really imagined communities” in the form of fictional countries placed in the post-communist space.¹⁰

As John Tierney opined in a *New York Times* op-ed, “I wish Cohen had instead invented a country like Molvania,” rather than have Borat come from Kazakhstan.¹¹ Molvania is, of course, the well-known fictional land of the Jetlag Travel Guide series [*Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry*], described as “somewhere north of Bulgaria and downwind of Chernobyl.” (Despite the fictitious country’s name, stipulated location, and characteristics, its three Australian authors maintain it was not modeled on Moldova or even Romania, but was inspired by travels in Portugal.¹²) Among many other things, Molvania is home to Europe’s oldest nuclear reactor, and as one of its authors relates: “It’s a very beautiful country now that radiation levels have dropped to acceptable standards.”¹³

Unsafe nuclear power plants, environmental degradation, and genetic mutation are also the punchline in Ben Stiller’s 2004 comedy *Dodgeball*, in which we are introduced to Fran Stalinofskivichdavidovitchsky of Romanovia: “In her home country of Romanovia, dodgeball is the national sport and her nuclear power plant’s team won the championship five years running, which makes her the deadliest woman on earth with a dodgeball.”

Then there is Mike Myers’ creation of Kreplakistan in the Austin Powers series: Kreplakistan is a former Soviet republic apparently unable to protect its nuclear warheads and in a state of perpetual chaos (as mock CNN clips of people running pell-mell convey to us). There is speculation on the Wikipedia that Kreplakistan is “likely based on the real Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, now the Republic of Karakalpakstan.” More convincing, however, is the idea that “kreplak” is inspired by “kreplach, an Eastern European Jewish dish consisting of meat-filled dumplings.”¹⁴

But is inventing a country the solution to the problems of negative stereotyping and prejudice? If the Internet is any indication: apparently not. Molvania comes in for sharp criticism from those who view it as yet another variation on the (neo-)orientalist theme. There are angry denunciations particularly of the photos the authors use in the book and on the Molvania website—for while they play the role of fictional, mockworthy Molvianians, they are indeed real people. Nor have criticisms of Molvania been consigned merely to the orientalism monitors. In comments similar to those of Kazakh officials about Borat, in 2004 former UK minister for Europe Keith Vaz criticized the book because “it does reflect some of the prejudices which are taking root [in Europe]... The sad thing is, some people might actually believe that this country exists.”¹⁵ Ironically, too, the choice of a fictional “everycountry” can in fact be interpreted as even more insulting because it treats the people of an entire region or group as an essentially undifferentiated “them”—“I can’t tell ‘em apart, they all look alike...”

Borat, Class, and Urbanity

The parallel drawn by John Tierney between *Borat!* and *Molvania* is arguably a natural one, and thus one that many, especially on the Internet, have made. Particularly as stories began to come out about how Borat's mock "Kazakh" home village in the movie was filmed in a poor Roma (gypsy) village in Romania—where the villagers received as payment for their work the feast of "a pig" and while Sacha Baron Cohen reportedly spent the night in the swanky mountain retreat of Sinaia¹⁶—the issue of class entered the discussion about *Borat!*. It is difficult not to conclude that the issue of class can become funny in the film precisely because it is portrayed by a "safe cultural environment." That is: poverty becomes broadly funny when it is portrayed by the comparatively unknown or culturally unprotected...be it Kazakhs or "trailer trash" in "red(neck) state" America.

The Polish author of the blog "Beatroot" captured this well in a post on the *Molvania* guidebook entitled: "Why is it that the only people 'liberals' think it's OK to laugh at these days are the white working class and Central and Eastern Europeans?"

Europe's 'white trash'

*...There is something a bit strange happening in the West. If this sort of book had been written about, say, African people, then, quite rightly, there would have been uproar and outrage. Words like 'racism' would have been used by lefty-liberal reviewers. But it seems that Political Correctness extends to all groups these days except poor whites from urban, rural or semi-rural areas in America and Europe.*¹⁷

Indeed, I would venture to speculate that had the villagers in *Borat!* been presented as Roma or "gypsies," rather than as fictional Kazakhs, there might have been greater outrage about this, precisely because of the hierarchy of officially-recognized discrimination that prevails in cultural and political circles in the West. By being presented as the comparatively-unknown Kazakhs, however, it made it "easier" to laugh freely. And had the English tabloid press not taken an interest in the village of Glod (meaning "mud"!) and shown clips of the movie to the villagers, it is possible that these fictional Kazakhs would have been every bit as disenfranchised as the Amish relative to Weird Al Yankovic: according to the journalists, "not a single villager we spoke to had ever been able to afford a trip to the nearest cinema, 20 miles away!"¹⁸

