

HUMOR RESEARCH 4



Christie Davies

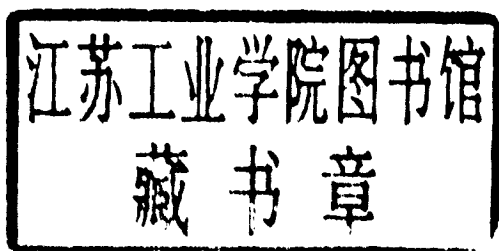
**Jokes and their
Relation to Society**

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Jokes and their Relation to Society

by

Christie Davies



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Chapter 1

Introduction

The central theme that runs through each of the essays that constitute the chapters that follow is that the most common scripts (Raskin 1985) on which ethnic and many other kinds of jokes and humour are based make the butts of the jokes appear either stupid or canny, the Scots word canny being a convenient way of suggesting that (for the purpose of the jokes) a group is crafty and stingy (Davies 1990a). The reasons for this seem to lie in the nature of work in modern societies, which threatens everyone with two opposed kinds of failure.

First, there is always present the threat that one will fail to master some aspect of the world of work and be regarded as stupid in consequence, particularly at a time of rapid technical and commercial change. The second mode of failure and the one that awaits the canny is that one will be so absorbed with working, calculating and making money, as to lose out on the pleasures of life and to forfeit the trust and esteem of others by being too clever and too calculating.

In general, the stupidity jokes are pinned on a familiar group, one similar to the joke-tellers but who live at the periphery of the joke-teller's country or culture. The people at the centre are thus laughing at what appears to them to be a slightly strange version of themselves; almost as if they were to see themselves in a distorting mirror at a fair ground. The butts of stupidity jokes are not a distant or alien group. This centre-periphery relationship may take a geographical, economic, linguistic or even religious form (Davies 1990a: 40-83). Sometimes the two groups may be hostile or in a state of conflict, sometimes they live as amicable neighbours and sometimes they are indifferent to one another, as may be deduced from a perusal of the cases listed in *Table 1*. The jokes are essentially the same in all three cases and cannot be related easily to the presence or absence of conflict or hostility. It has been shown in the earlier studies (Davies 1990a: 84-101) and is shown again here that it is futile to search for an explanation of stupidity jokes in terms of inter-group conflict or tensions. The key explanation of these jokes is always the centre-edge relationships of the jokers and the butts of their jokes.

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Table 1. Stupid and canny jokes by country

<i>Country where stupid and canny jokes are told</i>	<i>Identity of stupid groups in the jokes</i>	<i>Identity of the canny group in the joke</i>
United States	Poles (and others locally e.g. Italians Portuguese)	Scots, Jews, New England Yankees.
Canada (Central and Maritime Canada incl. Ontario and Quebec)	Newfoundlanders ("Newfies")	Scots, Jews, Nova Scotians
Canada (West)	Ukrainians, Icelanders	Scots, Jews
Mexico	Yucatecos (from Yucatan)	Regiomontanos (citizens of Monterrey)
Columbia	Pastosos (from Pasto in Nariño)	Paisas (from Antioquia)
England	Irish	Scots, Jews
Wales	Irish	Cardis (from Cardigan-shire/Ceredigion), Scots, Jews
Scotland	Irish	Aberdonians (from Aberdeen), Jews
Ireland	Kerry men	Scots, Jews
France	Belgians, French Swiss (Ouin-Ouin)	Auvergnats (from the Auvergne) Scots, Jews
Netherlands	Belgians, Limburgers	Scots, Jews
Germany	Ostfrieslanders	Swabians, Scots, Jews
Italy	Southern Italians	Milanese, Genovese, Florentines, Scots, Jews, Levantinis.
Switzerland	Fribourgers from Fribourg/Freiburg	Genevois, Balois (from Geneva and Bâle/Basel), Jews
Spain	People from Lepe in Andalucia	Aragonese, Catalans

