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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CEAUȘESCU JOKES

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Abstract: Political humour, as an indispensable part of popular culture, played a complex role under communism in Romania. It was a catalyst of the general discontent towards the catastrophic effects of Ceaușescu's megalomaniac dictatorship, a forbidden, dangerous means of expressing opposition. This dynamic part of folklore captured and exposed essential aspects of life in communism, from the permanent fear of the Securitate to the ever-growing ridicule of the presidential couple and their acolytes. Unforgiving jokes targeting the Ceaușescus, now almost forgotten, rendered the grotesque portraits of the abusive, illiterate leaders of a totalitarian regime, radically contrasting with the official discourse that glorified them as heroes of socialism and parents of the nation. Drawing from a rich body of theoretical approaches to political humour and, particularly, political folklore, I intend to critically reread Romanian political humour of the communist era regarding Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu in order to question its role in transforming the public perception of autocratic power. Authors such as Egon Larsen, Dana Maria Nicolescu Grasso, Christie Davies and Elliott Oring, among others, have closely explored the complex territory of this limited yet significant cultural realm. I also intend to explore its specific traits as a potentially particular genre and re-evaluate some divergent theoretical stances that view gallows humour in a dictatorial regime either as a concrete protest or as a means of rerouting and defusing resentment. The creative richness of this rather dominant part of Romanian political humour of the 70s and 80s could reveal a unique territory in which caricature is nurtured by everyday despair.

Keywords: Romanian communism, dictatorship, political humour, censorship, postcommunism.

The Ceaușescu jokes dominated political folklore for almost three decades, from his ascension to the highest position in the Romanian communist state, in 1974, as president¹, until the late 1990s, when the turmoil of Romanian transition to a new political and economic order gradually shifted the focus of humour to other plots and characters. No longer forbidden, its main villains dead, the corrosive humour targeting Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena – “the odious and the sinister,” as they were popularly called – lost its prevalence and subversive appeal. Historically dated, as the greatest part of political humour inevitably becomes, this specific type of folklore no longer reflects the mind-set, values and dissent of its age. However, its richness, diversity and impact transgress the limited role it once had, as receptacle, or, on the contrary, diffuser of popular dissent. A verbal construct, wit is, indeed, as Egon Larsen concisely remarked, a weapon, but it is a problematic one – oppressive power, the main target of political humour, is not easy to destabilize, at least not with symbolic ammunition. I intend to question some major theoretical premises regarding political humour, almost integrally applicable to humour concerning Romanian totalitarianism as well: its role as protest against autocratic power, as a means to mirror and express dissent (without necessarily involving an overt remonstrative intention) and as a means to re-route actual revolt instead of channelling it towards actual political protest.

Indeed, a joke could land one in jail in communism, under the incidence of the infamous 209 article of the penal code that criminalized “conspiracy against social order”. This did not prevent an immensely rich folklore from flourishing, generating sub-species focused on specific aspects of communist life – the endless lines in front of grocery stores, the precariousness of everyday life, encompassing food shortages, lack of electricity, heating, hot water, the Securitate and its one million informers in the 1980s, the Party ideology and its impact on the general population, the nomenclature and the struggle for influence and power inside its highest ranks. Above all, like a pinnacle of hilarity, there were the jokes mocking

¹ Ceaușescu’s rise to power and his efforts to discourage and block opposition are documented in Dennis Deletant’s *Ceaușescu and the Securitate* (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 1995).

the leader and his wife. His longevity, verbal tics and gestures, their decrepitude, her greed, bad taste and lack of basic intellectual ability, all became the landmarks of a massive repository of secret jokes, anecdotes and rhymes. Laughing at power in communist Romania meant, in a basic sense, laughing at the dictatorial couple and the ideology that served them. However, this tendency towards caricature was far from gratuitous, as the Ceaușescus were not benign comical figures. There was a clear symbolically vindictive component in the manner they were portrayed in jokes, as the official propaganda portraiture would systematically conceal their real age, presenting them as decades younger looking, and their public interventions benefitted from the support and assistance of countless specialists supervising every minute detail.

