Jokes and Groups

Christie Davies

The Institute for Cultural Research
THE AUTHOR

Christie Davies was educated at Emmanuel College Cambridge (MA, PhD) and was for many years Professor of Sociology at the University of Reading as well as having been a visiting lecturer in India and the United States. He is the author of several books, including Jokes and their Relation to Society (1998), The Mirth of Nations (2002), Esniki Joku (with Goh Abe, 2003) and The Strange Death of Moral Britain (2004); also of a large number of both academic and popular articles on humour and on morality.

PUBLISHER’S NOTE

This monograph derives from a presentation given at Groupthink, a seminar sponsored by the Institute for Cultural Research in February 2004, on aspects of group behaviour and the concept of a ‘group mind’. The various references to ‘groupthink’ in the text reflect this context.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

In a lecture to non-specialists it is not possible to back up with notes all the factual, methodological, and often contentious points that have been made. However, everything that has been asserted here has been substantiated in one or other of my publications listed in the Bibliography.

All activities of The Institute for Cultural Research are for the general public. If you would like to be added to its mailing list and informed of future events, please contact the Administrator on 020 8452 0960, by email to admin@i-c-r.org.uk, or by post to The Institute for Cultural Research, PO Box 2227, London NW2 3BW.

You can also find details of the Institute and its activities on its website, www.i-c-r.org.uk
Jokes and Groups

Jokes can be analysed in relation to groups at two levels. First, we may consider the way individuals use jokes within the small groups to which they belong, and how this affects interaction within the group and its cohesion or lack of it. Second, we may make comparative studies of entire cycles of jokes in relation to the society and its institutions within which the jokes are generated. It is possible to speculate about the links between these two levels of analysis, but only with great care and caution, for that which may seem to be intuitively obvious often turns out to be false. You cannot, for example, infer a joke-teller’s feelings or motives from the text of a joke nor the tone in which it might be told. These can only be discerned in a particular context and even then with difficulty.

Likewise it is not possible to say anything of any significance about an aggregate cycle of jokes by observing a single telling of one of the jokes of which it is constituted. Those who try to do so and dress up their illicit generalisations in the language of discourse analysis or functionalism or psychoanalysis are engaged in a form of deception — sometimes the deception of others, sometimes the naïve deception of themselves. Not much can be learned from observing the telling of jokes within small groups. In order to do it properly you would have to video a very large number of joke-telling sessions and then get a large panel of observers to watch them. It would be prohibitively difficult and expensive, methodological uncertainties would remain, and the only real conclusion would be that human interaction is very varied and humour very ambiguous.

Jokes are created in groups

Nonetheless, small groups are of central importance in the generation of jokes, for this is where jokes begin. Jokes are not invented by scriptwriters, who are usually desperate for new material. Look at the credits of any joke-intensive television comedy and note the large number of names listed as ‘additional material contributed by’. Who, then, invents jokes, given that there are tens of thousands of them in circulation at any one time and probably hundreds of thousands altogether? I do not know, but I will advance a hypothesis.

It seems likely that many jokes begin as wisecracks and witticisms produced within a group, and are tied to a particular event or conversation and context. These are not yet jokes, merely proto-jokes. However, one of the participants then detaches an amusing statement from its original context and wants to use it elsewhere without having to explain the background. In order to do this, it has to be turned into a properly structured set-piece joke. It has to become a canned joke that will travel.

The newly minted joke may not be very sparkling, but someone who hears it will remember it, polish it, improve it and pass it on. This may happen several times
before a really good joke emerges. Good joke-tellers do not memorise the jokes that they hear. They merely remember the punch line and what it is about and treat these as a do-it-yourself kit. Whenever they tell the joke they reinvent it with new words and new humorous touches. Only bad raconteurs memorise jokes by rote. They then stumble through them and may even blurt out the punch line at the beginning as they try to organise their minds.

Jokes differ from other forms of humour in that they are anonymous; they have no authors. This utterly sets them apart from, say, a sitcom or a satire, the works of Jaroslav Hašek or Tom Stoppard, P. J. O'Rourke or Evelyn Waugh. In the case of the latter it may be possible or even worthwhile to try to discern aims and intentions. You cannot do that with jokes. Jokes do not in and of themselves have tendenz, i.e. they are not serious statements in disguise with some kind of purpose. They can be used in that way, but this is not something that can be inferred from the text. Likewise, they do not carry a fixed set of implications. An individual joke-teller may knowingly put spin on a particular joke, but this is a product of the particular telling and not an inherent quality of the joke.

Jokes are a product of groups, both the small groups where they are invented and the larger public that shapes them. Since they exist in very large numbers we should treat them as aggregates and explain them as aggregates. Jokes as aggregates obey implicit cultural rules that do not affect individual authors in the same way. A humorous author is free to innovate in ways that cannot really be explained and is thus an exception to any generalisation we may seek to make. An individual joke-teller is constrained in where he can go partly by the very large stock of jokes that exist, but more important by the existence of set-piece scripts known to the listeners. Even a new joke has to fit existing patterns, and when a new pattern emerges we seek a social explanation, not the identity of an individual, talented innovator.

Jokes are an important form of popular creativity, one of the few that are left now that the mass media have annexed or intruded themselves into so much of popular culture. Jokes are immune because the best jokes are politically incorrect. The mass media dare not use them and so they remain the people's jokes. Jokes 'happen' within small groups, where they give people an unusual chance to excel as actors and narrators, to use language in attractive and creative ways, to escape from the narrow roles in which they are trapped for much of the day. To listen to ordinary people telling jokes is to realise how much they are demeaned by the writers of soap operas, who place only clichéd melodrama in their mouths.

Let me illustrate some of these points beginning with a particular example, the case of disaster jokes that make light of accidents and the deaths of celebrities. Such jokes are extremely popular and huge cycles of them regularly appear, something that might well not have been expected by those who think that the essence of humour is heart-warming togetherness.
Groups and the humour of death and disaster

It has long been known that men who perform dangerous or disagreeable tasks such as the military, the police, firemen or high iron workers indulge in grim humour about their everyday work. It has been suggested that it helps them to cope with risk and danger; if this is the case, it sure beats counselling. Likewise it has been suggested that the exchange of jokes and comic insults in circumstances of danger and difficulty creates trust and solidarity between individuals and within a group. Much of the banter is ephemeral but some survives, such as the grim, cynical songs of the First World War: ‘Where’s your fiancé?’ ‘E’s ’anging on the old barbed wire.’ Likewise in the Second World War they sang: ‘They scraped him off the tarmac like a piece of strawberry jam.’

It may well be the case that such humour assists in establishing group cohesion or in giving people the necessary callousness to keep on going in the face of fear. However, the insights gained from observing the use of humour within these groups may be downright misleading when we come to consider a very different phenomenon: the exchange of set-piece jokes about death and disaster. Some of the early examples of these set piece jokes purport to come from coal mining areas where the death by accident of individual miners or even of a large part of a small community was common, feared and even expected:

A miner was killed in an accident and someone had to go and tell his widow what had happened. No-one wanted to do it. Finally they decided to send the colliery clerk, who was reputed to be a man of great tact. He went up to the dead man's house and banged on the door. A woman opened it.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘but are you the widow Bevan?’

‘I’m Mrs Bevan,’ the woman replied, ‘but I’m not a widow.’

‘Well, I’ve got news for you.’

A visitor to South Wales went into a pub and ordered a beer. He soon noticed that every miner who came in and bought a drink said to the barman,

‘ . . . and a pint for old Dai in the corner over there.’

The barman would then take a drink over to a very short man standing in the corner – about four feet high – with his face bashed in. After this had happened a few times, the visitor asked one of the miners why everybody treated old Dai to a drink.

