

Laughing Matters: the Cultural Dynamics of Political Jokes in Communist Romania*

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MANY INVESTIGATIONS concerning Communist Romania revealed the core elements that helped forge the shape of a modern age of fear: closed borders, severe censorship, food shortages, deprivation of heat, hot water and electricity, poor medical assistance, the ubiquity of a paranoid megalomaniac dictatorial couple, the unlimited social control of the Securitate Service, to name just a few. Political humour might seem like a lesser issue, compared to the gravity and relevance of those aspects that define a somber recent past, still in the process of being disclosed and interpreted. Yet it goes without saying that folklore and popular culture play a key role in defining the spirit of an age, greatly influencing the beliefs and mentalities of a community or society. Political humour has been a cardinal part of popular culture in totalitarian repressive regimes, of significant influence both on a small scale and in a wider social context.

Historians, sociologists, theorists of culture and humour specialists agree that the act of telling jokes has quite different meanings, according to context: while political humour has been present throughout history, it is particularly those times of oppression that can turn the banal act of laughing at power into a crime. A famous Romanian joke of the last years of Communism divides the workers at the Danube-Black Sea Canal (one of Ceaușescu's monster industrial projects) into two groups: those who told political jokes work on the right bank, those who listened, on the left one.

The present approach is particularly interested in the investigation of the cultural dynamics of political jokes in Romanian Communism, more specifically, in the "Golden Age" of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime. It will focus on a general background of political humour as a means of expressing the *vox populi*¹ and it will try to pinpoint its roles and specific meanings. Even if it accompanied Communism since the 1920s, the relevance of humour grew as censorship and repression became more present and active in everyday life. In Romania, political folklore became even richer and more diverse as

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the personality cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu reached grotesque imperial dimensions and the draconic social politics gradually impoverished citizens to the ultimate limit of daily survival in the mid-1980s.² In a country where the media was the main tool for propaganda, jokes played an important role in expressing emotions and mentalities. While we practically address the same questions as the researchers that significantly contributed to the scholarship on the issue of political humour in repressive regimes and in Communism, we will try to find answers at different levels: what is typical for Romanian political jokes, as compared to those in other Eastern Communist countries? What type of communication did they facilitate? Can this genre of popular culture be considered a clandestine/parallel system that preserved the spirit of a time when creation and communication were viciously altered by an entire system of falsifications and lies? What could a literary perspective on this topic reveal? How could this mode of creation/writing be evaluated from a present perspective, i.e. a post-communist one?

The present contribution will indirectly answer an important concern raised by Marjolein't Hart in her *Introduction to Humour and Social Protest*³ when she raised awareness concerning the pitfalls of such an endeavor, one of them being the fact that “humour can bind but also divide”:⁴ in the case of Communist Romania, political humour had something of the risk and charm of a taboo-breaking act. The binding power of joke-telling is similar to that of any forbidden act, and, in discussing humour in Communist Romania, this should be an important premise. Another famous joke, that later gave the title of a collection of Romanian political jokes published in the US in the ‘80s,⁵ depicts things wittily: “What are the prizes in a contest of political jokes in Romania? Third prize is 100 lei, second prize is 1000 lei, and the first prize is fifteen years.”

As a part of folklore, this type of jokes might be regarded as a blueprint of a historical interval, a relevant set of short narrations that display the underlying processes that define particular moments of history and everyday life. Jokes are important primarily because of “the insights they give us into the particular society in which they are invented and circulated.”⁶ In a most relevant imagological analysis published in the US in the months preceding the 1989 Revolution, former Fulbright fellow Robert Cochran, a visitor of Communist Romania, rightfully concludes: “If you knew all the jokes, you’d know everything important.”⁷

Still, the relationship between political humour as a psychological and social phenomenon and its creators, transmitters, receptors and, no less important, its targets, is quite complex and always worthy of reinvestigation. There is, nevertheless, no theoretical consensus when it comes to the anatomy of political humour in totalitarian regimes—researchers have reached conflicting conclusions concerning the impact of “whispered” political jokes. Any parallel between humour in democratic societies and humour in authoritarian regimes easily reveals the divergent roles⁸ they play under these very different circumstances. In an open society, humour is a legitimate part of public discourse⁹ and it facilitates political communication on multiple levels, while in oppressive systems it takes on many other roles, as we will argue later.

The amount of scholarship regarding political humour is significant, and its specific manifestation in Communism benefitted from the critical attention of numerous researchers. Before investigating the issue of political jokes in Communist Romania, it is more

than necessary to create a theoretical framework that would allow us to understand the role and meaning of this type of humour in the Romanian '70s and '80s. It is the age when Ceaușescu's power reached its pinnacle, followed by a series of events and measures that established his dictatorial status.