Another relevant, although not central, aim of this exploration of political humour in Romanian communism is to scrutinize the specific part of humour targeting both Ceaușescus, as I consider it harbours elements pertaining to a particular Romanian framework of the genre. Romanian communism bears unique traits, as the personality cult of its leader and his consort gained pharaonic proportions similar to those of the North Korean leaders Ceaușescu started to emulate at the beginning of the 1970s. Romania was singular in the Eastern Bloc from more than one perspective – the very low living standards of the general population, along with a prompt and efficient repressive apparatus that annihilated any intention of opposition gave the country the profile of an impoverished land controlled by a totalitarian regime that would preserve its extreme authority at all costs. The myriad aspects of this multifaceted, intricate historical reality nourished an equally singular political folklore. It shared many common themes and collective characters with anti-communist political humour from other Soviet-controlled countries, but the element that distinguished it was the richness and diversity of the Ceaușescu jokes. They could be assumed as a veritable trademark of Romanian political humour during communism specifically due to the manner in which they captured the nuanced complexity of the figures of the supreme leader and his wife.

Indeed, all political folklore in history included jokes directed at leaders, it is not a communist trademark. What is specific of communism is the relationship of the joke teller to the participants sharing a dangerous moment – that of laughing at power, at that moment an act punishable by law. The cultural value of this niche should be reconsidered and revisited from a memorial perspective as well.

The Ceaușescu jokes are no longer in circulation, as recent history deactivated their role as hidden, small scale, yet pertinent protest. However, they have the remarkable potential to preserve essential traits of the portraits of both Ceaușescus, as they persist in collective memory. The historical figures of the dictator and his wife are incomplete without the once carnivalesque laughter they elicited – from his apparent wish to become immortal to her infamous glorification as a renowned savant and mother of the nation. Popular consciousness commonly viewed dictators and their wives as a united front, held together by their common background and goals. As Vladimir Tismăneanu observes in his opening argument to the Romanian edition of *The Sinister Lady. The Widow of the Albanian Dictator Enver Hoxha* (Balliu 2009), the wives of totalitarian rulers are “humans of a special substance, willing to tolerate or even encourage the most abject tendencies their husbands might have” (Tismăneanu 9). With the exception of Nadia Allilueva, Stalin’s second wife, who tragically committed suicide, the life partners of dictators shared their husbands’ views and, almost as a rule, directly contributed to their implementation. Tismăneanu invokes many notable examples: Lotte Ulbricht, the wife of Walter Ulbricht, head of the German Democratic Republic, “Mme Mao,” clearly referring to Mao Zedong’s fourth and last wife, Jiang Qing, Jovanka Broz, Nina Petrovna Hruščiova, Jeannette Vermeersch-Thorez and Nilde Iotti² (Tismăneanu 10).

The Romanian collective imagination could not, therefore, separate Ceaușescu from his influential spouse³. They would customarily be referred to as “them”, as they seemed to form an indissoluble unit, supporting and empowering one another. In jokes, their names would resound their humble southern peasant origins, as they would often be referred to as “nea Nicu” and “Leana”. “Cabinet 2” was Elena’s office in the Central Committee building, situated in the immediate proximity of the presidential “Cabinet 1”. There are few published official documents concerning her political activity, besides the enormous body of homage literature dedicated to her, gradually expanding since the late ‘70s, when her

² The last two women were the wives of Western communist party rulers Maurice Thorez and, respectively, Palmiro Togliatti.

³ In 1989, up to her execution by firing squad on December 25th, Elena Ceaușescu had 12 official functions in various scientific and executive state organizations; see also Lavinia Betea, *Ultimul an din viața Elenei Ceaușescu (The Last Year of Elena Ceaușescu’s Life)*, Corint, 2018: 19.

personality cult grew alongside her husband's⁴. Of particular importance is, in this sense, the disclosure and partial publication of her agenda for the year 1989 (Betea 2018), revealing her close-knit political entourage, a rigorously repetitive daily routine and, supremely, her direct involvement in the repression of protesters in Timișoara, starting on December 17, 1989 (Betea 278-86). Owing to a traditionalist, patriarchal representation of female agency, popular imagination held Elena morally responsible for her husband's tyrannical actions. Her scientific imposture would be relentlessly reaffirmed in various manners, and, although a minor incident, her alleged mispronunciation of the CO₂ formula earned her an everlasting nickname that would resurface during her trial⁵. Although their documentary value is debatable, since they could easily be regarded as self-interested defensive stances of little historical and academic value, the memoirs of former communist ministers and party members such as Ion Mihai Pacepa and Dumitru Popescu are not without relevance in revealing Elena Ceaușescu's concealed, more private persona. They ostensibly paint the image of a power-hungry uneducated woman with a strong tendency toward envy, resentment and promiscuity. Folklore hyperbolized these traits into a monstrous avatar that would captivate the imagination of the late 1970s and 1980s. Taken out of the challenging context of everyday life in communism, jokes may appear as a vast framework for caricature, as both Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were mercilessly ridiculed by jokesters. In order to comprehend their impact, one must become aware of their actual backdrop.