‘Well we’re grateful to him, you see. He save our lives. The roof was coming down and he stood and held it up just long enough for us to escape. That’s why he’s so short. He got squashed.’

‘Ah, I see, but how did he get all those marks on his face?’

‘Well that’s where we knocked him into place with a pit prop.’

However, a characteristic of these jokes is that they are frequently exchanged among people who have never been in danger underground in their lives and are never likely to be, nor is any one among their close associates. Therefore the dynamics of danger and the need to live with risk are irrelevant to their enjoyment
of the jokes. We cannot and should not try to infer why they laugh at the jokes by
drawing upon the experiences of those who live dangerously.

Modern jokes about death and disaster

This point is even more true of the recent set piece jokes about disasters –
disasters that viewers have only experienced via the television set.

The first cycle of such jokes referred to the assassination of President J. Fitzgerald
Kennedy in Dallas in 1963.

   Kennedy needed that trip to Texas like he needed a hole in the head.

   What did Kennedy’s son get for Xmas that year?
   A Jack-in-the-box.

In the United States there were subsequently many jokes about the two space
shuttle crashes and, as we shall see later, September 11th.

   What does NASA stand for?
   Need another seven astronauts.

   Where do school teachers go for their holidays?
   All over Florida

In Britain there were the essentially similar jokes that followed Aberfan, the
sinking of the Herald of Free Enterprise and the Piper Alpha fire.

   What is black and goes to school?
   A coal tip.

   Why is French contraception like the Herald of Free Enterprise?
   Roll on, Roll off, and the place is full of dead semen/seamen.

   Where do oil-rig workers spend their weekends?
   Burnham-on-Sea.

The biggest and most varied of these joke cycles was the huge international joke
cycle that emerged after the death of Princess Diana in a road accident. The well-
publicised accident very quickly gave rise to merriment all over the world.

   What was the cause of the crash in Paris?
   Fitting a Mercedes with parts from an obsolete 1961 Princess.

   Have you heard the song the mortuary attendant sang as he put the corpses
   into their body bags?
   ‘Zippety Dodi. Zippety Di.’

The death crash generated hundreds of jokes in French, German and Dutch, as
well as British, American and Australian English.

   Quelle est la définition d’une soirée idéale pour une anglaise?
   On dine au Ritz, on fâle à l’anglaise et on fuit en boîte.
[What is an English woman’s ideal night out? Dine at the Ritz, then sneak off and end up in a nightclub/box.]

Hät der britische Geheimdienst Diana getötet?
Nein, der Französische Untergrund.

[Did the British secret service kill Diana? No, the French underground.]

When asked for an instant response to this phenomenon, people tend either to say that the jokes are an indication of human nastiness or to describe them as emerging from a need to come to terms with tragedy. Nonsense! There is no evidence that those who laughed at the jokes were in their everyday lives more callous or brutal or nastier than those who dislike such jokes. The sheer volume of the jokes shows how popular they were with a large number of people. Are the jokers all to be dismissed as sick individuals lacking in all decent feeling? It is equally unlikely that the joke-tellers were trying to come to terms with grief. Why should we assume that the jokers had been upset by and had to come to terms with the death of someone they had never met, in a car accident in France caused by drunken driving? Gallic drink-drive fatalities happen every day and they are a tragedy for those directly involved. For others they are a mere statistic that has no effect on their everyday lives.

When someone close to you dies, particularly when they die suddenly, that leads to real grief. There are difficult adjustments to be made. There is a loss, a gap that has to be coped with. A house is empty, the touch of a hand has vanished, a phone call to a well-remembered number will not produce that reassuring voice, the duties and kindnesses you owe can now never be fulfilled. In time grief fades, but in quiet moments memories and regrets, affection and guilt come creeping back. You and your life have been irrevocably changed. When a mere television icon is killed, life goes on as before. What kind of comfort or distraction is needed? Besides, those who mourned for Diana and those who laughed at the jokes could have been different groups of people. There are even jokes that involve this point:

A ferry boat has sunk in Haiti and three hundred people have been drowned.

However, it doesn’t matter. None of them was a princess.

What is the difference between a puppy and people who don’t like Diana jokes?

Eventually the puppy will stop whining.

If we are to understand these jokes about death and disaster, attempts to analyse them in terms of the functions they perform for individuals or for the small groups within which they are told will not get us very far. Rather we must view the jokes comparatively and in relation to the overall social context in which they occur.
Understanding through comparative analysis

The key to an understanding of cycles of disaster jokes is that they did not exist before the second half of the 20th century. It is possible that there may exist a joke about a particular disaster of which I am not aware, but we may be sure that there is no pattern of disaster jokes comparable to those that have been common to the big joke cycles of the latter part of the 20th century. As far as we can tell, there were no contemporary set-piece jokes about the Tay Bridge disaster, the hideous fate of Isadora Duncan and her children in separate car accidents, the death of the French President Félix Faure in the very moment of having sex with one of les grandes horizontales, or of a military associate of the Kaiser while dancing at a party dressed as a female ballerina. There were no jokes about the assassinations of McKinley and Jaurès, or the eating of the Vicar of Stiffkey by a lion in an amusement park, or the murderous activities of Madame Caillaux, Jack the Ripper or John Reginald Haliday Christie. These crimes and disasters were well known to the public through the popular press, but no joke cycles were set off by them and indeed there were probably no jokes at all, or at least none that have survived.

We have no reason to suppose that the people of those times differed in their psychology or mode of interaction with others in such a way as to affect their ability to enjoy such jokes. After all, they liked the Ruthless Rhymes of the 1900s, they invented the savage songs of World War I and they had an array of sick jokes, albeit not ones linked to particular newsworthy events. Now, it is always possible that such jokes may not have been considered suitable material to print, but it is more likely that such jokes did not exist at all. If this is the case, then it is a phenomenon that calls for an explanation. In analysing jokes, it is vital to consider not only the types of jokes that do exist, but also those that easily could have existed and do not.

The important principle in explaining the jokes is to ask what has changed in society that could plausibly be regarded as the source of this new kind of joke. The answer suggested both by the timing of their arrival and by internal evidence from the texts of the jokes is that the key factor was the arrival of television and its growth to become a dominant source of information. In particular we can now see disasters happening and not as mere still pictures: sometimes we see them as they happen. Newspapers and radio cannot do that.

However, this creates a paradox and one that is accentuated by the producers of, and commentators on, television. They try to convince us that we are actually present at the scene of the disaster and that we should experience the feelings appropriate to someone who is at the scene. But we are not present. We are merely watching sanitised pictures of the disaster shown on a small box sitting in a corner of a comfortable, well-lit, warm, safe, unthreatened living room. The smell, the tension, the fear, the apprehension, the horror, the pities, the grief felt by someone on the spot cannot be fully conveyed by television, and television
commentators who pretend that this is so often look absurd. This was well brought out in the British television comedy series *Drop the Dead Donkey* about an imaginary news and current affairs programme.

The television coverage of disasters has thus created a new kind of incongruity, and this has formed the basis of a new kind of joking. People begin inventing jokes within minutes of a disaster being shown on television, within the next few months the numbers swell into a huge joke cycle, and then interest slowly fades away, leaving a vast terminal moraine of disaster jokes on internet websites. Many people thought it would not happen over September 11th, but it did, and it followed the usual pattern:

Have you seen the new Bin Laden cookbook? It is called *How to make a Big Apple crumble*.

Why do they call the police and the firemen New York’s finest? Because you can run them through a sieve.

It’s 1929 all over again. Stockbrokers are jumping off the top of skyscrapers.

