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Borat and Anti-Semitism

Abstract

Is the film *Borat* (2006) an instance of anti-Semitism? Only if understood superficially, though Sacha Baron Cohen's Jewishness does not exempt Borat from charges of anti-Semitism. Does the film expose anti-Semitism in others, or at least uncover their indifference? Yes, partly, but while risking that the exposé itself will be misinterpreted. More subtly, the film ridicules Jewish worries about anti-Semitism, a strategy that undercuts moral earnestness. Finally, *Borat* challenges, by ridiculing more "sophisticated" social attitudes, the very basis on which one decides about the nature and existence of anti-Semitism. In short, *Borat* unmasks anti-Semitism to denounce it; but, even more, interrogates our concerns about its manifestations.

Examining the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) in terms of Jewish humour, and its alleged anti-Semitic dimensions, opens up some fascinating interpretive possibilities. As Hannah Dick has argued, Jewish identity in America is "unstable" and "fragmented."¹ If indeed ideologies are precarious because they are relative and arbitrary, so too is the notion of what constitutes prejudice, in this case anti-Semitism. And, if Jewish humour includes an irrational or pathological response to the Jewish condition, then, Borat's anti-Semitism surely exhibits that possibility. As is well known from Freud and others, Jewish humour sometimes has incorporated and played upon anti-Semitic stereotypes.

The *Borat* film begins with a scene in Borat's home of Kuzçek in Kazakhstan. During a Pamplona-like festival called "The Running of the Jews," Borat in his professional role as announcer describes the event as if it were a sports contest. Papier-mâché figures of a Jewish couple, like peripatetic piñatas replete with claws, horns, and large noses, are herded down a street enticed by costumed men waving money. When the woman stops to lay a giant egg, Borat cheers on the children: "Go kids! Crush that Jew chick before he hatches!" Borat then explains that his visit to the "US and A" for "cultural learnings" is because Kazakhstan "have a problem too: social, economic, and Jew." But the real Kazakhstan is a Muslim-majority country with little or no religious strife, and where both Christians and

Jews are in the minority. Borat's presentation of this and other erroneous "facts" about Kazakhstan ought to alert knowledgeable viewers to the film's other distortions. Where, indeed, is America's "Jewish problem" to be found, and how is it addressed there?

Borat takes with him on his trans-America quest crude and folkloric stereotypes of Jews as being acquisitive, embodiments of the Devil, and dominating banks and media and government. In his confused prejudice Borat attributes the attacks of 9/11 to Jews, a view propounded by some Arab media. When Jay Leno asked for his response to the comment that his film is homophobic or anti-Semitic, Sacha Baron Cohen, in character as Borat, replied, "Thank you very much!"² Elsewhere he states that Kazakhstan censors decided the film had sufficient anti-Semitic content to pass their scrutiny.³ At one level, then, Baron Cohen may be doing no more than displaying how ridiculous these anti-Jewish and other caricatures are.

Is, then, the film itself anti-Semitic? As is well known, Sacha Baron Cohen is from an orthodox Jewish family. He himself is Sabbath-observant, adheres to a kosher diet, has lived in Israel, has a fiancée who has converted, and wrote his Cambridge thesis on Jewish involvement in the American civil rights movement. He maintains that his parents love the Jewish humour of Borat, and that his 91-year-old grandmother phoned from Haifa to discuss nuances of various scenes.⁴

But does it make a difference that the film's major writer and actor is himself a Jew? To suggest that someone who is Jewish cannot be anti-Semitic stands as an instance of the genetic fallacy, that one's origins determine one's attitudes. Does it matter what Baron Cohen says about what he's doing? Critics, after all, should avoid the intentional fallacy or personal heresy—that is, erroneously interpreting a text as a form of self-expression or the communication of its author's own views. Interpreters ought instead to follow D. H. Lawrence's dictum: "Never trust the teller, trust the tale."

The actor playing the character of Borat conceals his Jewishness. Borat makes the absurd claim that practising his religion as a Kazakh means to be a "follower of the hawk." And Baron Cohen himself deflects the accusations of the film's anti-Semitism by arguing that "Borat essentially works as a tool." He explains: "By himself being anti-Semitic, [Borat] lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it's anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism."⁵ Borat's segments of the film's television predecessor, *Da Ali G Show*, include incidents that presage the anti-Semitic moments of the movie. In one incident Borat goes to Serengeti Ranch in Texas where exotic animals are hunted and shot. After some comments about the mercenary nature of Jews both in America and Kazakhstan, Borat remarks to the rancher that it is "a shame ... you

cannot hunt the Jew.” The man replies: "It's OK with me, but it's not with other people.”

