

Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Who Is America?” on Showtime: Scattershot satire, with hits and misses

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Rarely has there been a period in history more ripe for—and more sorely in need of—genuine satire. Imperialist governments slaughter civilians in massive numbers in the name of defending “human rights.” Massive technology monopolies censor the internet while claiming that they are protecting “democracy” and excluding “fake news.” Multimillionaire film stars and corporate executives claim that they are oppressed and discriminated against because they have not yet captured control of the highest echelons of ruling class power. Stupidity, hypocrisy, mendacity and reaction flourish in every section of the privileged elite.

At the same time, the media treats noxious and criminal political figures with reverence and obsequiousness. Even the would-be satirists of our day have remarkably little to say. The various media figures who specialize in “political comedy” largely belong to a complacent and privileged upper-middle-class layer that accepts uncritically the political line of the Democratic Party. With few exceptions, the comedy of Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, et al has been flat and empty-headed at best; at worst, they have actively supported the right-wing anti-Russia campaign that threatens the world with nuclear catastrophe.

Sacha Baron Cohen is a British comedian best known for his television series “Da Ali G Show” (2000-2004), and the films *Borat* (2006), and *Briino* (2009). His latest show, “Who Is America?” premiered on Showtime in July, after having been announced only a few weeks earlier. In a style similar to “Da Ali G Show,” Cohen plays a number of bizarre and flamboyant characters, who he uses to lure subjects into mock interviews intended to ridicule and humiliate them.

In our review of *Borat*, we noted, “Cohen’s specialty ... is to inhabit a supposedly transgressive personality obsessively—in some ways quite brilliantly—then place himself in the path of ordinary people or ‘celebrities,’ come out with the most outrageous statements or questions, and see what emerges. In short stretches, in the presence of the

pompous, self-promoting or politically reactionary, the results can be entertaining and even enlightening. At other times, Cohen is simply crude and embarrassing.”

“Who Is America?” contains entertaining and embarrassing elements in roughly equal measure. The satire here is limited, yet within these limitations Cohen is at times able to land satirical punches at those who sorely deserve it.

At its best, the show mocks some of the most repugnant and reactionary figures in the political landscape. In perhaps the series’ most infamous segment thus far, Cohen plays Erran Morad, an imbecilic, fascistic Israeli “commando” type promoting a program called “Kinder Guardians” that would put live firearms into the hands of children as young as three years old, supposedly in order to stop school shootings. Cohen-Morad is able to get a number of right-wing politicians to agree to support the program, including former Senate minority whip Trent Lott as well as various current and former congressmen and “gun rights” lobbyists.

In one of the most incisive segments of the series, Cohen-Morad interviews former United States Vice President Dick Cheney, a war criminal directly responsible for the sociocidal destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. In character, Cohen-Morad states his approval for the mass slaughter and torture of Iraqi civilians, which clearly does not perturb Cheney in the slightest. Cohen-Morad goads Cheney into naming his “favorite” war that he has started (Cheney insists it was the 1991 Persian Gulf War) and insists that Cheney must have “enjoyed” the wars and found them “fun,” which Cheney more or less agrees with.

At one point Cohen-Morad even gets Cheney to sign his “waterboarding kit,” which Cheney does with amusement. The segment is revealing in a number of ways. Cheney, a monstrous criminal who in any genuine democratic society would be in prison for war crimes, gloats of his atrocities without the slightest hesitation, even stating openly at one point that the Iraq War was launched because of that country’s “important strategic interest.” Cheney is clearly

not on guard for any sort of criticism, and why would he be? The spineless talk show hosts and media propagandists who have interviewed him in the past have only ever treated him with bootlicking reverence.

In two other segments, law-and-order fanatics former Maricopa County, Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio and former Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke are interviewed by Cohen as childish YouTube personality OMGWhizzBoyOMG! who conducts the interviews while unboxing tiny plastic toys.

Arpaio and Clarke are made to speak fascistic diatribes to the toys, while Cohen-OMG draws parallels between their views and those of the Nazis. Clarke explains he would have arrested anti-fascists in Germany in the 1930s (“You have to act aggressively. You use force to disperse the crowd, you have to be willing to arrest people, take them to jail”). One gets a sense of how truly pathetic these two are, despite the media’s attempts to treat them as serious figures.

A number of the interview subjects have expressed outrage at having been “duped” by Cohen into making ridiculous statements on camera. At least one politician, Georgia state representative Jason Spencer, was forced to resign after he was filmed shouting racial epithets and performing a shockingly racist impression of an Asian tourist.

One does not feel an ounce of sympathy for the various right-wing politicians involved, who were merely encouraged to express their reactionary views more openly. However, some of Cohen’s targets are less deserving than others. In one segment, Cohen plays ex-convict-turned-artist Rick Sherman who presents his “art”—consisting of paintings made with various bodily fluids and excretions—to an obviously uncomfortable yet accommodating fine art consultant. The segment ends with Cohen-Sherman attempting to sexually humiliate the woman in a particularly crude and mean-spirited way.

In another segment, a group of working class residents of Kingman, Arizona are told that their town has been selected to be the site of a massive new mosque. The attendees, who were obviously selected for this very purpose, react with bigotry and racial animus, the implication being that such views are the norm in “red state” America. (In fact, according to reports, some members of the crowd opposed these views and attempted to get others to stop playing into the “set-up.” Such exchanges were not a part of the segment.)

There are some missed opportunities and segments that go nowhere. The first episode of the series opens with an exchange between Cohen, as right-wing conspiracy theorist Billy Wayne Ruddick, and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. Cohen-Ruddick, unequipped to satirize the phony “socialist” Sanders, treats him with kid gloves. The segment proceeds

into a pointless and unfunny debate over whether it would be possible to “bring the 99 percent into the 1 percent.”

Far too often Cohen goes for the comedic low-hanging fruit. Scatological humor involving various bodily functions becomes a convenient fallback and quickly becomes tedious.

One of Cohen’s characters, Democratic Party activist Nira Cain-N’Degeocello, is an amusing satire of upper-middle-class complacency and self-righteousness. He is introduced by saying, “I’m a cisgender, white, heterosexual male, for which I apologize.” He asserts that, “the world’s most dangerous chemical weapon is testosterone,” and claims that he forces his daughter to urinate standing up in order to “challenge gender stereotypes.”

The character is one of Cohen’s most entertaining and a bright spot in the series, but seems somewhat wasted in interview segments with Republican Party officials, who react with predictable disdain. Cain-N’Degeocello would perhaps have been better deployed in segments with various pseudo-left and identity politics figures, satirizing the poisonous politics of race and gender. However, such satire would require a more thoroughly worked-out perspective that opposes the entire political establishment, something Cohen does not yet appear to possess.

To be sure, much of the political and media establishment has reacted to the show with either silence or hostility, which is to Cohen’s credit. An upcoming segment featuring former Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin has already provoked her strong rebuke, indicating that it may be one of the more interesting segments. Elements of “Who Is America?” are amusing, even incisive. They are worth watching, if one can stomach the sophomoric and crude strands interwoven with them.



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