No-one can deny that September 11th was a tragedy, a horrible act of terrorist aggression by evil men, a nightmare for those who experienced it, a dreadful loss for their families and friends. Yet on television, for many it looked like a scene from *King Kong*. Television images are not real and cannot truly and completely capture reality. Also there exist controls over the medium, both internal (by producers) and external (by censorship), that prevent television even from approaching as close to reality as it could. It is this disjuncture that gives rise to jokes that were not available in the past. The Edwardians laughed at sick jokes and at Harry Graham’s *Ruthless Rhymes*, but not at jokes about the loss of the *Titanic*. Jokes about the *Titanic* only emerged in a big way after cinemagoers familiar with the modern tradition of disaster joking saw the film. Television programmes pushing famine in Ethiopia or Eritrea or Somalia into the homes of obese viewers in Europe or America while they are guzzling T.V. dinners or chomping popcorn, are merely providing them with pictures. I doubt if the diners ranged before the little screen eat a single morsel less because of what is on the news. Yet those doing the commentaries on the famines lecture the viewers on how they ought to feel and how they must be feeling, treating them as if they were actually present at the lack of a feast. Earnest moral lectures tend to give rise to subsequent mockery among those forced to listen to them.

The Diana episode was the most glaring example of an attempt by those in charge of television to establish a sentimental hegemony and to tell people that there was only one possible response to her death and only one acceptable, indeed compulsory, way to talk about it. Some people went along with this. For many it reinforced what they would have done anyway. Others were not caught up in sentimental groupthink. Some of them, who may have seen a person killed in a
motor accident because they were on the spot or remembered real grief at the loss of someone close to them, may well have reacted differently, thinking ‘what’s a manufactured television icon to me?’ They would have been reminded, not of ‘ask not for whom the bell tolls,’ but of the First World War song, ‘The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling’:

‘The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling
For you but not for me,
And the little devils how they sing-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me
Oh death where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling,
Oh grave, Thy victory?
The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling
For you but not for me.’

Go and look in any town or village at the long list of men killed in that war. They left behind grieving families, yet now these songs are sung on the stage. One day, comedians will tell jokes about Diana too.

We can now suggest an important relationship between the telling of jokes by individuals and the nature of the large groups and institutions with which they interact. Jokes always appear when there is hegemony, when there is one compulsory way of talking about a subject. The most recent parallel with the jokes that defined the cultural hegemony of sentiment about Diana was the political jokes told in Eastern Europe under socialism.

Political jokes under socialism

During the socialist era jokes were told everywhere in Eastern and Central Europe and the Soviet Union which mocked political leaders and the central institutions, ideology and sacred icons of socialism. Nothing was spared.

A thousand people were queuing outside a butcher’s shop in Warsaw when Jaruselski came past in his chauffeur-driven car. He stopped. ‘What are you waiting for?’ he asked.

‘We are waiting for meat. There is no meat,’ they replied.

Jaruselski said: ‘It is dreadful that you have to stand like this. I must do something about it.’

An hour later a truck drove up and unloaded a hundred chairs.

A priest went to heaven and was asked by St. Peter if there was anything he would like to see before he entered.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I would like a conducted tour of hell.’

He was taken to the very worst circle of hell and there was Hitler, in boiling shit up to his moustache, and next to him Stalin, standing in it up to his waist.

The priest protested at this, saying: ‘I was persecuted by both of them.'
Stalin was just as bad as Hitler. Why is he only in it up to his waist?’

‘Ah,’ replied his guide, ‘you see, Stalin is standing on Lenin’s shoulders.’

Such jokes are often regarded as a form of resistance, and it is certainly true that the socialist regimes lacked legitimacy and were hated and despised by most of their subjects. However, the jokes were popular even among the privileged members of those societies, who stood to lose a great deal if capitalist democracy were to replace centrally planned socialism. The jokes are better seen as an escape, as time off from compulsory ways of talking that in theory even extend to private conversations.

We can learn much from a comparative analysis of the different jokes told in different groups. People in Britain do not tell political jokes with the same enthusiasm as they were told in the Socialist countries, because they are free to say what they like about our politicians, about the corrupt European Union and the hopelessly ineffective civil servants who oversee education and criminal justice. They do not look over their shoulders to see who is listening – unless of course they are expressing politically incorrect opinions about ‘minorities’, the one area where freedom of speech is seriously restricted and which as we might expect gives rise to jokes. Jokes are verbal tricks for indirectly sneaking round the rules imposed by groups to restrict everyday speech. If there are no rules or only very weak rules, there are no jokes, or none of this particular kind. It is the absence of jokes about politics in Britain that explains their prevalence in unfree societies.

Likewise, in Eastern Europe under socialism there was no satirical mockery of politicians or the political system in the mass media; there could be no equivalent of Brenner, Bird and Fortune. The absence of open satire as well as open criticism led to the universal popularity of the whispered jokes that circulated among the broad masses of the population.

**Jokes are not revolutions nor is wit a weapon**

The ineffectiveness of jokes in relation to larger groups, such as an entire social order, is easily demonstrated. Let us look again at the huge volume of political jokes that were told in Eastern Europe under socialism. What contribution did they make to bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire? It may well be that in some small way they kept up people’s morale and sharpened their knowledge that socialism was an oppressive denial of personal freedom and national independence. It may well be that telling the jokes was an act of resistance and defiance. Equally it may be the case that the jokes were a substitute for political struggle, an excuse for political passivity, a palliative for moral outrage, a way of damping down conflict, a source of brief relief that enabled people to put up with the unendurable. It does not matter which. Whether every joke is a tiny revolution or a tiny acquiescence, its effect is still tiny and the net effect of the millions of jokes told would still have been negligible.

My point can be proven by putting the question the other way around. If after the fall of socialism those with an insight into the causes of the rapid collapse of an
entire, superficially permanent social order had been asked to give the five, or ten, or twenty most important reasons why it collapsed, would any of them have mentioned jokes or humour?

**Jokes and the obsessions of the powerful: the essence of groupthink**

It is no doubt the case that those who held power under socialism saw the political jokes as offensive. Even if they themselves laughed at such jokes in private they would not allow them to be told on the mass media, much as nobody was or is allowed to tell Diana jokes or jokes about Yorubas on radio or television in Britain. It is a question of who is going to be seen as powerful round here, of who is in control. It is not about shared values, for there is much political dissent. They, the powerful ones, decide what is offensive, who can be offended with impunity and who cannot. In Britain, if someone even accidentally tells a forbidden joke in public not knowing they are being overheard by a snooper, their career may suffer. In Eastern Europe prosecution and severe penalties might also have followed.

It would be wrong to assume, from the extraordinary lengths to which those in power go to suppress such jokes and keep them out of the public domain, that jokes have any significant effect. Those who exercise power over society have fears and ideological obsessions that are often quite irrational and they enforce absurd rules and impose disproportionate penalties that could safely be abandoned. A radio station in Yerevan that had permitted political jokes about socialism to be told would hardly have brought about a revolution in Armenia – indeed it might have been a useful safety valve – unless of course the government in Moscow had recklessly staked its entire credibility on preventing it happening.

It is perhaps worth looking at an analogy. During the First World War about three hundred men serving in the British armed forces were executed after trial by court martial for purely military offences, mainly desertion. In the period 1919–30 attempts were made, eventually with success, to abolish the death penalty for such offences even when committed in wartime. The leaders of the military and former military officers in Parliament bitterly opposed these reforms, saying that it would lead to the collapse of morale and discipline and that the British army would become a useless, dangerous rabble. Yet none of them were either able or willing to cite examples from their own units in World War I where timely executions warded off this kind of collapse. Also the Australians, who had no death penalty for military offences, fought at least as bravely as other British and Commonwealth troops who were subject to it. I have discussed this question at length in my most recent book, *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (2004). When the death penalty was abolished in 1930 it seems to have had no appreciable effect on the effectiveness and fighting capacity of the British armed forces.

