

Jokes and their Relation to Society



Humor Research 4

Editors

Victor Raskin

Willibald Ruch

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York

Jokes and their Relation to Society

by

Christie Davies

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1998

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines of the
ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

Library of Congress – Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davies, Christie.
Jokes and their relation to society / by Christie Davies.
p. cm. – (Humor research : 4)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 3-11-016104-4 (cloth : alk. paper)
I. Wit and humor – Social aspects. I. Title. II. Series.
PN6149.S62D37 1998
306.4'81–dc21 98-27688
CIP

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davies, Christie:
Jokes and their relation to society / by Christie Davies. – Ber-
lin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1998
(Humor research ; 4)
ISBN 3-11-016104-4

© Copyright 1998 by Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., D-10785 Berlin
All rights reserved, including those of translation into foreign languages. No part of this
book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mecha-
nical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.
Cover Design: Christopher Schneider, Berlin.
Printing: Druckerei Hildebrand, Berlin. – Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin.
Printed in Germany.

For Gwenda, Janetta and in memory of my father, Christy Davies.

Acknowledgements

Jokes and their Relation to Society is a comparative and historical study of jokes and other forms of humour that has required the advice and assistance of scholars from many countries. I am particularly strongly conscious of the help I have received in the translation and interpretation of jokes from very many languages. In particular, I wish to thank Goh Abe, Stanislaw Andreski, Jason Annets, Mahadev Apte, Zygmunt Baranski, Arthur Asa Berger, Wladyslaw Chlopicki, Peter Cook, William Coupe, Pete Crofts, Philip Davies, Emil Draitser, Alan Dundes, Malcolm Fisher, Vera Gaspariková, André and Liliane Ghilain, Charles Gruner, Robin Gwyndaf, J. R. Hawthorn, Melvin Helitzer, Borek Hnizdo, John Hobgood, Bengt Holbek, Colin Holmes, Irving Louis Horowitz, Randolph Ivy, Christoph Jaffke, Marjatta Jauhianen, Mark, Janet and Samuel Jenkinson, Peter K. Jones, Fardos Khan, Ronald Knowles, Ernest Krausz, Giseline Kuipers, Lauri Lehtimaja, Russell Lewis, Richard Lynn, Des MacHale, David Martin, Irena Matlin, Gerard Matte, Geoffrey Matthews, Jessica Milner Davis, Lawrence Mintz, Peter Narváez, Mark Neal, Don and Aileen Nilsen, Clara Ong, Elliott Oring, Martyn Page, Charles Preston, Pirkko-Lissa Rausmaa, Walter Redfern, Selwyn Roderick, W. M. S. Russell, Ludek Rychetník, Richard Scase, Barry Schechter, Charles Schutz, Alexander Shtromas, Elene Skondra, Paul Smith, Henry D. Spalding, Gerald Thomas, Eugene Trivizas, Margarita Vassileva, Magne Velure, Tony Walter, Alan Wardman, Vivian White, Larry Wilde, David and Ruth Williams, Roy Wolfe, Anat Zajdman and Avner Ziv, for providing me with data, advice, help with translation, and other valuable assistance. None of them is responsible for the use I have made of material they provided, and the opinions expressed in this book are of course entirely my own.

A great deal of the research for this book has been done in archives and libraries and I would like to express my thanks for their help to the staff of the libraries and folklore archives of the University of California Berkeley, University College Dublin, the House of Humour and Satire in Gabrovo, Indiana University, the Université Laval, the Memorial University of Newfoundland and the Université de Moncton and to the staff of the British Library, the Bodleian Library, the library of the London School of Economics, the National Library of Wales, the Polish-American Museum in Chicago, the Schmulowitz Collection in San Francisco Public Library, the State Library of

New South Wales and the libraries of Bombay, Cambridge, Glasgow, Leeds, Punjab, and Reading Universities and to the libraries of the University of Wales at Saint David's Lampeter, and Swansea. I am grateful to the British Council, the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Indian University Grants Council, the Institute for Humane Studies, the Japanese Society for Humour and the research board of the University of Reading for helping to fund the expenses involved in visiting the various libraries and archives.

