

NEWS IN BRIEF

THESIS DEFENCE: LIISI LAINESTE

POST-SOCIALIST JOKES IN ESTONIA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

On 17 December 2008, Liisi Laineste defended her PhD thesis *Post-Socialist Jokes in Estonia: Continuity and Change* at the University of Tartu. Thesis opponent Christie Davies, the leading expert on ethnic humour in the world, claimed this was one of the weightiest of the tens of PhD theses that he has reviewed.

The thesis consists of an exhaustive introductory chapter, five articles published during 2003–2008, conclusions and appendices. The study focuses first and foremost on the interaction of post-Socialist ethnic and political jokes, together with their political, economical, cultural and other contexts and fields of influence and the dynamics of continuous consistency and change proceeding from these. In addition, it tackles the rather wide range of humour issues, *summa summarum*, including the general problems of sociological theories of humour, especially the views on ethnic humour by Christie Davies and other authors, the problems surrounding folk humour databases, the idiosyncrasies of online jokelore and their use as source material, the merging of qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of developmental trends of jokelore, the concepts of post-Socialism and ethnic identity as such, the socio-psychological universals of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and many other topics.

Abundant quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence offers profound insights into the relations of folklore and reality and indicates how the political (but also economical and technological) context of jokelore impacts the content structure of jokes, relations between different categories of humour, etc.

According to the thesis, the influence of social factors on humour lore is beyond dispute while the relationship between reality and jokes is complex and indirect. The superiority theories of the past emphasised mostly the aggressive side of jokes, although humour, no doubt, has also a binding function which promotes communication. Sociological functionalist approaches are more prolific in explicating the social function of humour, but even these focus on the few specific aspects that are secondary in terms of humour as a genre. Furthermore, it is obvious that the dilemma ‘hostility versus mirth’ that recurrently emerges in jokelore has no double-valence solutions but implies more specific comparative-historical research. In terms of methodology, the author therefore emphasises the comparative historical approach which, as a result of analysing the social and historical situation in specific countries, aims for discovering



wider-ranging rules and universals among the social roles, development trends, etc. of jokes.

The central focus of the study is the analysis of ethnic humour and the relations of ethnic and political humour. The statistics of ethnic jokes in Estonia indicates that the total percentage of ethnic jokes in jokelore has clearly decreased over the past about 120 years. At the same time, the range of characters has clearly widened and become more global: At the end of the 19th century the main joke characters in Estonia were representatives of the local periphery (islanders from Hiiumaa and Saaremaa, and also the Seto) and minorities (Jews, Gypsies); during the Soviet period there were Russians and other predominant Soviet ethnicities (Jews, Chukchi, Georgians, Armenians, and others) and the generally known nationalities with specific ethnic stereotypes from outside the Soviet Union; in contemporary online jokelore the characters can be of any ethnicity, even though the 'socially significant' ethnic characters (fellow Estonians, Russians, Finns, and others) predominate in this group as well, and there seems to be a growing tendency of using Estonians as ethnic characters and the attempt to connect ethnic jokes with local characters, like islanders from Hiiumaa, the Seto, and others.

According to the theory proposed by Christie Davies, ethnic mockery is asymmetrically oriented from the wealthier and more innovative centre to the economically backward periphery. Laineste's statistics show that Davies' hypotheses which probably apply in many stable democracies (especially in Anglo-American capitalist countries) are nevertheless not universal: these rules of direction may vary in different types of societies (e.g., in the situation of authoritarian Socialist regimes or at different stages of post-Socialist development) and change when the socio-political context of jokes changes. A more precise mapping of these fields of influence would need an analysis of the choice of ethnic characters and other characteristics of ethnic jokes in joke traditions which have sprung up from as many different types of society as possible, in order to construct an even more universal model for explicating the choice of the butts of ethnic jokes, predicting developmental trends, etc.

As mentioned above, the study also discusses the relationship of ethnic and political jokes. The political context exerts a rather varied influence on the style of ethnic jokes: contents, the choice of the butts of jokes and popularity relations, the features of characters, and even the boundaries of natural joke categories. Thus, in Western democracies, ethnic and political jokes are clearly separated; in the folk humour of Soviet and other post-Socialist countries the political and ethnic aspects of jokes were so tightly bound and interrelated that it could be termed the Socialist ethno-political or political-ethnic joint category; in post-Socialist democracies these categories, again, are becoming more differentiated.

Alexander Rose's theory about the targets of political jokes – namely, that in totalitarian societies it is the system that is ridiculed while in democratic societies the personal inadequacies of political leaders are laughed at – appears similarly generalising. As a matter of fact, in the jokes of the Soviet and other Socialist countries, the system itself *and* the personal traits of the authorities were ridiculed. The old, Soviet repertoire of political jokes is being replaced by a new, contemporary and topical repertoire but the replacement is gradual rather than abrupt. The reaction of jokes to politi-

cal events and changes in politics is selective: some topics may be overlooked in jokes because they are either overly complicated or, on the contrary, excessively reiterated and thus boring.

Laineste's work presents intriguing developments of the relationship of globalisation and subculturalisation in humour. These opposite tendencies operate simultaneously and their relationships are intricately duplicitous. For instance, the number of ethnic characters in jokes and the percentage of translated jokes will be definitely growing, and these tendencies may be considered the aftermath of the general globalisation process. At the same time, globalisation does not represent the universal 'melting pot', that is, a diminishing of cultural diversity, but rather the expansion of certain dominant cultures – formerly Russian-Soviet and now European-American – outside their borders and as such representing also a type of subculturalisation. The constantly increasing spread of jokes on the Internet stands for the globalisation of humour on the one hand and creates possibilities for the formation of groups with narrower interests and the development of subcultural forms of humour on the other.

Since the empirical source of Liisi Laineste's study is contemporary online jokelore, she also explores the advantages and disadvantages of Internet jokes as a specific source of research. There have been complaints about online jokes that they are canned material and the results of any quantitative study inevitably remain questionable, the joke texts often lack data about informants, the material reflects the preferences of an unrepresentatively small group of people, and that they have been deprived of their natural communicative context, etc. However, the author's personal experiences convince that the total percentage of online jokes in modern source material is so predominant that they cannot be ignored as a source of research and their representativity is beyond doubt. Some websites featuring humour are highly popular and constantly expanding and which inspire lively interactive communication. Online material makes it possible to make longitudinal observations of the general trends and changes in the repertoire, and it is the online jokes that reveal the most expeditious reactions to political and other daily news.

Liisi Laineste's thesis is a major outcome of the work carried out as part of the Estonian Science Foundation Grant Project No. 6759 'Contemporary Jokelore: Post-Socialism–Internet–Cognitivity'. Considering other results of the project, especially the partnership instituted with humour scholars from other post-Socialist countries (Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria), the prospects of humour research in Estonia are rather promising.

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