

POWER AND RIDICULE – ELENA CEAUȘESCU IN COMMUNIST HUMOUR

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Abstract: *Although one of the most influential figures of Romanian Communism, Elena Ceaușescu has been the subject of a rather limited literature exploring her historical figure. I intend to revisit the political humour of Romanian communism in order to reveal the manners and strategies employed by this type of folklore in affirming the hyperbolized clichés that defined the dictator’s wife in the public mind of that age. I also intend to bring into discussion the common traditional prejudice that blamed Elena Ceaușescu for her husband’s catastrophic politics that impoverished and isolated Romania in the Eastern Bloc.*

Keywords: *dictators’ wives, Elena Ceaușescu, female communist leaders, political humour, post-communism, Romanian communism.*

1. Introduction

In the past three decades since the 1989 downfall of Romanian communism, a rich and diverse body of literature concerning Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu emerged. Political humour, a fundamental part of this literature, preserved mainly in oral form before the demise of the dictatorial couple, reflects the complex relationship between public consciousness and the pharaonic magnitude of the Ceaușescus’ rule. Although historically dated, the political humour surrounding the communist president and his wife is an important memorial resource, preserving the diverse manners in which the general population perceived them and responded to their totalitarian regime. Although Nicolae Ceaușescu’s rule benefitted from significant critical attention since 1989, significantly less has been written about Elena (Marinković 2017: 344). This potential imbalance is due to an often-invoked commonplace - she was “infinitely more hated than the President” (Greenwald 1986:33), and few historians, cultural theorists or political commentators succeeded to grasp the complexity of her persona and to reveal her unique (yet largely despised) mark in recent Romanian history. Nevertheless, political folklore

and particularly humour generously exposed her caricature in the myriad shades and forms it took during the two decades Elena Ceaușescu rose to power by her husband's side. This could arguably lead to an interesting premise that I intend to explore in this paper: in the paradigm of communist humour targeting the Ceaușescus, Elena's apparently secondary position of power fuelled a richer, more original and diverse spectrum of narratives than her husband did. Her academic imposture and idiosyncratic authoritarian manner reached significant heights in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as her birthday celebrations and increasingly frequent international acknowledgments were brought into the spotlight on national television and in public celebrations. Directly proportional to her visibility and authority as active presidential consort, popular dislike may have also been nourished by a traditionalist view that did not favour female empowerment, especially the kind based on kinship privilege. Moreover, Elena's propensity for fake and fraud was visible on all levels – from her rapid ascension in the ranks of the communist party to her eagerness to accumulate academic titles and honours that had no equivalent in real merit. As I have previously discussed in another study (Glăvan 2019), Lavinia Betea mentions in her comments on Elena's recently published agenda of 1989, the last year of the first lady's life, up until her death by firing squad execution, on December 25th, besides her numerous international titles, Elena Ceaușescu held 12 official positions in numerous organizations, ranging from scientific institutions to administrative and political ones (Betea 2018:19). Yet, Elena Ceaușescu's case is not singular. As Vladimir Tismăneanu argues in his *Introduction* to Fahri Balliu's *The Sinister Lady. The Widow of the Albanian Dictator Enver Hoxha* (Balliu 2009), the life partners of dictators are “humans of a special substance, willing to tolerate or even encourage the most abject tendencies their husbands might have” (Tismăneanu 2009:9). The historian of Romanian communism argues that, as a rule, the wives of totalitarian leaders were fanatic supporters of the ruthless politics implemented by their husbands and they wouldn't hesitate to get actively involved in the consolidation of their authority. Many examples could be invoked in order to illustrate this observation: Lotte Ulbricht, married to Walter Ulbricht, head of the German Democratic Republic, “Mme Mao”, as Tismăneanu ironically calls Mao Zedong's fourth wife, Jiang Quing, Jovanka Broz, Nina Petrovna Hrușciova, Jeannette Vermeersch-Thorez (the spouse of Maurice Thorez) and Nilde Jotti (Palmiro Togliatti's wife) (Tismăneanu 2009:10). However, there is one notable exception that must be mentioned as a tragic counterpart to the blind devotion of all the above-mentioned women - Nadia Allilueva, Stalin's second wife, who violently committed suicide in 1932.