A similar farce was enacted at the end of the 20th century when, against intense opposition from the military, it was decided that known homosexuals should be
allowed to enlist in and remain in the armed forces. Dire predictions were followed by easy adjustments. That is how people with power over groups behave. They are terrified that if something goes wrong they will be blamed, so they demand far greater powers and a far greater range of control than they actually need.

The same is true of legislation regarding health and safety, where it is impossible to prevent such absurdities as the precautionary principle and the demand that something be proven to be safe (which is impossible). Politicians are so concerned to avoid being blamed that they enact and enforce legislation whose indirect cost is so high as to cause more mortality and morbidity elsewhere than could possibly be saved by the new rules. In this way everyone comes to live in a mental universe of symbolic absolutes – the very essence of groupthink – from which there is no escape. Everyone is too busy sending messages and making gestures to consider calmly the real world of cause and consequence.

Rules about jokes in public merely follow social change; they do not bring it about, nor can they prevent it. In the 1940s the BBC took desperate measures to prevent sexual jokes and jokes mocking religion from being broadcast. The Director-General himself would investigate and punish if a comedian slipped an unscripted off-colour joke into an outside broadcast. It was the same kind of attempt to protect a symbolic universe that we saw in Eastern Europe or in today’s politically correct Britain. If the rules of propriety were broken there would be a witch-hunt and exchanges of pompous memoranda. The walls of civilisation had been breached and offending jokes were pouring through. No-one fooled themselves into thinking that such jokes about sex or religion were not part of everyday banter and conversational entertainment, but whenever even one joke broke through from the private into the public world it was seen as a dangerous calamity. Yet when I came to write *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*, about the tide of secularisation and sexual hedonism that swept away the entire moral basis of the censors’ world from the mid-1950s onwards, it did not occur to me to discuss jokes. The movement of filthy and blasphemous jokes from the private sphere into the public world of broadcasting was a (minor) consequence of, not a cause of, broader social changes. The collapse in churchgoing was not produced by jokes about vicars and choirboys (now once again forbidden though for quite different reasons), or humour about the book of Genesis or the Blessed Virgin Mary. The rise in illegitimacy and divorce was not a product of indecent humour. We cannot prevent that which we fear from happening by censoring jokes about it.

Rather than speculating about the long-run effects of jokes upon society, we would do better to study the characteristics of those individuals who grossly overreact to jokes and the groups to which they belong. The use of humour within groups to elicit laughter is not a very puzzling phenomenon. Extreme, negative, indeed pathological responses to humour, however, do call for explanation.

When students have, for example, posted ‘objectionable’ jokes on a website, offended objectors have sent them death-threats and tried to get them expelled
from their university. We might well ask what sorts of individuals, what kinds of groups, what patterns of social interaction, what perceptions of the social world have led to these people's aggressive and even violent rejection of humour? Likewise what excuses do such people make for their anti-social response to jokes? What do they say when others point out to them that jokes are merely jokes and that it is a mistake to treat them as if they were serious statements?

Surely it is wrong to pick on vulnerable first-year student jokers and to try and put them in a state of fear. Likewise it is morally wrong to publicise the jokes that prominent individuals tell in private and to use this as a political weapon against them. People are as entitled to have irregular joke-lives that may not fit their public profile as they are to have irregular sex-lives. The protection of individual privacy should be an over-riding value in a democratic society based on rights. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's questionable taste in jokes, like his adventures with women, was never disclosed by the press. Jeremy Thorpe's homosexuality was not revealed until his boyfriend's dog got shot. That, surely, is how it should be.

It is often argued that a privacy bill that constrained the press would reduce freedom of speech. On the contrary, everyone would feel able to speak more freely in private and not to be afraid of denunciation to the press or other media by an informer seeking either money or to further a cause. A free society depends on interpersonal trust and a decent regard for the privacy of others. In an ideal world, this would be a moral code that everyone would observe, and to make public a private conversation or even a piece of eavesdropping would be universally condemned.

The usual excuse given by those who seek to censor jokes is that jokes are a pleasant and relaxed way of indirectly conveying undesirable beliefs and sentiments. The justification given by the censors of jokes in Eastern Europe under socialism was curiously similar to that now given by the politically correct in Britain and the United States. It ran something like this: 'Joking makes light of the achievements of socialism and undermines egalitarian socialist values. This could lead to the erosion of socialism and the restoration of an exploitative system of market relations in which the interests of the working class would suffer. Inequalities in the distribution of income and the ownership of property would become magnified, social mobility would decrease and the life chances of the least fortunate members of society would be diminished.' Then as now, an egalitarian ideology was used to justify censorship.

The ineffectiveness of jokes in relation to groups

As it happens there is no evidence that jokes are a particularly effective way of conveying beliefs and sentiments. Such experimental evidence as we have indicates that they are not. In the United States it is customary to tell jokes that depict lawyers as vicious, greedy and unscrupulous and to suggest that it would be a good thing if they came to a bad and rapid end.
What is the ideal weight for a lawyer?
About three pounds including the urn.

How many lawyers does it take to roof a house?
Depends how thin you slice them.

American psychologists tried to test whether exposure to such jokes made people anti-lawyer. Even though they had expected to discover an effect they found that no such effect existed. They had the admirable honesty to publish their results as they were, unhedged around by quibbling and special pleading.

What is very funny in retrospect, though, is that the experimenters said that they had felt it would have been unethical to carry out the experiment using jokes about an underprivileged group. This is doubly absurd. First, because even if they had found an effect it would surely have been so small as not to pose an ethical problem. Second, because serious hatred is often directed against members of groups precisely because they are perceived as unfairly privileged. This is the basis of the hatred felt by the Africans for the South Asians living in East Africa, or by the peoples of South-East Asia for the overseas Chinese. It can, as we know from the history of European anti-Semitism, lead to genocide. The German National Socialists, with a great deal of local support, particularly in Eastern Europe, murdered six million Jews whom they represented as both overly prosperous and as somehow malignly powerful. More recent mass killings, as in Cambodia under Pol Pot, have likewise been directed against traders, the educated, city dwellers or even those who wore spectacles, who were seen as being privileged at the expense of the illiterate rural people. Admittedly, it is extremely unlikely that the Americans would rise up against their lawyers in this way, though some representatives of the legal profession in America have expressed fear that the prevalence of vicious jokes about lawyers could lead to violence.

Every time a lawyer is murdered by a client upset at the outcome of a divorce or the failure to avert a conviction (lawyers are in fact murdered less often than social workers, who are not the butt of these kinds of joke, but who also deal with fraught matters) there are mutterings about the evil wrought in society by jokes about ruthless lawyers. Given the unpleasantly litigious character of American society relative to other economically advanced societies and the fact that in America matters much better settled in other ways fall into the hands of the legal system, it is easy to see why those who practice law would be unpopular in that country. However, if there is any connection between popular resentment of lawyers and jokes about them, the causality is entirely in one direction. Such jokes do not proliferate in, say, the Netherlands where law and lawyers play a less important role in society. Moreover it is difficult to see how the translation of American jokes into Dutch and rigorously putting them into circulation would have any effect.