Although essential to the political folklore or late Romanian communism, jokes have often been discarded as a lesser issue among the factors that shaped the real, mostly unspoken attitude of Romanians toward the communist regime. The minority of the act is contradicted by the severity of the punishment – joking about the regime was a form of transgression that could lead to arrest, imprisonment or forced labour. Although the effectiveness of humour as protest could be disputed, mocking any aspect of communist life involved a significant risk. As I underlined

⁴ Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković explores the origins and development of Elena Ceaușescu's political cult in "Elena Ceaușescu's personality cult and Romanian television," *Balkanica*, 48, 2017: 343-360.

⁵ According to the transcript of the brief trial held at an army garrison in Târgoviște, on December 25th 1989, the defense attorney Constantin Lucescu ironically mentioned "our dear leaders, the great world-renowned scholar, «codoi», pardon me for saying that". Available online https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Stenograma_procesului_Ceau%C8%99escu. Accessed on March 12th 2019.

before, there is a solid shared territory of political folklore among the nations behind the Iron Curtain – a joke about NKVD practices would resurface in Romania as a joke about the Securitate, and most communist leaders would be mocked as vicious, megalomaniac tyrants. Historically, jokes about the communist order began to circulate in the former USSR at the end of the 1920s, the process of their creation and dissemination continuing until the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In her extensive study concerning “political jokes in the countries of real socialism,” Dana Maria Niculescu Grasso reveals that political humour focused on communism flourished in a vast geographical area that included not only the Eastern Bloc, but also remote areas such as Cuba, China and Vietnam (Niculescu Grasso 18). Their role as vehicles of disagreement towards official rule could easily be extended to agents of social cohesion – if political joke telling was illegal, participants would be bound by their complicity. Much like the forbidden humour of ages past, jokes about Romanian communism were told cautiously, “with a keen eye as to who is within listening distance” (Brandes 335). This type of non-conforming activity was well known to authorities, and this imaginary dialogue lies at the core of a joke tackling the 10-15 years sentence one could get for deriding the communist order:

A comrade asked the party secretary:

“Comrade, why do comrades who tell political jokes get 15 years, and those who listen get 10 years? Why are those who neither tell nor listen still being locked up?”

“Because they don’t take part in the life of the organization”⁶ (Itu 10).

A similar joke directly includes Ceaușescu, and turns a joke about illegal humour into an irreverent remark about the dictator’s sexual politics, indirectly alluding to the official control of reproduction beginning in 1966:

Work visit at a correction facility. Ceaușescu wants to know who had received the harshest sentence and why. An elderly, thin man is brought in. The director informs Ceaușescu that the man had been condemned for telling political jokes, including jokes about the general secretary himself.

⁶ Unless specified otherwise, all translations of Romanian jokes are mine.

“If you tell me a joke that does not involve me, I will pardon you!” Ceaușescu promises. After a brief moment of thinking, the man put on a brave face and says:

“Comrade Elena Ceaușescu is pregnant.”

“And what is the punchline?” Ceaușescu says nervously.

“The punchline is that it does not involve you,” the man smiles, looking at comrade Bobu⁷ (Itu 32).

It has also become commonplace to invoke the quip about the workers who built the Danube-Black Sea Canal – those who told jokes about communism worked on the right side, those who listened – on the left. Another one, so famous that a collection of jokes published abroad in the 1980s borrowed its punchline for its title (“First Prize-Fifteen Years...”) told of a competition during communism where the 3rd prize for a great joke would be 100 lei, the second-1000 lei and the first prize would be 15 years. Alan Dundes, the folklorist who co-edited this cardinal collection of communist jokes and published it in the United States in 1986, later argued, in a study on the war lore concerning another dictatorial figure, Saddam Hussein, that jokes are “veritable fictional bullets firing a constant barrage at a repressive system and its leadership” (Dundes and Pagter 1991). Dundes’ co-editor, symbolically named C. Banc⁸, is a woman who emigrated to the West, carrying in her luggage a collection of three hundred jokes concerning all aspects of communist life in Romania, exposing the multiple “facets of grim Communist suppression” (Bendix 218). A singular editorial event in the years before the 1989 Revolution, Dundes and Banc’s volume is an important cultural vehicle, exporting into the West one of the most significant Romanian folklore products of the 1980s. In Ben Lewis’ view, communist humour was the greatest cultural achievement of that era (Lewis 268).

