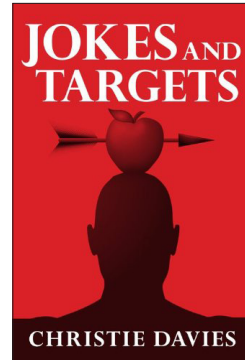


BOOK REVIEWS

A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW ON TARGET CHOICE IN JOKES

Christie J. H. Davies 2011. *Jokes and Targets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 314 pp.

Professor Christie Davies, the renowned humour scholar, has written yet another account on the rules that govern target choice in folkloric jokes. His latest book “Jokes and Targets” aims at explaining and predicting how popular joke cycles develop, and why some targets are more prone to feature in those jokes. This time, he focuses on other targets than ethnic to extend the validity of his statements to more groups than before. The six chapters, framed by the generalising introduction and conclusion, all concentrate on a separate target: blondes, the French, Jewish women and men, men having sex with men, lawyers, and the totalitarian Soviet Union. The conclusion is followed by 23 pages of references and an index.



To get a proper grip of what Davies’s stances are, we have to go back to his previous works. Since taking up humour studies in the late 1970s, he has published five books and a number of articles on humour. Many of these have become landmarks in the study of ethnic humour, but, as he mentions in a recent interview, “[Jokes and Targets] is much broader in scope and deals with jokes about professions and social classes, sex jokes, and political jokes which were not in the earlier books. This one is comprehensive.” (interview with C. Davies, 2011) This is true in many ways: not only does this book refer back to previously valid models in order to enhance them, but it also touches on other issues that Davies has polemicised on earlier occasions like, for example, the functions of jokes (developed in greater detail in “Mirth of Nations”). For a concise overview of Davies’s theories and arguments, the present book is a very valuable source.

Contentwise, “Jokes and Targets” is an extension of the research that was first outlined in the book “Ethnic Humour around the World” (Davies 1990). In this book, which has become a frequently cited classic, he maintained that ethnic jokes about stupidity are dependent on 1) geographical (centre versus periphery), 2) linguistic and cultural (the target usually speaking a non-mainstream version of the same language than the joke-teller), and 3) economic (joke-teller is better off than the target) factors. This gave a list of perfectly testable hypotheses of different ethnic groups that can become objects of ridicule. Throughout his work, he stresses the importance of appropriate methodology and points out possible pitfalls for novices in the field. In “Jokes and Targets” (p. 2), he warns against underestimating the task and reducing the existence of jokes to arbitrary common sense explanations, without sufficient proof or even possibilities of falsification. So, to set down another positive example, the author presents a study based on his thorough sociological research that at times ventures into literary, folkloristic, or historical studies. He succeeds once again to provide even better explanations for jokes and cycles,

approaching his task by analysing jokes from two main aspects: what is specific to the place and time that the jokes are told in, and why the same kind of jokes did not spread in other similar contexts. Davies makes an explicit use of the methodological toolkit of comparative sociology developed by Max Weber and, more recently, Stanislaw Andreski. In an academically elegant prose, he guides the reader through the material, furnishing the path with plenty of colourful examples from various genres, but, above all, jokes. To those familiar with his style, it is no surprise that subtle pieces of humour like “But it is time to leave beauty altogether and turn to the French” (p. 76) wait for the reader, casually scattered into the text.

Joke targets chosen to shed light on the relationship of jokes as social facts and their surrounding social reality form a seemingly accidental set. But the inherent underlying aspect that unites them is that the proliferation of these joke butts has not got a snugly fitting explanation before. The first chapter “Mind over matter” overarches the book by outlining the theory, whereas the following chapters add valuable details and insights. Starting with a concise introduction that covers the methodological tools in use as well as defines the main object of research and its sources, Davies continues by stopping on each of the aforementioned targets, intricately cross-referencing between the chapters to further clarify his point about a few rules explaining the majority of cases. Elaborating on his previous statements on the direction of joking about stupidity, he formulates the rule of laughing at the more material and earthy over the more ethereal and mental. This applies to most ethnic, vocational and other groups. Jokes are not always about power and lack of it; the direction of laughter can be bottom-up as well as top-down. Instead, the mind and body form a pair of opposites, and excesses in the use of either can end up in communal laughter. Jokes are also prone to happen when power is based on the force of physicality (p. 31) as shown in the plenty of examples of jokes about stupid militias, dictators, aristocrats, marines, orthopaedic surgeons, or athletes. So, he concludes, stupidity jokes rely, above all, on the contrast between body and mind.

The occupations and groups associated with material things are most likely to be cast as stupid. On the other end of the scale, also intelligence can be laughable, especially when it is put to work for attaining rewards in a morally questionable way. A majority of the chosen targets seek to illuminate the same line of thought. The second chapter, focusing on “Blondes, sex and the French”, combines two very different accounts, sex being the uniting factor in the analysis. Blond jokes cycle derives from an entrenched disposition to think of blondes as sexually attractive, which leads to a stereotype of them as being sexually available, i.e., ready to surrender to bodily urges rather than calculative thought. A different example is presented by jokes about the French, the roots of which lie much deeper in the history, vested in the asymmetries of trade and travel: the pre-World War Western erotic literature and art came prominently from France, and sex tourism was also asymmetrically in favour of this country. Even if there is no actual support for the stereotype after the Second World War, the tradition is still alive, feeding on its strong and distinctive roots.