Parts of this work have previously been published as journal articles or as chapters in edited books and I would like to thank the publishers for their permission to reproduce them here, namely Macmillan for permission to use my chapter from Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton (eds.), *Humour in Society, Resistance and Control*, Basingstoke 1988, Paragon for permission to use my chapter from Alexander Shtromas and Morton Kaplan (eds.), *The Soviet Union and the Challenge of the Future*, volume 3, *Ideology, Culture and Nationalism*, New York 1989, Susquehenna University Press for permission to use my chapter from Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (eds.), *H. G. Wells under Revision*, Toronto 1990, Sheffield Academic Press for permission to use my chapters from Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (eds.), *A Nest of Vipers*, Sheffield 1990 and from Gillian Bennett (ed.), *Spoken in Jest*, Sheffield 1991 and the *British Journal of Sociology* for permission to reprint my article "The Protestant ethic and the comic spirit of capitalism" from Volume 43, Issue 3, 1992. I would also like to thank all the relevant editors for encouraging and enabling me to write these articles in the first place.

The same thanks must be extended to my present editors Victor Raskin and Willibald Ruch who invited me to write this book for the Mouton series in Humor Research and who also read and commented on the manuscript. I am very conscious of how much I owe these two leaders in humour scholarship for their unstinted help to me over many years. I must also thank Dr. Anke Beck and Heide Addicks for steering it through the press in Berlin and Mrs. Enid Richardson for her skilful word processing.

The dedication once again expresses my gratitude to the members of my family who have sustained me during the time when I was writing this book and to the memory of my father who encouraged me to take a scholarly interest in humour just as he had earlier taught me to enjoy it.

Contents

Chapter 1	
Introduction	1
Chapter 2	
Fooltowns: Traditional and modern	
Local, regional and ethnic jokes about stupidity	11
Chapter 3	
From the Milesians to the Milesians: The Irish-Pontian joke, its history and its absence in China and Japan	27
Chapter 4	
The Protestant ethic and the comic spirit of capitalism	43
Chapter 5	
Stupidity and rationality: Jokes from the iron cage	63
Chapter 6	
Humour for the future and a future for humour	85
Chapter 7	
Ethnic jokes about alcohol: A study of the humour of ambivalence	101
Chapter 8	
“Nasty” legends, “sick” humour and ethnic jokes about stupidity	137
Chapter 9	
Making fun of work: Humour as sociology in the humorous writings of H. G. Wells	151
Chapter 10: Conclusion	165
Notes	193
References	205
Index	229

List of tables

Table 1. Stupid and canny jokes by country
(Chapter 1) pp. 2-3

Table 2. Ethnic jokes about stupidity and alcohol
(Chapter 7) p. 108

Table 3. Opposed sets of ethnic jokes
(Chapter 10) p. 188

Table 4. Irish and Polish jokes about drinking
(Notes to chapter 7) p. 201

Table 5. Irish and Polish jokes about stupidity
(Notes to chapter 7) p. 201

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.

2 Introduction

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	Pastusos (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

4 *Introduction*

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 Croats 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 Croats, 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 Indeterminate 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, Croats 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

6 Introduction

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

8 Introduction

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.

Chapter 2

Fooltowns: Traditional and modern

Local, regional and ethnic jokes about stupidity

Fooltowns: Centre versus periphery, urban versus rural

Jokes about stupidity have always been pinned on peoples of, or from, a particular village, town, region or nation. The jokes told today in Egypt about the simplicity of the Nubians from the far south are based on a comic script about Nubians that is thousands of years old.¹ The Nubians then, as now, lived on the southern periphery of Egyptian civilization, a group of distant rustic provincials, neither entirely foreign nor wholly Egyptian.² The ancient origins of ethnic jokes of this type was noted at least as long ago as 1622 when Thomas Fuller ([1662] 1811, 2: 206) noted (see p. 32) that such jokes were told about the Phrygians, Abderites and Boeotians in the ancient world.

The Boeotians, like so many other butts of ethnic jokes about stupidity, were the rustic peasant neighbours of a great urban metropolis (Andrewes 1971: 94). Athens was a commercial city and one of the centres of Greek civilization, whilst their neighbours were “a whole class of free and independent farmers operating on a small scale in Boetia around 700 BC” (Andrewes 1971: 101). These ancient jokes of the city dwellers of Athens about the predominantly pastoral and agricultural Boeotians survive, even today, in the adjective “Boeotian”, meaning an illiterate rustic, and so do the jokes about Abdera, which have given us the terms “abderite” and “abderitic” for a foolish simple-minded person (*Brewer’s Dictionary* 1981: 137; Grambs 1986: 27; von Wieland 1861).

