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Author(s): Eliot Borenstein

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Our Borats, Our Selves: Yokels and Cosmopolitans on the Global Stage

Eliot Borenstein

Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.

—Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

“Believe it or not, but they’re absolutely useless. And you can never teach them anything either. Say what you like about our friends the Kabardians or the Chechens—robbers and vagabonds they may be, but they’re plucky devils for all that. Why this lot don’t even bother about weapons. You’ll never see one of them wearing a decent dagger. There’s your Ossete for you!”

—Maksim Maksimych, in Mikhail Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*

There is a specter haunting the multicultural world. That specter is the yokel. The yokel puts the lie to fantasies of the benign, uncomplicated encounter between cultures, whether in the form of a multicultural celebration of difference or a neoliberal conviction that peace and brotherhood can be ensured by the proliferation of McDonalds franchises.¹ The yokel is local knowledge as an open, but dirty, secret: clinging to folkways and quaint but highly inappropriate behavior, he is the quintessence of foreign backwardness, to which no amount of goodwill or diplomacy can accord true subjectivity. Though the yokel has been with us since the dawn of travel writing, his importance is only heightened in the age of globalization. I use the term *globalization* advisedly, for in the past decade it has become an empty buzzword; I imagine it as the trigger word for downing shots in a drinking game, leaving nearly all our chattering classes in a drunken stupor, turning the Op-Ed section of the *New York Times* into a blank page, and sending Thomas L. Friedman to an early grave. Yet it is precisely the fatuousness with which globalization is so often invoked that the yokel’s mere presence sets in sharp relief. The yokel reminds us that the global village is populated by global village idiots.

The yokel, a perennial figure in popular culture, has made a comeback since the end of the Cold War. The linguistically challenged nar-

Epigraphs taken from Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (New York, 1994), 10; and Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Paul Foote (London, 1966), 25.

1. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York, 2000), 248–75.

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rator of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (later portrayed by Eugene Hutz in the film of the same name), the hapless refugee in Stephen Spielberg's *Terminal*, the hopelessly backward natives of mud-ravaged Elbonia in the comic strip *Dilbert*, and the pornography-loving adolescent on *That 70s Show*, whose unpronounceable name is replaced by the acronym "Fez" for "foreign exchange student" (though we do learn that the first k's in his last name are silent). Combining good-hearted buffoonery with the slightest threat of aggression, the yokel is almost always male (the women from their countries are usually portrayed as peasant mothers, shrews, and whores from central casting). Most of these yokels fit a particular type: they are sexually preoccupied, prone to ostensibly hilarious malapropisms, and strangely lovable despite (or perhaps because of) their backwardness. None of them, however, can compare with the most notorious and most subversive yokel of them all: Borat.

Borat Sagdiyev is the creation of British comic Sacha Baron Cohen, who first gave this fictional Kazakh telejournalist international exposure on a satirical interview program, *Da Ali G Show*. When the show started, Borat was but one of many personas Baron Cohen adopted to trick his subjects into spouting absurdities in response to his unconventional interview techniques; the titular Ali G, a British Muslim suburban wannabe hip-hop artist, was particularly noteworthy for getting the xenophobic American politician Patrick Buchanan to copy his faux gangsta slang. But as Baron Cohen retired Ali G in response to his shrinking pool of potential interviewees (too many people had become aware of the joke), Borat grew to new prominence, in no small part thanks to the wonders of YouTube. With the release of Baron Cohen's new blockbuster movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006), the world seemed gripped by a veritable Boratmania. Americans lined up to see the film, which was number one at the box office during its first weekend. Kazakhstan's government initially reacted with outrage at the Central Asian nation's portrayal as the homeland of joyfully clueless urine-drinking, Jew-hating, sister-shtupping rapists. The film board of the Russian Federation recommended against the movie's distribution on Russian territory, citing the potential for inciting nationalist hatred. And, inevitably, Baron Cohen and his studio were threatened with lawsuits from a veritable rainbow coalition of offended parties: American frat boys, New York feminists, Romanian gypsies, and, at least at first, the aforementioned government of Kazakhstan. Such strange international bedfellows provide a glimpse of Borat's globalist scope, uniting disparate cultures through his brash violation of the norms of multicultural etiquette, thereby, ironically enough, bringing his enemies together in an angry and offended variation on "We Are the World."