What one is inclined to suspect is that the choice of lawyers rather than some disesteemed ethnic group as the butt of the jokes had nothing to do with the kind
of common sense utilitarian view I am advancing here. Rather, the researchers had accepted quite uncritically the egalitarian prejudices and ideology that prevailed among their peers. It was not the material consequences of the experiment that mattered but the possible adding of a tiny additional increment of disesteem to the weight of disesteem already borne by a disesteemed group. Lawyers have high social standing even if they are the subject of resentment. To add to that resentment by the intensive unleashing of jokes is acceptable to an egalitarian since it is an attack on the privileged.

Scripts, stereotypes and realities

For the politically correct, jokes also convey undesirable facts about the butts of jokes, things that should not be mentioned even if they happen to be true. Jokes seem to provide information about ethnic and regional minorities which is as unpalatable and as frightening to our politically correct elite as the comic insights into the likely failure of a socialist economy were to the dominant elite in Eastern Europe. Yet, is this the case? If it is the case, is it necessarily a bad thing?

The first point to note is that jokes are based on conventional and fictional scripts, not on stereotypes providing a basis for behaviour. Canadians, for example, tell jokes about Newfoundlander being stupid and dirty. It is very unlikely that anyone in Canada believes that Newfoundlander are either stupid or dirty. It is certainly the case that no-one behaves as if they think it is true. Canadians do not refuse to go on holiday in Newfoundland because they think that the accommodation or cutlery or public transport or the hands of a masseuse would be unspeakably grubby relative to the standards of Ontario. No-one sneaks off to shit in the woods because of the state of the local lavatories, something not unknown in parts of France. No-one, as far as we know, has ever declined to employ a qualified applicant in a position requiring a capacity for rational decision-making because he or she has a Newfoundland accent. Yet Newfie jokes are rife.

What’s the worst form of air pollution?

The Newfoundland parachute brigade.

‘Hé le Newfie! Où vas-tu avec tes bottes?’

‘Je vais voir Histoire d’O.’ (histoire d’eau)

[‘Newfie, where are you going in those rubber boots?’ ‘I am going to see the film Histoire d’O.’ (story of water) – Histoire d’O is about kinky boots. You need fisherman’s boots to keep dry during the histoire d’eau.]

Je suis allé dans un magasin Newfie et j’ai demandé une robe de chambre. Le Newfie m’a demandé, ‘Quelle grandeur la chambre?’

[I went into a shop owned by a Newfie and asked for a dressing (bedroom) gown. ‘How big is your bedroom?’ he asked].

How do you get a Newfie out of a bath?

Throw a bar of soap in.
Exactly the same point may be made about Dutch jokes about Belgians being dimwits or Belgian jokes about the Dutch being tight-fisted megalomaniacs. The jokes do not convey anything because there is nothing to convey. Everyone knows that the script is a mere fiction assumed for the duration of the joke.

How was copper wire invented?

Two Dutchmen had a dispute over the ownership of a penny.

A Dutchman came back from a visit to Brussels upset because the Belgians had called him a megalomaniac and went to see a psychiatrist in Amsterdam.

‘How did this all start,’ asked the psychiatrist?

‘Well,’ began the Dutchman, ‘in the beginning I created heaven and earth.’

A Belgian and a Dutchman had a competition to discover which of them could tell the most unlikely story. ‘You go first,’ said the Belgian.

‘Once upon a time,’ said the man from the Netherlands, ‘there was a very generous Dutchman . . . ’

‘Stop,’ said the Belgian. ‘You’ve won.’

Jokes and stereotypes: the homosexual Greeks

Sometimes, of course, there does exist a stereotype that coincides with the script of the joke. There are, for example, many British and American jokes about Greek men being homosexuals.

How do you separate the men from the boys in Greece?

With a crowbar.

What do you call a Greek homosexual?

Andros, Miklos, Demetrios, Vassilis, Telemachus or just plain,

‘Hey, you!’

Yet the proportion of men who are by preference homosexuals in Greece is not likely to be any greater than in Northern Europe or North America. Modern Greeks are very largely Orthodox Christians and their church disapproves strongly of homosexual behaviour. Nonetheless, Greeks both in Greece and when travelling abroad have been known to complain that they have been propositioned by male homosexuals from Britain or America who have assumed that Greeks like that kind of thing.

Clearly, a stereotype is operating, but is it at all likely that the stereotype stems from the jokes? It is more probable that both the untrue stereotype and the conventional jokes are derived from a perception of ancient Greece as a civilisation in which male homosexual conduct was tolerated and the ties between male homosexuals admired. From the evidence of classical literature and shards in museums it seems likely that this was true, though only of some city states and only at certain times in their history. This evidence is available to the educated
population of Northern Europe and America and it has been used by homosexuals seeking to defend their orientation and activities in the face of popular and religious hostility. Who would not make jokes about the Greeks given that such a stereotype is reasonably widely known?

**Stereotypes without jokes: the fiendish Japanese**

Yet there are much stronger stereotypes about groups that do not give rise to jokes. During the Second World War it was widely held in Britain, America and Australia that the Japanese were cruel, treacherous, fanatical and generally fiendish, but this did not give rise to any jokes. In America, a quite unjustified fear of Japanese-American treachery led to the Japanese in California being interned hundreds of miles away from their homes. But jokes were not told about the Japanese, nor have any jokes about them been invented since the end of the Second World War. There exists no corpus of jokes about the Japanese stemming from that war comparable to the numerous jokes that were and are told in many European countries and in the United States about the alleged militarism, ferocity and corpse-like obedience of the Germans. The well-documented cruelty of the Japanese in their long war against China, their attack without declaration of war on the British, Australians, Americans and Dutch, who were not at the time massing their forces against Japan, their ill-treatment of prisoners of war and of the local peoples of South East Asia were all the subject of contemporary political cartoons as well as of explicit condemnation, but not of jokes. Allied cartoons about the Japanese used grotesque stereotypes to depict them – short, ugly, bespectacled men with big teeth and the features of Pierre Laval strutting awkwardly while waving rising sun flags. Yet the cartoons are not particularly funny and they do not seem to have been intended to be funny. They are merely illustrating political arguments. The Japanese enemy is made to look ridiculous, but not particularly ludicrous. More to the point, there was, as far as we can tell from published sources, no circulation of jokes told by the people, among the people.

In this particular case the cartoonists and the propagandists had a clear purpose, one rooted in the war aims of their own group, which was to make the enemy look both ferocious and fallible. Jokes, by contrast, do not have purposes. Jokes do not have known inventors. Jokes cannot easily be harnessed to the aims of those who lead a group into a desperate conflict. Wit is not a weapon and humour is not a strategy. The leaders of the allies could not have called jokes about the Japanese into being to fit their political purposes. Jokes are the spontaneous product of a different kind of group, not of hierarchical groups designed to fulfil a particular task, but of a network of small, fluid, spontaneous groups.
Jokes, stereotypes and reality: Italian armies

When derogatory jokes about the enemy do arise in wartime they may well not suit the purposes of those directing or influencing the war effort. When Italy entered the Second World War by invading France in 1940, the BBC imposed a ban on jokes about Italian cowardice. The reason given was that although the Italians had at times in the First World War run away spectacularly and, in the view of Captain Rommel on the Italian front, laughably, the BBC feared that it was possible that close to two decades of Fascist stiffening might have turned them into formidable soldiers. If this were the case then the jokes might lead the British to underestimate them and be defeated by them. The BBC’s reasoning was doubly faulty. First it assumed that jokes create stereotypes leading to action. They do not. In any case it was the views of officers and officials making decisions about how to oppose this new enemy that mattered. What the general radio-listening public thought was neither here nor there. The second level of error was that the Italian army had run away as recently as the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 and there had been jokes about it.