Opposite to this, jokes that the Jews tell about their nation and, more specifically, their women, stress qualities that express self-control and -preservation. In the chapter “Jewish Women and Jewish Men”, Davies refers to jokes about Jews as the perfect counter-statement to jokes about blondes and athletes, as an example of a case where the excess use of mind can be as funny as being ascribed to having no intelligence at

all. A bold statement thrown at the reader concerns the exclusive nature of these jokes. The author maintains that the jokes about Jewish women are unrelated to the general humour of misogyny, and cannot be reiterated as jokes about non-Jewish marital relationships. At the same time, jokes about the hypo-sexual wife are common all over the world, and can bear no reference to the Jewish wife, for example:

A man tells his friend: "Last night, we finally started to tie in with my wife, sexually: I, too, got a headache!" (Meie Naljaraamat [Our Jokebook], 27.08.1997)

So, it is hard to approve of Davies's proposition when he writes: "Gentiles would not have been able to invent them, for they would have no interest in the matters raised by the jokes." (p. 113) This does not call for re-structuring of the theory with regard to the Jewish marriage jokes, but does raise a need to a more general background in the explanation.

The chapter about masculinity (titled "Sex between Men") provides a difficult case full of intrinsic details, displaying a different pattern within the model of the mind versus the body. It would have been illuminating to read more about how the particular tendency – to choose a male target for sex-related jokes, depicting them as being penetrated by another man – in the framework of the overarching mind-body dichotomy, because in some ways it even contradicts the base of the theory by letting the body (masculine strength and determination) take victory over the mind (by depicting the educated, well-off social classes as effeminate, or as targets of male penetration).

Sometimes the reason to laugh at some targets is not brought about by their deliberate over-thinking. Lawyers, for example, are most probably laughed upon because they tend to use their intelligence in a way that benefits only themselves, without any evidence left for their clients to prove this, as described in the chapter "The Great American Lawyer Joke Cycle". Jokes about lawyers, real estate agents and bankers become especially popular during times of economical crises. The reason for this is that the representatives of these professions are selling services that are not tangible (hence, representing the mind rather than the body), and their real economic contribution is opaque, all of which makes them a perfect target for jokes about craftiness. Again, the starting point is contrasting the material with the ethereal. The important question is why the cycle is so inherent in American culture, and even if the jokes have travelled, they have remained the same, i.e., they have been translated, but not adapted any further. The answer, as Davies prompts, lies in the distinctly American virtues of free speech, legal rights, individualism, and the American dream.

The last target to make it into a book is a generalised one: the Soviet society in "The Rise of the Soviet Joke". In this case, Davies notes that the jokes became to represent the whole system and it was no longer meaningful to single out any target. I cannot but agree with him when he states that all manner of targets were aggregated into a single huge genre of political jokes. The entrance point to this subject is also comparative in essence, as the author sets apart the jokes of autocracy (as those seen in jokes about General Franco) and totalitarianism. He continues by sketching a thorough historical backdrop to the jokes in order to approach his focus of interest concerning Soviet jokes: did the jokes have a marked effect on the system and its collapse, and could the collapse have been predicted through the existence of these jokes. In this, he strays quite far

from the overarching model (which, intuitively, would mean blaming the physicality and brute force of the totalitarian power – versus intellectual power – for drawing in all the humour), and instead elaborates on his thesis of jokes being a thermometer, not a thermostat. Providing a number of examples from the history of political hegemonies and their collapses, he maintains that although metaphors like “wit is a weapon” persist, humour possesses no straightforward power to bring down a political system. But humour does, however, help to understand and judge the system from the inside, which is why paying attention to jokes and knowing where they came from and what patterns they have displayed may lead to unusual but truthful insights into societies that produce the jokes.

The conclusive chapter presents an invaluable lesson of theory construction and refutation. Davies outlines the developments of his theories of jokes and targets (namely, centre-over-periphery, monopoly-over-competition, and mind-over-matter models), explaining where the need to expand and elaborate on them has stemmed from, and how new comparisons and material have forced him to re-formulate his stance. The mind-over-matter model, a follow-up to the previous ones (described in Davies 1990 and 2009), indeed accounts for the insufficiencies that his former theory has displayed. For example, the first model did not explain fully why aristocrats would be depicted as stupid in British jokes, whereas monopoly-competition model failed to include, for instance, athletes or orthopaedic surgeons as targets of stupidity jokes. As a replacement, Davies offers an elegant and simple model (yet not too simple, as in good-over-bad dichotomy), providing the reader with ample illustrations on the way. However, he does not wholly neglect the initial theories, which, as he states, “taken together, [...] explain more than any one of them does on its own” (p. 264).

“Jokes and Targets”, being an excellent piece of scholarship, helps to further clarify why certain targets have become conventional and what are the rules that govern target choice.

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