It would be pointless to try to explain why Borat is funny—either it is obvious, or the material is not funny at all. The kind of humor that is Baron Cohen's stock-in-trade should be familiar to those who have followed the career of Stephen Colbert, or to anyone who has paid attention to the late- and post-Soviet manifestation of corrosive irony called *steb*: the

power of the performance is due to the subject's deliberate and explicit overidentification with the target of satire or disdain.² Nor is there any need to belabor the patent untruths and inconsistencies involved in the Borat persona (the borrowings from Polish and Czech, the slander against Kazakhstan, or the fact that Borat does not even remotely look Kazakh). Rather, at issue here is exactly what Baron Cohen is doing *while* he is being funny, what sources he draws upon to create his absurd and deliberately offensive comedy. Borat functions within a fictional framework of racism and ethnic hostility, bringing to light barely concealed discomforts about border-crossings, cosmopolitanism, and global cultures.

Racial Hygiene

Comedians who dabble in ethnic or racist humor often shield themselves behind the designation "equal-opportunity offenders," a cliché suggesting that offending everyone amounts to offending no one. And indeed, anyone would be hard-pressed to appear on camera with Borat and not look like an idiot. But Baron Cohen's satire always has two targets, one actual (his interlocutor), the other ostensible (the people he explicitly denigrates). And it is in this second category that Borat is more selective. He cannot use the word *Uzbekistan* without following it with the epithet "assholes," but actual Uzbeks (or even fake Uzbeks) are absent from his comedy. To call Borat's pronouncements on women "medieval" would be to give his words too much credit, but classifying the humor as merely sexist would be a category error. Much of the antifeminist rhetoric functions primarily within a nationalist context: when Borat says that women in Kazakhstan gather in groups of three or more only in brothels, the target is his "backward" mythical homeland, rather than women per se. Instead, Borat reserves his animus for two particularly hated groups: Jews and Gypsies (Roma). The hostility toward Gypsies is much less shocking and scandalous to an American audience, since most Americans probably have only a vague sense of Gypsies as a mythical rather than an actual people. Indeed, one could almost imagine Borat convincing yet another crowd of midwestern yokels that the Gypsies were only narrowly defeated by Frodo and his Fellowship somewhere between Mordor and Lothlorien. But why should the adventures of a naive and absurdly backwards foreigner consistently invoke these two groups?

Here we must note the obvious about Baron Cohen: he is Jewish. Raised Orthodox, he keeps kosher, and even observes the Sabbath ("when he can").³ The relentless antisemitism of his adopted persona fits within a long line of self-defensive Jewish humor, which often preempts expressions of anti-Jewish hatred by mirroring it back to its audience.

2. On *steb*, see Viktor Matizen, "Steb kak fenomen kul'tury," *Iskusstvo kino*, 1993, no. 9: 59–62; and Aleksei Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife," in Adele Marie Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, 1999), 76–109.

3. "British Comic Cohen Defends His Alter Ego Borat," Reuters, 15 November 2006.

Baron Cohen, however, takes it a step further: he *elicits* antisemitism from his interlocutors, encouraging them to ignore whatever internal censor might normally reign them in. The entire game is, of course, inextricably wrapped up in Baron Cohen's own Jewish identity: what could be a more powerful confirmation of Jewish anxiety than the ease with which Borat gets a gun shop owner to explain to him which rifle would be best for killing Jews?

As the puppetmaster in a grandly conceived game, Baron Cohen both perpetuates anti-Jewish hostility and reveals that the racist frat boys, Romanian villagers, and Southern aristocrats have all been humiliated by a crafty Jew. On the other hand, Baron Cohen, in creating Borat, is participating in his own abjection. Borat is many things, but he is no Kazakh. Allegedly modeled on a doctor Baron Cohen met while vacationing in Sochi, Borat embodies everything that is backwards about the "Old Country," wherever that old country might happen to be. Uncultured, uncivilized, unwashed, Borat is a contemporary reimagining of the ethnic vermin who populated racist propaganda in general and Nazi propaganda in particular. Perverse as it may sound, Borat is a Jew.