2.The Demonization of Elena Ceaușescu

Popular imagination could hardly separate the Ceaușescu couple, as they would be customarily referred to as “them” in everyday conversation. As a direct consequence of their apparent consubstantiality, a veritable personality cult of “mother of the nation”, who was also a “world-renowned savant” emerged in the late ’70s. Her official title was “academician doctor engineer” and it directly reflected the party politics concerning the social and professional role of women in communism. As Luciana M. Jinga argues in her comprehensive study concerning *Gender and Representation in Communist Romania* (Jinga 2015:112) gender equality in the workplace was a strong direction imposed by the Party. To fulfil this directive, The National Women’s Committee was established in 1966, with the clear mission of encouraging women to get involved in various forms of activism and become equal participants in the production process in the workplace (Jinga 2015:114). Against the backdrop of the complex and far-reaching activity carried out by this organization, the rise of the cult of Elena Ceaușescu is a process that only confirms the new paradigm of the communist woman. Cristina Liana Olteanu (2004) makes a coherent inventory of the cardinal moments that later emerged as landmarks in the articulation of Elena’s cult. Her frequent diplomatic missions often made her the recipient of honorary academic titles and her scientific reputation, carefully managed by a dedicated team that wrote books and articles signed by Ceaușescu herself, grew exponentially. Her ambition was well-known and carefully cultivated by the inner circle of the party officials and their spouses. In Diane Ducret’s compelling formulation, “Elena does not aim for simple intellectual recognition, or the exercise of political power itself. She wants to be a female role model, the only model for the Romanian woman, respected, desired, envied. Total consecration or nothing” (Ducret 2011). By 1979 the central press, especially “Scântea”, the official party newspaper, often included homages to Elena, and, in its January 7 issue, the date of her birthday, even enlisted a short resume of the internationally acclaimed woman of science (Olteanu 2004). However, public consciousness was not unaware of the massive fraud orchestrated in plain sight and it could be speculated that the significant popular dislike surrounding Elena Ceaușescu, years after her death, is partially based on a vast disapproval of the practices that turned her from an average party member into a sacred scientific figure and exemplary woman. The gigantic amount of celebratory literature dedicated to her, culminating with the infamous “homage” volumes published regularly at the beginning of the 1980s, articulates a visible discursive effort meant to justify Elena’s position as adjunct to the head of the state. As Olteanu argues, “she had to recuperate at a discursive level the void of legitimacy” surrounding her (Olteanu 2004). Almost 25 years after her death, an INSCOP survey (“Barometrul Adevărul despre România”

2013), conducted on 1055 people that the polling company deemed “representative for the Romanian population over 18 years of age” revealed that, indeed, Elena Ceaușescu is posthumously perceived more negatively than her husband. Asked which of the three historical figures mentioned (Nicolae Ceaușescu, Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, Elena Ceaușescu) played a positive or a negative role in Romanian history, 46.9% of the respondents said that Nicolae Ceaușescu played a negative role, while 80.2% answered that Elena Ceaușescu played a negative role. At the same time, 44.7% of the respondents considered communism a good thing for their country (the same survey is invoked by Annemarie Sorescu Marinković (2017) in her study concerning Elena Ceaușescu’s personality cult).

There was, indeed, a dense mythology surrounding the presidential couple. Urban legends, anecdotes and wild stories told of immense fortunes, outrageous extravagances and an ever-growing contempt for the impoverished and humiliated Romanian population, who suffered directly the dire consequences of Ceaușescu’s obsession to pay the country’s external debt in full. The proliferation of this folklore is clearly reflected in the political humour of the time, where some evident differences are visible when comparing the public portraits of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife. Although Elena Ceaușescu gained political visibility and concrete authority by the end of the 1970s, folklore was fixated on her drive for scientific recognition and her public persona, rather than her political ambitions. Although the chief of state was, in fact, in a position of power that made him directly responsible for the political climate of the nation, Elena was, nevertheless, equally, if not more blamed for the catastrophic effects of the regime’s austerity policies on the general population. By the beginning of the 1980s, her ascension reached unprecedented heights for a presidential consort – her office in the building of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party was known, in those days, as “Cabinet 2”, and all the important decisions were run by her before her husband made his final resolutions. Both were mercilessly mocked for their hubris – the desire to appear decades younger in official portraiture, to be recognized as heroes, parents of the nation, cardinal theorists in all domains of knowledge, but Elena’s fraud was always prevalent. A woman of humble beginnings, born into a family of peasants in the village of Petrești, Lenuța Petrescu, as her name was recorded in official documents, Elena barely managed to finish her elementary education and, after moving to Bucharest with her brother, briefly worked as a laboratory assistant. Her social ambition and desire for recognition followed her well into maturity, and humorous anecdotes about her lack of taste and love of luxury and pomp abounded. “Nicu” and “Leana”, as they were mockingly called by their popular names, were apparently inseparable in the public mind, yet a careful exploration of the political humour targeting them clearly