<i>Country where stupid and canny jokes are told</i>	<i>Identity of stupid groups in the jokes</i>	<i>Identity of the canny group in the joke</i>
Finland	Karelians	Laihians (from Laihia), Scots
Bulgaria	Šopi (peasants from the hinterland of Sofia)	Gabrovonians (from Gabrovo), Armenians
Greece	Pontians (Black Sea Greeks)	Armenians
Russia	Ukrainians, Chukchees	Jews
India	Sikhs (Sardarjis)	Gujaratis, Sindis
Pakistan	Sikhs (Sardarjis)	Hindus, especially Gujaratis
Iran	Rashtis (Azeris from Rasht)	Armenians, people from Isfahan or Tabriz
Nigeria	Hausas	Ibos
South Africa	Afrikaners (van der Merwe)	Scots, Jews
Australia	Irish, Tasmanians	Scots, Jews
New Zealand	Irish, Maoris (North Island), West Coasters (South Island)	Scots, Jews, Dutch

In addition, stupidity jokes are told about Carinthians and Burgenlanders in Austria, about the citizens of Aarhus and about Norwegians in Denmark, about Finns and Norwegians in Sweden, about Bosnians and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, about Slovaks in the Czech lands, about Uzbeks in Tadzhikistan, about Kurds in Iraq, about Kurdish Jews and Moroccan Jews in Israel, about the Laz (from Trebizond) in Turkey, about Nubians and Sa'idis (Southerners) in Egypt, about Tunisians in Algeria.

Clearly we have here the material for an analysis based on international comparisons. The stupidity jokes are almost universal and jokes about canny people are also very widespread, although concentrated in several countries

on a particular well-known group such as the Scots, rather than each country having its own local version as in the jokes about stupidity.

The modern ethnic jokes about stupidity are more numerous than those told in the past and in general better constructed, but they are nonetheless very similar to the older genre of jokes about fooltowns. This similarity is examined in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 looks at the history of fooltowns renowned in the past for their comic stupidity and compares them with more modern stupidity jokes which may be pinned on a town, such as Lepe in Andalucia in Spain, Aarhus in Denmark or Rasht in Iran, on the people from a region or a county such as the jokes about the Laz in Turkey, the Lancastrians in England, or the Kerry men in Ireland, on the people of a province such as Newfoundland, on an ethnic minority such as Polish-Americans or on a nation such as the peoples of Belgium or Ireland. In general it may be said that the similarities between the stupidity jokes operating at different levels (i.e. town/region/ethnic group/nation) are more important than the differences between them. This is not surprising since the differences between the categories are often the result of the arbitrary outcomes of yesterday's politics. Until 1922 southern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland still is. Belgium has only been an independent country since 1830, having previously been part of France and the Netherlands and having also been ruled by the Spanish and the Austrians. It may well in the future split into two units, a Flemish-speaking Flanders and a French-speaking Wallonia. As the research that led to the writing of this book was being carried out, both Yugoslavia and Bosnia split into fragments. It may well be that the violent conflicts in Bosnia have a shared origin with the Yugoslav ethnic jokes of the 1960s and 1970s about stupid Bosnians. The conflict in Bosnia as compared with the quiet secession from Yugoslavia of Slovenia and Macedonia has been a consequence of the mixed ethnic and religious composition of the province, which contains Orthodox Serbs, Roman Catholic Croatians and Muslims, some of whom may be the descendants of Christian heretics. Each group has tried to carve out a sector for itself by driving out the others in a vicious persecution that has become known as ethnic cleansing. Before the most recent carving up of Yugoslavia the Bosnians would have been made up of an intermingling of all three groups who share a more or less common language, which is why they were the butt of stupidity jokes told by both Serbs and Croatians, since the Bosnians would have appeared to them as a distorted mixed-up version of themselves, rather as the Belgians are the butt of stupidity jokes in both France and the Netherlands. A further and entirely peaceful parallel would be the way in which both French and German-speak-

ing Swiss tell stupidity jokes about people from the canton of Fribourg/Freiburg (Herdi 1979: 56-57; Ringo-Ringo 1978: 86), a mixed language canton where one third of the population speaks French and the other two thirds Swiss-German (Bonjour, Offler and Potter 1952: 304; *Schweizerische Volkszählung* 1980).

