

• *Book Reviews* •

Jokes and Targets. By Christie Davies. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. pp. x + 300, index).

Christie Davies' *Jokes and Targets* is a collection of essays focusing on certain contemporary Western (primarily Anglo-American) joke cycles. The book involves the engaging question of "how certain cycles come about and why particular groups rather than others become the targets of these jokes" (1). The main targets discussed by Davies include dumb and oversexed blondes, the sex-obsessed French, American lawyers, frigid Jewish women and wimpy Jewish men, various social groups stigmatized as homosexual or effeminate, and Soviet autocrats. Davies adopts a socio-historical approach, attempting to explain the *raison d'être* for each joke cycle—which he suggests be considered as a "social fact" in the Durkheimian sense (7-8). He draws upon an interesting variety of "outside evidence" (17), from historical, literary, and artistic sources to relevant findings in empirical social scientific studies from numerous countries. The book provides important examples of how popular jokes, as seemingly insignificant discursive practices, can often be indicators or— as in the case of Soviet jokes—sometimes precursors of significant cultural and historical phenomena and transformations.

Davies' first chapter, "Mind over Matter," plays a pivotal role not only in the book but also arguably in Davies' oeuvre. The chapter proposes a general theory about perhaps the most widespread joke cycle with a target, stupidity jokes, while seeking to elucidate another almost equally universal joke category about the "canny". Davies interestingly suggests that at the heart of all stupidity jokes—which comprise a vast array of "jokes about occupations, social classes, athletes, the use of force, and sexy blondes as well as the ethnic jokes" (67)—resides the simple yet long-standing binary opposition of the mind/body. The theory, as we learn in detail in the book's conclusion, is intended to advance models Davies had previously offered to explain certain stupidity joke cycles based on center/periphery and monopoly/competition oppositions (254-264). Davies initially introduces the mind-

over-matter theory as one which allegedly embraces all stupidity jokes (21), and yet he ultimately argues for the usefulness of his past models as supplementary accounts (264). This suggests either that Davies' ideas are still progressing, or that there may be some tension in his proposed mechanism(s) for understanding stupidity jokes.

Yet, I find Davies' argument debatable in other more crucial respects. Notably, Davies partially detaches jokes from social reality by denying outright the former's influence on the latter (Elder-Vass 2010, 203-204; 2012, 143-158). For Davies, there is a one-way path from social structures to jokes: "Jokes are a thermometer, not a thermostat" (248). Davies further overlooks the functional role of what his book is actually about, i.e., *ridicule*. If Janes and Olson's (2000) research on "jeer pressure", by which they mean the effects of ridicule on observers, rather than on direct targets, of ridicule, has any merit, then certain joke cycles—especially those revolving around social norms—could be argued to serve disciplinary functions. Within social relations, these jokes monitor and punish norm-violating behaviours.

Davies' "exculpatory" approach to humour is even incompatible with his above-mentioned suggestion that jokes be regarded as "social facts" (Weaver 2011, 8-9). Central to Durkheim's understanding of social facts, but overlooked by Davies, is the way such facts constrain social acts by exercising coercive power (Morrison 2006, 193-195). More importantly, Davies' one-way formula impedes what I would call the "displaced" functions of jokes. By this term, I mean that joke cycles with certain targets might serve functions which have little, if anything, to do with their immediate or stated targets. In this way, such jokes—even though not straightforwardly—still affect the social order. Some pertinent examples of displaced functions are Iranian *Qazvini* jokes, as well as jokes about the *Rashti*. Davies has mentioned both joke cycles in his work, though his reference to Rashti jokes are only in passing as an example of stupidity jokes (155, See also Davies 1990, 12, 27; 2008, 164-5). Jokes about male dwellers in the Iranian city of Qazvin

often display a marked fear of the act of homosexual penetration. Jokes about men from the city of *Rasht* often center on their lack of *gheirat*, a form of masculine jealousy about their close female family members. While neither of these joke cycles directly affect Iranians' actual perceptions of Rashti and Qazvini men, the jokes' peculiar popularity among many Iranians does suggest a significant connection between such jokes and the "hegemonic masculinity" of the contemporary Iranian society (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 849-850). Davies' relentless opposition to critical views of humour apparently results from his legitimate suspicions about censoring humour (248-49); however, not all critical attitudes to humour espouse censorship (e.g., see Weaver 2011, 191).

Furthermore, throughout his book, Davies repeatedly engages in critical dialogues with other—hypothetical—scholars, whose alleged arguments are anonymously paraphrased only to be rebutted or taunted (2, 6, 17, 87, 90, 103, 145, 182, 246). At such points, Davies often develops an unduly contentious tone, deeming his imagined opponents as, for example, "foolish" (6). This attitude is particularly prevalent in Davies' defence of his justificatory approach to humour, which has come under severe criticism from the emergent school of critical humour studies (see Billig 2005, 10-33; Lockyer and Pickering 2009, 808-909 ; Weaver 2011, 9-10). For example, Davies mocks analyses of jokes based on the self/other dichotomy (87). Yet, Weaver (2011) has thoroughly demonstrated that this framework is a central feature of racist jokes. Thus, Davies' rejection of this dichotomy renders him unable to analyze the interplay of humour and racism, a significant shortcoming, especially in a work focused on humour in the United States.

Likewise, at the end of his chapter on "Blondes, Sex and the French," Davies concludes that the dumb blonde is merely a counterpart to the male targets of stupidity jokes, and that the French are not othered in French jokes. These conclusions not only de-gender and depoliticize the dumb blonde image/stereotype, which seems problematic *prima facie* (see Lacey 1998, 139-140), but they also

contradict his conclusions elsewhere about how older stereotypes of the French in jokes were recently revived to *other* the contemporary French nation (110). Thus, although Davies' socio-historical analysis of jokes does throw light on how certain joke cycles might have originated, such an analysis is barely capable of describing the *uses* to which any of these joke categories might be put in social relations.

Despite such criticisms, however, *Jokes and Targets* is an important addition to Davies' significant previous research on various categories of verbal joke. Furthermore, Davies' mind-over-matter theory will be highly stimulating for further comparative research on jokes. Finally, this book, like Davies' previous work, contains a valuable repertoire of jokes from important contemporary joke cycles. These important and sometimes hard-to-find examples will be a rich source for other scholars.

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