

Bruce O'Neill (2017)

***The Space of Boredom:  
Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order***

Durham: Duke University Press, pp.280, \$25.95

The book represents an ethnographic study analysing and explaining an intriguing issue – boredom – and the lived experience of it by homeless people. This spatial framework of analysis is situated in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, and analyses boredom as a particular feature of homeless people and homeless living conditions generally as well as in the context of the development of homelessness in Romania.

The book starts with a *Preface*, giving preliminary details on: (1) the topic, the category of population studied, the ethnographic approach, and the social-economic context that triggers boredom as a phenomenon among homeless people in Bucharest; (2) the methodology of the analysis, based on fieldwork and direct interaction with both homeless people and different representatives working in the field of managing homelessness; and (3) the scientific contributions of the study to advancing ethnographic knowledge on the topic. Boredom among homeless people is particularised in the framework of a post-socialist country facing the new challenges of a global economic crisis, while transitioning to fully function as a capitalist European country. The research used participant observation, documentary photography and interviews with homeless people in Bucharest, both women and men, of different ages and backgrounds. It investigates boredom as a construct of their daily lives, dominated by the lack of stability of a home, relationships and a job. Besides characterising and explaining homelessness in Romania, the ethnographic findings evidence boredom in relation to social exclusion that is linked to the global consumerism of a capitalist society, in the aftermath of a global economic crisis, and in the final stages of post-communist transition.

Starting with the case study of a homeless man in Bucharest who feels deeply bored, the *Introduction* of the book differentiates boredom from depression, the former resulting from a lack of financial and relational resources for socially marginalised people to access the new consumerist meanings of daily living. Detailing the social, political and economic background of Romania from the beginning of the

20<sup>th</sup> century, with emphasis on the communist period and the post-socialist transition process, the book contextualises the development of homelessness, its national and local management processes and the general characteristics of homeless people in Bucharest. Including useful references to theoretical thinking on boredom, it goes on to explain the production of boredom in different living spaces of homeless people – shelters, squatter camps and the railway station – all share the same outcome, boredom, which represents life at the margins of a competitive global economy.

Chapter One describes boredom in the case of two homeless men living rough in a squatter camp. The intriguing aspect is that boredom is part of their current daily life, but not during the communist period, when most of their free time was occupied by the need to stand in the queue at grocery stores in order to be able to buy food for their families. The social, political and economic context to current rough sleeping and past communist practices for work and daily living are highlighted, and serve to illustrate the objective and subjective characteristics of these two situations of deprivation, both resulting in distinct experiences at the level of the individual. This part of the book also includes a close look at an example of displacement from the global economy, based on the story of a young homeless person living in a public shelter localized at the margins of the city. The story emphasises the role of ethnic stigma in the construction of individual social and economic disruption that ultimately leads to everyday boredom.

Focusing on the homeless shelters in Bucharest and explaining the background of their organization and functioning, based on both homeless residents' testimonies and personal documentation on the topic, Chapter Two develops the idea of an entire infrastructure of displacement and boredom. Returning to a case of street homeless men that live in a squatter camp, the investigation of boredom continues by discussing boredom in relation to global consumerism. The low-qualified homeless men found themselves without a job, a home or financial resources to satisfactorily fill the passing of daily time, so that they find themselves to be deeply bored. Although normal life and the "disciplinary society" involve a range of boredom due to the obligation of respecting schedules and performing repetitive tasks, the author explains that while boring work results in financial resources that may ensure individual stimulation within one's free time, homeless people, despite having a greater amount of free time, enjoy much less opportunities to use it for personal satisfaction, and experience generalized boredom.

Chapter Three is a complex study of boredom that is closely linked to social exclusion in the context of ageing and poverty. Life in the shelters for poor older people, people with bad health and those with limited financial resources are particularly vulnerable to boredom, as they are at the margins of the city, of society,

of the global economy and of life in general. The discussion revolves around the experiences of several pensioners, and opens debate on the old communist pensioning system and the former regime of pensioners, who used to represent a reliable support for younger members of their families. This is in opposition to the current situation for older people who find themselves excluded and in a process of displacement, during the post-socialist transition period and with the additional effects of the global economic crisis.

The loss of hope for a chance to improve their living conditions and displacement from public, social and economic life is constant for homeless people, and means boredom is inescapable. Boredom emerges and strongly develops as the homeless people experience a social death in relation to the city. Chapter Four uses interviews with different homeless men to illustrate boredom as a construct of structural factors which lead to long-term homelessness – the global economy that highly disadvantages the low-skilled middle-aged men, consumerism as the leading theme of a fulfilling post-socialist life, and an inefficient and under-financed social protection system. Developing the parallel between life under communism – a currently desirable life – and life under the global economy, the analysis delves into the mechanisms of social death in the context of homelessness, while highlighting the social suffering and violence faced by the vulnerable population.

Chapter Five is an ethnography of underground sex markets, dealing with the black market opportunities that the homeless people use in search of means of survival and living, and the use of sexual favors as an antidote to boredom. For some, making money to pay for distractions such as drinking and smoking is the first choice for a way to fill time. Additionally, relationships and the satisfaction of sexual needs on the street are characterized by specific dynamics that turn homeless men to occasional sex with other men – the lack of sufficient money constitutes an impediment to maintain heterosexual relationships or paid intercourse with female prostitutes. In the end, boredom seems to represent a distinctive aftermath of homelessness, with homeless people in the same daily battle for a satisfactory life as the general population (which, as opposed to the homeless people, ends in the attainment of financial resources that seem to support all other components of a normal social life).

Beyond homelessness, boredom acts as a general threat to the daily wellbeing of Romanians, with consumerism the constant stimulus of defense against it. An international coffee company promoted their instant coffee product with the slogan: “Defeat boredom!” which is also the title of Chapter Six. In fact, for homeless people, coffee and cigarettes represent the most available and the most often used instrument to defeat boredom on a daily basis. At the same time, such practices of small consumerism represent a means for the inclusion of homeless people into

social dynamics, by increasing the mobility of the homeless people from the margins, and making use of different commercial spaces. The study accompanies several homeless people in their adventures for consumption in places such as: the gas station shop, the mall, the hypermarket or the fast food restaurant, while unveiling the strategies employed by the homeless people to integrate themselves in the flow of those spaces and in the conversations with the other consumers or the local representatives of those spaces.

The book ends with a new look at the hotspot of nighttime entertainment in the old-town district of Bucharest. It highlights the social pressure of globalism in the world of homelessness and makes reference to a general antagonism between the hyperactive – hyper-passive pace. Within the specific case of homelessness, boredom mostly emerges as the disappointment of not living a standard life and it represents the lack of formal productivity, while all informal activity is internalized as inactivity in the end.

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