In her *Introduction*¹⁰ to *Humour and Social Protest*, where a considerable amount of attention is dedicated to the specific connection between the two autonomous realms mentioned in the title, Marjolein't Hart questions this connection from many perspectives. Her investigation mainly aims at identifying the circumstances that make visible "the power of humour in the framing of political protest"¹¹ and those that favor the employment of humour as a strengthening factor in social protest and as a real instrument of change in social movements. It is significant to point out at this stage of analysis that social protest in Communist Romania was very rare and isolated, therefore political "jokelore," as humourologists call it, needs to be tackled from a different angle, rather as a part of a culture of silent protest and subversion than as a tool of real change. "Jokes are thermometers, not thermostats," concluded Christie Davies, one of the most prominent theorists of humour in a study concerning humour in socialism,¹² once more disagreeing with the often accepted hypothesis that wit might act as a weapon or an agent of social revolt in authoritarian regimes. This is a fortunate formula, since it reunites two potential starting points into one. Humour is always context-bound, and, at a deeper level, it has various sets of social, historical, cultural, ethnic or gender values embedded in its species and genres. Political humour, present throughout history, becomes a dangerous enterprise in repressive regimes, more than other kinds of humour.¹³ Indeed, it flourishes despite obvious dangers, and the impressive number of political jokes circulating in the Eastern Bloc are an important proof for that: while other types of humour remained within normal expansion limits, the political genre was thriving.¹⁴ Alan Dundes, an important anthropologist of political humour, reached a paradoxical conclusion: "the more oppressive the regime, the more numerous the political jokes."¹⁵ To contradict this assertion, Christie Davies points to the fact that more jokes were generated in the less repressive periods of Communism,¹⁶ for the simple reason that in those moments forbidden humour was not a common reason for persecution. However, an interesting complaint circulating in the new Eastern democracies after the fall of Communism was that "while everything else has become better, humor has worsened."¹⁷

Romania shares a great number of jokes with the rest of the Communist countries of Eastern Europe, mainly with the former Soviet Russia, the source of many "imported," then adapted jokes. Romanians created their own political folklore, populated by anti-heroic figures and almost invariably focused on the canonical target of hate, the dictatorial couple. Still, Romanian Communism was seldom contested from the inside. As Vladimir Tismăneanu observes, "dissent in Romania, (. . .) was reduced to quixotic stances, all the more heroic since those who voiced unorthodox views could not count on solidarity or support from colleagues."¹⁸ It is only legitimate to question the role of political jokes in a country where, if we accept that humour and protest might be related in certain contexts, the protests of humour have remained a weak murmur for decades until they shifted to a dramatic tone in December 1989.

It is important to note that, as it has been stressed before,¹⁹ humour in general was encouraged in Communist countries. The type of humour encouraged was, nevertheless, the safe type, one that wasn't even remotely connected to potential irreverence towards the state and its leader: Romania had "Urzica," Slovakia—"Rohac," Russia—"Krokodil," Bulgaria—"Sturshel," Hungary—"Ludas Matyi."²⁰ These were the officially approved humour magazines, and, according to Alexander Rose, they "mostly stuck to caricaturing foreign politicians, inadvertently providing for us a glimpse into official party conceptions of the great abroad."²¹ Adds Christie Davies, "the officially approved humour of totalitarian societies (whether in war or in centrally directed peacetime) tends not to be very funny [and] it is far less successful than the unofficial secret humour of the ordinary people which may well be cynical, mocking or even subversive."²²

Popular culture in Communism was split into two separate realms, following the divide between the utopian official discourse and the radically different realities of everyday life: there was the ideologically altered discourse of approved cultural products²³—patriotic literature for children and youngsters, communist-themed films, traditional musical folklore, politically-oriented musical and literary groups, etc. For most of these controlled official cultural activities and products, there were the underground, unofficial, yet very popular equivalents—foreign fashion and music magazines, action, romance and erotic VHS movies and cartoons, Western pop and rock, folk Balkan and Oriental-inspired music. The arid, aseptic, highly ideologized discourse of popular culture had a varied, colourful and very dynamic counterpart that people really enjoyed. In the same manner, political jokes belong to the realm of the hidden, the whispered and concealed, and are very popular, while official humour fails to entertain its readers or listeners.

While political jokes have a long history and tradition,²⁴ their cultivation and proliferation in repressive regimes have been the subject of an intense debate in recent decades. The territory of clandestine popular culture may harbour subversive acts and it may as well, favor protest, but, in totalitarian regimes, secrecy usually implies a solid barrier that isolates potential protesters in the limited safe perimeters of their private lives.

According to Elliott Oring,²⁵ there are six possible hypotheses concerning the dynamics of political jokes in Communist countries, including the Former Soviet Union. A succinct enumeration and analysis would be of use in order to establish the main theoretical trajectories of the present endeavour.

