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Rumours in Socialist Romania

Steven Sampson

DURING several periods of anthropological fieldwork between 1974 and 1984, I have been constantly impressed by the never-ending and imaginative stream of rumours emanating from peasants, workers, intellectuals and Party officials. These are the old stories of the Soviet sabotage factories, of restaurants selling human meat, of religious fanatics stealing children, and of members of Romania's ruling family the Ceausescus running down pedestrians or losing thousands of dollars at the gaming tables of Monte Carlo. Rumours in Romania combine petty gossip, informal news, and narrative of a fantastic character. In this combination of information, distortion and sheer fantasy, rumour has become a kind of modern-day folklore in Romania.

The study of rumours—their origin, transmission, content and function—can provide insights into the nature of the so-called "informal sector" which operates in all socialist countries. Rumours exist in structural opposition to the official communication system in the same way as improvisation exists in relation to the Plan, corruption to bureaucracy and second economy to official economy in Romania. Like other branches of this informal sector, rumours are only partially controlled by the state. Hence, they help create social ties which hold out the possibility of change in these societies, of a possible realignment between state and society. This article examines rumour as a means of folk expression, as a mirror for understanding how socialist societies work, and as a possible instrument for social change in Romania and Eastern Europe.

I will argue that rumours in Romania are comparatively more significant than rumours would be in the West. This is because they combine "news" with expressions of societal anxiety and conflict.

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The Nature of Rumour

A rumour is any kind of information which is neither substantiated nor refuted. Rumours may often be stigmatized ("just a rumour"), but they do not have to be false. For example, rumours that Yuri Andropov was gravely ill turned out to be true. Rumours are usually transmitted by word of mouth, but they may also be propagated by the printed media, together with "news." Rumours contrast with other forms of popular oral expression such as narratives, legends, folk-tales or myths. The latter normally lack the topicality of rumour, and they do not have the pretence of transmitting valuable information.

Rumour and gossip are sometimes used synonymously. Gossip is any discussion of people and their activities. Unlike rumour, which is always unsubstantiated, gossip can be verified as true or false. In addition, gossip tends to be more restricted than rumour, in that it deals only with individual behaviour and is relevant to a delimited social group. Gossip tends to be transmitted among people who have intense, long-term social relations. Rumours, in contrast, encompass more than gossip, and may be passed among total strangers, in public places. The line between gossip and rumour is determined by the social context. Gossip about the Ceausescu family and high officials circulates among Bucharest's elite. As it leaves these circles and diffuses among the masses and into the countryside, what may be a simple fact becomes distorted, embellished and remains unsubstantiated. It has become a rumour.

Theorists of rumour divide into two camps. Sociologists, such as Shibutani, Fine and Roznow, focus on rumour as a collective act. Shibutani sees rumour as a form of "collective problem solving" in which "people make sense out of ambiguous situations." Rumours are a form of "improved news," and the way this news is formed and reworked is what is significant. In contrast, the psychological approach taken by Allport and Postman, Jung, Festinger and the anthropologist Lienhardt, sees rumour as expressions of individual and societal anxieties. Rumours reflect psychological states of mind rather than efforts to make sense of the environment. Hence they can be analysed as...
texts, just like dreams or other forms of symbolic expression. Lienhardt and Firth, the only two anthropologists to deal explicitly with rumours, seem to fall into this school.

The major studies of rumour tend to be eclectic in their data base. This becomes problematic when one seeks to use rumour to understand a particular society like Romania. If rumours are everywhere a reaction to constant ambiguity and anxiety, why are they generally so comparatively rare (as Lienhardt asked)? Why do we need rumours to reflect our state of mind? The concentration on sociological or psychological functions robs rumour of its multi-functionality.

Here I would like to approach rumours as a cultural phenomenon. The culture in question has two elements: (1) the culture of really existing socialism as it exists in Eastern Europe, and (2) the specific social, political and historical characteristics of socialist Romania. In this framework, what may be viewed as Romanian rumours—to the extent they are found in other East European societies—may be more fruitfully seen as "system rumours."

Rumours and Socialist Societies

Socialism brings with it the gradual politicization of social life. No sphere of human relations is immune to the penetration of state plans and programmes (even if this penetration is not as complete as planners would prefer). There are efforts to build a new economy, a new political order, new cultural values, to create a new socialist man and to transform human relations from "friendship to comradeship."

The separation between public and private spheres is not simply a dichotomy but a genuine conflict. The public sphere continually imposes itself on the private, while the intimate social relations of family and friendship close ranks and resist. This is done by intensifying interpersonal exchanges of information. By means of "idle chatter," informal oral communication becomes a means to combat state control over information, to find out "secrets," to go around the censors, to neutralize the bureaucratic forces of society, and to locate or procure scarce resources (material or social). Rumour and gossip are politicized, as the state tries alternately to censor, stigmatize or criminalize all channels of information which it cannot control—from letter-writing to telephone conversations to social clubs to any informal oral channels.

The sphere of official literature culture and its censorship closely parallels the vertical social hierarchy in socialist societies. Those at the higher levels are granted access to more reliable and more extensive information, which in turn provides access to other resources. Via censorship the information is then allocated to various strata in this vertical hierarchy—to the Party apparatus, to specialists, to provincial officials and to the masses. In this way, the 100-page report on a miners' strike prepared for the Central Committee becomes five pages when it reaches the local Party organization, while the masses may learn of it only obliquely. In a newspaper article entitled "Improving Worker Discipline in the Coal Mining Sector," hence, information is dispensed down the vertical hierarchy.

Yet information does not only flow vertically. In all East European societies there also exist horizontal "circles," i.e., social or occupational ghettos of intellectuals, officials, technicians and Party functionaries. Shipper, who coined this term with reference to the USSR, notes that such people often tend to work at the same places, live in the same buildings, eat at the same clubs, go to the same resorts, marry their children into the same families and have similar cultural interests. Like small communities everywhere, horizontal segments tend to thrive on exchange of information. Everyone may have secrets, and they may find it in their interest to be on guard, duplicitous or to practise the kind of posturing which Milosz termed "Ketman."

But horizontal segments are characterized by the constant desire to seek and exchange new information. Hence, where vertical relations carefully dispense information, horizontal relations guarantee that it diffuses widely. With the state's efforts to control information and society's constant demand for it, rumour takes on a new significance. It evolves from a supplemental system of communication (as we know it in the West) to a parallel communication network competing directly with the official media.

