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Boredom as a Way of Life: Grey-ness, Homelessness, and Consumption in Bucharest

“When I hear neighbors saying that they feel bored, I am shocked! How can someone feel bored when there is so much work to do? I never get bored! I can always work in the garden, clean the house, read, there is much to do!” My mother, now in her mid-50s, worked for decades during the communist era as an accountant in one of the state-owned companies. After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, she continued working in the local administration until she decided to retire. Work is engrained in who she is, and even now, 30 years after the fall of the communist regime, when she has an afternoon siesta and she remembers the six-day, 10-hour-per-day work schedule during communism, a feeling of guilt possesses her. For her generation, work is ingrained in the elders they have become. Not working is a sign of laziness, and therefore, according to people like my mother, being bored implies being lazy: *“How can someone feel bored?”* after all. Bruce O’Neill, in “The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order,” focuses his attention on the ways in which Bucharest’s poor, homeless, and once productive workers experience their exclusion from the city’s post-communist and now global economy, an experience embodied by a deep sense of boredom. The analysis is built on tracing and overlapping the daily life experiences of homeless people in different corners of Bucharest. O’Neill chooses to position boredom in relation to consumption, and in so doing, defines boredom as “a window into the cultural politics of exclusion in a moment of troubled global consumerism” (p. xiii). In this review, I briefly summarize the ethnography’s main ideas and focus my attention on a few elements that seem to be minimized in O’Neill’s analysis of boredom.

For the reader unfamiliar with the socio-economic reality of Eastern Europe, it’s worth recalling that Romania has the second highest poverty and social exclusion rates from the 28 countries of the European Union (“At-risk-of poverty or social exclusion rate, 2014 and 2015,” n.d.). “Champion” of low social indicators, the country “inherits” many of its social problems from the “transition” period of the 1990s. The “structural adjustment plans,” once unsuccessful in Latin America and Africa (Babb, 2005; Ferguson, 2006) were applied in post-socialist Romania, whose entrance in the global market came together with neoliberal reforms, requiring textbook neoliberal policies such as the privatization of once state-owned enterprises, and curtailing the role of the State. Similar large-scale loans from the World Bank followed ritually every four years, justified by the country’s “transition” to democracy, its entrance in the European Union, and recently, the fight against poverty. Regardless of their negative social

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impacts, especially in the early 1990s, after the “transition” period, the structural adjustment plans were still accompanied by the same neoliberal requirements, focusing on the health of some numbers, more than on the health of the Romanian people (Mandache, 2015). This is – in a few words – the political and economic scenario in Romania described by O’Neill’s ethnography.

The first chapter of this book, “Space-Time Expansions,” situates today’s Bucharest homeless’ boredom into a larger political and economic context in order to underline that boredom and homelessness are relatively new realities in democratic Romania. In the second chapter, “Bleak House,” O’Neill focuses on the analysis of boredom experienced in shelters, on the psychosocial and infrastructural dimension of boredom. The third chapter, “The Grey Years,” continues the analysis with a focus on the production of homeless retirees, once hard-working Romanians during the communist regime. The analysis continues in the fourth chapter, “Bored to death,” emphasizing the chronic and emotionally shattering dimensions of boredom, arguing that “boredom with life affectively registered the homeless’ radical social displacement from a consumer society” (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012). In “Bored stiff,” O’Neill describes one of the strategies that homeless people use to get by: the instrumentalization of their bodies through *survival sex*. “Defeat Boredom!” exposes strategies that homeless people employ to challenge their boredom, through consumption, while the “Conclusion” revisits the main arguments of the book.

Bruce O’Neill chooses to analyze the embodiment of the exclusion, from the market and the state, without pathologizing poverty, and without labeling boredom as depression. Instead, he takes a very original path in interpreting boredom in relation to socio-economic marginalization, solitude, and something similar to an existential crisis. In so doing, he draws on the emic perspective on boredom that many of his informants narrate, where boredom is described as an existential crisis tied to social and structural conditions. The originality of his approach comes from understanding boredom, both as a mental and a material space, almost as a variation of passive and internalized infrastructural violence (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012) specific to places such as the shelters and the squatter camps. This approach makes a very powerful argument about the extent to which economic and political marginalization inhibit homeless people’s bodies and sense of self. To a different extent, and in a very different context, the boredom described by O’Neill is similar to the deep marginalization expressed by many of the very poor Brazilians I have met during my fieldwork at the periphery of Fortaleza, Brazil, in the last three years.

Besides contributing to the anthropological literature on urban poverty, O’Neill’s ethnography could also make a significant contribution to a growing body of literature on the “politics of the poor” (Auyero, 2001; Das & Randeria, 2015; Savell, 2015 among others) if only the political voices of those represented in this volume would be acknowledged. Many of the narratives of the homeless presented here also voice particular understandings of poverty as part of larger national politics, an aspect often underappreciated and understudied in anthropological studies about “the poor.” Additionally, the book could also make an important contribution to policy conversations about homelessness, if ever policymakers would look in the anthropological literature for inspiration.