The stereotype of the Italians as bad soldiers is, as Machiavelli long ago realised, true. Machiavelli found this reality and reputation upsetting and disturbing and sought a social explanation for it, but Montaigne, Rabelais and Erasmus found it amusing and made it a source of humour. In the 19th century, at the time of the Risorgimento, it was still true and the French were still laughing about it. It was perfectly reasonable for a French, Greek or a British army commander in 1940 to assume that if you attack an Italian army larger than your own it will collapse from a mixture of disorganisation and unwillingness to fight. A rational German commander in North Africa knew that it was better to leave the Italians to work on road building rather than to involve them in combat, and if they did have to fight to ‘corset’ them with battle-willing German units. A military leader who had declined to accept the stereotype of cowardly Italians as true on the grounds that all peoples are equal and stereotypes are misleading would have been incompetent and might have lost a battle.

It is as irrational and self-defeating to refuse to believe in stereotypes against the evidence as to believe in them in the absence of evidence. It is not that the Italians are cowardly as individuals or in any other contexts – their bravery in the Mafia or as the crews of midget submarines is well known – but their armed forces do not cohere. That is the verdict of history. That is how it is. Groups have qualities and these may form the basis of jokes.

The Italian army has got a new battle flag.

It is a white cross on a white background.

How do you stop an Italian fighting?

Give him a uniform.
It will do no good to hide behind the vocabulary of ‘aren’t stereotypes awful’. The important thing is to try and assess whether they are false or true. If it seems that the stereotype is true, we need to have some idea of how true it is and under what circumstances. It is precision that we need to seek; mere denial is unhelpful. The quality at the centre even of a stereotype that is true will most likely only apply to a minority of the members of the group about whom it is held, but that is irrelevant. The key test is whether the size of that minority as a proportion of the group’s members is significantly and substantially greater than the proportion of the individual members of other groups who possess this quality. Then it is time to try and explain it in a completely open-minded way.

Jokes, stereotypes and reality: alcohol and the Irish

We have now paved the way for a final discussion of how jokes, stereotypes and reality are linked. Jokes live in an independent world of their own where the rules of bona fide communication do not apply. Sometimes there is no corresponding group stereotype or one so weak and lacking in influence on how people behave that it should be ignored (I would not even call it a stereotype). Sometimes there is a corresponding group stereotype. There are for example many jokes about the Irish and about Irish-Americans and Irish-Australians getting drunk and their distinctive mode of drunken comportment based on the alcohol sugars jocose, verbose, bellicose and comatose.

O’Sullivan celebrated St. Patrick’s night so well that he woke up the next day in hospital. His friend Costello came to see him.

‘What happened?’ asked O’Sullivan.

‘You were truly plastered,’ replied Costello. ‘You went over to the window, climbed up on the window sill and said you were going to fly from Camden to Kilburn.’

‘What?’ shouted O’Sullivan. ‘Why didn’t you stop me?’

‘Well,’ replied Costello, ‘at the time I really believed you could do it.’

Mrs. Murphy was spring-cleaning when a visitor called and asked, ‘Mrs. Murphy will you give me something for the Home for Inebriates?’

‘Come back this evening,’ said Mrs. Murphy. ‘You can have Murphy.’

What is humorously assumed in the jokes does in this particular instance coincide with what other Americans and the British seriously believe to be the case. It is a sufficiently important question to have inspired many studies aimed at finding out why the Irish are more likely to get drunk and to have problems with alcohol. 5 It interests me because I want to explain the jokes. It has been studied by the medical profession and by psychologists for more directly practical reasons. The researchers have correctly asked the strong question ‘Why do the Irish get drunk?’ rather than restricting themselves to the equally interesting but less decisive question ‘Why are they perceived as getting drunk?’ For the analyst of jokes about Irish drinking the answers to both of these questions are important. Irish drunkenness has many roots, but in its modern form it stems from the bachelor
culture that developed in Ireland because of a very late age of marriage for men and the sexual puritanism and sexual segregation imposed by Irish Catholicism. Men drank in single sex groups without food and away from their families or female disapproval. All of these points also find their way into the narratives of the jokes.

Conviviality and drunkenness in pubs, like appearances in court on the morning after a disorderly St. Patrick’s night, are of course highly visible. It is easy to understand how, given the sheer size of the Irish communities in Britain, America and Australia, such behaviour would produce both stereotypes and jokes. What is invisible is that a high proportion of the Irish, particularly the women, are teetotallers. The amount of alcohol consumed per head per annum in Ireland is not particularly high, but that is irrelevant. The jokes, as with Scandinavian jokes about Finns, are a product of a high incidence of binge drinking and a distinctive mode of drunken comportment. The behaviour is not a simple function of the social class that many Irish immigrants belong to. Italian immigrant labourers do not get drunk; their traditions and mores are different.

It is much more unconvincing to argue, though it has been done, that the jokes told by others sustain this pattern of Irish hard drinking. Yet why should there be any significant feedback from jokes to behaviour, given that we have other, stronger explanations of why people drink too much and that alcohol is the major mind- and mood-changing drug in many societies? People like it, and up to a point they enjoy the behavioural toxicity that goes with it. It provides excuses and mitigations for anti-social behaviour. A pillar of local society in North Wales can grope the barmaid and then plead the next morning, ‘Oh, I was swilling’. It is our tolerance of and ambivalence towards drunken conduct that makes mitigation possible, not the jokes. Jews or Italians would regard such behaviour with disgust, but it does not mean they do not enjoy jokes about other people behaving in this way. In the last forty years in Britain there has been a marked increase in binge drinking, particularly among young people. Many reasons can be advanced to explain this. Jokes are not one of them.

The Irish ambassador to the U.K., Edward Barrington, complained in 1997 about the depiction of Irish drunks in British television programmes, something he saw as presenting ‘an image of Ireland that conforms to old-fashioned negative stereotypes’. It is doubtful whether he thought these representations would encourage Irish people or British people of Irish descent to take up heavy drinking because it was a fashionable expression of a national identity. Rather it was a ritual objection by a representative of a national group to its members being depicted in a negative way. Ireland since the 1970s has been a remarkable economic success story, with high growth based on investment in scientific and technical education and the shrewd attraction of outside investment. Irish alcohol abuse, though still visible, is now seen as an aspect of the bad old days when Ireland was dingy, ‘dorty’ and peripheral, and so the ambassador does not like it being put before the television viewers of Ireland’s immediate neighbour.
Rather surprisingly and much to their credit, the producers declined to act upon his complaint. Why should they have done? Behind the jokes lies something shared by the peoples of Northern Europe, North America and Australia, an ambivalent attitude to alcohol, the beguiler and betrayer. In strictly Muslim countries alcohol is banned, among the Jews and Italians it is integrated into meals and family life. But the English-speaking world is ambivalent and the Irish are more ambivalent than most. It makes them not a strange and alien people, but a people like us, only much more so. It is a situation particularly likely to produce jokes.

Jokes and consequences

Not to be the subject of jokes in popular circulation as happened with the Japanese in World War II is a sign that you are perceived as very alien and inexplicable indeed. There were no jokes to humanise the Japanese. It was precisely for this reason that Hitler disliked jokes about Jews. He saw them as a Jewish invention that made the Jews appear to be a harmless little people with their own foibles to be laughed at. Ironically, this evil anti-Semitic fanatic had more insight into the jokes than those great-hearted humanists who have managed to convince themselves that jokes about ‘Chaim and Izzie’ in some way or other facilitated the kind of murderous anti-Semitism that Hitler advocated.

