

The Comparative Study of Jokes

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Abstract Jokes can only properly be studied comparatively and in relation to differences in the social structure and culture of the two or more countries where they are told. This is best done by looking at how joke cycles, large aggregates of jokes, change as they move between two countries that have the same language. American stupidity jokes about Poles and blondes changed significantly when they came to be told in Britain about the Irish and about Essex Girls, even though the same themes were employed. The changes can be related to the greater British willingness openly to acknowledge and to joke about class distinctions and to their not sharing the American obsession with hygiene, purity and physical perfection. American lawyer jokes are told in Britain not as local jokes about lawyers but as specifically American jokes about American lawyers. In Britain power and decision making lie with Parliament not judges and lawyers, a utilitarian not a rights political philosophy prevails and there is no sacred written constitution. In America there is far more respect for ‘the law’ and lawyers can not possibly live up to these expectations. In Britain to be a lawyer is just one more job and the lawyers do it honestly and unremarkably.

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There is only one circumstance in which we can with certainty use the comparative method to analyze the jokes told in different countries and to reach conclusions about the social and cultural bases of their humor. This is when an entire joke cycle begins in one country but only arrives somewhat later in another. We can then trace how the jokes change in the process. I do not mean mere adaptation to what people are

familiar with in another place, as when disaster jokes are switched to locally familiar disasters. Rather the key questions we shall ask of the data go deeper. They are:

- 1) What systematic changes in *theme* occur when the joke cycle moves from one culture and another?
- 2) Joke cycles normally proceed easily between one country and another and yet from time to time a particular cycle fails to do so. Even though the jokes are very funny and easily comprehensible in both countries, they may fail to catch on in the second, even when explicit attempts have been made to transfer them. Why?

The best and easiest case to study is the movement of jokes between the United States and the United Kingdom, since they share the same language and there is a very large degree of communication between the two countries. Why and how do joke cycles originating in the United States get adapted and changed by the British? Why are they sometimes rejected? The reader will note that I speak of joke cycles, sudden outbursts of a very large number of jokes on a particular theme that spread rapidly. To compare single jokes from Britain and America would be pointless. How could you generalize from such a comparison? How could you relate what you thought you had discerned to other separately observed social differences between the two countries?

The first two American joke cycles I wish to consider are the Polish jokes about stupidity that began around 1960 and the later blonde jokes about stupidity and promiscuity both of which soon spread to Britain where they became Irish jokes and Essex girl jokes respectively.

Both the Poles and the blondes are in a sense mere ‘placeholders’. Stupidity jokes are universal but they need a target. They are jokes in search of a place to settle. The American Poles are a case in point, for the jokes about them rarely refer to any topic specific to Poles or Polish Americans, such as language or institutions. The jokes are

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not really about Poles but are social class jokes, jokes about an ethnic group still in the early 1960s often living in large, visible, clearly demarcated blue-collar neighborhoods. They are jokes about those less skilled manual workers who lack qualifications or sophistication. That is why they can be transferred to the Portuguese (Hawaii and California) or to Italian-Americans (New Jersey) who occupy a similar position in the American hierarchy of social classes. None of them are an unfamiliar ‘other’ nor a focus for anxiety or hostility on the part of other Americans. They are from the joke-tellers’ point of view ‘people like us but not quite’, a slightly inferior version of ourselves, ‘ourselves in a distorting mirror’. What is striking though is how the jokes make very few direct references to class, such as occupation or levels of income. The characteristics they exhibit in the jokes are those that are popularly associated with unskilled or less skilled manual workers—ignorance, crassness, dirtiness but you can not say that, for America is, in theory, though not in practice, a ‘classless’ society ; indeed this belief is central to American ideology. Even in jokes Americans must not use the C-word.

When the ‘Polish’ jokes arrived in Britain they were switched to the Irish, which is not surprising since similar jokes about the Irish had been told in large numbers in Britain for the previous three hundred years. They were though changed in two very important respects. First, the jokes were given a social class element. There were for example explicit references to unskilled Irish laborers working as navvies on building sites or in the construction of the freeways.

How do you tell an Aer Lingus pilot?

By the three gold rings on his wellies

(Wellies, Wellingtons, black rubber boots worn when working in a muddy or dirty place such as a building site. They carry the same implications as hard-hats in the United States).

In the process the jokes were rendered far more particular and told using a specific accent and dialect, stage Irish. There are numerous references to particular Irish places and institutions and they were and are told in an imitation of an Irish brogue. By contrast there is no distinctive way of telling American jokes about Poles or indeed about the Portuguese. They are told in standard American English.