Such peoples constitute a Transitional Wavering People known by the acronym TWP [the W is pronounced like the 'oo' in took] or even a Transitional Wavering People and Seemingly Inderminate Nation known by the acronym TWPSIN. Their uncertain geographical position in a political order of jostling nation states or ethnic groups seeking to be nations both renders them likely to be the butt of jokes about stupidity (which is a matter of no importance) and also in certain cases a centre of conflict (which is disastrous for the people who live there). Belgium and Bosnia have long been the cockpits of Europe. If politicians of all kinds had studied the ethnic jokes of the region, they might have behaved with more caution where Bosnia was concerned. The Yugoslavian stupidity jokes were not an indication of an existing conflict but provided a warning that Bosnia lay on a political fracture line, where it was not possible easily to parcel out territory in an equitable and acceptable way. The trouble with justice is that there is never enough of it to go round.¹ Had the political and military leaders of the Serbs, Croatsians and Muslims and their backers from outside acted in a more circumspect fashion and been more willing to compromise, the fighting might have been avoided. Wars are made by politicians and generals who command organizations designed for that purpose. They are in that respect quite different from jokes, or prices arrived at in a free market, or conversations, which are a form of spontaneous order resulting from the unplanned interaction of individuals. An artillery barrage and ethnic jokes are about as unlike as any two social phenomena can be; yet if we pay attention to the latter it could in some cases lead us to take precautions which would enable us to avoid the former.

What *can* be said with certainty is that the pre-existing Yugoslav jokes about stupid Bosnians played no significant part in creating or exacerbating the present conflicts; the conflicts had been rumbling since the last years of that ailing curiosity, the Ottoman Empire, a Muslim, Asian colonial empire, many of whose subjects were European Christians. Within the twentieth century Yugoslavia has been prevented by the Austrians and Hungarians, created by the French, destroyed by the Germans and precariously held together by fear of the Russians. The fall of the Soviet Empire took away the Yugoslav fear of a Russian invasion via its Warsaw pact allies and left the different ethnic groups and semi-nations that constituted Yugoslavia free to fight among

themselves. Politics is about politics, i.e. the behaviour of those who hold power and can command the use of organised force. The telling of ethnic jokes did not and could not have been a causal factor in the Yugoslav conflict but jokes are a source of information as in the following Yugoslav joke from the 1960s:

Two African students met in their home-town. One was a graduate of the University of Belgrade [in Serbia] and the other of Zagreb University [in Croatia]. They began to quarrel over some trivial issue. Finally, one shouted at the other, "Go fuck your Serbian Mother".

The other replied: "Huh, go fuck your Croatian mother".

At the time (late 1960s) the official line put out by the Yugoslav government claimed that there was no internal ethnic dissension in Yugoslavia, but the British army was already training its officers with a war-game called "Death of Tito," in which each of the republics that made up the federal state of Yugoslavia had its own player in the game. They were concerned, lest World War III, like World War I, should begin in Sarajevo, sparked off by a local dispute, and they wanted to be prepared for it. The joke quoted above, far from rendering an inter-ethnic Serb-Croat dispute more likely, shows a certain awareness of dangerous tensions on the part of those who shared it. Had the politicians and military men shown a similar degree of amused detachment, the recent fighting might have been avoided. I have discussed the case of the Yugoslav jokes at some length, not because they are of any great importance for the study of humour, but in order to dismiss the politically correct view that there is something damaging and reprehensible about the telling of ethnic jokes. War is waged by blood and iron, not by jokes

In Chapter 3 the coincidence that the word Milesian applies both to the Irish who are the butt of modern British jokes about stupidity and to the citizens of Miletus, about whom the ancient Greeks told much the same kind of jokes, is also used to explore and emphasize the continuities between ancient and modern humour. In thriving commercial cities such as Athens there was clearly already scope for stupidity jokes to be told by those at the centre of Greek civilizations about those who lived at its edge. Even though the ancient Greeks knew nothing of the rapid technical innovation that has shaped the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it can be argued that they were an alert, widely-travelled, trading and questioning people who were thus able to tell "modern" jokes about stupidity. Alternatively, the view may be taken that today's stupidity jokes are thousands of years old and universal and that the

growth of modern industrial societies has merely given them a boost.

