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In Remembrance



Christie Davies

December 25, 1941-August 26, 2017

From Giselinde Kuipers, Professor of Cultural Sociology, University of Amsterdam

Christie Davies, esteemed humor scholar and beloved colleague, passed away on August 26, 2017 after a brief illness. Everyone who has ever attended an ISHS conference remembers Christie. For his khaki fishing jacket, his outrageous ties and his many keynote lectures about (and containing many) ethnic jokes. But also for his astute interventions, his wide-ranging knowledge, and his unending interest in new ideas and new humor scholars. The field of humor studies, as well as the work of many individual humor scholars, would not have looked the same without Christie. It would have been much less rigorous, international, original – and of course much less funny.

A central member of the humor studies community since the first conference in Cardiff in 1976, Christie has made a lasting mark on the field. With his comparative work on jokes, he opened up a whole new field of inquiry: the systematic comparative analysis of humor and its relation to society. Moreover, Christie's work shaped the contours of the field: rigorously empirical, often comparative, the socio-cultural segment of humor studies is wary of critical or poststructuralist theory, and remarkably tolerant of the work of humanists, historians, psychologists and even linguists. Finally, Christie has been an important mentor to academics from around the world, including myself. He offered younger scholars advice, encouragement and friendship. This friendship-cum-mentorship took typical Christie-esque forms: odd postcards, often anonymous (it took me some time to figure out who sent me these cards with images of Dutch "cheese

women” in traditional costumes), mock insults, and, after the advent of digital photography: emails with unflattering pictures taken surreptitiously during conferences. But behind Christie’s practical jokes always lay affection and deep intellectual engagement.

Christie Davies was born on Christmas day of 1941. He was a proud Welshman, who loved to show off his mastery of Welsh consonants. His Welsh patriotism is reflected in the protagonist of his children’s book: a Welsh dragon called Dewi. He was educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he was both a member of the Footlights revue, and the President of the Cambridge Union debating society. After graduating with a double first (for non-UK readers: this is very good) in economics, and brief stints in Australia and Leeds, Christie worked at the University of Reading for most of his academic life. His early research focused on the sociology of morality: the death penalty, law, censorship, regulation of drugs and tobacco, and sexual taboos. He kept returning to this field throughout his career. His interest in humor sprang from this work on morality. In 1982, he almost simultaneously published articles in the two premier sociology journals that reflect this close link. The paper in the *American Journal of Sociology* analyzed sexual taboos and social boundaries, whereas his contribution in the *British Journal of Sociology* dealt with ethnic jokes, moral values and social boundaries.

Since the 1980s, Christie published a series of path-breaking works on humor. He wrote dozens of articles, as well as four monographs: his early masterpiece *Ethnic Humor Around the World* (1990), his most programmatic book *Jokes and Their Relations to Society* (1998), his tour de force *The Mirth of Nations* (2002) and his final death-blow to aggression and superiority theories of humor, *Jokes and Targets* (2011). In this work, Christie pursued three aims. He developed a systematic comparative-historical analysis of humor as a distinct form of expression, which he defined as “play with aggression”. He analyzed humor as a socio-cultural expression that cannot be reduced to individual motivations – including, but not limited to aggression and superiority. Finally, he levelled a strong attack against popular and one-dimensional “theories” of humor, which he revealed to be untestable, circular and somewhat implausible statements. This is a grand research program, which he made manageable with one genius move: he mined the well-archived, easily comparable, largely unexplored field of jokes. Because jokes rely on retelling, they only exist when many people find them relevant (note that this was pre-internet. Today, many irrelevant jokes live on indefinitely, as do many other irrelevant things.). This insight led Christie to explore folklore archives, finding largely similar jokes around the world. (With the exception of Japan, which made for another fascinating article). Christie was the first to recognize the sociological relevance of jokes as “social facts” and cultural “thermometers”.

I first met Christie 1997, in a hot, remote, deserted university campus in Edmond, Oklahoma. This was the first of many meetings around the world, often far from the tourist crowd, for conferences and summer schools from Romania to Osaka, Groningen to Skokie. As it was for many others before and after me, the first meeting with Christie was a surprise (The shock could have been worse, though: unlike others, I did expect this “Christie” to be male). This famous professor did not look professorial at all, and he was remarkably approachable. He was also very interested in my work (though not uncritical), appeared to know everything about everything, seemed to have political viewpoints that I had never before encountered in a social scientist (but that he defended with great wit, clarity and conviction), and was a central figure in a lively and unconventional community of humor scholars.

In the 20 years since Oklahoma, I learned many things from Christie. Academic lessons, for instance: scholarly rigor is even more important in frivolous themes. Comparison is at the core of sociology. What many people call a theory really is not a theory at all. No one can build a scholarly career on humor alone. Try to like what you study (which is completely different from the rather vacuous advice to study what you like), because you will not understand it otherwise. Always listen to junior scholars, they ask the best questions. Christie introduced me to Inuit art and the Good Soldier Švejk, to Scottish puffins, deep-fried Mars Bars and English hedges, to Japanese stone gardens, British operas and American bumper stickers. He told me the best jokes, and how to tell them. Maybe most importantly: from Christie, I learned that you can respect someone for their thinking, even be good friends with them, when you disagree with them about many things. Knowing Christie has sharpened my thinking, and broadened my mind. Christie Davies has made me think, and he has made me laugh. Moreover, he has shown that these things—laughter and thought—have a lot in common.