In the film *Borat* continues in this vein, most notably when he asks a gunshop owner, "What is the best gun to defend from a Jew?" The man answers: "I would recommend either a 9 millimeter or a 45." Unable to purchase a gun, Borat and his producer-companion acquire a bear for protection. In a deleted scene, Borat goes to a dog pound where he attempts to get a puppy trained "to attack the Jew." In another scene, also deleted, he goes to arrange for a tattoo of a Jew, provided with horns, as Borat explains, "to make him look realistic." Compounding stereotypes, he asks the tattoo artist: "Do you think it would be better if he was controlled the puppet of the media or Uncle Sams?"

The Academy-award nominated documentary *The Courage to Care* (1986), about efforts of non-Jews to conceal Jews during the Holocaust, includes a teenaged boy hiding out with a Gentile family in a Polish village. When a police officer says, "You know, this kid looks like a Jew," the boy begins laughing and responds: "That's quite a compliment you make, gentlemen." Everyone then joins in the laughter at this shared joke. In the same film a woman in Paris conceals a Jewish family in her building. When inquiries are made about their whereabouts, she says, "Oh, you know how Jews are—they live in poor places like [this], but they all have money and they have a country house, and they've gone off to their country house."⁶

In both instances anti-Semitic stereotypes are used as mechanism of defense and protection. Such defensive but non-retaliatory jokes are protection from authority figures and potential aggressors. At this level it might be possible—though not very plausible—to see Baron Cohen the Jew, disguised as a Kazakh, using negative views of Jews to endear or disarm.

A rodeo organizer in Virginia advises Borat to shave off his mustache so that he will look more "Eye-talian." In his view Borat too much resembles an Islamic terrorist in post-9/11 America, where Muslims are perhaps the "new Jews." That Borat is played by a Jewish actor is an inside joke for those in the know that might partly ward off allegations of anti-Semitism. The film's popularity in Israeli theatres derives partly from moviegoers believing that only they can fully appreciate the film's humour with its witticisms and puns because Borat and Azamat are speaking Hebrew, not Kazakh.⁷ Approaching the Holocaust through humour in Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, after all, was challenged in part because it came from a non-Jew. One contributor to an on-line discussion, who identified himself as a Jew, wanted others to know that the character playing Borat is a Jew: "So you better not go yelling at a Jew for offending Jews, you retards." Unfortunately, the upshot of this intervention and disclosure was to make this contributor himself the target of nasty epithets, "dirty Jew" among them. Privileged insider jokes can backfire.

Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) stands in some ways as a precedent for Baron Cohen's *Borat*, not least because Chaplin played ambiguously dual roles as a Jewish barber and as Hitler. At one point the barber delivers a speech mistaken for one by Hitler. Employing an odd mixture of languages, this film was likewise controversial, and its humour misinterpreted. Borat on arrival in Los Angeles discovers his erstwhile friend and producer Azamat on the sidewalk, in mannerisms and dress a replica of Oliver Hardy. But Borat confuses Azamat's disguise for one of Hitler, thereby, like Chaplin, reducing Hitler to a comic figure for mockery. By this point the film's viewers ought to have become aware that the characters are not what they seem.

Probably the best-known example of the earlier Borat character's alleged anti-Semitism is when, again for *Da Ali G Show*, he encourages the patrons of a Tucson country-and-western bar to sing along in the chorus of his song, "In my Country There Is Problem." The readily singable refrain includes the words: "Throw the Jew Down the Well (So my country can be free)." Commenting on this admittedly "very controversial sketch," Baron Cohen acknowledges that "some members of the Jewish community thought that it was actually going to encourage anti-Semitism." His defense is: "But to me it revealed something about that bar in Tucson. And the question is: Did it reveal that they were anti-Semitic? Perhaps. But maybe it just revealed that they were indifferent to anti-Semitism."⁸

Baron Cohen, in this interview from November 2006 given to Neil Strauss of *Rolling Stone Magazine*, expands on the subject of indifference. While studying history at Cambridge he came across a quotation from Ian Kershaw: "The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference." Baron Cohen continues: "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." In November 2006 Elie Wiesel gave a speech at Queen's University on indifference, an elaboration of a shorter talk he gave at the White House in 1999 in which he expressed a preference for an unjust God over an indifferent one. Wiesel claimed that indifference "is more dangerous than anger and hatred" because "Anger can at times be creative":

But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it.