Rumour will be that much more important when the population views official media as irrelevant or ineffective. This is clearly the case in modern Romania.

Rumour in Romania

Romania represents an extreme case of the features cited above. It remains one of the poorest countries in the Eastern bloc. In recent years the living standard has stagnated and in some cases declined, leading to economic hardship, political tensions, and social alienation. All aspects of the polity, economy and culture are centralised and the population is given very little data with which to judge the validity of state decisions. There is a heavily censored press and an almost total lack of unofficial or dissident publications which could take up certain issues that are rumoured. (The only exception is the samizdat publication of the Transylvanian Magyars, Counterpoints, which is published in Hungarian and limits itself to aspects of the ethnic and cultural problems of this group). In its lack of informal written channels, Romania thus differs
from countries like Hungary, Poland, the USSR and Czechoslovakia, whose alternative press provides in principle a middle ground between formal written and informal oral communication.

As a result of lack of information and state mobilization, Romanians are confronted with a myriad of new laws, decrees, cutbacks and other measures which often come as a shock to the population. In what amounts to a wartime economy, where food and energy are severely rationed, a great deal of anxiety and competitiveness has arisen among people trying to procure life’s necessities and secure a better future for their children. Nevertheless, the state has instilled a high degree of expectation and a hunger for information among the population. The anxiety, competitiveness, secrecy, capriciousness and unfulfilled expectations in a relatively literate population generate fertile ground for rumours.

The precise content of these rumours reflects some specific features of the Romanian political situation. Most notable is the overbearing presence and glorification of President Nicolae Ceausescu and his family. As the sole political actor on the Romanian stage, the only leading thinker in politics, economics, culture and philosophy, with his wife and son holding high Party positions while another daughter and son are active in the scientific arena, it is natural for the Ceausescus to become the focus of “royal-family” type rumours.

A second aspect providing a basis for rumours revolves around the fear of external enemies, particularly the Soviet Union and Hungary. Anxiety about Romanian national integrity is cultivated in several foreign policy moves by President Ceausescu, for it is defence of Romania’s national autonomy that forms the basis for Party legitimacy and for Ceausescu’s own prestige among the population (a prestige in rapid decline, however).

Third, there is the regime’s general fear of foreign elements and the kinds of “ideological pollution” they may cause. Xenophobia and jingoism appear periodically in Romanian political and cultural life and reflect the political insecurity of the leadership. This has led to strict laws limiting contact between Romanians and foreign citizens and suspicion of any Romanian who establishes such contact. It has also produced veiled anti-semitic attacks in Romanian literature, campaigns against certain religious sects, and the dismissal of some officials and academics because of their interest in Transcendental Meditation, which was seen as a plot to take Romania out of the Warsaw Pact.14

Fourth, Romanians’ continuing economic hardships have obvious influence on rumour content, generating cynicism and discontent about the ability of the state to provide the population with bread, meat, milk and vegetables, not to mention quality goods and services.


Given these kinds of factors, it is not altogether surprising that rumours appear which deal with the escapades of Nicu Ceausescu’s son, the Soviet sabotage of factories, the religious sects who kidnap children, celebrities who come into conflict with the regime, restaurants selling human meat, and Party secretaries who miraculously appear in factories, clinics and meat queues to identify wrongdoing and bring justice. All such rumours reflect the kinds of daily problems facing Romanians. However, we are still left with a problem of credibility. How is it that even the most discerning intellectuals can believe the most fantastic and unverifiable of rumours? Here we must bring in the value system as it accords with informal oral communication. The historical conflict between state and society in Romania, a conflict which in many ways has continued in the socialist period, has failed to produce intermediate institutions which can win the allegiance of the population. The official media are instruments of these institutions, and suspicion of the media is such that even were they directly to deny a rumour, it might only serve to confirm it.

The informal, family and kin networks are the ties that bind in Romania. Like Poland, Romania could be considered “a federation of families.”15 The expression of these informal relations lies in oral, interpersonal exchange at the face to face level. The normative value of these exchanges means that anything spoken about receives a higher degree of credibility simply because it is orally transmitted. Not only is anything in the newspapers suspect, but what is NOT in them MUST be true. Oral channels give rumour a kind of authority that transforms it into “news.” Rumours are credible because they reflect the authenticity of the private sphere relations.

Rumour Diffusion

Not everyone is equally adept or interested in gathering or spreading rumours. Those most likely to play a key role are people who link the vertical classes or who connect horizontal segments. One category of rumour agents are those who travel from one location to another. Bauer and Giecher16 report the importance of truck drivers in the USSR’s rural zones for spreading news in that country. Visiting officials are also important since they are in a position both to propagate and clear up rumours about reported accidents, food shortages, new decrees, etc.

Another rumour agent consists of people whose work takes them into a higher social class or different segment of society, e.g. maids, repairmen, waiters, chauffeurs for high officials, etc. These people may make contact with those whose information is more reliable. Their presence is not a threat to their superiors, so they may become privy to much information. This may be embellished and distorted as it is passed down the line and across horizontal segments.

Finally, there are individuals whose occupation functions as an intersection for varying social categories—taxi-drivers, hairdressers, the doctor who treats both high officials as well as cousins and friends from the village. Subsequently, the information collected by these individuals can be transmitted by kin, friends or colleagues as they meet socially or stand in queues. In village Romania particularly, doctors and local officials who have contacts in the county seat and also make home visits are important links in rumour transmission.

In the cities, rumours easily filter down and across social segments. For example, a Bucharest intellectual first heard about the restaurant selling human meat from a writer, who himself had heard about it from a waitress in the Writers’ Union canteen, “a woman without culture.” The waitress had heard about it from a friend “in the branch”; the friend had attended some sort of meeting regarding the maintenance of health services in the food sector. I myself heard the story from an engineer in a Romanian provincial town and from the son of a Bucharest doctor. The doctor’s son had friends who knew the pathologist called in to verify that it was a human liver which had poisoned a boy at the restaurant. Workplace and neighbourhood ties were also forums for transmitting big city rumours; e.g. the various stories of grizzly murders in Bucharest which circulate from time to time (in one such story a woman’s body was found chopped up in 19 different pieces, strewed all over Bucharest).