In targeting Jews and Gypsies, Borat chooses the two groups who shared the lowest rung on the Nazi racial ladder. Both challenged ideals of racial hygiene precisely because of their perceived insistence on ignoring national boundaries, on crossing borders and thereby subverting loyalties: Jews and Gypsies were cast as cultural disease vectors.⁴ Borat the antisemite encapsulates two diametrically opposed, yet symbiotically linked, fantasies of the dangerous Jew. His words target the Jew as rich, international schemer for world domination, the cultured Jew—the Jew as cosmopolitan. Yet his greenhorn persona and aggressive backwardness are reminiscent of the "Eastern Jew," the abject Other of the Jewish cosmopolitan: the Jew as yokel. By eliciting antisemitism, by encouraging a bar full of good old boys to join him in a rousing chorus of "Throw the Jew Down the Well," Borat the Jew receives confirmation, and even validation, of his own abjection. And if one of the points of his comedy is that stupid American yokels are no different from mythical greenhorns, then it is also that the stupid greenhorn is a mirror of the group he allegedly despises: Borat's prejudices are those of our own rednecks, and yet Borat also embodies the things that xenophobes hate.

But if Borat is a Jew, even more is he a Gypsy. Indeed, parts of the feature film seem to parody the work of Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica. Nearly all the "ethnic" brass band music on the soundtrack was the work of Kusturica's longtime collaborator Goran Bregović, taken from several of Kusturica's most famous films, including *Podzemlje* (Underground, 1995). *Borat* even featured the Romany melody "Ederlezi," the theme song to Kusturica's *Dom za vešanje* (Time of the gypsies, 1989). "Ederlezi" itself

4. Both Jews and Roma are examples of what Yuri Slezkine calls "Mercurians," border-crossing outsiders who functioned as go-betweens rather than working the land. Cosmopolitans "routinely accuse them of tribalism, nepotism, clannishness, and other sins that used to be virtues (and still are, in a variety of contexts)." Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004), 24.

is an odd study of national appropriation and reappropriation in an age of global cultures, since it first became a hit when performed in Serbo-Croatian as “Djurdjevan” by the Bosnian rock sensation Bijelo Dugme in the 1980s, only to resurface as the Hungarian entry in the 2006 Eurovision contest, sung by Ruzsa Magdolna in Hungarian and Serbian, but not Romany. This mournful tune is thoroughly out of place in *Borat’s* comedy, and yet the original Roma lyrics would sadly have been the perfect grist for the Borat mill. An unsympathetic summary of the song’s chorus would be, “How come everyone around here gets to sacrifice sheep, and I don’t?”

“Ederlezi” itself is a textbook story of continued appropriations and misappropriations: Bijelo Dugme’s transformation of the song into throaty, Romantic Serbo-Croatian mush, Kusturica’s inclusion of it in a haunting film that traded in hoary Gypsy stereotypes (while, admittedly, connecting the song to scenes that resonated with its original context and content), and Borat. Baron Cohen’s misappropriation of “Ederlezi” is far more jarring than Kusturica’s, since, by including it in a scene in a film that does not even fit the melody’s mood, he has reduced it to its essence as a global cultural commodity: a sign of pure Otherness, signifying absolutely nothing but its own strangeness.⁵

Borat’s debt to Kusturica goes beyond the soundtrack. The first ten minutes of the movie, ostensibly set in Borat’s home village in Kazakhstan, paint a portrait of rural poverty, over-the-top squalor, and old country festivities that could have come straight out of *Time of the Gypsies*. Borat’s travels with his live chicken evoke the young Perhan’s almost mystical bond with his beloved pet turkey. Even the cinematography at times echoes that of *Time of the Gypsies* and Kusturica’s later *Arizona Dream* (1993). Kusturica’s film was controversial among Roma for its indulgence in long-standing Gypsy stereotypes (theft, child abduction, and supernatural powers are key themes), and I do not intend to hold it up as a model of authenticity. In *Borat* authenticity is clearly not the point. Rather, the world of the Gypsy-hating Borat is modeled on preexisting representations of Roma, an assertion that is confirmed and further complicated by the fact that the “Kazakh” scenes were shot in an isolated Romany village in Romania. One of the most disturbing aspects of *Borat* is that these villagers, like nearly everyone else in the movie, had no idea that Baron Cohen was not filming a documentary and did not have sufficient knowledge of English to understand that he was presenting them as prostitutes, rapists, and pedophiles. Ironically, the villagers quoted in a story about their experience referred to Baron Cohen as “that American,” getting his nationality wrong while highlighting the disturbing imbalance of power in this particular global cultural exchange (who could be more global than an American)?⁶ Even more disturbing, of course, is that these hapless villagers were duped by a Jew.