A further boost has been given to specifically ethnic jokes by the rise of the modern nation-state which has provided its citizens with a national and ethnic, as distinct from a local loyalty. Since stupidity jokes are told about a group similar to the joke-tellers, then this change is likely to lead to a corresponding shift in the butt of ethnic jokes from being about a neighbouring town or village like the joke-tellers' own town or village, to being about a different but similar nation or ethnic group. What the jokers see themselves as being also determines what kind of group they will perceive as being like a distorted version of themselves and thus suited to be the butt of jokes about stupidity. Towns laugh at towns and countries laugh at countries.

In Chapter 4 the jokes about those "canny" groups who, like the Scots, have a Calvinist background will be examined in the light of Max Weber's notable thesis *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's work on bureaucracy will likewise be used to analyse both a wide range of stupidity jokes and a broad spectrum of jokes that can be opposed to them, jokes that mock the over-diligent and the over-obedient as well as the excessively canny. Chapter 5 has accordingly been given the title "Stupidity and rationality: Jokes from the iron cage". In this chapter, and in the chapter which follows (Chapter 6: "Humour for the future and a future for humour") emphasis is placed on the political jokes from the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe and in particular on the way jokes were created that exposed the irrational aspect of the politicised bureaucracies that dominated those societies. In many cases the stupidity jokes that were told in these countries, when they were under communist rule, about politicians, apparatchiks and the militia, are identical or very similar to the ethnic jokes told about stupidity in the rest of the world. This coincidence is not accidental and poses some interesting sociological problems that need to be resolved.

There are many ethnic jokes about the consumption of alcohol, which is not surprising given that alcohol is *both* the main legal euphoriant drug in Western societies *and* a source of serious social problems. In particular it conflicts with the work ethic of modern industrial societies which requires sobriety, diligence, reliability and regularity. Given the ambivalent attitudes to alcohol held in many societies, it seems likely that there should exist a similar dichotomy in ethnic jokes about alcohol to that outlined earlier regarding the contrasting ethnic jokes about the stupid and the canny. Indeed, a careful examination of ethnic jokes about alcohol does reveal a contrast between ethnic jokes about over-enthusiastic drinkers on the one hand and ethnic jokes about those who live in societies where one part of the society at

least takes a strongly negative and puritanical attitude towards the drinking of alcohol. It is important also to note the jokes that could exist but don't; there are very few alcohol jokes about ethnic groups such as the Jews who drink in moderation. Also there is no simple one to one relationship between the kind of ethnic jokes about alcohol consumption that get pinned on a group and the ethnic jokes about the stupid and the canny. Rather there is a complex series of relationships between these two kinds of ethnic jokes and the purpose of Chapter 7 is to elucidate these relationships.

In Chapters 8 and 9 the analysis of jokes which has been the basis of the previous chapters is taken one stage further and applied to other humorous items; first modern urban legends which have recently been extensively studied, particularly by folklorists, and secondly the humorous novels of a particular writer, H. G. Wells. Urban legends have often been treated as a completely separate genre from jokes but in fact there is often a considerable similarity between the two, both in content and in structure. Indeed, it is difficult in some cases to tell whether a tale is a joke that is known to be a mere invention and intended to make people laugh or a modern urban legend that purports to be a true account of the experience of a friend of a friend and is intended to shock. Jokes and urban legends are overlapping sets and this is particularly true in the case of (a) ethnic jokes about stupidity and (b) sick jokes; both kinds of jokes tend to end in disaster, which in turn is a key element in many of today's "nasty" modern legends and particularly those that involve advanced technology. In principle it ought to be possible to analyse them together.