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor--never his victim....⁹

Along lines such as these Baron Cohen claims that he is unmasking apathy and indifference when he cajoles the bar patrons to sing along. This justification has sparked both severe criticism and an over-the-top approbation—an adulatory Youtube documentary proposes that Baron Cohen is a genuine Jewish hero.¹⁰ But why, after all, would people in a bar respond in a seemingly anti-Semitic way? Only about three percent of the population of Tucson, a city of about a half-million

people, is Jewish. Is the city a noted hotbed of anti-Semitism, or are people there indifferent to it? Judy Carlock of the *Tucson Citizen* commented on 15 December 2006 that, if you look at the items posted on the newspaper's website, "You won't see much anti-Semitism, but you will find plenty of paranoia about Mexicans."

Charles Krauthammer, writing in the *Washington Post*, does not accept Baron Cohen's explanation of what he is doing: "Whoaaaa. Does he really believe such rubbish? Can a man that smart ... really believe that indifference to anti-Semitism and the road to the Holocaust are to be found in a country-and-western bar in Tucson?" Krauthammer suggests Baron Cohen could have found more extreme examples of anti-Jewishness closer to home, in the UK and in Europe, than in an Arizona bar.¹¹ But then, as Daniel Goldhagen has stated, even the most hateful kinds of anti-Semitism are "socially constructed," passed on within societies, and occurring "where there are no Jews, and among people who have never met Jews." Such people, Goldhagen continues, "have believed that Jews were agents of the Devil, inimical to all that is good, responsible for many of the world's actual ills, and bent on the domination and destruction of their societies."¹² But still, unmasking an extant anti-Semitism ought surely to be something different from deliberately provoking it where it is at best latent.

In September 2006 the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) provided a press release on *Borat* in advance of the movie's initial appearance.¹³

The ADL was of two minds, recognizing on one hand that Sacha Baron Cohen "is himself proudly Jewish," using "humor to unmask the absurd and irrational side of anti-Semitism and other phobias born of ignorance and fear." Yet the ADL, perhaps having in mind its mandate "to put an end forever to unjust and unfair discrimination against, and ridicule of, any sect or body of citizens," was also wary lest some moviegoers misunderstand, and thereby have their own bigotry reinforced. The fear was that "the audience may not always be sophisticated enough to get the joke," or that mimicry or retelling of the film's humor might not translate well into the real world. Discussions of "Throw the Jew Down the Well" reveal that such concerns are not fanciful. The comic and ironic intent of the film is not widely obvious.

The same fears arose around the CBS sitcom of the 1970s, *All in the Family*, whose Archie Bunker was frequently described as a "loveable bigot." Were TV audiences laughing for the wrong reasons, despite the provision of Archie's foil in his liberal son-in-law Michael, or the fact that most episodes ended with Archie's grappling with some not quite fully apprehended insight? The difference with *Borat*, now a generation after, is that the discomfort remains unalleviated, there is no corrective or foil provided for the Borat character, and no obvious moral insights are offered. At the very least we might wonder whether merely to unveil indifference about anti-Semitism is to disarm or denounce it. Viewers are not

provided with enough cues to enable them to adopt the appropriate ironic distance towards the film's humour.

Proceeding down this hallway with its infinite recursion of mirrored hermeneutic possibilities, Ron Rosenbaum, in *Slate Magazine*, takes things one step further. He suggests that Baron Cohen might be providing a parody of Jewish worries about anti-Semitism. Perhaps the corollary of the interpretation that the film is really anti-anti-Semitic is that "this is a practicing Orthodox Jew's vision of the world, even of the most Jew-friendly nation in the world: 'They all hate us even if they try to disguise it, but you can find it right beneath the surface.'" In this light, then, the movie may be a comic portrait of "concern about anti-Semitism," as if to say that Baron Cohen is "exploring what would happen if a Jew gave the world anti-Semitic caricatures of Jews."¹⁴ A parallel instance might be that of Canadian television comic Rick Mercer, who regularly does on-the-spot interviews in American cities, asking passers-by to comment on the polar bear hunt in Saskatchewan, or inviting them to congratulate Canada for joining North America or for legalizing insulin. In this "Talking to Americans" segment Mercer may be satirizing, not American ignorance about Canada, but Canadians' preoccupations and anxiety about how they are perceived by Americans.

