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Author(s): Alan Dundes

Source: *Western Folklore*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Jul., 1981), pp. 261-266

Published by: Western States Folklore Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1499697>

Accessed: 16/11/2008 12:36

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Many Hands Make Light Work or Caught in the Act of Screwing in Light Bulbs

Alan Dundes

Folklorists never lack data, for there is not only the accumulation of folklore from centuries past but new folklore constantly being created in response to each succeeding generation's social and psychological needs. The distressing feature of folkloristics, the scientific study of folklore, is that new folklore does not appear to be any better understood than was the old. Even though modern folklorists have the advantage of virtually being able to observe an element of folklore at its moment of inception, they seem able to do little more than report its existence. Folklorists somehow cannot bring themselves to depart from the longstanding tradition of merely describing. What is needed, of course, is description *and analysis*. Granted that it is much easier to describe than to interpret, but that is no excuse really for the dearth of analytic commentary on folklore old and new.

Among the dozens and dozens of Polack jokes so popular in the late 1960s and 1970s, one particular text asked: "How many Polacks does it take to screw in a light bulb?" The answer(s): "Five—one to hold the bulb and four to turn the ceiling (chair, ladder, house)." William M. Clements in his useful "The Types of the Polack Joke," first published in 1969, indicates that the Indiana University Folklore Archives contained more than twenty versions of this joke.¹ The joke was simply one of many purportedly commenting on the physical ineptitude and stupidity of Polacks.²

What is of special interest is that apparently this single joke provided a model or impetus for a whole new cycle of jokes, all based on the initial formulaic question of how many _____s does it take to screw in a light bulb? This leads one to speculate on the possible genetic interrelationships of joke cycles. As the light bulb cycle may have spun off from the Polack joke cycle, so the Polack cycle may in turn have derived from some earlier cycle.³ One cannot help wondering what new joke cycle, if any, may be inspired by one or more of the light bulb jokes.

By 1978 and 1979, the light bulb cycle had swept the country, and by 1980, a short note on the subject had appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* and a popular anthology of some forty texts entitled *How Many Zen*

1. William M. Clements, *The Types of the Polack Joke*, *Folklore Forum* Bibliographic and Special Series No. 3 (Bloomington, 1973), 27, E7.6.6, "The Number of Polacks Needed to Screw in a Light Bulb."

2. For a discussion of this trait and others in the Polack joke cycle, see Alan Dundes, "A Study of Ethnic Slurs: The Jew and the Polack in the United States," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 186-203.

3. I have previously suggested that the American jokes about Polacks had antecedents in a German ethnic slur tradition about Poles. See Dundes, 200-201.

*Buddhists Does It Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?*⁴ had been published.⁴ The anthology contains texts only (accompanied by cartoon drawings as illustrations) and ends with an invitation for readers to “join the newest and fastest-growing joke craze since the Knock, Knock!” by sending in additional examples of the genre. The note in the *Journal of American Folklore* presents some of the better known light bulb jokes and asks in conclusion why the cycle came into being. The author claims the answer is complicated and suggests that complex social movements and decision-making in the 1980s “call for comment.” Presumably the joke cycle is a response to that call. The author also argues that the underlying impulse for the formation of such jokes may “be more a matter of esthetics.” These vague notions do not explain at all why the particular metaphor of screwing in light bulbs was selected as a paradigm for social commentary. Why wasn’t one of the many other available Polack (and other) riddling jokes used as the datum for a new cycle? In short, what is the significance, if any, of the choice of the act of screwing in light bulbs as the basis of a series of jokes?

The original (?) Polack joke reflected a stereotype, namely, that Poles or Polish-Americans are stupid, that is, they are not too *bright*. Inasmuch as an illuminated light bulb is a standard popular iconographic symbol for “idea”—as found, for example, in comic strips—it makes a certain amount of sense for a Polack to be unable to screw in a lightbulb, that is, to be unable to come up with a bright idea. But the same attribute of stupidity is *not* necessarily part of the stereotypic features normally associated with the various groups named in the light bulb jokes.

How many WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) does it take to change a light bulb?

Two. One to mix martinis and the other to call an electrician.

The WASP is not stupid but rather is above carrying out such menial tasks as changing a light bulb. Instead he pours himself a drink and pays for a high-priced specialist to come to perform a simple household chore which he could easily do himself.