The way in which rumours can cross large social gaps has itself created its own folklore. One story concerns a peasant who was hitch-hiking and was picked up by Nicu Ceausescu, son of Romania’s President, in his red Jaguar. The peasant did not know who Nicu was, and proceeded to relate a story of a Hungarian minority demonstration in Harghita County, at Lake Saint Anna, in which Hungarian flags were flown and 6,000 Hungarians sang patriotic songs. Nicu took this information and told his father, who then disciplined those members of the Harghita County Security apparatus who had failed to inform their chief. This story reflects typical Romanian anxiety over a suspect minority group (the events of the demonstration are apparently true and led to several expulsions from among Cluj’s polytechnic students). Yet it also reflects the limitations of information flow. Only by going outside the system—in a chance encounter between the son of the ruler and a simple peasant—is the ruler informed of what is going on.

A fourth channel of rumour transmission is the Western mass media itself, especially Radio Free Europe, which broadcasts daily to Romania, is not jammed, and is heard by many segments of the population. Radio Free Europe’s material frequently consists of translating Western correspondents’ news stories as published in the British, French, German or American press. Typically the correspondent has spent a few days in Romania and gathered some rumours from an embassy contact or a Bucharest intellectual. These will then be broadcast as rumours by Radio Free Europe, a curious situation whereby peasants in a remote mountain village may hear about miners throwing stones at Mr Ceausescu’s helicopter or mull over rumours about an aborted palace coup which occurred in Bucharest.

An additional factor in rumour transmission involves the motives of those who transmit them. For some people, rumours may be perceived as wholly untrue and may simply be an entertaining diversion. Yet sheer repetition and further embellishment may transform an entertaining story into “news.” This may be the case with stories of Madame Ceausescu’s plastic surgery and her presumed “stand-in,” or tales about Ceausescu’s negotiations with Indira Gandhi about repatriating Romania’s Gypsies back to India.

Yet the career of a rumour is not solely dependent on its means of transmission. Just as important is the relation of rumour to other communication systems in Romania.

**Rumours and the Official Literate Culture**

The Romanian press is characterized by much formalized and ritualized content. It reprints effusive tributes to President Ceausescu, toasts by foreign dignitaries, diplomatic communiqués, and telegrams of well-wishing to and from world leaders and from the people to their President. Like most East European papers, the hard news is usually found in short notices of personnel changes, decrees of amnesties or wage increases, or notes at the bottom of the foreign news page. Given the cryptic nature of the Romanian press, people are forced to “read between the lines,” assuming that minor changes in wording can have key significance. Other readers make more convoluted interpretations of what they read, especially as regards cultural and socio-political problems. As one Romanian explained, “if a film gets a bad review in Scintea [the Party daily], then I will definitely go to see it.”

The official literate culture in Romania is circumscribed by the dictates of censorship, both prescriptive and prescriptive. Authors and journalists censor themselves before they write. Editors, publication houses and Party watchdogs make further changes. Censorship offices were officially abolished in Romania in 1978. In fact, this only transferred more responsibility to editors and led to the placing of former censors and Party watchdogs directly on editorial boards.

In the oral sphere, censorship is not possible. The State’s only sanction consists of intimidation and laws against rumour-mongering. In the late 1940s, those who voiced too much criticism of the regime (written or oral), who told too many political jokes or who listened to Western radio stations risked imprisonment. Romania’s current shortage of political jokes—attributed to low morale among the population—has also been explained in terms of a renewed campaign against unauthorized oral expression.

Rumours in Romania are politically stigmatized. They represent a potential threat to the regime’s control over communication. Those who spread or preoccupy themselves with rumour—even if only to prove them
false—are taking risks. A journalist who asked her editor for further information on a series of Bucharest murders was told to "stop hanging around with the type of people who spread these kinds of slanders." The journalist observed that, "it's safer to discuss rumours with a salesgirl than with colleagues. Who knows what they will think?"

Those who control Romania's mass media generally choose to ignore rumours rather than confirm or deny them. In exceptional cases, and for explicit reasons, they will try to counteract a report on Radio Free Europe: typically, an individual who RFE says is on a hunger strike for religious freedom is presented by the Romanian journalist as a parasite, criminal or religious fanatic. Sometimes rumours may be denied in a very indirect way. For example, in 1981, rumours circulated that Stefan Voitec, a long-time member of the Political-Executive Committee, had had a public argument with Ceausescu at a ceremony and was now in jail or psychiatric hospital. For two months Voitec had been absent from public view, which in Romania means being present at ceremonies and meetings in which Ceausescu officiates, or having his name mentioned as one of those who sent off or welcomed him at Bucharest's airport. Radio Free Europe began to carry commentary about Voitec, intimating that his career was finished. The same day, during a Ceausescu speech to Party cultural activists, Voitec was again seen sitting in his usual position behind the podium, next to Madame Ceausescu. During the President's speech, the camera focused on Voitec an inordinate number of times. The man had become somewhat thinner, but he was politically alive, nevertheless. The television's oblique presentation managed to convince most of those who had been affected by the rumour. A small minority insisted that Voitec was drugged or forced to appear on the podium or was replaced by a double. Meanwhile, those who had never heard the rumour remained ignorant of the controversy altogether.

Romania's prohibitions on any unauthorized publications and its cautious approach to rumours cause them to diffuse more widely. The rumour's "career" cannot be hindered as occurs in the West, where official spokesmen or enterprising journalists will seek to confirm or deny a controversial story. In Romania, the rumour only reinforces uncertainty and anxiety, giving rise to more anxiety, further embellishment of the rumour, and the diffusion of the most implausible tales. Romanians' faith in oral channels gives them a credibility which is often wholly undeserved. These improvisations are illustrated in the stories about Nadia Comaneci's wedding. She is alternatively viewed as a Hungarian, Gypsy, or Russian. According to these rumours, there was a fistfight between the friends of the groom (a soccer player) and the bodyguards of Nicolae Ceausescu (rumoured to be a former suitor). These rumours have circulated for months. Yet Nadia recently told an American television interviewer in Los Angeles during the Olympics that she is not even married!

The relationship between rumours and the official media varies according to social categories. Bauer and Gleicher\(^\text{\textsuperscript{n}}\) compared the way rumours function among Soviet peasants and urban intellectuals (their study was part of the Harvard project which interviewed hundreds of Soviet emigrés after the Second World War). Bauer and Gleicher found that for Russian peasants, rumour functioned as a substitute for other media. Peasants relied on word of mouth even for news which was readily available in the newspapers or radio. State campaigns in the village were also conducted via oral agitation, in accordance with the peasants' faith in the use of oral channels and to create more personal bonds between Party activists and the masses. Since the peasants were far from the centres of news and in a low position to verify it, they could become subject to the most implausible of rumours.