If most studies of social inequality position the urban poor at the margins of the state (Auyero, 2012; Maskovsky & Goode, 2001 among others) O’Neill’s poor seem to be situated at the margins of the global and national economy above all; his ethnography thus focuses on “how the inability to fulfill attachments to a new and growing array of consumerist

fantasies shapes the lived experience of those displaced from work and home and into poverty” (p. xv). Seen this way, the opposite of boredom would be *consumption*; similarly, if boredom means exclusion, consumption would be a form of inclusion in the market. Therefore, consumption would integrate the homeless into the city. For example, discussing about Clara, one of the homeless people in his ethnography, O’Neill remarks that her consumption of coffee and cigarettes is a form of integration within “the city, within Europe, and within the global economy.”

At this point, it remains unclear if O’Neill’s choice is to see homeless people as consumers, before being citizens. If so, proper shelter or food seem to be understood, from this perspective, as items of *consumption* and not as citizenship based rights. Consequently, homeless people are “under-consumers,” and homelessness is not so much the result of the state’s incapacity to create a functional and inclusive economy, but rather the byproduct of the market’s larger structures of dispossession and exclusion. If this is an inaccurate interpretation of O’Neill’s understanding of homelessness, then probably what his ethnography lacks is a clearer political stance vis-à-vis these issues.

O’Neill chooses to adopt his informants’ emic language to describe their situation. Each of his informants seems to be repeating: “*Sunt plictisit!*” (I am bored!) In interpreting these narratives, two “variables”, the meaning of work and of the idea of home are underrated in the analysis. It seems that in the narratives of many of them – Florin, Mircea, Dinu, Gheorghe, Victoria or Sorin – boredom is related to the lack of formal work, but it is not always clear that the reason why a job is important is because it would offer the possibility to consume. Costel, one of his main informants, describes his boredom in the following way: “When you have a job you always have something to sit on and talk about over a beer or a coffee at a terrace bar or whatever. But what am I supposed to do now?” (p. 100). In other words, according to Costel, a job would allow him to talk about something he does on a regular basis. The lack of sense of self and the existential crisis he experiences can thus be interpreted not only as his lack of ability to consume and so, have a social life, but rather as related to his incapacity to work, and “have something to sit on” or be someone. The feeling of losing one’s identity, here “sense of self”, can rather be related to losing one’s job. One has to always keep in mind that the people described by O’Neill haven’t always been homeless and jobless, and so they experience the loss of both.

With a particular attention to Romania’s context, homeless’ complains about not having jobs can be understood as larger claims about an embodied socialist work ethic now buried in the messy post-socialist neoliberal Romanian economy. In this fast process of “entering the global market” some managed to adapt and reinvent their work skills, while others were less successful and lost literally everything they had: including families, homes, jobs and even their sense of self. If that was the case, then their existential crisis – experienced as boredom – could be interpreted as a result of their loss of formal jobs, family, and a home, all elements on which one’s identity is built. Additionally, similarly underestimated is the importance of a formal “job” in defining a sense of personhood and identity, even more so for the Romanian socialist working individual.

A second “variable” that could shed light on the deep state of boredom experienced by O’Neill’s informants is the loss of his informants’ homes. A homeless is, by definition, a person without a home; considering that home is for sedentary populations an *axis mundi*, losing one’s home is in itself a process of alienation, or uprooting, experienced here as an “existential crisis.” These aspects could have been developed further in O’Neill’s analysis,

while in the same time keeping a focus on materiality and space, central elements in his interpretation.

In many of the narratives of homeless people that O'Neill reproduces in this volume, boredom is illustrated as a continual search for a certain time and place as well as for a certain material support that would give sense and meaning to homeless lives. These narratives sound similar to the narratives of illness that Garry Becker collected in trying to understand how people make sense of their lives in the face of disruptive events, such as terminal diseases or infertility (1997). Wandering around in the city, being reminded with each step of one's marginality, and reflecting on it by positioning it into the larger national political and economic context is in itself a way of performing a particular form of agency. An example of this kind would be the final Hypermarket scene with Emil, Eveline, and Nicolaie (p. 168). It does not seem like Emil didn't know that he could not eat sunflower seeds or drink beer in the supermarket, or that loudly burping would make a stranger feel uncomfortable, but he chose to do so with the purpose of drawing attention to his "marginality and act upon it" (Tsing, 2002). As a consequence, we are left to believe that people like the homeless described in this volume do not respond in any way to their marginalization. Is that really the case, that the structural forces that create and maintain their marginalization are so strong as to nullify any form of response on the ground?

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