The scholarship concerning political humour is vast and varied, and it reunites often contradictory perspectives upon the role of jokes in the downfall of communism. It is difficult to discern among the arguments that either give political jokes a power that in fact they never had (as weapons that undermined totalitarian regimes, preparing the ground for their downfall) or completely dismiss them as restricted group expressions of otherwise well founded dissent that dissipated their

⁷ This joke is a cultural product of the 1980s, when Emil Bobu’s allegiance to Elena Ceaușescu reached its zenith; a woman in her 70s, Elena was far from her reproductive prime, but the obvious humorous exaggeration is meant to target both Ceaușescu’s lack of control over his family (and, implicitly, the country) and Bobu’s legendary servitude.

⁸ “Banc” in Romanian means “joke”.

power in small-scale irrelevant discharge of feeling instead of opting for real protest and revolt. A brief critical revision of these theoretical positions concerning political humour is necessary in order to reach valid conclusions about their grounding and perspectives. One of the most debated opinions was that it actively undermined the official order, ultimately leading to its long-awaited collapse. To support this argument, its proponents would frequently quote Orwell out of context as a believer in the revolutionary power of jokes – “Every joke is a tiny revolution”⁹ – although the writer was in fact criticizing the softness of modern British humour, without making a direct reference to the revolutionary potential of political jokes. Researchers exploring the impact of political humour on the actual historical course of communism seem to follow two distinct patterns, as Ben Lewis argues in his investigation of the issue. He distinguished two major types of critics who considered jokes relevant for the history of communism – minimalists and maximalists (Lewis 26). As expected, minimalists followed a Freudian interpretation of humour, in which joke-telling reveals truths and beliefs that cannot be openly expressed, their purpose being that of liberating the mind from the pressure of interdiction. From this perspective, political humour may have provided moments of relief, but did very little to undermine the system and its overpowering authority. On the contrary, maximalists would argue that humour had an undeniable corrosive power that contributed to the downfall of totalitarian regimes. They believe it must have undermined the political system at grassroots, maintaining a slow burning disapproval of the official doctrine. Indeed, political folklore reflects, to a certain degree, the interests, anxieties and attitudes of a given historical interval, it does elicit reaction, as opposed to apathy, but it does not directly lay the ground for revolutions. The Romanian case needs a brief clarification: decades after anti-communist jokes lost their forbidden appeal, they should, nevertheless, be considered reflectors and revealing cultural products of their age. Implicitly, the historical figures of the Ceaușescu could hardly be separated from the rich folklore that mocked them incessantly. Egon Larsen argues that “jokes assume the role of the vox populi in countries and periods lacking free

⁹ “A thing is funny when — in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening — it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution. If you had to define humour in a single phrase, you might define it as dignity sitting on a tin-tack. Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny.” Leader, 28 July 1945, cited from www.nonsenselit.org/Lear?essays?orwell_2.html. Accessed on March 20, 2019.

elections” (Larsen 2) although this collective voice is publicly silent and reinforces closed circuits of trust, without reaching the actual source of distress – party officials and the presidential couple. There is a strong sense of futility that accompanies political humour in totalitarian regimes, thus including it in the realm of “gallows humour,” as an epitome of bitter laughter. In an older, yet not outdated analysis of the genre, Antonin J. Obrdlik speculates that “gallows humour is an unmistakable index of good morale and of the spirit of resistance of the oppressed people” (1942, 712). It is noteworthy that Obrdlik wrote his study during the Second World War, before its horrors became widely known and before Eastern Europe was engulfed by Soviet communism. In the particular case of Romanian political humour, it could be argued that, besides expressing disagreement with the official ideology, it would also often trivialize the severity of the social problems the general population had to face on a daily basis. If the jokes targeting the Ceaușescu doubtlessly expressed disapproval towards concrete figures of authority, a characteristic that could marginally include them in the sphere of protest, there’s a significant amount of jokelore deriding other aspects of life in communism that may have had a contrary effect – instead of expressing refusal and protest, they may have made the unacceptable tolerable by laughter. Romanians mirrored the hardships of everyday life in a rich and diverse humorous register, yet humour could be, at most, included among the strategies of mental survival that eased the burden of the last decade of communism.