5. In Anglo-American popular culture, the same function is often filled by Bulgarian women vocalists, whose “mysterious voices” have provided the background to mystical scenes on *Xena: Warrior Princess* and HBO’s *Carnivàle*.

6. Bojan Pancevski and Carmiola Ionescu, “Borat Film ‘Tricked’ Poor Village Actors,” *Daily Mail*, 11 November 2006.

Multiculturalism and Its Discontents

If Borat is the embarrassing reminder of Old Country backwardness for a western Jew, he is also a profound challenge to the good manners and reflexive relativism required by right-thinking people in a multicultural world. In an increasingly globalized context, Borat is the unassimilable alien. One of the telltale moments in the film comes when Borat's Southern dinner party hostess optimistically assesses the faux Kazakh's potential: "It wouldn't take very much time for him to really become Americanized." Two minutes later, Borat returns from the bathroom with a plastic bag containing his own feces. "Where can I put it?" he asks her, in an exchange that is truly emblematic. With his body and its unsightly products, Borat has issued her a challenge: assimilate that! The yokel's body is all about excretion, pollution, and befouling. The only way to include him is through an act of ritual exclusion: comedy.

As a figure in popular culture, the yokel is a reminder of everything the cosmopolitan wishes to leave behind: the painfully ethnic, localized, and uncivilized set of customs that used to define him, and that unsympathetic onlookers can still deploy against him at will. This phenomenon is by no means limited to the Jew; it thrives on the anxieties of the recently marginalized about their precarious position in mainstream society. A telling example is "The Garden Party" (2005), the pilot episode of Cartoon Network's animated version of Aaron McGruder's comic strip *Boondocks*. When the Freemans, an African American family that has just moved to a whitebread neighborhood for the sake of better schools, are invited to a garden party at a rich white man's house, Robert, the grandfather and patriarch, takes great pains to show his manners and cultivation, yet all the while he is followed around by the bug-eyed, self-hating black servant known as "Uncle Ruckus," the embodiment of every negative stereotype that Robert is trying to reject.

Attention must be paid to the cosmopolitan and the yokel, for they undermine both the starry-eyed optimism of multiculturalism (which never met a cultural difference that could not be overcome with a Teletubby-style big hug), and the neoliberal cheerleading of globalization boosters such as the aforementioned Friedman. Friedman, it would appear, has yet to encounter a manifestation of globalization that he did not find to be positively globalicious. Here we should recall Friedman's famous example of the Lexus and the olive tree:

It struck me then that the Lexus and the olive tree were actually pretty good symbols of this post-Cold War era: half the world seemed to be emerging from the Cold War intent on building a better Lexus, dedicated to modernizing, streamlining and privatizing their economies in order to thrive in the system of globalization. And half of the world—sometimes half the same country, sometimes half the same person—was still caught up in the fight over who owns which olive tree.⁷

7. Friedman, *Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 31.

In other words, smart global consumers abandon their pesky cultural peculiarities in order to hop on board the luxurious juggernaut of free trade, while others cling stubbornly to their quaint folkways in the face of glorious modernization. The Lexus buyers are cosmopolitans, but the olive tree huggers are not quite yokels, at least in the sense used here. The true horror (and, hence, comedy) of the yokel in a globalized culture is that he desperately wants the Lexus, but he insists on trying to cram the olive tree into the back seat, along with his multiple goats, chickens, and wives.

Thus the yokel resists all inclusion, from all points on the ideological spectrum. He even casts doubt on the utopian aspirations behind the un-gainly neologism of “glocalization,” which posits that the global cultural economy does not have to be merely hegemonic but can empower local communities as real agents in a less hierarchical relationship between the global and the local. The figure of the yokel, however, suggests the capacity of global culture to objectify and commodify any aspects of the local with which it comes into contact, reifying it as charming or horrifying kitsch (something Disney excelled at long before Borat came along). This goes far beyond Baron Cohen. Borat, the comedies of Christopher Guest, the fake interviews on “The Daily Show,” and even the late- and post-Soviet phenomenon of Soviet self-hatred known as *sovok* point to a particular response to the pressures of cultural cross-fertilization: not globalization, not even glocalization, but the abject humor of yokelization.