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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Running of the Yokels

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

I realize I'm supposed to be worried about the dangerous tendencies of the Americans caught on film in "Borat." But I'm more concerned about the Americans sitting in the audience laughing.

Yes, it's a funny movie — I was howling along with everyone else. Yes, Sacha Baron Cohen is a comic master. On "Da Ali G Show," he was an equal-opportunity skewer of hip-hop artists, fashionistas and pretentious talking heads. He was a television star making fun of television icons and gaseous poseurs.

But "Borat" is more like the class bully picking on the nerds. The hip urbanite ventures into flyover country disguised as a Kazakh yokel to see how the American yokels respond. Are the rednecks just as barbaric?

Considering everything Cohen does to them — running naked through a hotel, smashing merchandise in a store, calling a man's wife ugly, presenting a bag of feces at a dinner party — the biggest shock is how politely they respond. Borat manages to goad several people into endorsing his appalling views, but most of the Americans come off as decent souls just trying to be nice to a weird foreigner.

The people of Kazakhstan are not so lucky. They're depicted as rapists and prostitutes, bigots and idiots. I instinctively side with comedians when the antidefamation police come after them, but in this case I sympathize with the Kazakhs angry at becoming the new global Polack joke. The country has enough problems as is.

I wish Cohen had instead invented a country like Molvania, the subject of the hilarious Jetlag Travel Guide published two years ago. The basic riff is the same as Cohen's — a visit to an impoverished hellhole of a country that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Molvania is "A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry," blessed with a form of folk music that is unique because of its "emphasis on volume over melody."

Its patron saint's day is celebrated with "parades, masses and an international arms fair." In the Miss Molvania pageant, women in nurse uniforms parade on a "specially reinforced stage." Beggars offer piggyback rides — "a charming local custom and the stamina of these emaciated vagrants is nothing short of amazing." The traditional greeting when entering a house is, "Don't shoot."

The humor is more deft than in "Borat" — and easier to enjoy because there aren't real Molvanians sitting through a mockery of their national anthem. The Molvanians have their brutal side: witch-burning is still legal, and the annual Running of the Bulls features a frightened herd of cows fleeing from a group of heavily armed men, followed by a barbecue.

But there's nothing as buffoonish as the Running of the Jew in "Borat." What bothers me most about the movie is its premise: that villagers who have not embraced Western values are violently anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic and misogynistic. Borat is an absurd caricature, but we wouldn't laugh if we didn't think there was some truth to the stereotype of the morally backward peasant.

This is the stereotype that arouses Westerners to become missionaries, and it's not just Christians going out to redeem the peasants. There's also a secular version of this impulse. The anthropologist Richard Shweder calls it "imperial liberalism": the pressure on third world countries to mandate Western notions of

individual rights even when they conflict with local customs and family traditions.

If you went into a real Kazakh village (as opposed to the one in “Borat,” which was actually in Romania), you’d find a lot of people — women as well as men — who frown on American values. They admire some of our freedoms and rights, but they also see the flip side of Western individualism: weaker families. They feel sorry for all the children separated from parents, all the adults living alone.

You’d also find plenty of villagers eager to import Western technology, like the iPods coveted by the villagers in “Borat,” and eager to educate their children so they can have opportunities beyond the village. As the children move to cities, they’ll become richer and adopt Western values on their own.

In the meantime, they don’t need our guidance, let alone sneers from a Cambridge-educated comic affecting moral superiority. Some Kazakhs are trying to defend their country’s honor by pointing to the country’s high rate of literacy and low rate of anti-Semitism, but they know they can’t compete with Hollywood. As long as we make the movies, the laugh’s on them.

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