In a recent exploration of political humour in China, King-fai Tam and Sharon R. Wesoky argue that “political humour captures and capitalizes on the dissatisfaction of society, but by articulating feelings of seething hostilities, it ends up reducing them” (Tam and Wesoki 2). My position is that a definitive, non-contradictory answer to the question of the specific role political humour had during communism in Romania is difficult, if not impossible to give at the moment. I believe that the issue lies on a massive paradox – politically charged laughter coexisted with one of the harshest, strictest and ultimately most repressive dictatorships Eastern Europe had in the 20th century. It spans across a quarter of a century, with aftershocks still perceptible decades after its actual demise. The history of the Romanian Revolution is still being written, as new aspects and data surface from the enormous material of files, depositions and legal actions pertaining to the last days of December 1989. The same clarity needed to fully comprehend

these events is required when investigating the countless steps that preceded and prepared it. Political humour may have morphed in various ways the anger and resentment at the official ideology and its repressive means of rule and control, but it could hardly be considered the major vector of collective angst that gave rise to a revolution. It clearly contributed to some decisive factors announcing it, but its real active role was rather symbolic. Conclusively, it is undeniable that political folklore was a significant reservoir that accumulated, transformed and influenced public perceptions of the official ideology and its leaders. In the lack of concrete data concerning the population involved and the magnitude of the folklore they created, the impact of political humour can only be speculated on and approximated.

Beyond these intricacies, laughter was one of the very few, albeit minor, outlets of private popular discontent in Romanian communism and this could indicate, contrary to Obrdlik's statement, that people had, at least momentarily, abandoned any active initiative that could challenge the regime. More recently, Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa stated that "rather than provoking and inducing social and political change, humour serves mainly two functions: it conveys criticism against the political status quo and it recycles and reinforces dominant values and views on politics" (Tsakona and Popa 2). Moreover, it could be seen as a strong, cohesive factor, one that strengthens a pre-existing collective identity (Hart 19), reflecting the beliefs, values, and strategies of facing adversity of that group, be it a specific population or a nation. Telling dangerous jokes was, as Christie Davies argues, "a way of testing and achieving interpersonal trust" (Davies 10). Shared by millions, misfortune appears ineluctable and permanent, it "assumes a kind of inevitability about which one can do nothing, like the weather or death" (Speier, "Wit" 1354); since it cannot be overcome, it can be, at least, belittled by laughter. It is Hans Speier's firm opinion that "ridicule is... a weapon" (Speier, *Force* 182), in an apparent agreement with Larsen's title of a history of political jokes – *Wit as Weapon*. However, Speier claims that humour could be a weapon if used by someone in power, not by those who endure oppression. For them, corrosive humour is just a means to relieve the painful awareness of their vulnerability (Speier 182), and, even the expression of a "failure to revolt" (Speier, "Wit" 1395). Contradicting theories that assimilate political joke-telling to resistance and silent protest, Elliot Oring, in his rigorous exploration of political humour in repressive regimes (Oring 2004; 2016) argues that this cathartic practice could, in

fact, replace and discourage actual opposition. He recalls his experience with two informants who decided to leave the USSR in the 1970s; once their plans to leave materialized and preparations were real, they were no longer inclined to participate in the subversive social ritual of joke telling. “Any enhancement of mood, any exaltation of self – afforded by the jokes, may have been bought at the expense of real action” (Oring, *Joking* 127). To a certain extent, he concludes, joking may have replaced concrete opposition and therefore could be “characterized as more a technology of domination than resistance” (Oring 127). Oring’s strict position contains an excessive amount of denial, invalidating the influence and persistence of a phenomenon that clearly expressed a relevant part of collective consciousness and imagination.

Robert Cochran, who came to Romania in 1985 as a Fulbright fellow and published his work on imagology in 1989, in the months before the Revolution, briefly summarized that “if you knew all the jokes, you’d know everything important” (Cochran 230). He also believed that “Romanians express themselves most characteristically and most profoundly in their joking” (Cochran 260), and he extended the observation from the limited interval he visited Romania to “their history, and perhaps even their temperament” (Cochran 260). An interesting comparison could be drawn with Chinese political humour, as Romanian communism shared certain characteristics with Chinese Maoist ideology. Xue-liang Ding (Davis et al. 27) noted that humour was silenced by rigid political measures in China, it flourished and started to have an expressive function only once the rigidity of political regulations was loosened. It could be argued that, on the contrary, the Romanian case involved an expansion of humorous strategies in the face of political adversity. The control of public discourse in China has been closely supervised, since 1949, by the *China Broadcasting Administration Office, Broadcasting Bureau*, later rebranded as *The National Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television Administration*, closely monitoring the use of language in all public contexts and seeking to impose “hegemonic notions of how language can and should be used” (Tam and Wesoki 2).