Sun-Baked Mud or When Things Get All Bollixed Up: The Uses of Borat

That finished cultural products can become intermediary inputs or be reprocessed for things their creators never could have dreamed of and might not even agree with is well-known. A few years back I remember seeing a television report in a major US metropolitan area where real estate agents were being investigated for using the shorthand "Archie Bunker" to describe clients with 'discriminating tastes,' thinking that by using such language they were somehow remaining within the bounds of equal opportunity regulations.¹⁹ Similarly, US troops in Iraq have described their incorporation of the satirical jingoistic ballad "America, **ck yeah!" from *Team America: World*

Police on their missions.²⁰ So it has been with Borat. This is undoubtedly the complaint of Jewish anti-defamation groups: that it doesn't matter that Baron Cohen is Jewish and seeks to highlight anti-Semitic prejudice, if his audience laughs with, rather than at, Borat's anti-Semitism.

The London tabloid *The Sun*, well-known for its "misgivings" over immigration and some would argue pandering to racist and xenophobic attitudes, searched for its pitchfork to make hay out of *Borat!* in the context of the looming immigration debate connected with Romania and Bulgaria's entry into the European Union on 1 January 2007. The paper delighted in quoting Gheorghiu Pascu, 46, as saying "Borat is a son-of-a-bitch who made us look like savages. This is Transylvania, home of Dracula. If he ever returns we will stick a stake in his backside and impale him. Then I would cut his b***s off."²¹ Two weeks later, under a headline blaring "We're leaving Romania" was a picture of villagers in horse-drawn carts with the caption "Horse and cart ... Romanians are heading our way for a better life; slowly."²² The article quotes a villager saying "people will simply get around the restrictions by working in the black market or being self-employed," and ends with another pledging, "Borat should watch out. He might bump into some of us in London soon."

America the Stereotype...Now Coming to a Theater Near You: Getting America's Wrongs Right, its Rights Wrong, and its Right Wrong

Borat! is replete with what might be called "nesting occidentalisms" or "nesting anti-Americanisms": that is, it creates and plays on foreign and domestic hierarchies of Americans, good, bad, and ugly.²³ Chris Jones hits on the triteness and tawdriness of Baron Cohen's itinerary in the film as follows:

...Borat starts his American trek in New York, land of the cold and the distant, where the only communication is by epithet. Then he heads to the South, land of the obsequiously and idiotically polite, where the local gothics haven't changed their outlook since the days of Scarlett O'Hara. He takes a turn for Texas—where outsize nuts in cowboy hats chew their cuds on every corner. And after a brief sojourn in the ghetto—where every street is named "Martin Luther King Blvd."—he ends up in Southern California, where surgically enhanced breasts heave in every swimsuit.²⁴

In other words, Baron Cohen took the road so-frequently-travelled through the European's amusement park of American stereotypes (and some would have us believe only Americans view the world as an extension of Disneyland!) "Othering," it turns out, does not acknowledge the class struggle or political correctness.

Baron Cohen certainly takes—or at least wishes to portray—himself seriously. It should thus come to no one's surprise that those Americans who come off best in the film are a religiously-observant elderly Jewish couple who run a bed-and-breakfast and an African-American callgirl (variously claimed on the Internet to be an actress):

I think part of the movie shows the absurdity of holding any form of racial prejudice, whether it's hatred of African-Americans or of Jews...Borat essentially works as a tool. By himself being anti-Semitic, he lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it's anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism...I remember, when I was in university I studied history, and there was this one major historian of the Third Reich, Ian Kershaw. And his quote was, "The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference." I know it's not very funny being a comedian talking about the Holocaust, but I think it's an interesting idea that not everyone in Germany had to be a raving anti-Semite. They just had to be apathetic.²⁵

But is that really what we are talking about with the ugly Americans Baron Cohen meets in *Borat!*? For one thing, Chris Jones poses a good question: did Baron Cohen really have to "cross the pond" to find such disturbing stereotypes?

