

# Anthropology Book Forum

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## **Boredom in Bucharest**

**Review by Christopher M. Kloth**

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

by Bruce O'Neill

Duke University Press, 2017

The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order, by Bruce O'Neill, offers a crucial insight into the boredom experienced by the homeless in Bucharest, Romania. Examining the pitfalls of global capitalism, O'Neill is able to probe the emotional toll that limited opportunities for those struggling to find a way, while struggling with seemingly permanent unemployment. This work stems from three years of ethnographic research in Bucharest, Romania, following the transition from communism to consumer capitalism, and "weaves between homeless shelters and day centers, squatter camps and black labor markets, in order to detail how people internalize and make sense of deepening poverty over and against the anticipation of rising, consumer driven prosperity" (O'Neill x).

Boredom is "traced in three types of spaces" (16). The first is a material space, referring importantly to the physical spaces that the homeless may inhabit, such as shelters. Shelters are themselves boring and create boredom for those inside of them. The second is an inward boredom. This inward boredom refers especially to the lacking of "meaning and significance" in shelters, camps, and others spaces that the homeless may inhabit (17). Finally, this boredom can be understood as a boredom that "define[s] individual personhood" (17). This boredom is of particular concern, as it is a feature that impacts one's interaction not only with the world, but with their own happiness. As O'Neill states, "[u]ltimately, the boredom captured within these pages registers within the modality of time the homeless's displacement from meaningful places and marks their resignation toward occupying the discarded spaces of the city" (17). Boredom, then, in addition to being an emotion of significant importance, helps one to understand

the ways in which the homeless inhabit space and “they rhythm of everyday life” (17).

The global expansion of capitalism is crucial to this ethnography. As capitalism expanded and tried to grow in Bucharest, it left the homeless to aimlessly search for opportunity. While capitalism promises to deliver prosperity and opportunity, this reality is not felt by everyone. After experiencing early growth, through the transition from a communist state, the economy again faltered. Early growth was largely rooted in consumerism and the rise of credit. O’Neill discusses the rise of shopping malls, new construction, and early hiring amongst business, both new and existing. Additionally, Romania was accepted into the European Union during this time, which increased resources, giving “people tangible cause to believe that better days were coming” (9). It is through these feelings of hope and desire that the emotional importance of boredom becomes more apparent.

While this book makes numerous theoretical contributions, the most important is the discussion of the embodiment of boredom. Boredom is examined as both an internal and external feature of homelessness in Bucharest. In all of the ways noted above, boredom could be understood simply as an emotion, one which is the result of certain pressures on one’s existence. While this is certainly the case, O’Neill pushes this notion further. He critically examines the way that boredom, and again, not depression, is woven into the fabric of the homeless’ existence in Bucharest during this time. Seemingly every feature of their lives is tied together by boredom, with it becoming the consuming force. Importantly, the embodied nature of boredom becomes the lens through which we can understand the experience of the homeless.

O’Neill additionally makes a broader contribution with this text. He provides a framework with which one can study homelessness in a more complete and all-encompassing manner, beyond just Bucharest. The examination of the relationship between space and the internal and external experience of a particular defining emotion is a method by which one can dig deeper into lived experience. It is this lived experience that ethnographers are often trying to get at, making understandable previously not understood ways of living. The way that the material and immaterial world hang together in O’Neill’s analysis provide a rich experience for the reader and inspire areas for further examination on the other side.

The area of gender, however, is one place in which a further analysis would have likely proven fruitful.

While O’Neill has offered reason for his not exploring further, a more thorough, even if brief, look at the matter would have aided in rounding out the overall aim of the project. The differences in lived experience of boredom by men and women in post-communist Bucharest, would allow a deeper consideration of the uniquely male experience that O’Neill is focused on, offering a foundation for further analysis.

Among the numerous contributions made by this ethnography, O’Neill captures the importance of seemingly mundane emotions, such as boredom. Importantly, this boredom is distinct from depression. Everyone experiences boredom, in one way or another, but less experience the kind of boredom described in this text. What is important about the boredom that O’Neill describes is the more dreadful impact that it has on those experiencing it. Those who are not facing endless unemployment often experience boredom as a temporary affliction. However, the boredom that is of concern here is one from which the afflicted “suffers” (xiv). The poverty and unemployment experienced by the subjects of this ethnography does not have a similar end in sight and is much less temporary. This examination of an often overlooked emotion provides a unique insight into the experience of those suffering at the hands of global capitalism in a desperately poor country. Additionally, it provides a kind of framework which one can use for future research into the emotional nature of lived experience, specifically those emotions not generally probed.

Taken together, *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*, is an excellent and thorough exploration of the mundane emotion of boredom. This ethnography is certainly necessary reading for anyone working in the area of homelessness, especially, but also those interested in the impacts global capitalism more broadly.

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