The first hypothesis, already indirectly dismissed, is the one that does not differentiate political jokes from other types of humour, such as jokes aimed at any other subjects and categories.²⁶ The logical fault of this theory lies in the primary observation that what truly differentiates them from general humour is their background, the psychological motivation and effects inside the group that creates and spreads them. A second, psychoanalytically-endebed hypothesis connects political jokes to an indirect manner of naming truths and realities that could not be openly uttered. Its more elaborate variant, the third of the hypotheses discussed here, connects humour to an essential mental process, that of relieving the individual from the all-encompassing aggression and pressure of society, be it democratic or totalitarian. In Bakhtin's formulation, we must acknowledge "the victory of laughter over fear,"²⁷ hence the role of humour as a constant instrument of mental survival in dicatorial systems.

Dissimulation was rooted in the rituals of everyday life during Communism, and it is only obvious that humour generally functions at a different level of representation than direct clear expression. In a context lacking freedom of speech, “humour helped in getting the message across, assisted in pointing to salient points, attracted attention to adverse conditions.”²⁸ This is a perspective that emphasizes the cathartic role of humour, seen as a mechanism of redirecting frustrations towards a safe exit, preventing a dangerous accumulation of resentment that might lead to actual protest. This is usually seen as “the safety valve theory,”²⁹ one that rejects the popular Orwellian “every joke is a tiny revolution” theory.

While it benefits from the support of prominent scholars (Speier, Davies), this theory has inherent pitfalls, as it was noted by Oring in his study. Its main argument is that political jokes should be regarded as agents of balance, because “their effect was to defuse discontent and to divert the joke-tellers away from serious political action against their rulers. The existence of these pleasing safety valves may even help to prevent an explosion.”³⁰ Speier’s argument, on the other hand, is historically nuanced—humour has long been a manner of adaptation to hostile environments such as prison or the army: “throughout history, whispered jokes have been safety valves, enabling men to reduce the frustrations inflicted through taboos, laws, and conventions.”³¹ Oring’s counter-argument relies on the fact that “it is difficult to register the catharsis or venting that is claimed to result,” while, in fact, it would be virtually impossible to do so. However, it should be noted at this point that the harshness of the regime might increase the intensity of the cathartic process, and Romanian political humour definitely falls into this category.

A fourth hypothesis aims at exposing the inescapable duplicity of life under oppression, one that impregnated humour with bitter self-irony. This theory was promoted by Alexei Yurchak in his 1997 discussion of political humour as means of pointing out “the coexistence of two incongruous spheres, official and parallel, and the subject’s simultaneous participation in both.”³² Yurchak speaks about Soviet Communism, but the cynical tone and lack of hope are present in Romanian jokes as well (Ceaușescu’s apparent immortality was derided in a joke about him trying to buy a pet, but when he is offered a turtle, he refuses it for fear he’d suffer too much when it died at the age of 500), accompanied by a type of humour Yurchak calls “pretense misrecognition.” Citing Sloterdijk’s concept of “humour that has ceased to struggle,”³³ Yurchak argues that humour in Soviet Communism before the implementation of the *perestroika* in the late ‘80s was part of a strategy of adaptation to a false representation of reality: “Thus the logic of the late socialist realm of ridicule was not in resisting, exposing, or ridiculing the officially imposed representation of reality, but rather in *adapting* to it while suspending belief.”³⁴

To complete the previous two theories, a similar hypothesis views political jokes as “an escape, as time off from compulsory ways of talking that in theory even extended to private conversations.”³⁵ Again, the psychological factor is cardinal in grasping the actual involvement of politically charged humour in the strategies of escaping the suffocating effect of surveillance and propaganda. The constant truth is that jokes would communicate the clearly negative feelings people had about the one-party/one-man rule, and, at a deeper level, “they were a welcome reminder that socialism was a mere social construct and not the inevitable order of things.”³⁶

The theory that has been discussed at large in the scholarship, newer or older, dedicated to this subject is the one endowing political jokes with the actual power of real weapons. Not only do they function “as a tribunal” used by “the politically powerless . . . to pass judgments on society” in contexts “where other ways of doing so are closed to them,”³⁷ but they are part of a discourse of protest and they bear the latent potential of a revolutionary act. Orwell’s famous statement, repeatedly quoted along with this hypothesis, was published in the 28 July 1945 issue of *Leader*³⁸ and needs to be properly contextualized—Orwell was discussing 19th century humorous writing, not necessarily political humour.