The Romanian culture of communist jokes targeted specific, stringent aspects of everyday life, and without them, the Ceaușescu jokes, exposing the failures and ridicule of a naked emperor, would not be complete. Romanian communist jokelore forms a complex system, nurtured by an insatiable popular

desire to symbolically attack an order that seemed everlasting and unyielding. As I argued before, symbolic action is insufficient in the face of totalitarian power – jokes may help shape a certain mental frame, but they need to be part of a systematic strategy for direct action in order to validate their value as protest and revolt. They clearly belonged to the realm of protest in the sense they expressed collective disagreement and dissent towards the official doctrine, but their impact was limited to a moral, ineffable dimension. As Gregor Benton argued in his investigation of the origins of the political joke, the very source of humour in this case emerges from the conflict between the public, dissimulative façade and the hidden truth of the private sphere (Benton 1988). However, the debate around political humour must not elude the fact that its role is essentially that of releasing tension, not of accumulating it. Political humour under dictatorship may alter this general assumption in the sense that this particular type of humour is a complex response to oppression, therefore its role should be discussed starting from the radical nature of its defining context.

The memorial value of communist folklore has not been debated sufficiently, although Romanian communist jokes have been collected, published in various editions, and have been the object of academic research for more than two decades. As Tzvetan Todorov noted in his seminal study *The Uses and Abuses of Memory*, the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century have revealed “the existence of a danger never before imagined: the blotting out of memory” (Todorov 2014, 11). The memory of the past is also endangered by historical distance, and forgetting trauma, minor or major, even from relatively recent decades, as it is the case with Romanian communism, is a rather common phenomenon. Numerous historical accounts detail the Ceaușescus’ aura of ridicule, malevolence and the absurd expansion of their ever-growing personality cult. However, jokes aimed at him and Elena have not permeated their “official” portraits, as revealed by various memorial and historical accounts. It is doubtless that jokes, as oral folklore, are dramatically ephemeral. They last as long as the subject of derision is relevant to collective imagination. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the December Revolution, and, at the same time, of the demise of the Ceaușescus. The once luxurious jokelore surrounding the presidential couple and their rule is no longer active, and only a few editions of collected jokes published in the 1990s are still available in libraries. There’s an abundance of “Ceaușescu and his times” jokes online, but the political humour

circulating in social media rarely targets the former leader. Still, the Ceaușescus are far from absent from contemporary political commentary, but more often than not they are invoked ironically. His compulsive hand waving and her false academic reputation surface when contemporary Romanian political figures seem to follow in their footsteps.

A dense mythology surrounded the Ceaușescu couple, with rumours ranging from the outrageous to the prosaic constantly flaring up. Following Seth Benedict Graham's terms, "neo-mythological strategies of image-construction" (Graham 2003, 5) were greatly involved in projecting both the public and hidden, presumably "real" image of the leaders. The issue of the immense fortune they allegedly hid in foreign accounts resurfaced during their trial¹⁰, his physical ailments and her mood swings being part of their grim mystery, persisting after their death. Indeed, she was "infinitely more hated than the President" (Greenwald 33), although she was "the object of a personality cult that rivals that of the 68-year-old President" (Greenwald 1986). There was a popular undercurrent speculating that he was heavily influenced by Elena and by a tight entourage of party officials, otherwise he would have struggled to be a good president. The underground culture of political humour promptly contradicted the myth that Ceaușescu was not completely aware of the poverty Romanians lived in during the 1980s. In fact, he must have been cynically aware of the dire living conditions following his decision to pay the entire external debt of the country (21 billion dollars), as one joke claims:

One day, on his way to the airport, Ceaușescu sees a line of waiting citizens. He orders his driver to stop. "Find out what they are waiting for," he demands. The whole motorcade pulls over, and soon the driver returns with the answer. "The people are waiting for bread". "My people should not wait for bread," thunders the concerned leader. "Let there be bread immediately!" Sure enough, a truck of bread appears in no time and bread is distributed. (The same happens a few minutes later when Ceaușescu sees another line, with people waiting for eggs). Very soon,

¹⁰ "Prosecutor: «Mr. President (of the court, i.e.), I have a question. Let the defendant Nicolae Ceaușescu tell us about the 400,000 dollar account.»
The judge: «400 million dollars in Switzerland.»
Elena Ceaușescu: «What account?»
Prosecutor: «In whose name is it, who does it belong to?»
Both defendants: «What account?»"

Excerpt from the trial of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, available online at https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Stenograma_procesului_Ceau%C8%99escu. Accessed on March 15th 2019.

however, the President spots a third line, the longest yet. Again he stops, sending the driver to investigate. “The people are waiting for meat”. For a moment, Ceaușescu is silent, but finally he speaks with the same authority as before. “Bring my people chairs!” he says (Cochrane 264).