Because Cohen is now reportedly the highest paid comic in Britain—and because he styles himself as a radical—here's the movie he should now make. Let's see his Borat make some Cultural Learnings of his own smug world. It wouldn't be hard for him to chat up a racist in a London pub. He could go to any British soccer game and find a cacophony of anti-gay slurs. Get an Irishman on the street chattering about Eastern European immigrants and someone will put a foot in it. Borat could spend time with French gothics from the Dordogne. He could teach us about the way Europe has integrated (or not) its Muslim citizens. Don't they have hookers in Hamburg? Let's see if they're welcome at your better class of German party.²⁶

As Andrew Mueller notes about the movie: "What astonishes about every American he encounters is not their naivete, but their politeness, hospitality, and the extraordinary degree to which Borat has to inflame situations to provoke reaction. Had he attempted these antics in many other countries—bringing a hooker to dinner, desecrating the national anthem in front of a rodeo audience—he'd have conducted the publicity campaign in traction."²⁷

I would argue that Baron Cohen to some extent misinterprets the reactions of those he "exposes." Is what he sees with most of the Americans he captures on tape the same as what he claims of the "upper-class Englishmen...so keen to appear polite for the camera"? I don't think so. The reserve, the failure to act, the consensual behavior of the Americans Baron Cohen meets, I would argue, is born of a desire not to offend the guest, no matter how odd he is, not to speak or ask questions lest one show one's ignorance. After all, the biggest faux pas one can make in today's globalized day and age, we are told, is to mock or express ignorance of our interlocutor's culture. Don't be judgmental, just play along, go along to get along...

This is American socio-cultural *laissez-faire*—also known as American self-centeredness—at its best and worst, a world where individual privacy can reach absurd proportions, whether it be not asking a neighbor about his salary or the worth of her

house, or not interfering with the neighbor next door even though you might question the noises you hear at night as indicating physical or mental abuse. Indeed, the very American counter to *Borat!* can be seen in the final episode of the long-running comedy series *Seinfeld*, where the four main characters are hauled into court for failing to fulfill a newly-passed “Good Samaritan” law and helping a man in distress, whom they instead made fun of because of his weight—an homage, intended or not, to American self-centeredness.

Is it safe?...Is it safe?

“Is it safe?...Is it safe?” is no longer just something you hear at the dentist anymore. It is the thought that crosses people’s minds before, while, or after they laugh in our post-modern world. Perhaps the lesson here, however, is to not to take all this overly-seriously.

Americans should actually be thankful for such a movie: it holds a mirror up and tells us how some in the rest of the world view us. As has frequently been said, in the past many who disliked the United States had a compartmentalized view that separated U.S. foreign policy from the American people; increasingly surveys of foreign public opinion suggest that foreigners are no longer drawing this distinction (although it may indeed be that the perceptions of the former are negatively affecting the latter). Like it or not, Baron Cohen has tapped in effectively to foreign perceptions of the United States and he found enough Americans to play the ugly stereotypes he expected of them brilliantly.

On the other hand, yes, Virginia, it is safe to laugh at Borat. Andrew Mueller explains why:

The reason that Borat is such a liberating hoot is Baron-Cohen’s understanding that nothing is funnier than what we’re not supposed to laugh at—and, in the early 21st century, the pressure upon us not to laugh at the backwardness and stupidity of foreigners has been considerable. We are expected to take seriously people who want to execute cartoonists for drawing, and stone women for having sex—neither of which, as ideas, are dafter than the Kazakh custom, described by Borat, of compelling gay people to wear blue hats.²⁸

Nor should we cry too much for Kazakhstan (Moscow certainly doesn’t). As one poster on a website debating whether Borat is good or bad publicity for Kazakhstan stated: “Without Borat, Kazakhstan is just another obscure Central Asian republic.” Another pointed out, Borat is portrayed as “naïve, but he is not cruel or bad.” Others suggest, the Kazakhs could pull off a real coup if they were now to use the Borat character in a film to market “the real Kazakhstan.” Professor Sean Roberts notes that, according to GoogleTrends, Borat more than doubled Kazakhstan’s usual google hits during the lead up and height of the Borat film’s PR campaign.²⁹ A cynic might say too that unintentionally Borat turns out to be brilliantly diversionary, if serendipitous counterpropaganda for the Kazakh elite of President Nursultan Nazarbayev: as Roberts, Timothy Garton Ash,³⁰ and others have noted, the reality of rights abuses, fraudulent

elections, and corruption of Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan are ugly enough, that Borat is a useful, innocuous distraction by comparison.

All that remains then is the final plot device for Baron Cohen to kill off Borat, so that nobody is upset anymore. A modest proposal: How about a "Dallas"-like plot twister with "Who shot Borat?" Was it the Americans, the Kazakhs, the villagers of Glod?... Why it was the Baron Cohen himself!