We may refute this claim using the same method that demonstrated the lack of impact of the political jokes told in Eastern Europe under socialism. Many scholars have sought to explain the virulence of anti-Semitism in Europe. They rightly point out that there is a very long history of Christian religious-based hatred of the Jews leading to persecution and murder, which is to be found in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions alike. It did not disappear with the Enlightenment. Voltaire called the Jews the enemies of the human race and ‘that atrocious nation’. In the 19th century some anti-Semites continued to believe that Jews were responsible for the ritual murder of Christian children, and others added to it the idea of a Jewish world conspiracy. Neither of these themes appears in jokes about the Jews except in Jewish jokes which mock them as absurd.

Other scholars have stressed the envy and resentment felt by the inert masses against an ‘outsider’ people successful in trading, banking and the free professions. The Armenians, the Chinese in South East Asia, the South Asians in Africa will know exactly what I am talking about. The main thing that Hitler added was his idea, not of a master race as such, but of a particular kind of master race, a martial race with an innate ‘state-building capacity’ whose measure of its own worth was military victory through barbarism. The Jews, with their intellectual and commercial pre-eminence, were defined as the antithesis of this, the evil opposite of the Nazi’s perverse notion of the good. Who needs jokes when we have social forces like these?
Groups that invent self-mocking jokes: the Scots and the Jews

What is most striking in regard to jokes about Jews is that they are predominantly Jewish inventions. It must also be added that they are more numerous and more sophisticated than the jokes invented by any other group. Freud believed that the Jews were unique in having this capacity for inventing self-mocking jokes and also that the jokes were quite distinct from the brutal comic stories told about Jews by Gentiles. He was wrong on both counts. The Scots have an equally well-established tradition of inventing jokes making fun of their own group and it emerged and flourished at about the same time as that of the Jews, or even somewhat earlier, in the 19th century. Before that, neither group was seen as a great contributor to humour. The Scots were perceived as poor and dour, and Jewish leaders were uneasy about their people's failure to contribute to the gaiety of nations.

Jewish humour is a modern phenomenon and confined to the Ashkenazi Jews. Jewish humour is less self-deprecating than Scottish, since Scottish jokes are almost entirely about their own people whereas many Jewish jokes trounce the gentiles. The Jews may in absolute terms have more self-deprecating jokes than the Scots, but that is merely because they have more jokes in total. A greater proportion of the smaller but still very substantial corpus of jokes invented by the Scots are self-mocking. It is important to make this point because it means that an explanation of the self-deprecating Jewish humour should also be able to account for the parallel achievement of the Scots. The better explanation is the one that accounts for the larger number of phenomena.

What the Jews and the Scots have in common is a religious tradition that emphasises literacy and education and which has come to prize argument and hair-splitting for its own sake. What better preparation could there be for becoming the great joke-makers of the modern secular world? Those whose religious traditions are rooted in hierarchical authority rather than argumentative democracy (with its accompanying disputes and splits) have never been able to match them in joking. It is quite possible that this theory also explains the two groups' remarkable achievements in philosophy and physics.

The other factor the two groups have in common is a questioning attitude to their own identity. Their identity cannot be smugly taken for granted as it is by, say, the inhabitants of Sweden or France or China. In the Jewish case the questioning stems from long experience of living in exile and, from the 19th century onwards, of having to live simultaneously in two worlds, the world of religious tradition and a secular world dominated by the gentiles but in which they chose to play a full part. In the case of the Scots there is a related paradox, that of a capable and self-confident people who had fully mastered the modern world, but only because they were politically united with a larger neighbour who provided them with
order and stability. Scotland was a nation without a state and without a language in any real sense. The Scots were the very gifted junior members of a partnership. They knew their own special worth but had to conform to English ways. A humour about oneself that is both self-mocking and self-congratulatory, that constitutes a form of self-deprecating boasting, is a likely outcome of the Jewish and Scottish experience.

The second point on which Freud was wrong was in thinking that it was possible to distinguish between the themes of Jewish jokes about themselves and those of the brutal outsiders. At one time I thought it was possible to do so and in 1986 I outlined a method for doing this. I was wrong, and soon after published a refutation of my own work. It did no good; the original article is the one that still gets cited because it reinforces the prejudices of its readers. The difference between the jokes does not lie in the theme or even in the text, but in the tone and the context. Impeccably Jewish jokes about arson in a dry-goods store to defraud the insurance company could easily be retold without changing any of the words to imply in a very hostile way that the wretched, wicked Jews endlessly conspire to do down the innocent, guileless gentiles.

‘Morrie, I was sorry to hear about the fire at your warehouse on Tuesday!’

‘Be quiet. It’s next Tuesday.’

What was the cause of the fire?

Insurance assessor: ‘Friction. A five hundred thousand dollar dry-goods store rubbed against a two hundred million dollar insurance policy.’

Jokes are not tendentious. They do not have fixed tendencies and purposes, for those are decided by the internal dynamics of the group within which the joke is told. They cannot be deduced from the text; nor does it make sense to say ‘only Jews should tell jokes that mock Jews’. Why should it be assumed in the 21st century that when gentiles such as myself tell jokes about Jews they are necessarily expressing criticism? No doubt some of them are, but for many of us it is an act of homage. I have been telling Jewish jokes in public for decades. I should apologise? I might be misunderstood? Well, some people did not appreciate the joke below:

Two gentiles meet in the street. One says to the other. ‘How’s business?’

‘Fine,’ replies the second, ‘and thank you for asking.’

Concluding thoughts

We are now in a position to understand something of the complicated relationship between jokes, groups and groupthink. It is a task that would have been impossible without first discussing particular cases in detail. All generalisations, all attempts at constructing theories about jokes must have a solid empirical basis and their truth or falsity of necessity involves making comparisons between different sets of jokes that arise in different situations and indeed by asking why certain sets of jokes that easily could exist do not. The
best explanations are those that account for the greatest variety of types of joke. 

*Ad hoc* explanations of a particular joke or even genre of jokes are inadequate. 
Explanations that force the jokes through a pre-determined and often tendentious grid reveal much about the theoriser but little about jokes; jokes are not tendentious nor a product of groupthink, but theories of jokes often are, 
especially if the theoriser is seeking a justification for ‘responsible censorship’ 
which imposes the preferences and indignations of the group to which he or she belongs.

Curiously little can be said about jokes and small groups that is certain or particularly interesting. It is probable that that is where jokes begin, but it is difficult to back this up with good data. We think that jokes can help to establish solidarity and maintain morale, but is this piece of common-sense knowledge backed up by anything more solid? Has anyone studied groups that hold together well without much in the way of jokes and humour, or groups that are full of good, clean supportive fun but fall apart acrimoniously or are disbanded because of failure? Why are some groups sustained (or not sustained as the case may be) by jokes about outsiders while others thrive on (or disintegrate due to) self-
deprecating humour? Nor will it do to explain all these divergent cases by means 
of a one-size-fits-all functionalism.

Equally unhelpful are detailed studies of individuals within groups trying to tell a joke but failing to do so, not necessarily because they are incompetent but because they are unable to insert it into the conversation. No interesting or important generalisations have ever emerged from conversation analysis. The only thing that can be said for certain about jokes and small groups is that jokes are important. We can infer this from the amount of time people spend telling and listening to them in small groups and from the visible enjoyment they get from the jokes. Jokes found in solitude in books or on the internet are not relished in quite the same way. Jokes may not be necessary for groups but groups are probably necessary for jokes.