Communism is not the only political system that was the object of “protest” through the use of humour. The idea that jokes helped maintain a healthy moral level in the general population has been often invoked. In her essay on the involvement of humour in fighting the Nazi occupation of Norway during WWII, Kathleen Stokker claims that jokes played a “vital role in encouraging resistance by portraying resisters as positive role models and emphasizing Nazi stupidity and cruelty.” More than that, according to Stokker, the constant mocking of Nazi occupation “no doubt kept many of the confuse and hesitant from following the more materially rewarding path of joining the Nationalist Socialist Party.”³⁹ In the case of Romanian Communism, creating and transmitting jokes was, according to Niculescu Grasso, a close observer of the phenomenon, “the only way by which the individual and the community react in order to keep their daily tarnished dignity.”⁴⁰

This type of argumentation exceeds the limits of interpretation, expanding the role of a clearly significant mode of communication to unrealistic proportions. Political jokes did express various opinions and beliefs, replacing, up to a point, concrete reaction and protest. However, humour and protest have been a successful binomial for a long time (Egon Larsen’s “wit as a weapon” concept has had a solid critical career) and a possible reason for this might be the need to invest humour with the function of protest, since the degree of repressiveness differed from one age or regime to another—massive protest was almost unthinkable in dictatorships such as Ceaușescu’s. Since it is hard to imagine that a despotic rule of this magnitude would not encounter any opposition, the small island of freedom that was humour is credited with a power that it never really had.

Davies has repeatedly contested this theory, underlining that humour could never be cited among the forces that lead to the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe⁴¹ and that the effect of jokes “would have been trivial in comparison with other more powerful social and political forces.”⁴² The humour—as—protest connection is even more problematic, due to the capacity of the first term of the equation to overshadow the second one. Humour possibly replaced protest in the sense that it started to work as a “psychological alibi,”⁴³ an accommodation with the absurdities of the regime, but cannot be considered its effective and legitimate alternative.

Political jokes in Romanian Communism can be seen as a sign of people’s “failure to revolt”:⁴⁴ they might have functioned as safety valves, helped to release tension induced by Communist oppression, but their effect was far from revolutionary. It is currently a standard opinion that “the political joke will change nothing. . . . It’s not a form of active resistance. It reflects no political programme. It will mobilize on one.”⁴⁵ It takes stronger stimulants to start a revolution and, to cite Speier once more, “in mutinies, the laughing stops.”⁴⁶

A brief inventory of the collections of Romanian jokes can identify the common experiences that nourished political humour in the area and can also facilitate a closer exploration of the cultural extensions of these texts. Chronologically, the first collection that must be mentioned is the one published by C. Banc and Alan Dundes in 1986, *First Prize: Fifteen years! An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes*. C. Banc (the word “banc” means “joke” in Romanian) is the pseudonym of a Jewish Romanian émigré who came to the United States in 1975, bringing along with her a rich collection of political jokes. For obvious reasons, her name and the names of those she heard the jokes from remained anonymous. Her collaboration with Alan Dundes resulted in a dense volume of approximately 300 jokes gathered in ten separate chapters, each corresponding to a specific theme that defines life in Communism. While reviewers appreciated the authors’ effort to make the jokes comprehensible to the Western public, there are clear objections regarding the anthropological and contextual framing of the material: “The jokes here are remembered and told in a drastically different context,” Regina Bendix observes,⁴⁷ while Elliott Oring emphasizes the need for a clearer background: “We are offered no descriptions of the occasions on which these jokes were told or the networks in which they were transmitted.”⁴⁸

The publication of this book in the West, while Communism was approaching, in 1987, in Eastern Europe, its long-awaited collapse, is meaningful at least for its documentary and imagological value. Romanian political jokes were launched on a vast orbit and became part of a universal discourse of wit and humour.

Two years later, Robert Cochran published his study on Romanian political jokelore “What courage!?: Romanian ‘Our Leader’ Jokes,” performing a valuable analysis on the context that transformed jokes into a part of popular culture that “played a vital, even crucial role in contemporary Romanian life.”⁴⁹ Cochran reads a lot into Romanian political jokes and becomes gradually aware of their testimonial importance, and, even more, of their capacity to sublimate essential characteristics of the Romanians as a people. His remarks, although overgeneralizing, indicate the author’s direct interest and nuanced understanding of the role of jokes in a highly oppressive regime: “Romanians express themselves most characteristically and most profoundly in their joking. In the ironies, obliquities, and covert aggressions natural to the genre they find a vehicle suited perfectly to their situation, their history, and perhaps even their temperament.”⁵⁰

After almost 20 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain, journalist and documentarian Ben Lewis published a rather descriptive compilation—study on Communism Jokes, *Hammer and Tickle: The Story of Communism, a Political System Almost Laughed Out of Existence* (Pegasus, 2009). Romania is well represented, there are convincing interventions from informants who provided Lewis the jokes, but the author fails to defend his version of the famous “jokes as weapons” theory. The accessible analytical discourse might encourage a wider number of readers, but, besides a formal contribution to the literature of political humour, the book has little scholarly significance.