For the urban intellectuals, rumour served not so much as a substitute for the official media but as a supplement and corrective. By talking with people, the intellectuals could interpret what they had read in the papers. Ninety-five per cent of the intellectuals interviewed by Bauer and Gleicher found rumours to be more reliable than the press. This group included not just the anti-regime or marginal elements, whose confidence in unofficial channels would be expected, but also those who had held high career positions in the political, economic and cultural apparatus. These individuals sought to supplement the official, censored information channels by using informal word-of-mouth channels. In fact, they could not carry out their jobs without this supplementary source. In contrast to peasants, intellectuals were closer to the centre of news, more able to verify it, and were presumably less susceptible to implausible rumours.

The fact that those in high-level positions also had a faith in the utility of informal channels has implications for the way state organs influence society. It means that those in high positions will not hesitate to disseminate rumours, believing that they will diffuse more widely and have more credibility than any written document or official campaign. This is clearly the case in Romania, where rumour campaigns are launched concerning a Soviet threat, the activities of a Magyar-minority Fifth Column, or concerning dangerous religious sects like Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses.

So far I have discussed rumours in terms of information content. Yet many rumours have a quite fantastic character which seems to overwhelm the otherwise critical faculties of Romania's urban intellectuals. Bauer and Gleicher assert that spreading such fantastic rumours constitutes a form of intellectual entertainment. Yet this explanation fails to link the nature of rumour with its actual content and the social processes involved. I believe that we can see rumours as expressions of societal anxieties and contradictions, which, given the nature of Romanian society, cannot be articulated in other forms. Even the most fantastic of rumours can also

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\(^{n}\) Op. cit.
serve (like jokes) to unite social categories which would otherwise remain separated. Rumours unite social classes and cross-cut horizontal segments. The suspicion, secrecy, competition and anxiety which characterize East European societies provides a stimulus for rumour transmission across wide social divides; hence, the journalist who finds it more comfortable to discuss rumours with a salesgirl than with colleagues. It is rumours which can unite the Party official with his chauffeur, the writer with the waitress, the journalist with the salesgirl. It is here that we can explain the wide appeal of rumours to all classes and categories of Romanian society, including the discerning intellectuals. Of course, some rumours will have more appeal and quite different functions than others. Hence, the remainder of this article discusses the varying types of rumours in Romania.

**A Typology of Rumours**

Fine and Roznow,18 noting a study by Knapp19 divide rumours into three distinct types:

1. **pipe-dreams**—rumours connected with wish-fulfilment;
2. **bogies**—rumours reflecting fear of the future, social anxiety, etc.;
3. **wedge-drivers**—rumours which seek to divide a community or find a common scapegoat.

In the Romanian context, pipe-dream rumours would include those dealing with the demise of an unpopular ruling family or revenge on an irresponsible ruler. They would also include “Robin Hood” type rumours describing peasant or worker uprisings, and “Good King” rumours in which Ceausescu or a high official surprises a wrongdoer and brings back justice in economic or social life. Bogey rumours would highlight the chaos and uncertainty of society—adulterated food, disappearing officials or celebrities, impending disasters, price-rises, cutbacks, invasions, coups, etc. Rumours about the exploits of Romania’s organs of state security in acquiring knowledge about and treating Romanian citizens would also be treated in this category, as would stories about corrupt officials. Finally, wedge-driving rumours would be directed at minority groups (Jews, Gypsies, Magyars), at dissidents, religious sects and at the Soviets.

Fine and Roznow compare two studies which categorized rumours according to this typology: Knapp’s 1942 study of 1,000 wartime rumours showed two-thirds to be wedge-drivers (anti-Black, anti-Semitic); a sample of rumours collected in Biafra during the 1970 civil war, however, showed an overwhelming percentage of pipe-dream rumours. My sample of rumours, described in the present article, seems more difficult to categorize. Depending on one’s political convictions, for example, a rumour that the Soviets are about to enter Romania and replace Ceausescu could reflect wish-fulfilment, social anxiety or drive a wedge between supporters and opponents of the regime.

The nature of state-society relations in Eastern Europe and the place of rumour in the total communication system demands that two other indices be added to describe rumour content: plausibility and point of origin. On the “plausibility” index we could distinguish rumours which are “possible” from those which appear “fantastic.” Firth20 and Lienhardt21 refer to these as “minor” and “major” rumours. There seems to be a fundamental difference between a rumour of a disaster or worker protest and a rumour stating that ex-King Michael has landed in Târgu Mureș in a helicopter. As for “point of origin” criteria, it would be useful to distinguish between rumours which appear to emanate from the population versus those which could arise with the help of the state (e.g., rumours of invasion or that a certain dissident is a Soviet agent).

It is my own impression that the number of fantastic rumours is increasing. This seems to accord with the increasing level of anxiety among the population, their uncertainty about the future, discontent with the Ceausescu regime, and state efforts to inhibit popular expression or even discussion of Romania’s problems. Second, it should be noted that state-supported rumours can be just as fantastic as those which emerge spontaneously from the population. Rumours of Soviet invasions or Hungarian conspiracies to annex Transylvania, and of local Party secretaries who appear in several factories simultaneously and restore order, of religious fanatics who kidnap and even eat young children, all are as implausible as peasant tales of witches, evil spirits or restaurants selling human meat.

**Pipe-dream Rumours—Ridiculing the “Royal Family”**

A common East European rumour genre centres on the high political figures and their families. We might call these “royal-family rumours” as they resemble those we hear in the West. However, rumours about Romania’s Ceausescus also reflect specific features of Romanian socialist society. First, they are *rumours*—not gossip—in that they are never mentioned, confirmed or denied in the Romanian media. Second, they generally tend to be negative, even vicious, reflecting the “pipe-dream” of seeing a royal family humiliated, brought down to earth or eliminated altogether. Third, they seem to concentrate much more on the immediate family of Nicolae Ceausescu than on Ceausescu himself. One could surmise that his legitimacy—while on the decline—is much more acceptable than that of his wife or son, who have no independent political experience. The fact that rumours about Romania’s first family are never mentioned in the media only serves to prolong their existence. Given the strained relationship between the state media and society, official denial of a vicious rumour would likely have the reverse effect.
Even within an East European context, Romania's royal-family rumours stand out as exceptional. This is due first to the total dominance and high visibility in the media of President Ceausescu, which makes public appearances or delivers major speeches continually. In this context, the appearance of any other celebrity—political or cultural—constitutes a destabilizing factor. In addition, Romania's royal-family rumours stand out because of the high public visibility of Ceausescu's wife Elena, who is First Deputy-Prime Minister, and son Nicu, who is head of the Party Youth Organization and mentioned as possible successor to his father. The cult of the Ceausescus is pervasive. A single issue of Scinteia may contain references to all three persons, plus occasional reference to daughter Zoia (a mathematician) and son Valentin (an atomic physicist who represents Romania in certain international scientific and atomic energy forums). Despite their high visibility and their obvious power, no further information about them is available to the public.