British humor in general deals quite explicitly with the very social class differences that Americans try to deny. It is the very stuff of British cartoons and radio and television comedies that draw on clashes of language and life-style between the classes as the basis of their humor. It is an accepted and deep-rooted feature of British life. The current speaker of the House of Commons, a most prestigious office, Michael Martin, a Scot, is popularly known as ‘Gorbals Mick’ because of his personal uncouthness, which

is associated in the popular imagination with the famous old Glasgow slum, ‘the Gorbals’.

The same point may be made about the American ‘blonde girl’ joke cycle which has spread to much of Europe. In Britain it has become a social class joke. ‘The Essex Girl’ joke. The butt of these British jokes about stupid and promiscuous females clearly comes from the lower working class areas of Essex around Dagenham, a place where those from the poorer parts of the East End have been rehoused and where many of the men are crude ‘metal bashers’, working in the Ford car manufacturing plant.

What do Essex Girl and Dagenham man have in common?

They both spend a lot of time in Fords.

The image of the Essex Girl having sex in the back of a vehicle is a common one.

A chap from a higher social class has taken an Essex Girl to a restaurant and they are looking at the menu.

Man: “Do you fancy *coq au vin*?”

Essex Girl: “Nah, I fink sex in a transit is tacky”

The use of ‘Nah’ instead of ‘No’, ‘fink’ instead of ‘think’ and even the deployment of the words tacky and transit in this context instantly tell a Britisher what her class origins are. She is the daughter of an unskilled manual worker now commuting to her own unskilled white collar job in London, such as working the photocopier or serving in a fast food chain. A skillful teller of the joke will imitate the grinding, ugly, mud-in-yer-mouf, ‘Estuary English’ that she speaks, a mode of speech which occupies the lowest rung on the British hierarchy of accents and dialects.

Once again the British have inserted a social class reference and a particular geographical reference into the bland blonde American joke. It fits both with the differing attitudes to and perceptions of class in the two countries and with the contrast between American universalism and the British love of the particular. Both differences have been noted quite independently by sociologists.

There is a second important difference between the British jokes about the Irish, who have never in recent years been depicted as dirty in jokes, and American jokes about Poles in which ‘the dirty Polack’s’ filthy habits are emphasized.

How do you get a Pole out of a swimming pool?

Throw a bar of soap in.

Columbus discovered America but who discovered Poland?

The Roto-Rooter man.

What is the difference between a blue-eyed Pole and a brown-eyed Pole?

The blue-eyed Pole is a quarter low on shit.

These jokes did not make it into British culture even though many such jokes are to be found in one particular best-selling British book of jokes about the Irish; they had been crudely cribbed from an earlier American collection of Polish jokes. They never caught on in Britain. They are never told; indeed some Britishers find such jokes bizarre and can not understand them. The reason for this difference has nothing to do with reality. You can tell a Polish-American area in Chicago because the houses are immaculately clean, unlike those of some of their ethnic neighbors. I know; I went to Chicago and looked for myself.

A more likely hypothesis lies in the importance of cleanliness and indeed even bodily perfection in American culture that expresses itself in all aspects of life, for example American burial practices which employ embalming, a casket instead of coffin, a concrete vault insulating the casket from the soil, the use of a 'hygenic'scoop rather than the bare hand to pick up a fragment of earth and cast it in the grave when the phrase 'earth to earth' is uttered in a traditional Christian burial service. Then there is the American emphasis on plumbing and elaborate bathrooms and well-scrubbedness, which does not in fact enhance health or longevity. Europeans live longer than Americans even when matched for social class. We may add too the unending American quest for an eternally youthful appearance and perfectly, orthodontist-guaranteed, even teeth.

The British and French practice hygiene but do not see it as a supreme virtue and calmly accept the ravages of age. They grow ugly gracefully. When the BCG vaccine for TB was discovered it was rapidly adopted in France and Britain with the compulsory vaccination of school-children. In America there was opposition to BCG because TB was seen as a disease of the dirty, who needed to be cleaned up and trained in American hygiene. Cleanliness in America and in Canada is a key value and so its deplorable absence is built into ethnic jokes. In Britain and indeed France and Ireland hygiene is simply a mundane means to an end. There is no mention of dirtiness either in French jokes about stupid Belgians or in Irish jokes about stupid Kerrymen. The other main country in which stupidity and dirtiness are fused in one single set of joke is, not surprisingly, Switzerland, where American style jokes are told about the canton of Fribourg/Freiburg.. In other countries such as Germany or the Netherlands there are dirtiness jokes but they are kept apart from the stupidity jokes and have different targets. Only the Americans, the Canadians and the Swiss see rationality and hygiene as one single item for the purpose of joking.