Collections published in Romania have a particular significance, since they are part of the same cultural space as jokes are. None of them were printed during Communism, though. Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, an engineer at the Bucharest Transport Administration, collected almost a thousand political jokes between 1979 and 1989 and published

them in 1991 under the title *Zece ani de umor negru românesc*⁵¹ (*Ten years of Black Humour in Romania*). An engineer with a strong interest in sociology and statistics, Ștefănescu not only wrote the jokes he heard in various circumstances (eavesdropping on the bus or during the long hours of queuing for food), but he also wrote details about those who told them—age, social group—and synthesized the data he gathered in a percentage table. The author's conclusions are amateuristic, but they bear a certain amount of truth. For example, as he declared in an interview,⁵² he noticed that as living conditions worsened at the beginning of the '80s, there were less jokes about Ceaușescu and more about the long lines outside groceries or about the ways in which food was being procured. This is a valid observation, due to the fact that jokes usually record significant changes in social customs and rituals. As for the social group that created and told most jokes, young and middle-aged educated people prevailed, according to Ștefănescu.

Jokes were published in brochures at the beginning of the '90s and one of them, *Istorii Paralele. Bancuri politice 1965–1985* (*Parallel Histories. Political Jokes 1965–1985*) was printed by the Romanian Literature Museum publishing house, "Universitas," in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova. Mihai Nicolae, the editor, divided the collection into short thematic chapters, following an already established tradition of jokelore editorializing the multiple faces of Communism in the Eastern Bloc. The jokes of this brochure cover the cult of Ceaușescu but it pays special attention to ideologically oriented humour as well—a good example is the joke about Marx travelling through the ages in a time machine saying "Proletarians of all countries, forgive me!"⁵³

The type of literature political jokes coagulated is also worthy of investigation. New, recycled or adapted, they are part of the oral tradition of popular culture. Their truth lies in the act of telling, in the complicity of those who narrate and those who listen. This essentially oral nature shifts the emphasis from the actual text to performance components (talent of the teller, intonation, gestures, etc.), overshadowing the aesthetic dimension. The social and political elements are of paramount significance in this equation, and this genre has been a framework for rendering axiology and mentalities for a long time. As a body of texts, the literature of political jokes has been of paramount testimonial relevance to foreigners and post-communist generations. The fact that they could only be published abroad raises a new set of questions regarding their cultural life-cycle: had they been published in Romania during Communism, would that have had an impact on their oral tradition? If censorship hadn't been that harsh and had allowed their publication, would that have affected their creation rate and popularity?

They can be seen as a parallel system of communication, since they transmitted facts and opinions that could not have been voiced by any other safe of accepted social or cultural system. Their clandestinity secured their success and popularity, but also contributed to their volatility—if collecting and publishing them hadn't been prohibited and dangerous, their corpus might have been richer and their history might have had more shades and colors.

It is also significant to remark the fact that Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu's interest in transcribing jokes generated a situation that he was never aware of (except for a vague intuition, when he was almost arrested for writing down in public things he heard around him): Romanian political jokes had a preponderantly oral career during the historical

interval of their creation and circulation. Later, after 1989, when they became “fixed” texts, they actually turned into short narrative accounts of a zeitgeist.

The dictatorial couple was, by far, the favorite subject of Romanian political jokes, and this ceaseless interest was fueled partially by their almightiness and partially by the somehow tragic discrepancies between their real status and their monstrously inflated official image. The constant high frequency of these jokes, their themes and permanent intense hate directed at the omnipotent duo can be considered a trademark of Romanian political jokes, although “dictator/president-jokes” are common in all countries, democratic or totalitarian. The decrepit, comically challenged orator who would mispronounce most words during his shouted speeches, a man of humble origins, trained to be a cobbler, was a favorite anti-hero of derision, because “in laughter as in life, he is at the center.”⁵⁴ Elena, his wife, despite a very poor education and a difficult, evil personality, had been awarded numerous academic titles by sheer political manipulation and was invariably named the country’s leading scientist and the “Mother of the Nation.”

The Ceaușescu jokes basically lampoon the dictator’s lack of education—there were many jokes about his wife accidentally throwing his graduation thesis in the garbage, since it was just a pair of old shoes (the cobbler apprentice past of the dictator was a fixture in political jokes)—and his godlike omnipresence in everything printed—books, newspapers, magazines. As Cochran notes in his study, Romanian customs officials would constantly ask foreigners entering the country if they were carrying “guns, drugs, pornography,”⁵⁵ as if this feared trinity was “the telltale mark of the decadent Western beast.”⁵⁶ The joke mocking the intersection of these facts is cruel: “Why are there no pornographic magazines in Romania? Because the first page would be too terrible.”⁵⁷

The catastrophic effects of some of Ceaușescu’s most infamous decrees have a history of their own in the folklore of political humour. The 1966 decree that prohibited abortion in almost all cases is the subject of Gail Kligman’s seminal *The politics of Duplicity. Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu’s Romania*, where she states that “nowhere in the Soviet sphere was the ‘marriage’ between demographic concerns and nationalist interests more extreme than in Ceaușescu’s Romania.”⁵⁸ A most expressive joke gives the ideal humorous reply to a law that turned a woman’s body into a fertile appendix of state ideology: a policeman sees a couple making love in a park and arrests them. At the trial, the woman is congratulated for her patriotism, the man for his initiative while the policeman is arrested for illegal birth control.