The viciousness of the rumours and jokes about the Ceausescus clearly reflects the acute disappointment of Romanians in a leadership which has failed to "deliver the promised goods," which has continually pressed the population towards more and more sacrifice, which has appropriated the good life for its members (villas, cars, travel abroad) and which has unabashedly elevated its members far above their peasant roots. Jokes exist about their inability to speak correct Romanian or converse intelligently with foreign visitors. Jokes about Madame Ceausescu may emphasize her physical unattractiveness or insatiable or peculiar sexual appetite. Rumours frequently cite her hidden power over her husband. In Romanian folk motifs, this combination of ugliness, sex and power resembles the kind of talk one might hear about a witch. (One might look for parallel rumours concerning Magda Lupescu, the mistress of Romania's King Carol during the 1930s.) Other tales emphasize Madame Ceausescu's callousness and the way she suffers for it. One example (in many variants) tells how she or (her chauffeur) ran down a pedestrian (or collided with an ambulance) on the way to a meeting. Madame Ceausescu herself was said to be severely injured and taken to Paris (or Vienna) for plastic surgery. Still another variant describes brain surgery performed in Bucharest by Romania's famed neurosurgeon Dr Arsenie (said to be both crazy and a millionaire). Dr Arsenie is said to have insulted her on the operating table, or refused to come when she called him late at night.

The theme of insult, of competent people confronting and earning momentary victories over illegitimate authority, is also typical of many stories regarding Nicu Ceausescu, widely regarded as the playboy of the family. As a youth, Nicu was said to have been pulled off the street by an over-zealous policeman because of his long hair. He is thought to have had some influence in allowing for more Western and Romanian pop music. He (or at times brother Valentin) is said to have fallen in love with a daughter of Romania's ex-king Michael, whom he met while studying at Oxford; Paris-Match or l'Humanité is said to have taken a photograph of the couple, which Romanian officials prevented from being published.

With his rise to power, however, Nicu's image lost its innocence. He is said to have his share of rumoured car accidents and smashed up restaurants. (In one alleged accident, he ran over a pedestrian on Calea Victoriei while drunk-driving. 1979.) Several stories tell of violent altercations with well-known and well-respected Romanian celebrities. In the lobby of Bucharest's Intercontinental Hotel, for example, Nicu confronts actress Florenti Persie and demands to go home with her girlfriend. Persie refuses; there follows an exchange of insults and a fight in which Persie succeeds in hitting Nicu before himself being pummelled by Nicu's bodyguards. In another he has an argument with the son of CC member Janos Fazeekas over a woman, Donka Mizil. He beats up women and gets Fazeekas' driver's licence taken from him. Rumours like this are difficult to verify. Sources have indicated to me that the two are friends and often go out together and that this could not have happened. Others say the opposite. It is interesting that Persie himself, during a performance in Cluj, actually made an ad lib remark about the incident. The audience howled, yet one could not tell whether he was making fun of the incident or playing on the rumours about it.

The theme of insult continues in other stories about Nicu. In another tale he confronts Ion Voicu, son of the director of the Bucharest philharmonic, and a Gypsy. Nicu demands that Voicu leave the restaurant, saying, "Son of a Gypsy, get out." Voicu is said to have responded, "Son of a cobbler, go home." Nicolae Ceausescu was originally a shoemaker's apprentice. In yet a third tale, Nicu has an altercation with Romania's cosmonaut, Dumitru Prunaru. Prunaru knocks Nicu to the ground and runs from the Doinea restaurant to the Soviet embassy, which is indeed nearby. Taking refuge in the embassy, he eventually leaves after receiving some kind of guarantee that he will not be harmed. Some weeks later, however, the Soviet ambassador in Bucharest has a heart attack and dies. The rumour behind his death is that the ambulance was purposely late responding to the Russians' call and had arranged an accident on the way to the hospital. This was Romania's retaliation for the Prunaru incident. Other versions have it that the ambassador died from a steam bath or simple heart attack.

The two most recent tales about Nicu refer to his irresponsibility. In one, Nicu is said to have lost 700,000 dollars at gambling tables in Las Vegas, Monte Carlo or Miami(?). In one variant he pays his debt with seven Lippezaner stallions from Romania's national stables. In another, his mother is forced to cover his debt from her private Swiss bank account. She is identified by a press photographer or journalist. Some say it is Richard Nixon who paid. In April 1984 a fresh rumour concerned Nicu's friendship with a Romanian foreign trade official stationed in the US, who supplied Nicu with cash ($400 per day) during his visit to the States. The official came under Romanian scrutiny but was protected by Nicu. He eventually embezzled money from the state and defected. Madame Ceausescu was so furious that she scolded her son for being a
good-for-nothing and a fool. Nicu got so angry that he assaulted her, forcing her to remain indoors for two weeks because of her bruises.

Rumours about Nicu's sister Zoița, a mathematician and head of her institute (the story of which is itself a subject of vixous tales), are more benign. The rumours concern her failed love affairs. She had an affair with a doctor from Cluj, and was found in a motel room in Suceava. He eventually left her. Zoița is now said to be living despondently in Paris, home of one of her ex-lovers. A house in central Bucharest, across from the Bucharest Hotel, has been prepared for her return, but this house is coveted by brother Nicu. She drives a Mercedes 280SE.

Royal-family rumours are easily the most embellished. They are beyond verification and are inherently interesting to all Romanians for both personal and political reasons. The "pipe-dream" aspect is that they depict a desire to see a family so filled with conflict that it will fall from power. Moreover, these rumours are not peasant rumours but originate with intellectuals from Bucharest and then spread to the provinces via human channels or Western radio broadcasts beamed back into Romania. When a peasant from the countryside can recite a conversation between Nicu Ceausescu and Florin Piersic in the lobby of the Intertcontinental Hotel, we have gone beyond the realm of rumour. We are talking of a folk narrative or legend. We are witnessing how folklore can become resurgent, with the help of modern-day media.