In ethnic slurs based upon a common action, the stereotype is supposedly revealed in the manner in which the action is carried out. So the only variable in the first line of each joke is the name of the group being pasquinaded. The principal variation occurs in the “answer” to the joking question. In this way, we are told that Californians are “laid back,” New Yorkers are rude, etc. Here are a number of groups and their stereotypic activity:

4. Judith B. Kerman, “The Light-Bulb Jokes: Americans Look at Social Action Processes,” *Journal of American Folklore* 93 (1980): 454-458; Matt Freedman and Paul Hoffman, *How Many Zen Buddhists Does It Take to Screw In a Light Bulb?* (New York, 1980). Kerman’s original manuscript had “Many Hands Make Light Work” as a subtitle, but presumably editorial intervention eliminated it. I have gratefully borrowed it for my own note’s title.

Californians. Ten. One to screw it in and nine others to share the experience.⁵

New Yorkers. Three. One to do it and two to criticize.

or

None of your fucking business!

Pennsylvanians. None. You just hold it up and it glows by itself (referring to the Three Mile Island nuclear facility and its radiation crisis).

Democrats. Thirty. One representative from every social/economic group

Republicans. Three. One to change the bulb, and two to see how good the old one was.

Graduate students. Only one but it takes nine years.

or

Depends on the size of the grant.

or

Two and a professor to take the credit.

or

Could you repeat the question, please.

Football players. One, but eleven get credit for it.

Law students. Six. One to change it and five to file an environmental impact report.

Pre-Med students. Three. One to stand on a stool to screw it in and two to kick the stool out from under him.

Gay men. Five. One to screw in the Art Deco light bulb and four to stand back and yell “Fabulous!” (or “Marvelous!”)

Feminists. That’s not funny.

or

Five. One to do it and four to write about it.

or

Five. One to change the bulb, two to discuss the violation of the socket, and two to secretly wish that they were that socket.

Psychiatrists. Only one, but the light bulb has to really want to change.

Zen Buddhists. Two. One to screw it in and one to not screw it in.

or

Two. One to screw it in and one to unscrew it.

Jews. So how many Jews does it take to change a light bulb?

JAPs [Jewish American Princesses]. One who refuses saying, “What and ruin my nail polish?”

5. Most of the texts were collected in Berkeley, California, in 1979 and 1980. I hereby acknowledge valuable assistance in supplying additional texts from Swedish folklorist Bengt af Klintberg (who forwarded to me a set of light bulb jokes he had received from a friend in New York City), Berkeley linguist Nancy Levidow, and my daughter Alison who collected texts from classmates at Harvard. It should be noted that each of the groups named in the light bulb jokes could be the subject of a separate study. For example, Californians, as a group, are featured in analogous jokes—“How many Californians does it take to water a plant? Two. One to pour the Perrier [mineral water] and one to massage the leaves.”

or

Two. One to call her father and the other to open a can of Diet Pepsi.
 Jewish mothers. None. So I'll sit here in the dark.
 Blacks. Hey man, whussa lightbulb?
 Mexicans. Ask me *mañana*, *señor*, if you still want to know.

These are representative although the list is not exhaustive. For example, several texts have been aimed at the Iranians as a means of venting anger over the unwarranted seizure of more than fifty American citizens housed in the U.S. Embassy in Iran:

Ayatollahs. None, they didn't have light bulbs in the thirteenth century.
 Beverly Hills real estate agents. Fourteen. One to screw it in and thirteen to learn Farsi.
 Iranians. One hundred. One to screw it in and ninety-nine to hold the house hostage.

In a joke about the joke cycle, the Iranians are also featured. "The *Village Voice* in New York City ran a light bulb joke contest. First prize was \$200. The winning joke was sent in by the Iranians: 'How many Iranians does it take to screw in a light bulb? You send us the prize money and we'll tell you the answer.' "

Having sampled the tradition, we remain in the dark about why the act of screwing in light bulbs should have been selected as a base metaphor for a joke cycle. I believe the efficacy of the metaphor turns on the word "screw." To screw is a common slang term for the conduct of sexual intercourse. And this very usage is found in the light bulb cycle itself. In one version of "How many Californians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?" the answer is: "None. They screw in hot tubs (or Jacuzzi's)." (In northern California, this same joke is told about Marin County residents, rather than Californians.) In another light bulb joke "How many Lilliputians does it take to screw in a light bulb?" the answer is "Two. You just put them in a light bulb and let them do it." In the published anthology, we find "What's the difference between a pregnant woman and a lightbulb? You can unscrew the light bulb!" and "How many mice does it take to screw in a light bulb? Two (with a drawing of two mice engaged in intercourse—in a human face-to-face position)."