The Program for Scientific Nourishment was adopted on 29 July 1984, a tragic excuse for Ceaușescu’s obsession regarding the payment of foreign debt and, at the same time, a disastrous measure that humbled Romanians beyond the limit of human dignity. Queuing was common throughout the Eastern Bloc and it soon became a social phenomenon in the region, since people would wait outside groceries for hours, desperately hoping to buy basic goods. For Romanians, queuing soon became a daily activity that would take several hours, and its success rate was poor, since the goods were scarce and the number of potential buyers increased by the minute.

“There’s a big line on a street in Bucharest” the joke goes, “so a man asks the people queuing if there’s any food for sale. They keep asking one another, until the first man in line finally gives an answer:—I have no idea, I just felt sick and leaned against

the wall. When I felt a bit better, there was already a long line behind me.—And why don't you leave?—Well, how could I, now, that I'm first in line . . .”⁵⁹

Then there are some others on the subject, this time with an erotic twist: “The doctor tells his patient, a young, voluptuous woman:—I want one night of your life . . . The girl hesitates, but, in the end, decides to show the doctor her gratitude:—Of course, doctor!—Great! Look, tonight at 10, go stand in line at the butcher's. In the morning, my wife will come to replace you.”⁶⁰

The “Neronian extravaganzas of the universally detested ruling family,”⁶¹ as Vladimir Tismăneanu wrote in his analysis of the Ceaușescu regime, were a constant subject of the whispered clandestine folklore. From this perspective, Elena was even more hated than the dictator. Her scientific imposture was derided to the point where she was a constant presence in jokes about stupidity and lack of education. One of the culminating moments of her career as the butt of the “academician doctor engineer” joke was when she allegedly mispronounced a chemical formula in a comical sequence of sounds that resulted in the Romanian word “codoi” (“big tail”). Almost instantly, popular culture recorded a new joke: “A hysterical woman in a customs office has no passport, but claims she's Elena Ceaușescu and she must be allowed to enter the country. A confused officer asks his boss what he should do. The boss suggests he should ask her what is the chemical formula of water. The officer does that, but the woman has no idea about the formula. The officer is now convinced the woman is Elena.”⁶² Her imperial sense of fashion is the target of a joke in which Elena is on a cruise on the Nile and demands that her aides fetch her a pair of crocodile boots. After one week and no word from them, she demands an explanation. They tell her that they caught a few crocodiles from the Nile, but none of them had boots.

Telling jokes was, paradoxically, no laughing matter, as one could be imprisoned for this kind of subversive act against the state, the party and their ruler. They doubtlessly were “a way of testing and achieving interpersonal trust,”⁶³ of expressing “one's alienation from and in some cases disgust with the entire political, economic and social order”⁶⁴ and of “recycling and reinforcing dominant values and views on politics.”⁶⁵ Their coagulative effect in strengthening a collective identity was probably the same as that of humour in general,⁶⁶ but it is highly improbable that their psychological impact exceeded the individual or small groups.

The Securitate, Ceaușescu's dreaded Security Service was the ubiquitous inquisition that struck terror into the populace, since its informers were selected from all lines of work and virtually anyone—family member, friend, colleague—could be part of it. Trust was fundamental when it came to sharing political views, and jokes were a common vehicle for transmitting them. The fact that political jokes “rely on the teller's and the listener's mutual, covert, assumed recognition of the regime's Big Lie”⁶⁷ assures a common ground for communication, but sharing this experience goes even further, it is, as Davies observed, an affirmation of trust.

Jokes about the Securitate never fail to mention the brutal punitive measures inflicted on “the enemies” of the Communist state and Ceaușescu (imprudent jokesters included): “A husband and his wife are having dinner. Suddenly, the door is banged against the wall and two Security agents burst in. They grab the husband and, to his wife's despair, they lift him up and take him into a black car. Days go by, then weeks, and the man seems

to have vanished for good. The desperate wife manages to get an audience at the Securitate:—Oh, we're so sorry, but your husband died of pneumonia . . .—That's impossible, the woman said crying, my husband was not sick when you arrested him, how come he got pneumonia . . .—Well, dear lady, he tried to run, and you know . . . he was sweating, the bullet was cold . . .⁷⁶⁸

Others are less somber, sympathizing with the potential victim. It is a typical example of an “us vs. *them*” joke, in which a collective identity gives the brief illusion of solidarity while mocking Power and its representatives: “Hearing someone knocking on his door, a scared man asks shyly:—Who is it?—We are from the Securitate.—What do you want?—We want to talk.—How many are you?—There's four of us.—And why don't you talk amongst yourselves?”⁷⁶⁹