reveals that she was often seen as the more evil one – more power hungry, more eager to dissimulate, more frustrated and in control. The main difference between the ways in which the Ceaușescus were reimagined in political humour was the easily perceptible resentment targeting Elena's fraudulent ascension and scientific reputation. There was indeed a justifiable hatred directed at both, but, while he was derided as a “naked”, ridiculous emperor, she was regarded as the evil, more lucid force behind his apparent madness. It could be argued that, while Ceaușescu often appeared senile and out of touch with reality in his later years, his wife seemed sharp, aware and monstrously indifferent to her people's ailments. Following a long monarchic tradition of generous, involved and patriotic queens, the reigning female figure of Romanian communism was egomaniac, deaf and blind to the darkness and misery that defined her country, and folklore couldn't have missed the chance to capture these striking character flaws.

There are many “witness” accounts regarding her personality and habits, many of them romanticized and unreliable, of uncertain documentary value. The memoirs of prominent party officials such as Ion Mihai Pacepa (former deputy chief of the Foreign Intelligence Department who defected to the United States in 1978), Dumitru Popescu (nicknamed “God” due to his decisional influence, president of the Council for Culture and Socialist Education, high-ranking member of the Executive Political Committee of the Romanian Communist Party), or Violeta Năstăsescu (Elena Ceaușescu's personal translator) (Năstăsescu 2010) are milestones in creating the Elena mythology, but are potentially self-interested, self-exculpating and excessively subjective accounts. In Seth Benedict Graham's terms, narrative accounts concerning such cardinal figures may involve “neo-mythological strategies of image-construction” (Graham 2003:5). In this case, they may help project both the public and private personas of the dictator's wife.

Political humour, on the other hand, flourishes on the margins of hyperbolic power, and, in the case of the Ceaușescus, the greater the fraud, the ampler the laughter. Yet, as numerous theorists argued, the function and nature of humour in dictatorial regimes is far more complex than a reflex response to oppression and abuse.

2. Laughter as Risky Business

Before exploring the concrete manner in which political humour reimagined Elena Ceaușescu during Romanian communism, a brief discussion concerning the possible roles of political jokes in dictatorial regimes is necessary. A solid theoretical body remains divided upon the question whether “gallows humour”, as it was often named by cultural theorists, anthropologists and political analysts, could be considered a form of silent protest against

oppression and dictatorship. It is important to note that, as in many other totalitarian systems, political humour was firmly restricted under the provisions of article 209 of the Romanian communist penal code criminalizing “conspiracy against social order”. In short, anyone who ventured to deride the presidential couple, the Securitate (Ceașescu’s secret police), the dire living conditions or any other aspect of life in the dark age of the 80s, could end up in jail. Two jokes are paradigmatic for this dramatic state of affairs: the joke about the building of the Danube-Black Sea Canal pointed out that the workers on the right bank were the ones who told jokes about the Ceașescus and those on the left were the ones who listened.

The other joke was so famous that its punchline became the title of a collection of jokes published in the US in 1986 (“First Prize - Fifteen Years...”). Its narrative focused around a jokes contest in communist Romania, and it said that the 3rd prize for a successful joke was 100 lei, the second prize was 1000 lei and the first prize was 15 years. The collection was co-edited by Alan Dundes, a folklorist, in collaboration with a mysterious co-author, C. Banc, whose symbolic name means “C. Joke” in Romanian. As it was later revealed, Banc was an immigrant woman who left Romania for the West and brought with her the transcripts of three hundred jokes about life in communist Romania, targeting “facets of grim Communist suppression” (Bendix 1986:218). It is important to note that Alan Dundes, in a later paper on the warlore surrounding Saddam Hussein, believed that political humour was a form of protest against totalitarianism – in his view, jokes are “veritable fictional bullets firing a constant barrage at a repressive system and its leadership” (Dundes and Pagter 1991:14). Although at the moment it is not a widely circulating volume, “First Prize - Fifteen Years...” was probably the only collection of Romanian political humour published abroad, before the 1989 Revolution, exporting to the US an important cultural product of that period. As Ben Lewis later concluded, communist humour was the most notable cultural achievement of those times (Lewis 2008:268). Nevertheless, the situation was clearly different behind the Iron Curtain, as anyone who would have miraculously succeeded to publish anti-communist jokes would have ended up being persecuted by the Securitate and thrown in jail. Robert Cochran, a Fulbright fellow, who visited Romania in 1985 and carried out an extensive imagological research and later published his work in 1989, before the Revolution, memorably stated that “if you knew all the jokes, you’d know everything important” (Cochran 1989:230). It was his conviction that “Romanians express themselves most characteristically and most profoundly in their joking” (Cochran 1989:260).