Many of the jokes the classical world told about allegedly stupid communities such as Cumae or Abdera have been written down and recorded. Such cities and regions were often seen as ambiguous; the peoples mocked by the ancient Greeks, for instance, often lived in Greek cities at the edge of Greek civilization or were surrounded, and in consequence influenced and penetrated by, the incomprehensibly babbling and thus, by extension, uncultured ba-barbarians (*Brewer’s Dictionary* 1981: 80).³ Many of the ancient jokes about their stupidity have survived to the present day:

12 *Fooltowns: Traditional and modern*

The father of a man of Cumae having died at Alexandria, the son dutifully took the body to the embalmers. When he returned at the appointed time to fetch it away, there happened to be a number of bodies in the same place, so he was asked if his father had any peculiarity by which his body might be recognized and the wittol replied, "he had a cough". (Clouston 1888: 15)

A man of Abdera was trying to hang himself but the rope broke and he cut his head. He went to the doctor to have it patched up and then returned and hanged himself. (Ferguson 1968: 96)

Jokes about foolish communities were later to be found all over Europe. Just as today, every country has its own ethnic jokes about stupidity (see pp. 2-3), so in the past every region had a foolish town or village whose "stupidity" formed the basis of many jests and anecdotes — for example, Gotham and Austwick in England; Risca and Abercregan in Wales; Gordon and Assynt in Scotland; Schilde, Domna, Fünsing, Mundinga and Teterow in Germany; Mols and Agger in Denmark; Kampen in Holland; Dinant and Malleghem in Belgium; Saint-Maixent in France; Belmont in Switzerland; Selpice, Vazec, Zahoriah, Prelouch and Nova Lhota in the former Czechoslovakia; Râtót in Hungary; Beira in Portugal; Lepe in Spain; and Pitsilia in Cyprus.⁴ In some countries there were a number of such foolish communities that became the butt of jokes: indeed as many as forty-five have been noted in England alone (Briggs 1970: Part A, 2, 1-5; Briggs 1977: 51-55). The reputation of a community for comic stupidity might well last for hundreds of years. Alfred Stapleton (1900: 9; see also 9-11, 47-48) has traced the tales of the foolish men of Gotham back to a fifteenth-century manuscript and notes that "we have an extent of four and a half centuries during which we know the reputation of the village has been current. Beyond this, as in other cases, we can safely assume the tradition had been current long anterior to the earliest recorded notice."

It seems likely that jokes about stupidity were attached to local communities in the past for much the same reasons as they are tied to ethnic minorities and neighbouring nations today. An undesirable quality is rendered comic and exported to another group who live on the edge of the joke-tellers' social universe. When people define who they are in terms of their membership of a local community, then they will tell jokes about the stupidity of the people of *some other local community*, defining *who they are not* in terms of a social unit similar to the one which gives them their basic identity. In traditional societies, where people derive one of their most important social identities from their membership of a local community, the jokes are told about the

members of a group that is recognizably similar and who, to the joke-tellers look like themselves as seen in a distorting mirror. Just as we laugh at the reflections of ourselves we see in a hall of curved mirrors, so too we laugh at jokes about the stupidity of our nearest neighbours.

The members of a joke-telling and joke-sharing group enjoy a “sudden burst of glory” as the stupidity of the others is unveiled and their own superiority is briefly confirmed. We should not mistake the glee of the winners in this successful piece of playful aggression for real hostility. In the past it was often the people of the next village, township or parish who were seen as rivals, a group known to be essentially *similar* to one’s own and yet also held to be *inferior*, though perhaps only by location.⁵ If the sense of superiority to one’s rival is or was buttressed by the recognized advantages that a community on the main routes of transport and trade has over a more remote community at the periphery, or that an urban centre has over its rural hinterland, then jokes about the alleged stupidity of the latter are likely to emerge. The once-famous jokes about the village of Gotham in England certainly seem to reflect its position as a relatively isolated village seen in contrast to the busy market and manufacturing town of the “smiths” of Nottingham. In more recent times jokes have been told in Port Talbot in Glamorgan in Wales about the alleged stupidity of the people of Abercragan, a mining village at the head of a “dead-end” valley, close to the industrial town of Port Talbot, which is a port, a major steel- and tinplate-manufacturing town and on the main road- and rail-routes from Wales to London.

Similarly, in the busy manufacturing, market and university town of Reading in England, people in their eighties still remember the time when jokes “akin to present day Irish jokes” or American Polish jokes were told about the people of the village of Tadley. Roger Searing (1984) wrote of his boyhood excursions by bicycle from Reading to Tadley in the 1920s that they never lingered in Tadley, for the “wild lads of Tadley seemed as foreign to us as Red Indians or Hottentots... we didn’t wait to find a solution to the mysterious tales we had heard of this strange village”. The jokes of the 1920s seem to stem from the (then) remoteness of the village, whose people worked as log-cutters and wore distinctive “pattens”, a kind of wooden clog for walking through the muddy woods around Tadley (a comic occupational badge equivalent to the present day jokes about the rubber boots, known as “wellies” of Irish labourers on English building sites or the long rubber boots worn by Newfoundland fisherman). They made hurdles, fencing, pegs and besom brooms from the local wood. The last of these gave rise to local jokes about the “Tadley witch”.