Potentially the most active and widely shared collective fantasy concerned the death of Ceaușescu and Elena, and each had their own dedicated jokes, as if to grant people the pleasure to enjoy the prospect of their demise twice. The 12th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, held in November 1979 was a remarkable event, as it was the stage of a rare conflict: Ceaușescu was openly confronted by Constantin Pârvulescu, a party member who openly disagreed with the president’s obviously despotic tendencies. Following this rather unique occurrence, a joke captured the popular wish that the dictator be eliminated like a parasite:

During the 12th Congress, a rat is found in the main hall. Rising from their seats, a few participants start shouting:

“Kill him! Kill him!”¹¹

A comrade who had fallen asleep, jumps up and screams:

“Her too! Her too!” (Itu 8)

By far the richest niche of the Ceaușescu joke lore, death jokes may even reverberate forbidden religious tones. “Rumour” jokes were particularly popular during communism in Romania, as official information could not be trusted. In an irreverent comparison to a despised deity, Ceaușescu should bear the same fate and be sacrificed, too:

It was rumoured that the Pope in Rome asked that Ceaușescu be sacrificed, as he met all the criteria for that purpose: he was born in a stable, he spoke to wise men when he was a little boy, he was all-knowing and almighty and above all, 23 million people wanted him to ascend into the heavens (Itu 15).

¹¹ In Romanian, there is no clear distinction between objects/animals and people for the 3rd person singular Accusative form; I opted for a literal translation (“him”, instead of “it”) so that the punchline is clear.

During the late 1980s, as the aging Ceaușescu seemed in relatively good health, the myth of their immortality animated the underground folklore of political jokes. Customarily, on New Year's Eve, the president would deliver his address to the nation. A short joke revealed a sinister prospect in a manner reminding of the monotonous news broadcasts on communist times TV. Their flat tonality made any ideological mystification seem real and acceptable, and the joke implicitly mocks this aspect, too:

New Year's Eve, the year 2000. Ceaușescu is on TV before midnight, and, with a sad demeanour, he announces:

“After a long and difficult struggle, the Romanian people has died” (Itu 12).

On the same note, another widely known joke would reaffirm his exasperating longevity:

While on a trip to an African country, Ceausescu wanted to buy a souvenir from a store.

“I want something special”, Ceaușescu said.

“I recommend a turtle.”

“How long does it live?”

“200-300 years.”

“I won't buy it, then. It would pain me to see it die” (Itu 23).

Since Elena's public verbal interventions were less regular than her husband's, her posture would often be derided, along with her hairstyle and fashion choices. Her habit of keeping her hands clenched over her lower abdomen while standing next to Ceaușescu was often laughed at in no uncertain terms, correlated with her long-anticipated death:

A journalist asked the academician [Elena Ceaușescu]:

“Why are you keeping your hands together on your...”

“That is the way I relax after my scientific activity.”

“It would be better if you held them crossed on your chest, so that the whole nation could relax!” (Bancuri din “epoca de aur”, no. 183)

Along with her lack of education and eagerness to receive undeserved academic titles, Elena was mocked for her luxurious wardrobe, comprising rare furs and designer items. Either she or Ceaușescu himself would be the protagonist of a joke deriding her expensive tastes:

During a “friendly”¹² state visit in Africa, Ceaușescu was invited to a crocodile hunt¹³. After shooting some crocodiles, Ceaușescu threw them back into the water. Confused, the hunter officer asked:

“Why did you throw them back after shooting them, Comrade?”

“Leana asked me to bring her crocodile shoes. I looked at each one of them, but none had shoes” (Itu 9).

No matter how despised their political manner was, the Ceaușescus were immensely ridiculed for their intellectual pretence. Nicolae’s beginnings as a cobbler’s apprentice were often revived in various humorous contexts, a famous one depicting the couple fighting over Elena having thrown Nicolae’s diploma work in the garbage – a humble pair of shoes. His academic modesty would be purposely placed in contrast with her scientific glory, as another “couples talk” joke shows:

Lenutsa, glancing at herself admiringly in the mirror:

“Did you ever fancy, Nicu, while you were resoling boots in your small chamber, that one day you’d marry an academician?” (Itu 19).

Her lack of minimal orientation in a field she claimed to master – she was, in a formula repeated ad nauseam during the 1970s and 1980s, an “academician doctor engineer” – and the questionable manner in which she finished her studies and earned her PhD title generated a major popular response, materialized as unforgiving laughter. Her alleged inability to pronounce basic chemical formulas became the main subject of many jokes. Dialogue is especially important in such an instance, as it directly involves the actual protagonist and favours a direct focus on her presence:

¹² State visits to other communist countries (or dictatorial regimes) would frequently be called, in the official language of the regime “friendly” visits.