Communism was not, however, the regime that favoured the invention of the political joke, this folkloric niche had targeted leaders throughout history. Political humour accompanied

communism since the late 1920s, when they began to circulate in the former USSR, flourishing especially in Eastern Europe, until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Dana Maria Niculescu Grasso elaborated a thorough investigation of “political jokes in the countries of real socialism”, and she argues that political jokes about communism were not restricted to the Eastern Bloc, but were widespread in other countries dominated by authoritarian regimes from various parts of the world, such as Cuba, China and Vietnam (Niculescu Grasso 1999:18). Although their popularity was enormous, their direct impact on the monolithic cohesion of the regime remains controversial. Ben Lewis distinguished two distinctive perspectives on the role and influence of political humour and on its capacity to elicit concrete action against dictatorships – a minimalist view and a maximalist one (Lewis 2008:26). Maximalists base their arguments on a famous (mis)quote from George Orwell - “Every joke is a tiny revolution”, when in fact he was criticizing the weakness of modern British humour. Promoters of this idea argue that political humour gathers the anger, frustration and unspoken revolt of the masses and redirects them as a silent protest against oppressive power. Minimalists, on the other hand, agree that political humour in totalitarian regimes functions as a means of rerouting resentment, but it is far from having any revolutionary potential. This is a fundamentally Freudian direction, presuming that hidden truths are expressed in a veiled, indirect manner. In his study of the origin of the political joke, Gregor Benton argued that at the very basis of this type of humour there is an opposition between the visible, apparent layer and the unspoken, concealed truth that could but rarely and carefully be spoken (Benton 1988). Contrarily, Egon Larsen considers political humour a veritable weapon, arguing that “jokes assume the role of the *vox populi* in countries and periods lacking free elections” (Larsen 1980:2). In an older yet still relevant study concerning “gallows humour”, published during the Second World War, Antonin J. Obrdlík clarifies that “gallows humour is an unmistakable index of good morale and of the spirit of resistance of the oppressed peoples” (Obrdlík 1942:712). As long as they still have the willingness to laugh at their misery, people have not lost hope. Applied to the framework of political humour during communism, one may argue that laughter made oppression more tolerable, as a manner of creatively transforming dire hardships into bearable everyday realities. Following this argument, in a recently published analysis of political humour in China, authors King-fai Tam and Sharon R. Wesoky wrote 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 Wesoky 2018:2). The authors of yet another study following this hypothesis, Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa believe 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 2011:2). Marjolein’t Hart even argued that the risky activity of telling political jokes contributed to a strengthening of collective identity (Hart 2008:19), as they could be regarded as reflectors of values and beliefs. Christie Davies adds to the argument by observing that this particular type of folklore could be seen as “a way of testing and achieving interpersonal trust” (Davies 2010:10). Indeed, the historical reality Romanians had to face in the 1980s had no equal in Eastern Europe. The fear, poverty, censorship and surveillance by the Securitate generated the sense of “a kind of inevitability about which one can do nothing, like the weather or death” (Speier 1998:1354). Above all, the imperial, apparently eternal figures of the dictatorial couple dominated the Romanian wasteland. Due to the dangerous nature of joke telling in a country where the secret police had one million informers at the height of its influence in the 1980s, these clandestine activities could be regarded as factors of social cohesion – complicity and trust were the foundation of such risky acts. Laughing at power was done “with a keen eye as to who is within listening distance” (Brandes 1977:335). Elliot Oring contradicts this rather idealist perspective and, in his extensive discussion on the role and characteristics of political humour in autocratic power structures (Oring 2004:2016) states that humour, although exorcising, may have a negative impact on initiatives of actual opposition. “Any enhancement of mood, any exaltation of self-afforded by the jokes, may have been bought at the expense of real action” (Oring 2016:127). Defusing collective anger may replace and discourage actual protest.

I believe that theorists cannot achieve a consensus on the matter of the actual role and impact of political humour on the fate of oppressive regimes due to the inherent specificity of each historical, ethnic and geographical context. Many factors contribute to a political climate at a given time in history and it is quite probable that political humour could lie on a paradoxical fundament – it does reject, deride and oppose abusive power, but at the same time its force is visible at a small, interpersonal scale, rather than a collective, national one.