Royal-family rumours (of the wish-fulfilment type) are not the only kind of pipe-dream. Others concern what could be called "Robin Hood" tales, in which common people outwit the authorities, take from the rich and give to the poor, or assert their identities in the face of power holders. There are stories of peasants who stop Romanian trucks filled with meat destined for export and distribute the meat among the villagers. Perhaps these stories derive from truck accidents where meat is salvaged or pilfered. A Gypsy tale makes fun of border authorities: a Gypsy wanting to go abroad was so impatient that he left Romania at the border with Yugoslavia, visited 13 European countries, and returned home without a passport; when the security organs eventually decided to give him permission to leave, he told them it was unnecessary, since he had gone and already come back. This story has attained enough credibility in some areas for Gypsies to use it to intimidate local authorities into giving them a passport.

There exist numerous tales of consumer and worker resistance in Romania, not all of which are untrue. A much-discussed rumour tells of miners in the Jiu Valley, on strike in 1977, who threw stones at President Ceausescu's helicopter as it tried to land there in 1981. This was reported even in The Times (London, 4 Sept. 1981) and other Western papers.

All the pipe-dream rumours cited represent desired situations on the part of the population—the demise of a decadent royal family, the disciplining of the "foolish son," the overcoming of shortages, the establishment of popular control. Sensing this kind of anxiety, the state can also generate its own kind of pipe-dream rumours (which will be discussed later). Pipe-dream rumours exemplify the expressive character of rumour as opposed to its informative function. As a Bucharest intellectual explained to me when I questioned the credibility of the rumour that miners had thrown stones at Ceausescu's helicopter: "It doesn't matter if it's not true. It should be."

Given the actual conditions in Romania and the popular desires as expressed above, one should expect a continuing stream of pipe-dream rumours.

Bogies—Anxiety Rumours

Bogie rumours are the most acute expressions of social anxiety and the least linked to actual news events. One form of anxiety emphasizes the capriciousness of the political order under Mr Ceausescu. Political figures are constantly being rotated to new posts or may disappear from the scene altogether. Anyone with a degree of celebrity in Romania will be the topic of rumours describing his or her downfall. Corneliu Burtica, a recently demoted member of the Party elite, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cultural Affairs—and a presumed in-law of President Ceausescu—is said to have committed suicide after being discharged from his posts. The poet laureate of the regime, Adrian Paunescu, argued with Ceausescu over the latter's poetry. He was thought to be a victim of Ceausescu's antipathy when he was publicly insulted at a large gathering. Peasants also mentioned the possibility of Paunescu taking an ambassadorial post in Canada. Dumitru Prunariu, who has not recently appeared in public, is now said to be of Russian descent, to have married a Russian, and to have sought to emigrate to the USSR.

A typical case of political caprice is the case of Virgil Trofin, former head of Brasov County and Central Committee member. In September 1981 Trofin was dismissed as Minister of the Coal Mining Industry for allegedly falsifying production statistics, after which he was sent off to head a state farm in the Baraglan plain. A year after his dismissal, he was reported to have committed suicide, been killed, or as one doctor's son insisted with 100 per cent certainty, to have died when he fell under a tractor (with his wife). Yet a year later, I spoke with a woman who claimed to have been told on someone in a train displaying an invitation from Mr and Mrs Virgil Trofin to attend their son's wedding. In mid-July 1984, after circulating for over two years, the rumour was belatedly confirmed when the daily newspaper Romania Libera printed a short notice of Trofin's death and funeral in its "Obituaries" column (the notice was submitted by his family). Reuters and Radio Free Europe subsequently commented on Trofin's stormy career, but the official Romanian media remained silent.

A Turkish provocateur (?) was planted at Paunescu's Flashara presentations, at which he offered a friendly greeting in Turkish. When it was published, this greeting translated into a slander, intended to put Paunescu firmly back in his place.

The only hard evidence for this comes from the fact that the original transmission from the space capsule had astronaut Prunariu speaking the first few words of Romanian with a Russian accent. After that he spoke normally, however. In any event he has not been heard of since.
A host of bogey rumours involve Romania's strained relationship with the Soviet Union. Soviets are seen as one cause of Romania's economic problems. Soviet border guards, for example, are said purposely to halt Romanian food exports to that country so that the produce spoils. In 1974, a series of fires and explosions which occurred in factories in Bresov, Pitesti, Bucharest and Tigrivest was explained as the result of Soviet sabotage. The factories presumably specialized in exporting goods to the West; the Soviets would have preferred to obtain the Romanian goods themselves. These explanations seem implausible, despite their wide currency even in American diplomatic circles. The Soviets could have caused much more damage by striking at Romania's oil refineries. Besides, rumours in Bresov spoke of poor safety conditions and worker discontent; slogans complaining of unpaid bonuses were found on factory walls after the fire.

A similar subversionary theory operates to explain a fire at Bucharest's national theatre which occurred the day before the Chinese premier was supposed to see a performance there. The safety curtain in the theatre failed to operate. The utility of the "Soviet subversion" theory is that it combines genuine anti-Russian sentiment with official state policies of asserting Romanian independence and attributing Romania's difficulties to evil outside forces. Exploiting Romansians' anti-Sovietism is one way for the state to deal with unpleasant rumours. The sudden death and secretive funeral of author Marin Preda provides a case in point. Preda was known for his literary independence and for the anti-Soviet tone of his historical novels. The original rumours of his death mentioned alcoholism and suicide, but suspicions were also focused on the Romanian or Soviet security services. It was then rumoured that Ceausescu himself had ordered an investigation to determine whether Preda had been killed by the KGB. In keeping with the delicate nature of Romanian-Soviet relations and the conspiratorial nature of the "Soviet subversion" theory, neither the investigation nor any of the above-mentioned disasters were mentioned in the press.

The Russian bogey may also be employed with respect to any social problems in Transylvania. These may be automatically attributed to subversion from Hungary, even to Hungarian efforts to re-annex Transylvania. In Romanian eyes, Hungary operates as a Soviet surrogate.

Rumours of impending Soviet invasions arise periodically, often spread by Romanian diplomats abroad. Yet such tales also attain a popular version, as in the following: a Soviet delegation, led by Brezhnev himself, came to Bucharest to force Ceausescu to knuckle under to certain Warsaw Pact decisions. When Ceausescu refused, KGB members of the delegation pulled their guns, whereupon the Romanian Securitate guards appeared from behind a curtain and shot it out with the Russians. Brezhnev returned home without his concessions.