Self-referential humour can be considered a mild reminder that oppression is favored by a general lack of reaction and protest, and irony may target either the people's useless wishful thinking—“If Ceaușescu dies, Nicu⁷⁰ will inherit us, then he'll gamble us on roulette, he'll lose, the Americans will win us . . .”⁷⁷¹—or the fact that Romanians had given up on their country, therefore prefer to focus on their individual matters: “A Romanian worker meets a Japanese worker. The Romanian asks:—You are world-famous for your work ethics. How do you do it?—It's easy. Everyday I work two hours for myself, two hours for the owner of the company and the rest of the time is for the Emperor of Japan. What about you, Romanians?—It's the same with us. I work everyday for myself, we have no company owner and I couldn't care less about the Emperor of Japan . . .”⁷⁷²

A specific characteristic of many Romanian political jokes is their dark component, that which defines “gallows humour”—an attitude suited to the bleak context of the Communist '80s. “Gallows humour,” as it has been labelled by theorists, opposes misfortune and humour and finds objects of derision in circumstances that normally don't cause laughter. Hans Speier accentuates the component of “inevitability” in his considerations on this type of humour: “In gallows humour, misfortune assumes a kind of inevitability about which one can do nothing, like the weather or death.”⁷⁷³ In one of the earliest analytical accounts of the characteristics and effects of gallows humour as a sociological phenomenon, Antonin J. Obrdlík discusses the case of Czechoslovakian humour following the advent of Hitler and concludes: “Relying on my observations, I may go so far as to say that gallows humor is an unmistakable index of good morale and of the spirit of resistance of the oppressed peoples. Its decline or disappearance reveals either indifference or a breakdown of the will to resist evil.”⁷⁷⁴ As it has been argued earlier, political humour in repressive regimes is rarely an index of anything positive, but rather a means of moral and psychological survival, a silent protest, at most. As Alexander Rose defined them, “authoritarian jokes are not tiny revolutions; they are temporary pain relievers serving as a substitute for being allowed to participate in real politics.”⁷⁷⁵

The core argument in favor of the importance of understanding political jokes is that they facilitate a clear perspective on the metamorphoses of Romanian society during Communism. Western scholarship on the subject also has constantly emphasized the emblematic value of political jokes in understanding the Communist history of Eastern Europe.

Since the realities that prompted their genesis are no longer present, political jokes have changed their subjects and characters, in synchronism with post-Communist

times. They have lost their former influence and, like any jokes about the past, they call for a different kind of laughter—uninvolved, distant and bitterly nostalgic.

To conclude, political joke-telling was a widespread phenomenon manifested at all social levels in Communist Romania, and it was neither a revolutionary surrogate nor an actual means of protest. It was a way of indirectly voicing political views and opinions in various modes and tones, from resignation to desolation and self-irony. The political humour of that age offers an important insight into the dynamics of popular culture, mentalities and everyday life, revealing a facet of history that is both significant and inspiring. □

Notes

1. Egon Larsen, *Wit as a weapon: The Political Joke in History* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1980), 2.
2. Dana Maria Niculescu Grasso, *Bancurile politice* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1999), 90.
3. Marjolein't Hart, "Introduction" to *Humour and Social Protest*, eds. Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–21.
4. Hart, "Introduction," 20.
5. C. Banc, A. Dundes, *First Prize: Fifteen years! An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes* (Cranbury, NY: Associated University Presses, 1986).
6. Christie Davies, "Jokes as the Truth about Soviet Socialism," *Folklore* 46 (2010): 10.
7. Robert Cochran, "What courage!": Romanian 'Our Leader' Jokes," *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, 405 (Jul.–Sep., 1989): 230.
8. Giseline Kuipers, "The Sociology of Humor," in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin–New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008): 374.
9. Hans Speier, "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Power and Laughter," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, 5 (March 1998), 1352–1401.
10. Hart, "Introduction," 1.
11. Hart, "Introduction," 1.
12. Davies, "Jokes as the Truth."
13. Elliott Oring, "Risky Business: Political Jokes under Repressive Regimes," *Western Folklore* 63, 3 (Summer, 2004): 209–223.
14. Davies, "Jokes as the Truth," 11.
15. Alan Dundes, "Laughter behind the Iron Curtain," *Ukrainian Quarterly* 27 (1971): 51.
16. Christie Davies, "Jokes under Communism," in *Humour and Social Protest*, eds. Marjolein't Hart, Dennis Bos, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 295–296.
17. Kuipers, "The Sociology of Humor," 375.
18. Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for all Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 211.
19. Oring, "Risky Business..." 217.
20. *Ibid.*, 217.
21. Alexander Rose, "When Politics is a Laughing Matter," *Policy Review* (December 2001): 59–72.
22. Christie Davies, "Humour Is Not a Strategy in War," *Journal of European Studies* (September 2001): 395–412, 397.
23. For a detailed account of popular culture in Romanian Communism, see Paul Cernat, Ion Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, Ioan Stanomir, *Explorări în comunismul românesc*, I–III (Iași: Polirom, 2004–2008).