Jokes are numerous and have no author, which makes it possible to use them to compare one culture with another, by noting which jokes are constant across cultures and which are peculiar to some cultures and missing from others. The joke that isn't told, though in principle it could be, such as the absence of American or British jokes about the Japanese in World War II, is also a highly significant phenomenon. The absence of jokes about the Japanese is hardly compatible with the view that jokes are primarily vehicles for expressing hostility. Likewise it is significant that the British and the French do *not* include dirtiness in the traits they ascribe to the butts of their stupidity jokes (the Irish and the Belgians respectively) despite examples of parallel jokes being available to them in the American jokes about Poles and the bilingual (in English and French) Canadian jokes about Newfoundlanders, both of which treat dirtiness as just one more aspect of stupidity. Given that in serious discourse "dirty" has a stronger negative connotation than "stupid" (e.g. dirty bugger is stronger than silly bugger), a believer in the hostility theory of humour

should infer that the Americans and Canadians feel more hostile towards the Poles and Newfoundlanders than the British and French do towards the Irish and Belgians respectively. Unfortunately, for the proponents of this theory there is no independent evidence at all to show that this is the case, so the theory is falsified.

It is clearly much more difficult to apply this kind of method to longer, authored, humorous works such as a novel. However, if the ethnic jokes about the stupid and the canny are, as has been suggested here, related to the pressures of work in a modern society, then the generalizations derived from the analysis of these jokes should have some application to comedies whose core is the way individuals experience work in a modern society. The comic novels of H. G. Wells fall into this category, which is why they have been chosen for analysis here. Although Wells' comedies deal with work as it was experienced by the lower middle classes in Britain in the years before the First World War, they still have a relevance to the way work impinges on people today. A fortunate few may be able to retreat into a post-modern world where hobbies and obsessions rule, but for most people work is both an important aspect of their lives and one that is very much plugged into a harsh modern reality; their working lives are shaped by the market-place and bureaucracy, just as they were when H. G. Wells was writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is a measure of Wells' genius that he could write comedies about the tedium of work, the frustration of crushed creativity and the horrors of unemployment and bankruptcy in a way that is both cheerful and funny. Both those who fail to fit in with the work ethic of their society and those who have been totally taken over by it, both the stupid and the canny, appear prominently in Wells' comedies.

Wells' comedies can be seen as criticisms of the capitalist society of his own time and indeed he makes these criticisms in a much more explicit way in his other writings. In his comedies he portrays capitalism as an economic system which endlessly squeezes people to obtain more out of less and which forces individuals to compete with one another until the stupid and the canny have been relentlessly sorted out. In the process it destroys the social world which characterises those who get labelled stupid in the jokes, a world of stability, tradition, inertia and strong personal ties. Wells' canny characters are equally the victims of such a society for they lead narrow specialised lives obsessed with financial or bureaucratic matters, as indeed was indicated by Max Weber writing at much the same time as H. G. Wells.

Capitalism, with its many faults, is the worst of all economic systems, except for all the others. In particular capitalism has proved superior to the

former socialist economies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe where work was far more tedious and oppressive again than in capitalist societies and the economic rewards considerably less. If the ethnic jokes about the stupid and the canny can be perceived as expressing the discontents of a capitalist society, then the political jokes of the former socialist countries may well have expressed the far greater discontents of the socialist system. At the same time it must be realised that this interpretation of jokes, which by their very nature are ambiguous, is an arbitrary one and individual East European joke-tellers may have found many other meanings in their jokes.

The jokes from Eastern Europe are a reminder to the reader of H. G. Wells' humorous novels that these comedies are set in England prior to the First World War and that Wells' explicit and implicit social criticism now seems dated, both because of the rise and fall of the socialist alternative since that time and because the liberal, capitalist societies of the West have evolved in unexpected directions, solved old problems and encountered new ones. Despite this, Wells' humour is timeless in the sense that, say, the humour of Cervantes or Rabelais or Swift or Hašek is timeless; it is not necessary to grasp all the contemporary references in their work to appreciate the humour. Also the core of Wells' comedies, the mockery of work, is still valid in a world that remains harshly modern and the reader can still recognize and laugh with the plight of his inept lower-middle class small heroes. Also as with the ethnic jokes about the canny, we can easily laugh at Wells' materially successful characters, who enforce the oppressive work ethic of their society, yet are also clearly trapped by it themselves.