A 1983 rumour, reflecting the instability of Ceausescu's rule, concerns an officers' coup. Most Romansians would interpret this as a Soviet-inspired plot, however patriotic the officers' motives. Having been trained in the USSR, the officer corps is seen as Soviet-manipulated. In one version, the officers politely appeal to Ceausescu to change his policies, but the President presses a button and they disappear, never to be heard of again. In another version the officers, with guns drawn, actually reach Ceausescu's ante-room, but are repulsed and overpowered by bodyguards. This rumour was first mentioned in the French press and then repeated on Radio Free Europe more than a month after it supposedly occurred (December 1982). No one in Bucharest could add any more to the story except for a woman who maintained that "there were many funerals of army officers that week." Most Romansians cannot even imagine, much less discuss, the possibility of a Romania without Ceausescu. He has been in power since 1965, and his period of rule is now modestly hailed as the "Ceausescu Epoch." The rumour of a failed coup is perhaps one way of combining pipe-dreams about his demise, anxieties about the future (a Soviet-dominated Romania) and conscious recognition of his hold on power.

The anxiety of Romansians is not solely connected with hostile foreign powers, however. The country suffers from a myriad of internal problems, including many economic hardships which have served to increase the anxiety of the citizens in recent years (more piece-work, factory closings, price-rises, lower state subsidies for health and education, emigration, appeals and rationing of food). The most recent crisis is the virtual halt to all abortions, a campaign which has had tragic consequences in some cases. The anxiety situation has led to several rumours reflecting the crisis nature of Romanian life. In 1983, a rumour arose that customers in the Budapest restaurant in Bucharest had been poisoned by eating human organs. The restaurant is not far from the city morgue. One variant of the story told of a morgue employee who sold organs to a knowing chef at the restaurant. In another variant, the chef unwittingly bought a human liver from a peasant, bypassing the state distribution system; a child was said to have been poisoned. Following this, similar "cannibalism" rumours in Pitesti and Targu Jiu involved adulteration of sausage dishes. The Budapest case was not mentioned in the Romanian press, of course, but was quite widespread.

The cannibalism rumour has several interesting elements. First, the food served is not simply adulterated or spoiled but converted into human form. Second, the rumour concerns not a food store but a restaurant. Third, it centres on a restaurant with a particular "cuisine" (which by Western standards does not vary much from standard Bucharest fare).

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* One rumour maintained that 200 Bucharest taxi-drivers, protesting their lay-offs due to the energy crisis and/or lowering of their commission, decided to turn in their papers to emigrate, since strikes are illegal. Going down to present their papers, they were told that this cannot be done in groups but must be done individually. According to various drivers, 20 per cent of them eventually went to prison, others left, but most were turned down.
Adulteration and spoilage of food is a common concern of most Romanians who buy from state shops. Many Romanians do not buy any sort of processed meat, and stories have circulated of peasants passing off dog meat as lamb. The Budapest rumour reflects some of the anxiety and uncertainty in Romanian society. People do not know what they are eating anymore. No one can be trusted. It is every man for himself in Romanian daily life: people are devouring each other to obtain scarce resources—food, housing, education, consumer goods, train tickets, places for their children in good schools, etc.

The rumour has its share of sly characters—the morgue worker, the peasant and the chef, who is also spoken of as simply “crazy” or vicious, purposely out to insult his customers.

The tale takes place in a restaurant rather than a shop. In today’s Romania, where restaurant prices are high compared to wages, those in the restaurants represent an upper social category—high officials or those making extra money on the side, exploiting the system in some way. That such people are fooled into eating human flesh may be seen as a kind of revenge on the part of those circulating the rumour.

Finally, that this is the Budapest and not one of the other deluxe restaurants in the Romanian capital may have, in addition to its “booby” character, a “wedge-driving” function. According to this interpretation—which I heard from Western diplomats and from Romanians interested in the functioning of the security organs—the “cannibalism” rumour was part of a state plot to restrict clandestine meetings of Hungarian dissidents, who supposedly used the Budapest as a meeting place. This interpretation seems to be as fantastic as the rumour itself. The Budapest was not closed down, and there has been no noticeable effect on the social and political activities of Romania’s Magyar minority, which lives predominantly in Transylvania and not in Bucharest.

Cannibalism rumours have occurred periodically in Romania. They indicate a society whose level of anxiety and cynicism has reached a point where people believe that anything, even this, can happen. Such a rumour—with credibility among intellectuals and workers alike—could be one indication of the spiritual crisis into which Romania has sunk. Given such anxieties, it is understandable for people, and for the state, to seek scapegoats.

Wedge-driving—Rumours and State Control

State officials know the power of rumour even as they seek to control unauthorized rumour-mongering. Rumour campaigns which blame the Russians are one way in which the state tries to relieve some of the social anxiety in Romania. A more vicious form of state-sponsored “wedge-driving” focuses on undesirable religious sects such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentacostalists and Seventh-Day Adventists. In 1982, a Bucharest teenager accidentally died in an apartment; a youth whose parents were Jehovah’s Witnesses was involved. The Party then ordered school teachers in this district to call parents in for special meetings. At the meetings, parents were told that it was the Jehovah’s Witnesses who had been responsible for the boy’s death, and that they had special means to kidnap and brainwash young children. Indeed, the Witnesses had a small following in this neighbourhood of Bucharest, but Party officials later admitted to sceptical teachers that the Witnesses had no part in the killing or kidnapping of children. Nevertheless, the conferences produced minor hysteria among parents, and rumours spread well beyond Bucharest that the Witnesses were kidnapping and even sacrificing young children (note the obvious parallels with historically-familiar rumour spreads directed against other pariah groups—Jews and Gypsies—which tend to circulate in times of social crisis and political instability and are frequently manipulated by the powers that be). Near the town of Turda, a Cluj priest was murdered in 1981. He had often spoken out against the religious sects, and it was soon rumoured that a Jehovah’s Witness had murdered him.

At the same time as the informal rumour campaign was occurring, Romania’s mass media were conducting an “anti-mysticism” campaign. This campaign dramatically pictured the way in which children were ruined by religiously fanatic parents: kept out of school, forced to attend all-night religious rites, compelled to fast, denied medical treatment, etc. The combination of the meetings with parents, the rumour campaign and newspaper accounts did more to stigmatize the Witnesses than any purely official information campaign could have done.