24. For a historical view on the issue, see Larsen, Oring and Rose.
25. Oring, "Risky Business," 223.
26. Oring stresses the fact that this hypothesis "has not, to my knowledge, ever been discussed" (Oring, *ibid.*) Indeed, political humour circulating under extreme political pressure has been unanimously considered radically different from other types of humour by scholars and researchers that contributed to the topic before and after Oring's 2004 inquiry.
27. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 90.
28. Hart, "Introduction," 18.
29. Oring, "Risky Business," 227.
30. Davies, "Humour Is Not a Strategy in War," 399.
31. Speier, "Wit and Politics."
32. Alexei Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense and the Anekdot," *Public Culture* 9, 2, (1997): 161-188.
33. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 305.
34. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason...", 182.
35. Christie Davies, *Jokes and groups* (London: The Institute for Cultural Research, 2005), 13.
36. Davies, "Jokes as the Truth about Soviet Socialism," 10.
37. G. Benton "The origins of the political joke," in *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*, eds. C. Powell and G.E.C. Paton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 33-55, 33.
38. The complete quote: "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 http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear?essays?orwell_2.html. Accessed September 21, 2012.
39. Kathleen Stokker, *Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Occupied Norway, 1940-1945* (Madison, Wisconsin: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), 18.
40. Grasso, *Bancurile politice*, 88.
41. Davies, *Jokes and groups*, 13.
42. Davies, "Humour Is Not a Strategy in War," 399.
43. Speier, "Wit and Politics," 1395.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Benton, "The origins of the political joke," 54.
46. Speier, "Wit and Politics," 1396.
47. Regina Bendix, "Review of 'First Prize: Fifteen Years! An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes' (Banc and Dundes)," *Folklore Forum* 19, 2 (1986): 218.
48. Elliott Oring, "Review of 'First Prize: Fifteen Years! An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes' (Banc and Dundes)," *The Journal of American Folklore* 100, 397 (Jul.-Sept. 1987): 376-377, 376.
49. Cochran, "What courage!?" 260.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *Zece ani de umor negru românesc* (Bucharest: Paideia, 1991).
52. Eugen Istodor, "Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu," *Dilema* 535 (2003): 16.
53. *Istoriile Paralele. Bancuri politice 1965-1985*, ed. Mihai Nicolae (Chishineu: Universitas, Museum of Romanian Literature, 1992), 9.
54. Cochran, "What courage!?" 260.
55. *Ibid.*, 261.
56. *Ibid.*, 260.

57. Ștefănescu, *Zece ani*, 25.
58. Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity. Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 20.
59. Nicolae, *Istorii Paralele*, 45.
60. *Ibid.*, 43.
61. Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for all Seasons*, 225.
62. *Bancuri din Epoca de Aur* (Bucharest: Tencon, 1990), 120.
63. Davies, "Jokes as the Truth about about Soviet Socialism," 10.
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Studies in Political Humour: In Between Political Critique and Public Entertainment*, eds. Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (John Benjamins Publishing, 2011), 2.
66. Hart, "Introduction," 19.
67. Rose, "When Politics is a Laughing Matter," 69.
68. Nicolae, *Istorii paralele*, 16.
69. Nicolae, *Istorii paralele*, 16.
70. Nicu Ceaușescu was the youngest son of the dictatorial couple and had the reputation of a playboy and a gambler.
71. Nicolae, *Istorii paralele*, 27.
72. Grasso, *Bancurile politice*, 127.
73. Speier, "Wit and Politics," 1354.
74. Antonin J. Obrdlik, "'Gallows Humor': A Sociological Phenomenon," *American Journal of Sociology* 47, 5 (Mar., 1942): 712.
75. Rose, "When Politics is a Laughing Matter," 70.

Abstract

Laughing Matters: the Cultural Dynamics of Political Jokes in Communist Romania

Despite the lack of critical consensus regarding the social/cultural role of political jokes, a close investigation of their status in Romanian clandestine popular culture during communism can be a relevant initiative from many perspectives. A coherent approach of the subject must nevertheless target the complex network of cultural phenomena developed during the repressive communist regime while it should also aim at identifying the specific place of the genre of political jokes in this framework. Both as oral and written texts, the literature of political jokes can be regarded as an indicator of isolation from the official cultural canon, a means of "silent protest" and implicit subversion, a "weapon of the weak." Published abroad before 1989, circulating underground as private texts in communist Romania, then printed freely early in the '90s, political jokes establish a particular type of literature in Romanian popular culture. The anonymous authors, their heroes and narrative structures draw on the vast domain of folklore, but their impact goes further than immediate comic relief. The present article tries to explore the anatomy and dynamics of this particular genre as a parallel system of thought and creation in Romanian communism from the vantage points of popular culture, literature and cultural history.

Keywords

Political jokes, humour, Communism, social protest, popular culture, subversion