3.The Joke is on Leana

Many collections of jokes were published after the December 1989 downfall of Romanian Communism. Their popularity grew significantly by the end of Ceaușescu’s era, and they commonly circulated in oral form. After the death of the dictator and the seize of power by a new, apparently democratic “Salvation Front”, their charm shifted from danger to memorial preservation of the past. Among others, Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu (Ștefănescu 1991, 2014) and Ion Itu (1992) published small collected volumes of jokes about communism and the

Ceaușescu. Although the two characters habitually mirror each other, the ones mocking Elena are thematically specific, targeting the main components that articulate her personality cult – her scientific imposture, her megalomania, bad taste and predisposition towards envy and hate. A daring version of a “couples” joke, deriding both, claimed that at one point there was talk among party officials that it was high time that Romania had its own pornographic magazine. “The idea never materialized, as nobody found a solution for the first page, customarily dedicated to the Ceaușescu couple” (Itu 1992:13).

However unfathomable, their intimacy carried a certain degree of fascination. In public imagination, it was quickly ruined by her eagerness to be an academician even in bed:

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 1992:4, my translation)

The “Codoi” incident, Elena's public mispronunciation of the elementary chemical formula of carbon dioxide was the object of countless jokes, each having its twists and versions. Her fame as international woman of science was doubted in a place where many Romanians couldn't dream of ever reaching – the border and customs service:

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 1992:19, my translation)

Nicolae Ceaușescu's upbringing and education was no less modest than his wife's. A cobbler's apprentice in his youth, the dictator's “healthy”, peasant origins may have recommended him as a brave communist revolutionary, but not as a visionary theorist of modern politics and global thought. Yet he did not crave academic recognition beyond the already vast realm of his power, and this discrepancy may have contributed to the isolation of Elena as the ridiculously ambitious

one. An endless string of jokes mocked their education with one claiming that one day, by mistake, Elena had thrown her husband's diploma in the garbage – as it consisted of a pair of shoes. But jokes often made her stand out as the more fraudulent one:

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 1992:19, my translation).

Her sense of fashion was frequently laughed at, despite Elena's best efforts to appear polished, ladylike and age appropriate. Her modest origins and eagerness for social climbing projected the inescapable paradigm of her imposture. Close allies and personal staff must have added details to the urban legend of Elena Ceaușescu as fashion queen:

During a 'friendly' state visit in Africa, Ceaușescu was invited to a crocodile hunt. 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, 1992: 9, my translation)

Body image and sexuality, although less present in the political humour of the age, was relevant for the many facets of the public's perception concerning the dictator's wife. Again, her clumsiness, social awkwardness and lack of manners were visible in apparently simple gestures, such as the way she held her hands while standing up. Maliciously, she was mocked for keeping them crossed over her crotch area, and this detail rapidly gained a morbid connotation certifying the public disapproval she elicited:

A journalist asked the academician [Elena Ceaușescu]:

Why are you keeping your hands crossed 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"/Jokes from the "Golden Age", no.183, my translation)

Her sexuality and uncertain reputation as a youth of easy morals couldn't have been overlooked by the political jokelore of the age. Although Ceaușescu's wife was definitely past her reproductive years in the 1980s, when this joke became popular, her close ties with her most faithful aide, Nicolae Bobu, couldn't escape the humorous circuit. Although here Ceaușescu

was the main target, it is relevant to point out that she (or, more precisely, her body and sexuality) were the instruments of his derision:

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.

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 Bobu. (Itu 1992:32, my translation)

The common prejudice that “it was her” who orchestrated many of Ceaușescu’s catastrophic strategies, and, when she was not directly involved, she rejoiced in the perilous effects they had on the general population. Revenge could only be symbolic, though, and dark humour once again revealed its potential as verbal weapon:

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

Kill it! Kill it!

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

Her too! Her too! (Itu 1992: 8, my translation)

3. Conclusions

Investigations concerning the recent past cannot elude the female presence in power structures, and Elena Ceaușescu is the most prominent one. In the years following the 1989 Revolution, there were few women in first-line politics in Romania, and the allegoric shadow of the dictator’s wife could be invoked among the reasons that contributed to this precarious state (Lovatt 1999). Still under-researched, the historical character of this massively influential first lady uncovers many of its layers and facets in the popular genre of political folklore. A certain type of grassroots, this level of public consciousness exposes, simplified and magnified, the fundamental elements that made Elena Ceaușescu’s character loathsome and memorable. The political humour of communism is, at this moment, an almost forgotten reservoir of the spirit of its age. The paradigm changed its shape, instruments and media, and although some

patterns persist, the characters and plots are unavoidably different. Although inseparable from her husband in both life and death, a momentary focus on the figure of Elena Ceaușescu favours a closer exploration of her public image as reflected in the folklore that symbolically undermined her power, while at the same time reaffirming it.

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