The Power of Rumour—Image-Making Among Local Party Secretaries

The faith in informal channels which prevails among state functionaries is no better illustrated than in the use of such channels by county Party secretaries. Fluctuations in the post of First Secretary of the County Party Committee (Romania has 40 counties) are continuous and capricious. Often the new First Secretary comes from another part of the country or is sent out from Bucharest. Each county is plagued with similar problems: inadequate services, poor planning, shortages, inefficiency, consumer discontent, etc. Theoretically, first secretaries have the power to enter any enterprise or service outlet to make an inspection. They can suggest changes and replace personnel. Within their counties, they can function much as Nicolae Ceausescu does in Romania at large. However, they cannot publicize themselves or build a public image in the county press. There is only one political actor in Romania and that is Ceausescu himself. When appointed to a new county, the Secretary seeks to buy time among constituents to establish an image that “now things will really get done.” Lacking the ability to manipulate the local press, they and their staff can resort to informal or unofficial channels. Generally this follows a pattern whereby the First Secretary travels incognito around the county, encounters chaos and indiscipline, takes dramatic measures to restore order and brings back justice. This illustrates state-manufactured pipe-
dreams. Let us describe three cases which are typical of what I have heard in Brasov, Cluj, Tulcea and other counties.

In one case, the newly-arrived Brasov County Party Secretary disguises himself as a worker and applies for a job in the tractor factory. He is told to wait in the office. The Secretary spends the day observing the foreman and others going in and out of the factory, playing cards, doing nothing. The Secretary wanders around the premises and sees further instances of sloth and indiscipline. At the end of the day the personnel director finally decides to see the prospective employee. The First Secretary reveals his identity and demands to see the factory director. When the director is confronted with the hard facts, he calls in his subordinates and castigates them for their indiscipline and promises that things will improve. In the sphere of retail services, the Party chief stands in a meat queue, waiting for chicken. When the butcher says he is out of chicken and that everyone should leave, the Secretary demands to examine the store. Finding hidden stocks of meat (destined to be sold on the black market or to special customers) the Secretary demands that the butcher give them to those in the queue and cover the costs himself. Health services are a third example: the local Secretary puts a false bandage around his wrist, enters a clinic and asks to be treated by a nurse. The nurse ignores him until he is forced to bribe her. When she finally finishes treating him, he reveals his identity. In one case the Party chief’s name is written on his left wrist; in another he hands her his business card. In both stories, however, everyone in the clinic is fired. Unlike the “tales” in industrial enterprises, treatment of the service sector is harsher—there is no second chance.

The exploits of the new Party Secretary spread easily among residents of the town and via commuters to the outlying communities. The “visits,” never mentioned in the media, are publicized solely via interpersonal transmission. Gradually the rumours become more embellished and elaborated. The Party Secretary is suddenly in three places at once, “putting things in order.” Stories arise of his incognito visits even before he took over his post. The examples, while being spread by local officials to gain breathing space, seem to touch on a general motif in European and Oriental folklore generally, and Romanian folklore specifically: that of the righteous king who goes among his people in disguise and re-establishes justice. Like in the Harun al-Rashid folktales, the justice in Romania (here meant as “the proper state of affairs”) is produced not by the system but by the physical presence of the “ruler.” It is supposed to be a benevolent despotism. For the first months, the local Party Secretary puts a scare into the workers. Since no one knows what he actually looks like, he can be anywhere, like a mysterious force. Depending on the spread of the rumours and the population’s level of suggestibility, the rumours create breathing space for the new leader until he actually can take concrete organizational measures to alleviate factory inefficiency or service bottlenecks. The problem in Romania, however, is that as a rule the inefficiencies and over-centralized plans preclude this,

which means that a high level of social tension remains in the population. Rumours about the “good king” thus revert back to rumours of “chaos,” or wish-fulfilment type rumours highlighting forms of protest or ridicule of power-wielders.

In employing oral transmission to bolster their images, Party secretaries themselves may be only continuing something started earlier. It is rumoured (!) that Mr Ceausescu himself, before assuming power (1965), used to wander anonymously around markets and enterprises in disguise. It is not inconceivable that local Party secretaries, recalling these rumours, decide either to act them out, or what is more likely, to give the impression that they are also wandering among their people in disguise. What is important is that local Party secretaries may actually have carried out incognito excursions like those described above, but that these stories are systematically replicated in county after county, throughout Romania. Hence, rumours which appear to be idiosyncratic may be systematically reproduced by specific socio-political conditions and by the nature of the communication-information system generally. These are conditions of popular aspirations, unfulfilled promises, unpredictability in political behaviour, uncertainty about the future, local inadequacy in meeting consumer demands, popular mistrust of the official media, and a strong confidence in the credibility of orally-transmitted information, reinforced by Western radio broadcasts.

Conclusion—Rumours and the Socialist State

The socialist states, which have established a high degree of control over written channels of communication and broadcast media, have been less successful in censoring informal communications, especially in the oral sphere: rumours cannot be stamped “secret.” They can be manipulated or embellished, but they cannot be censored or confiscated. Rumours create a social interaction which is partly autonomous from the state. Within the societies of “really existing socialism,” rumours constitute a transient form of liberation. To quote Lienhardt, “Rumours..., are the voice of the mob before the mob gathers.”

The danger for the state lies in the way rumour encapsulates a vicarious collective consciousness. Even as the state may try to manipulate rumour channels, the rumour may take on a career of its own. A new kind of folklore can spread from intellectuals to peasants, from city to countryside, being transformed and embellished as it perhaps picked up by a foreign correspondent and transmitted back to a Carpathian mountain village by radio stations located in Washington, London or Munich. In view of the acute problems faced by socialist societies in general and Romania in particular, given the way these societies not only ignore these problems but complicate them in the process, we can expect rumours to become more and more prominent in the future. Rumours will become the folklore of socialism. Just as we find similar types of jokes throughout

* P. Lienhardt, op. cit. p. 130.
Eastern Europe—"system jokes"—"system rumours" are replicated in all communist countries. Such "system rumours" resemble each other in content, in mode of transmission, in measures of plausibility and in their function, as pipe-dreams, anxiety reducing, wedge-driving, etc. In all communist countries, rumour has been elevated from an incidental channel of communication to a parallel one. A focus on "system rumours" can help us explain how what appears on first sight to be "improvised news" or reactions to anxiety are part of a political system characterized by political manipulation, and covert conflict between state and society.

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