¹³ Hunting was one of Ceaușescu’s favorite activities, as documented by Lavinia Betea, in *The Last Year...* (55).

Leana was returning from a trip abroad. At the border, she was asked to present her documents. The customs officer saw the passport with the name of Elena Ceaușescu and he couldn't believe his eyes. Presuming the passport was fake, he asked the customs director to intervene. He looked at the papers, then at the woman, he thought of something and said:

“Tell us what is H₂O?”

“How do you want me to know your business?”

“It's alright, the customs director said. She may go. It is her.” (Itu 19)

Separately and together, the Ceaușescus were the emblematic “village idiots” in most jokes that concerned them. Contrasting their actual intellectual ability with their false reputations as world-renowned academics¹⁴ and communist visionaries, jokes would commonly deplore their lack of basic education:

In bed, at night, Ceaușescu was twisting and turning. Elena angrily snapped at him:

“What are you fussing about? Can't you just sleep?”

“Leana dear, today I read in the paper about the law of gravity and I don't remember giving that law. Do you happen to know?”

“Why are you asking me? You know I'm not into politics, I'm an academician!”

(Itu 4)

Direct address can be a source of humour, as Neal R. Norrick and Claudia Bubel argue (Norrick and Bubel 30). The banter between spouses is, in the case of the Nicu/Leana jokes, even more humorously charged, as the familiar form of address flagrantly contradicts their sombre, oftentimes imperial public personas.

Ceaușescu's speech impediment, along with his obsessive hand waving, became trademarks of his senile deterioration. Unrepentant, people created jokes to immortalize them. Again, for humorous amplification, he is addressed in an official manner:

It was established that in the year 2000 the Olympic Games would take place in Bucharest. At the opening ceremony, Ceausescu gave a speech on behalf of the hosts:

“Ooo, ooo, ooo...”

¹⁴ At the moment, Google Books indexes a few Chemistry papers falsely authored by Elena Ceaușescu, with no separate note that they do not reflect her honest academic effort, but were written by communist party collaborators from Romanian academia.

Someone behind him said:

“Leave that, comrade general secretary. Those are the Olympic circles.” (Itu 36)

The political jokes of communism permeated post-communist literature, most notably surfacing in works such as Herta Müller’s *The King Bows and Kills* (2003, 2005) or Dan Lungu’s *Sînt o babă comunistă (I’m an Old Commie!)*. In Müller’s first autobiographical essay of the volume, *In Every Language There Are Other Eyes* the writer emphasizes that dictatorial power exerted its influence, in Romania as elsewhere, over the essential domain of language. As a consequence, the subversive potential of verbal communication increased to a degree that “regular people would often mock Big Brother by resorting to cunning, contemptuous wordplay” (Müller 35). In Lungu’s novel, a brief chapter is dedicated to some widely popular Ceaușescu jokes told by “Nea Mitu” and the orality of the narrative renders the captivating force of the act, its danger, secretive nature and sheer satisfaction (Lungu 80). The novel faithfully follows key aspects of Romanian everyday life in communism, including anti-system joking among them.

To conclude, although political humour flourished as a consequence of oppression and ideological censorship, its role in shaping collective consciousness and in structuring an active background for the 1989 Revolution is complex, multifaceted and often contradictory. I consider it is still challenging to define the exact role and function anti-establishment jokes had in Romanian communism. As a repository of the various portraits the dictatorial couple imprinted in popular imagination, this rich folklore is a valuable resource connected to a vast cultural domain, predominantly literary. The Ceaușescus had, among other more notable roles, that of a confidential laughingstock.

Indeed, as Robert Cochran noted, in laughter, as in life, they are at the centre (Cochran 260). Although no longer circulating and, inevitably, forgotten by the larger public, this distinct segment of Romanian political humour built around their shared and individual mythology articulates a solid, particular literature revealing the Ceaușescus as they were perceived in their time. Important details of their imaginary autobiography¹⁵ are revealed in jokes, adding depth and vibrancy to their

¹⁵ A remarkable documentary, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010), directed by Andrei Ujică, is an alternative, cinematographic life story of Ceaușescu from his rise to power in 1964 to his final moments in December 1989.

historicized personas. Written and static, the political humour about Ceaușescu is a significant part of a discursive archive preserving the memory of Romanian communism. It informs the present perspective of the past in a distinctive, singular manner, as its ineffable truth, a minor synthesis of its age, speaks of perennial follies and fools.

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