Oddly enough, it is easier to make significant and testable propositions about aggregates of jokes and large impersonal groups such as institutions and societies than about the small groups within which they are tod. What we can see from a comprehensive study of disaster jokes, political jokes under socialism, sex jokes, politically incorrect jokes or jokes about aggression towards lawyers is that they all share a common pattern; they are all ways of sneaking sideways around rules and conventions about what may or may not be said in a particular society. In the absence of such prohibitions there are no jokes. Before the hectoring hegemony of television there were no cycles of jokes about disasters or the death of celebrities. Here I am deliberately making a falsifiable statement. If historians in the future produce evidence that such cycles did exist in the past then I will have to rethink my theory. In democracies there are very few jokes in general popular circulation about political institutions or ideology. It is these missing jokes that point to the importance of powerful groups in deciding what is funny, not by encouraging it, but as a result of what they forbid.
Jokes are anti-groupthink, they are a consequence of hegemony but are at odds with it. Sometimes the rules are common to many societies, as with the restraints on how people speak about sex or express aggression. Sometimes the rules are peculiar to one society and are a consequence of the dominant ruling ideology upheld by powerful elites – political conformity under socialism, political correctness under liberalism, respect for tradition and hierarchy under conservatism. Jokes are an escape from the rules, time off for those who defy and despise the rules, for those who passively accept that they exist and are prudent, and even at times for those who uphold them.

Humour provides an area of ambiguity and incongruity where no-one is quite sure what has been said. It is even a way of evading milder social conventions about the use of language such as the rejection of sentiment and sentimentality in today’s hard-boiled world relative to its Victorian predecessor, a point shrewdly noted by Elliott Oring. Greetings cards with sentimental messages often take a humorous form because it is a way of getting round this modern constraint. Yet such humour cannot be reduced to a serious expression of sentiment. People may try to use it as such, but also as its opposite. You will never really know what that vulgar, insulting birthday or Valentine's Day card someone sent you meant, even though it exploited an occasion for sentiment. The card itself, like a joke, is merely a simple humorous text. Whatever other implications it has can only be deduced from its particular context, and even then ambiguity rules.

Those who have the power to lay down the rules of verbal communication are often unduly disturbed by jokes, even seeing them as endangering the social order of the group. Yet there is no evidence that jokes ever have had serious consequences for a large group. Jokes are far too weak a social force. They are also far too ambiguous and are of little use in conveying a serious message. At best they are a form of extraneous decoration that makes a serious statement more entertaining and thus appealing. Qualities pinned on a group in jokes are not stereotypes, they are merely conventional scripts that everyone knows are fictional. They may well in some cases coincide with a seriously held stereotype about a group, but that can only be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Even so, jokes do not express stereotypes, they merely play with them just as they play with talk about sex or disasters or the killing of lawyers. It is this that enables members of groups such as the Scots and the Jews, known for their self-awareness and love of analysis for its own sake, to produce such a wealth of jokes mocking their own group. It appears as a clever and subtle form of boasting rather than an expression of rejection and hatred of one's own group, and yet we can never be sure. More important, the jokes are time off from and an evasion of the customary and powerful proclamations of one's own group's special and valued identity, from thanking God in your morning prayers for your particular identity or telling the celebratory dinner table ‘Here’s tae us, wha’s like us!’. Once brought into existence the jokes are ambiguous texts that may well be perceived and used differently by those hostile to the group.
Jokes do not carry with them known fixed purposes and tendencies. They are not part of groupthink. Groupthink characterises rather those who fear, dislike and seek to censor particular genres of jokes with all the unthinking conformity that implies.

NOTES

1 If someone finds a pre-TV joke cycle that contradicts my theory about disaster jokes, then that theory collapses, but at this stage I am sufficiently convinced of the evidence to make a clear and unequivocal statement. Probably people did laugh at the vicar eaten by a lion and even mocked the incident, and someone may have published a derisive account, but I am as certain as I can be, after many years of searching by myself and others, that there was no joke cycle.

2 For more detail see also bibliography, Davies 1996.


4 See bibliography, Davies 1982.


7 Jews of Central and Eastern European heritage.

8 Jews originating in the Middle East and North Africa.

9 2003 – see bibliography.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


I have also drawn upon and am indebted to the work of the leading humour scholars: Elliott Oring and Victor Raskin:


INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

A. Monographs

Series Number, Author and Title ISBN

2. Edward Campbell. *Some Unusual Aspects of Communication* 0 904674 23 1
3. Peter Brent. *The Indian Guru and His Disciple* 0 904674 04 5
4. John Allaway. *Exploring Human Behaviour in Groups* 0 950002 94 1
5. Robert Cecil. *Education and Elitism in Nazi Germany* 0 904674 05 3
6. Robert Cecil. *Cultural Imperialism* 0 904674 06 1
8. Sir John Glubb. *My Years with the Arabs* 0 950002 96 8
10. Alexander King. *Science, Technology and the Quality of Life* 0 950002 98 4
11. Robert Ornstein. *Physiological Studies of Consciousness* 0 904674 00 2
12. F.D. Rushworth, K.R. Minogue and Lord Wolfenden. *Purposes in Education* 0 904674 01 0
13. Alexander King, Martin Holdgate, Eugene Grebenik, Kenneth Mellanby and George McRobie. *An Eye to the Future* 0 950002 91 7
17. Michael Rubinstein. *Rembrandt and Angels* 0 904674 18 5
18. Mary Midgley. *Biological and Cultural Evolution* 0 904674 08 8
21. Robin Price. *The Healing Within* 0 904674 11 8
22. David Widdicombe. *A Clash of Cultures* 0 904674 12 6
23. Arthur J. Deikman. *Evaluating Spiritual and Utopian Groups* 0 904674 13 4
24. Rowland Parker and Michael Rubinstein. *Malta's Ancient Temples and Rites* 0 904674 14 2
25. Robert Cecil. *Cults in 19th Century Britain* 0 904674 15 0
26. Peter Wade. *Black Culture and Social Inequality in Colombia* 0 904674 16 9
27. David Schaefer. *Urban Legends and the Japanese Tale* 0 904674 19 3
28. The Role of 'Primitive' People in Identifying and Approaching Human Problems 0 904674 20 7
29. The Use of Omens, Magic and Sorcery for Power and Hunting 0 904674 21 5
30. Ritual from the Stone Age to the Present Day 0 904674 22 3
31. Steven Mithen. Problem-solving and the Evolution of Human Culture 0 904674 25 8
32. Peter Wade. Cultural Identity: Solution or Problem? 0 904674 26 6
33. Kevin Byron. Inventions and Inventing: Finding Solutions to Practical Problems 0 904674 27 4
36. Doris Lessing. *Problems, Myths and Stories* 0 904674 28 2
37. *Modern Primitives: The Recurrent Ritual of Adornment* 0 904674 29 0
41. Lynn Holden. *Taboos: Structure and Rebellion* 0 904674 33 9
42. Christopher C. French. *Paranormal Perception? A Critical Evaluation* 0 904674 34 7
44. *Godmakers: The First Idols* 0 904674 36 3
45. Alexander King. *The Universal Ego* 0 904674 37 1
46. David Simpson. *Conclusions from Controlled UFO Hoaxes* 0 904674 38 X
47. Christie Davies. *Jokes and Groups* 0 904674 39 8
48. David Pendlebury. *Creative Translation* 0 904674 40 1

Nos. 5, 6, 7, 10, 12 and 17 are in paperback A4 format; all the rest are paperback A5.

**B. Hardback Books**

- D.B. Fry (Ed.). *The Nature of Religious Man* 0 900860 67 7
- Robert Cecil and David Wade (Eds.). *Cultural Encounters* 0 863040 50 0
- Tahir Shah (Ed.). *Cultural Research: Papers on Regional Cultures and Culture-Mixing* 0 863040 64 0

All ICR publications are obtainable from The Octagon Press Ltd., P.O. Box 227, London N6 4EW.
Tel: 020 8348 9392. Fax: 020 8341 5971

*Please phone or send for catalogue/price list.*

32