¹ Sacha Baron Cohen, interview by Neil Strauss, "The Man Behind the Mustache," *Rolling Stone*, 14 November 2006,

http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally_speaks.

² Ryan Gilbey, "Thongs of Freedom," *New Statesman*, 6 November 2006, quoted in Christopher Hitchens, "Kazakh Like Me: Borat reveals the painful politeness of American society," *Slate*, 13 November 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2153578/>.

³ Lucy Kelaart, "Is it cos I is Kazakh?" *The Guardian*, 11 April 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,934389,00.html>.

⁴ Baron Cohen with Strauss.

⁵ "Racism rap for Ali G.," *BBC News Online*, 11 January 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/598586.stm>.

⁶ Baron Cohen with Strauss.

⁷ Baron Cohen with Strauss.

⁸ "Borat," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borat>.

⁹ Elizabeth Miller, "Vampire Hunting in Transylvania," <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emiller/transylvania.html>.

¹⁰ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fictional_countries.

¹¹ John Tierney, "The Running of the Yokels," *The New York Times*, 11 November 2006.

¹² See the comments of one of the authors, Rob Sitch, on CNN, 1 May 2004, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0405/01/i_c.01.html.

¹³ "Molvania spoof mocks travel books," *BBC News Online*, 2 April 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3592753.stm>.

¹⁴ See http://www.hollywood.com/review/Austin_Powers_II_/386413, Myers' films are known for his Yiddish-tinged humor, including Frau Farbissina (Yiddish for "embittered" or "sour puss").

¹⁵ "Molvania spoof mocks."

¹⁶ Bojan Pancevski and Carmiola Ionescu, "Borat film 'tricked' poor village actors," *The Daily Mail*, 11 November 2006,

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=415871&in_page_id=1770;

regarding the payment of the pig see the interview with Dan Mazer, one of Baron Cohen's producers,

<http://www.webgeordie.co.uk/borat/interview01.htm>.

¹⁷ "The Beatroot: Politics and current affairs of Poland and Central Europe," 21 January 2006,

<http://beatroot.blogspot.com/2006/01/molvania-land-untouched-by-modern.html>.

¹⁸ Pancevski and Ionescu, "Borat film 'tricked'."

¹⁹ One of the enduring criticisms of Norman Lear's "Archie Bunker" character, brilliantly acted by the late Carroll O'Connor, is that he was a lovable bigot, that in attempting to avoid making him a one-dimensional character, his bigotry was beautified. The same could perhaps be said of Borat...

²⁰ See Nir Rosen, interview with soldier from U.S. Special Forces, "Ugly Americans in Iraq," 27 June 2006, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20060627_ugly_americans_iraq/. Conservatives also like this movie for its parodies of heroes of the left including Michael Moore, Tim Robbins, and Sean Penn.

²¹ Oliver Harvey, "We'll put a stake up Borat's a**e," *The Sun*, 27 November 2006, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/article/0,,2-2006550090,00.html>.

²² Oliver Harvey, "We're leaving Borat's village," *The Sun*, 14 December 2006, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/article/0,,2-2006570725,00.html>.

²³ For the concept of "nesting orientalisms," see Milica Bakic-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Winter, 1995): 917-931; on occidentalisms, see Ian

Buruma, "The Origins of Occidentalism," *The Chronicle Review*, 6 February 2004, <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i22/22b01001.htm>.

²⁴ Chris Jones, "'Borat' Plays in Peoria; now turn the tables across the pond," *The Chicago Tribune*, 3 December 2006, http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/reviews/critics/chi-0612020310dec03.1.1209556.story?coll=chi-ent_critics-hed.

²⁵ Baron Cohen with Strauss.

²⁶ Jones, "'Borat' Plays in Peoria."

²⁷ See <http://www.uncut.co.uk/film/uncut/reviews/8963>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Borat and Kazakhstan Nation Branding: Signs of the Apocalypse?," 15 December 2006, http://roberts-report.blogspot.com/2006_12_01_archive.html; for the debate he references and I quote from see http://www.brandchannel.com/forum.asp?bd_id=74.

³⁰ Timothy Garton Ash, "There must be plain speaking at the end of the red carpet: The Kazakh president may have joked about Borat, but his regime's human rights record is no laughing matter," *The Guardian*, 23 November 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1954805.00.html>.