But connecting the dots in *Borat* to arrive at a conclusion or message or moral is made difficult and perhaps unattainable. The extended nude wrestling

scene between Borat and his producer Azamat is so prolonged and offensive that it becomes the breaking point for some viewers' confused reactions and sympathies. In effect, it pulls the rug out from under any simple and straightforward interpretation. But *New York Times* reviewer Manohla Dargis claims that this wrestling scene serves "an elegant formal function," namely, "relieving you of the burden of having to juggle your laughter with your increasingly abused conscience. Just when you're ready to cry, you howl."¹⁵ Martha Stephens once remarked of Flannery O'Connor's fictional shock tactics, referring to the violence and undercutting of mere tolerance and easy sympathy, that it is difficult to be the reader her stories require you to be.¹⁶ Similarly, *Borat* renders impossible any uncomplicated response of either humour or social outrage.

Finally, consider the anti-Jewish events in Borat's home village that bracket the film. On his return to Kazakhstan Borat speaks of the so-called "improvements" he has brought with him from the "US and A," including the discontinuation of "The Running of the Jews." Says Borat: "It's cruel; we Christians now." The running of the Jews has been replaced by a mock crucifixion with a Jewish man tied to a cross, where he is taunted, laughed at, and prodded with a pitchfork. To use an old distinction, the ignorant "cultural" anti-Semitism before Borat's journey has been replaced with a more sophisticated "theological" anti-Semitism after. The caricatured embodiment of evil, the Jew with horns who lays an egg, has been

turned into a recognizable historic individual, a Jew whose tribe has committed deicide, and is therefore to be executed as the killer of Christ. The returned Borat is supposedly more civilized and more progressive, but his negative attitudes towards Jews remain unreformed.

Is this the presumed outcome of the religious component of Borat's "cultural learnings" from America, and from his acceptance of "Mr. Jesus" at the Pentecostal revival service? Perhaps this more refined Borat, who elsewhere references both Mel Gibson and Madonna, has learned about mock crucifixions from them. Recall Gibson's execution as the lead character in *Braveheart* (1995), or Madonna's performance on a cross during her 2006 "Confessions" tour. It may be that Baron Cohen is doing no more than highlighting the arbitrariness of ideologies and who in this politically correct era can say or do what. After all, the actor—the "mighty Jew warrior Melvin Gibsons"—who played the lead in *Braveheart* can have himself crucified in a kind of cinematic *imitatio christi*, but then make a reputedly anti-Semitic movie about the death of Christ or utter anti-Semitic comments to an arresting officer. And Madonna, a sometime Roman Catholic who practises kabbalah, can in turn perform on a cross, against Vatican censure, but claiming Jesus' approval. Given these precedents, what then are we to make of the mock crucifixion of a Jew in a make-believe Kazakhstan? In effect, Sacha Baron Cohen, regardless of overt declarations about what he thinks he is doing, in *Borat* at least

exposes the conventions whereby we decide what is anti-Semitic and what is not, and who is and who is not an anti-Semite. And by undercutting any number of successive interpretive efforts, the film puzzles and provokes us to explore more deeply such phenomena and ourselves.

¹ Dick, Hannah. "Diasporic Entities, Destabilized Identities: Taking Borat's 'Cultural Learnings' Seriously," a paper presented to the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion and to the Canadian Theological Society, Saskatoon, SK, May 2007.

² From "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno," included among the Special Features of the DVD version of *Borat* (2007).

³ Strauss, Neil. "The Man Behind the Mustache." *Rolling Stone* Web Site , 14 November 2006.

⁴ Strauss.

⁵ Strauss.

⁶ Produced and directed by Robert Gardner. A United Way Production. 30 Minutes.

⁷ Aron Heller, Aron. "In Israel, moviegoers speak Borat's language," *Boston Globe* Web Site , 15 December 2006,

⁸ Strauss.

⁹ Wiesel, Eli. "The Perils of Indifference." *American Rhetoric* Web Site. Speech delivered 19 April 1999.

¹⁰ "Sacha Baron Cohen: An Unexpected Hero (Jewish)."

¹¹ Charles Krauthammer, Charles. "Just an Anti-Semitic Laugh? Hardly." *Washington Post* Web Site, 24 November 2006.

¹² Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997, p.41.

¹³ Anti-Defamation League. "Statement On The Comedy Of Sacha Baron Cohen, A.K.A. Borat." ADL Web Site, 28 September 2006.

¹⁴ Rosenbaum, Ron. "Not Very Nice. The *Borat* movie: They botched the joke." *Slate*, 2 November 2006.

¹⁵ Dargis, Manohla. "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (2006): From Kazakhstan, Without a Clue." *New York Times* Web Site, 3 November 2006.

¹⁶ Stephens, Martha. *The Question of Flannery O'Connor*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973.