In the 1920s the tendency for Tadley to be the butt of local wags was reinforced by the skill of touring professional comedians acting as “switchers” of jokes. Roger Searing (1984) wrote:

There must have been a member of staff at the Palace Theatre in Reading in the '20s who was consulted by all of the comedians for advice on local joke material and he must have had a particular relationship with Tadley. There was frequent reference from the stage to “Tadley-God-help-us”, “Tadley Treacle Mines”, “The Tadley Witch”, jokes concerning Tadley akin to present day Irish jokes.

From local to ethnic jokes

The decline of Tadley jokes and other similar jokes and their replacement by Irish jokes in Britain is in part due to the creation of national media networks, with a corresponding decline in the vitality of the local theatres and music halls where the touring comedians performed. Comedians now tend to tell jokes which latch on to ethnic scripts and joke-conventions which are widely understood, and to abandon comic references which only have a very local and restricted meaning. Economies of scale have likewise led to the replacement of local joke-books by nationally available books of ethnic jokes.

A more deep-rooted reason for the switch to ethnic jokes is the decay of people's sense of being primarily members of a local community, and its replacement by ethnic nationalism as the basis of their identity (Smith 1981: 69-71). People's sense of what they are *not* has also become ethnic. Accordingly, comic stupidity has to be exported into the domain of another ethnic group rather than that of another local community. Also, the expansion of the urban world into rural areas has forced once-remote villages to become part of an integrated economy of increasingly mobile people (Pahl 1968: 269-277). Tadley jokes are no longer told and would have no meaning for the younger citizens of Reading, for Tadley is now a commuter village and many of the people who live there are scientists and technicians in the nearby Atomic Weapons Research Establishment set up at Aldermaston in 1951. Jokes from Reading now export stupidity safely to Ireland; it would hardly do to locate it in atomic Aldermaston. In Britain, as in many other countries, ethnic jokes about stupidity have largely replaced those about foolish communities. To-day even the jokes about Gotham are almost forgotten. When the village was

damaged by a tornado in 1984, the reports in the British press did not so much as mention its former fame.

One piece of indirect evidence that the change from local to ethnic jokes about stupidity has been the result of the rise of national and ethnic loyalties at the expense of local ones is that jokes about “stupid” towns and villages have survived best in countries where the sense of national identity is relatively weak and local ties are very strong. Thus in Italy there are jokes about the individual quirks and characteristics of the people of almost every city and province, though it is significant that stupidity, when not pinned on Southern Italians in general or on the Carabinieri is sometimes assigned to the citizens of Cuneo, a town set on a wedge of land between two rivers at the very edge of Italy, close to the border with France at the foot of the Alpes Maritimes. Local, as distinct from ethnic or national, jokes are even more prevalent in Syria and Lebanon. In both countries many jokes are still told about the inhabitants of two towns, Homs and Hama, who are reputedly always quarrelling with each other and are renowned for their alleged stupidity. The two towns both lie on the river Asi (Orontes), and the jokes often depict them as engaged in endless disputes concerning the best way to divide up the river between them. In one such joke:

Finally they decided upon a place to draw the line and they put a rope across the river to mark it. One evening while some people from Homs were passing in the area of this line of demarcation, they heard some noise by the river. Upon checking, they found some people from Hama taking buckets of water from the Homs side and putting them in the Hama side. So the people from Homs got really mad and took the buckets away and started removing water from the Hama side and putting it back in the Homs side. (UCBFA, Lebanese file. Collected by Nan Elliott 1970)⁶

Other jokes contrast the canny people of the capital cities Beirut and Damascus with the simplicity of provincials from towns such as Aleppo:

A young Aleppan wants to go to Beirut and an older Aleppan is giving his advice: “Beirut is a city of crooks and when you buy anything always bargain the price down half.” The young Aleppan listens and goes to Beirut and goes into a shop and asks for a pair of pants. And the shopkeeper says: “This costs 100 Lebanese liras.”

So the Aleppan says: “Aha you can’t fool me — 50.”

They are bargaining. The shop-keeper says: “Well I’ll make it 80.”