The underlying sexual nature of the light bulb joke cycle suggests that the jokes are essentially about impotence. Sexual impotence is a common enough theme of oral (and written) humor. To be sure, some of the light bulb jokes have more to do with delineating alleged stereotypic features of various groups than with anything else. My point is rather that the basic premise of an individual's having trouble screwing in a light bulb has a definite sexual connotation. In addition to the nuances of the verb "screw," one might also mention the phrase "turn on." To "turn on" means to become emotionally aroused either through drugs or through sexual attraction. Thus someone who needs help in "turning on" a light by "screwing"

a bulb into a light socket is someone who is sexually inept. Please keep in mind that this double sense of "screwing in light bulbs" is explicitly signalled in the "They screw in hot tubs" text cited above as well as in the feminist text treating the violation of the socket.

Most of the stereotypes delineated in the light bulb cycle are not new. The cutthroat competition surrounding admission into medical schools which causes students to actually go so far as to sabotage fellow students' experiments in chemistry labs so that the saboteurs will finish higher on the class grade curve is unfortunately a sad fact of undergraduate academic life. The spoiled daughter of indulgent Jewish parents who is unduly concerned with her appearance (nail polish, slimness) and the aggressive rudeness of New Yorkers are much older than the light bulb cycle. The light bulb cycle simply utilized already existing stereotype traditions in American culture. And inasmuch as the light bulb joke itself already existed in the Polack joke cycle, we find that the "new" cycle consists of "recycled" older form and content. Still, the Iranian texts are new, having been sparked by the American shame and fury over the Iranian government's holding American citizens hostage for billions of dollars. And the articulation of older stereotypes in the light bulb joke format also represent something new. Folklorists are accustomed to seeing endless combinations of new and old elements in a given item of folklore.

One question we have not yet answered is why the light bulb cycle came to be so popular at the end of the 1970s. The sexual significance of screwing, assuming that it is valid, would not in and of itself explain why the cycle arose when it did. It could theoretically have arisen at any time as far as fears of sexual impotence are concerned. That is hardly a new anxiety peculiar to the late 1970s. My hunch is that the cycle is about power or the lack thereof. Specifically, power in modern times depends upon having sufficient energy resources. Americans have begun to fear that rising oil prices and/or diminishing oil supplies will severely decrease energy supplies ranging from gasoline for automobiles to heating oil for homes or electricity for household appliances. The question is "Will there be enough 'power' to go around?" The burgeoning pressures of increasing population growth around the world suggest that there may well be energy shortages in years to come, just as there are shortages of food and housing now in many parts of the globe. Modern society with its inevitable bureaucracy has made it increasingly difficult to carry out even the simplest tasks. A maze of rules and requirements must be fulfilled before a need can be met. As we become more and more specialized in our work, there are more and more intermediaries in the chain of events intervening between a need and filling that need. Whether one calls an electrician to change a light bulb or one has to wait until an environmental impact report has been filed before changing a bulb, the upshot is the same. The "deferred reward" philosophy remains in effect. One must wait for the light. The Iranians' seizure of American citizens confirms Americans' sense of a lack of power. And the fact that the Iranian government (as opposed to terrorists) demanded exorbitant sums

(e.g., twenty-four billion dollars) before releasing the hostages could have been easily construed as an attempt by Iran to “screw” the United States!

American society has historically had a positive attitude towards change—change is a good thing in a worldview system which places a high premium on progress. And Americans are impatient with the slowness of other societies with respect to change. Yet as the United States becomes enmeshed in more and more webs of conflicting legislation, it becomes harder and harder to implement change. And so it seems to the average American that it has become increasingly difficult for an individual to effect change—social change, political change, technological change, etc. More and more, it is groups, not individuals, which have become the agents of change. And so it is that we can understand the inflation of numbers with respect to how many people (of a particular group) it takes to change a light bulb. In theory, one person can change a light bulb; in practice, it may take more than one to carry out the task.

If the above analysis is at all valid, we can perhaps better understand the popularity of the light bulb jokes. On the one hand, they reflect the age-old theme of sexual impotence, a metaphor which lends itself easily to minority groups seeking power. But on the other hand, they may reflect a widespread malaise Americans share about energy supplies and the power that comes from energy. The simple necessities such as cheap gasoline and electricity, once taken for granted, are now in some jeopardy. Without electricity, we will all be unable to screw in lightbulbs to any useful purpose. We shall all join the Jewish mother who complainingly sits in the dark. Add to this the American concern about losing political power in the world and about the individual’s losing power to control his own destiny and we can see other reasons why the cycle might have mass appeal. We should not be misled by the presence of particular groups named in the cycle for when we joke about the impotence of others, we are joking about our own potential lack of sexual and political power.

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*University of California
Berkeley, California*