

universality that can only come into being where the colonial "contact zone" has been succeeded by more ordinary and perhaps more distinctively metropolitan forms of interaction with the strange and the alien.

The cosmopolitan position from which Montesquieu wrote suggests that imagining oneself as a stranger in a limited and creative sense might instructively be linked to actually becoming estranged from the cultural habits one is born to. This alienation was not for him a disadvantage; it is his anthropological and indeed ethical method. It cannot guarantee undistorted perception of the world but can still be used to show where overfamiliarity enters and taken-for-grantedness corrupts. His travelers' experiences establish that being a stranger can be invaluable as an opportunity to know the world better and to experience it in more complex and satisfying forms.

Montesquieu's enlightenment tale disguised its fictional character as a sequence of authentic letters. His imaginary alien visitors offered a scurrious critical commentary on modern metropolitan life. The social and moral conventions of the day were subjected to the anthropological gaze of a stranger, which aimed to reintroduce France to itself and to suggest that critical knowledge of one's own culture and society can only arise from a carefully cultivated degree of estrangement. Similar issues enveloped the humorous antics of the comic figure Ali G, who for a year or two recently managed to encapsulate all the larger political moral debates over the character and direction of contemporary British social life. His appeal will be discussed in more detail later on. Here, it is worth appreciating that his fleeting triumph brought new life to some subversive eighteenth-century tactics. I'm sure that Ali G's highly educated creators knew that a sense of what it meant to be English was at stake in the timelessness of their jokes. No wonder then that the comedian who plays him, Sacha Baron-Cohen, concealed the political intelligence that guided his project by refusing to step outside of his character.

Ali G was as much at ease in the postcolonial city as Uzbek and Ibben had been in Montesquieu's Paris. To all of them, the metropolis provided a fragmented and stratified location in which cultures, histories, and structures of feeling previously separated by enormous distances could be found in the same place, the same time: school, bus, café, cell, waiting room, or traffic jam. The results of this proximity are not always harmonious, but every notion of culture as property is broken and dispersed by the swirling, vertiginous motion of the postcolonial world for which Ali was an unwitting spokesman.

It is not far-fetched to suggest that the huge amounts of energy that were wasted worrying about whether the Ali G character was a white Jew pretending to be black, a white Jew pretending to be a white Jew

to be black, a white Jew pretending to be an Asian pretending to be black, and so on might have been better spent positioning his tactics in a proper historical and artistic sequence of strangers whose strangeness was functional and educative. It is telling that there were no similar discussions when Ali's author extended his repertoire to include the even more Montesquieuan figure of Borat the Khazakstani refugee.

Among his other great achievements, Montesquieu seems to have been among the first thinkers to suggest that we must learn to practice a systematic form of disloyalty to our own local civilization if we seek either to understand it or to interact equitably with others formed elsewhere. Adrienne Rich's luminous contribution to analyzing this problem reminds us that his argument has been extended by several generations of Feminist political reflection to include those other Others formed nearby but kept out of sight behind the veils of cultural and political segregation: "What has stopped me short, what fuses my anger now, is that we were told we were utterly different, *that the difference between us must be everything, must be determinative, that from that difference we each must turn away; that we must also flee from our likeness.*"⁹ Today, the women's movement to which Rich's angry words were addressed has faded and disappeared. The new obligation to grasp the global workings of imperial domination has been placed upon would-be world citizens. It intervenes to deny us the freedoms that Montesquieu and Baron-Cohen have enjoyed: either to invent the alien culture from which covert judgments of our own social order could be made or to project our critique of existing arrangements onto the aliens around us. In our circumstances, these ironic exercises in anthropological thinking have become little more than a joke.

From Ali G to Multicultural Democracy

All this means that though I am drawing inspiration from Freud's attempt to link the impossible injunction to love the unfamiliar with a speculative and critical account of the development of pathological intercommunal relations, I want to dispute his explicit rejection of the demand to practice an undifferentiated attitude toward friends and enemies, intimates and strangers, alike. I want to suggest that politics can be invented and practiced outside of Carl Schmitt's militaristic distinctions. Instead of accepting in the name of realism that his Manichaean system governs all our options, I want to explore ways in which the ordinary cosmopolitanism so characteristic of postcolonial life might be sustained and even elevated. I would like it to be used to generate abstract but nonetheless invaluable