A further example of a joke cycle not spreading is the recent American cycle of jokes about greedy, rapacious and unscrupulous lawyers. There is a long tradition of jokes about lawyers in Britain and Ireland hinting that they are not to be trusted but when American jokes about lawyers

are told in Britain they are told about American lawyers not the local variety.

Lawyers occupy a far more important symbolic position in American society than in, say, Britain or the Netherlands and they are far more powerful. Britain has no written constitution to be guarded and interpreted by lawyers. Important matters are decided in Parliament rather than the courts and on the basis of implicit constitutional conventions or what is felt to be the British way of doing things. In America by contrast the Constitution is a sacred written document that gives the country its distinctive identity and something of this sacred quality spreads to the courts generally and to those who practice in them. From its very beginning the American dogma has been 'government not by men but by lawyers'. In practice lawyers do not and indeed can not live up to these high ideals and so they become the butt of jokes about chicanery. In Britain or the Netherlands the law is simply an everyday matter and so are lawyers. There are no high ideals to fall short of and also in practice there is far less abuse of legal procedure than in America. There is not as much to joke about.

In Britain matters that in America are decided by litigation and by an appeal to fundamental rights are resolved on a utilitarian basis by a variety of political and administrative bodies. When the abortion laws were liberalized in Britain in 1967 it was done by act of Parliament and for entirely utilitarian reasons. The word 'rights' was never used in the debates in Parliament. The entire American right to choose versus right to life controversy leaves British observers baffled as did the referral of the matter to the Supreme Court. The Court's reasoning in the *Roe v Wade* case strikes the British as contorted beyond belief and the subsequent legal challenges to it are seen as absurd. Why should lawyers decide such an issue?

Likewise the American propensity to sue thy neighbor and the extravagant personal injury cases taken to court are seen as odd and often funny by Europeans. Such matters are often decided in Europe by arbitration or by a regulator. They are not contests between lawyers in court. The main redress for personal injury is a utilitarian not a legal one—free socialized medicine and sickness benefits. Where awards are made, they are not made by a jury and are proportionate to the actual injury. High personal damages are not awarded against a firm as a substitute for a substantial fine for breach of regulations. In Britain the introduction of 'no win, no fee' cases has brought with it a new breed of crooked ambulance-chasing lawyers seeking remuneration but the problem is nothing like as extensive as in the United States, nor are miscarriages of justice in the criminal courts as common. In the British courts and even on appeal questions of fact are stressed as against the American obsession with procedure and appeals may be allowed in Britain because the Appeal Court decides that a

foolish jury convicted against all the evidence, rather than because of a legal technicality as in the United States.

Thus all the matters that upset annoy and irritate Americans about the law and lawyers are blamed in Europe on politicians and administrators. The administrators are salaried and jokes about them center on their laziness and foolishness. They are not there to win and there are no prizes. In Britain, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, they are rarely personally corrupt. Hence fee and bonus chasing American lawyers alone are the butt of jokes about avarice and lack of scruple.

An (American) lawyer died and asked for admission to Heaven. Saint Peter looked up his records in the book and said ‘You’re 163 years old, the oldest man to come here since Methuselah’.

‘Nonsense’, said the lawyer. ‘I was only 52 when that client shot me’.

‘Well’, said St. Peter, ‘I’m only going by the number of hours you’ve billed’.

In each of these cases it is possible to see how differences in patterns of joking between Britain and the United States are rooted in differing cultural values, political systems or systems of stratification. In each case this can be confirmed by reference to quite independent empirical comparisons between the two countries. Americans are more idealistic and also less willing to recognize and accept the realities of their society than the British. They deny class differences, the inevitability of personal ageing and decay and the failings of core institutions, not because they are run by bad individuals but simply because all institutions are prone to failure. Perfectibility and the notion that “that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us.” still rule the Americans’ sense of what they are. Unlike the Americans the British have given up on piety and Imperialism and accept that life and the world are inevitably flawed, The British merely seek to minimize harm in the kind of modern Benthamism, I have elsewhere called causalism. It was after all Bentham who saw rights as nonsense upon stilts. For Bentham rights were merely a cover for rule by lawyers, which is of course the basis of the specifically American jokes about lawyers which have no relevance outside the United States.

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