

6-1-2018

O'Neill, Bruce. *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017.

Jean Martin Caldieron Ph.D.

Florida Atlantic University, School of Architecture, jcaldie1@fau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Caldieron, Jean Martin Ph.D. (2018) "O'Neill, Bruce. *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 15.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1413

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol9/iss2/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

O’Neill, Bruce. *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017.

The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order is an engaging study detailing the daily life of homeless inhabitants of Bucharest, Romania during a period of three years from the incorporation of Romania into the European Union to the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008. The author, Bruce O’Neill, is a faculty member in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Saint Louis University. He has recorded interviews and developed observation methods to create a strong description of people left out of the economic growth in post-communist Romania. This is an account of the daily life of homeless shelters, day centers, squatter camps, and labor markets, describing the existence of the poor and abandoned in a beautiful, ethnographic story. This narrative tries to integrate homeless people into urban life rather than exclude them from it. The narrative is well written, pleasurable, and compassionate.

Over the past two decades, several studies have been conducted about the economic and social problems of post-communist countries in Europe, including, Romania. Among the challenges are the lack of adequate housing; as such, examining homeless populations has been an important research topic. Unlike other studies, this book emphasizes one important and overlooked challenge that the new Romanian homeless population is currently facing: boredom. This consideration makes this study a special one.

Lack of affordable or adequate housing is one of the challenges faced by the inhabitants of post-communist countries after the economic policy changes. The authoritarian and repressive regime of the Romanian dictator Ceaușescu offered some benefit to the majority of the population: a guaranteed job and a roof. The fall of communism and the subsequent market economy were unable to keep the communist economy competitive; during the transition, many people struggled to maintain a roof over their head. Homeowners who sold their property and saw their meager profits extinguished by inflation, as well as those who were unemployed were unable to afford rent expenses. To make matters even more complicated, in 1995, the Romanian government enforced a law that allowed state-owned housing buildings to be returned to their pre-communist owners. This law allowed the local mafia to reclaim thousands of properties and evict building occupants. As a consequence, many Romanians ended up living in the streets or in homeless shelters.

This book describes the feelings of the homeless Romanian population fighting with an economic system that was unable to share its wealth and economic reform with all its citizens. Specifically, the book explores one of the most pervasive consequences of being homeless: the abundance of free time and the scarcity of financial resources to help avoid a permanent state of boredom in a consumerist society. “Feeling bored” is connected to the homeless condition, and this book allows us to understand what life with boredom is. The author argues how the global economy keeps people with money spending and living with interest. However, people without resources are not able to cope with the pressures from the global economy and are left out of modern daily routines, eventually feeling bored.

The first chapters of the book start with an introduction to the boredom associated with homelessness and the historical facts that precipitated the difficult transition between the end of the communist regime in Romania and the newly-introduced market economy in a slowing global order. It describes how shelters for homeless individuals act as an infrastructure for boredom. Among the homeless Romanian population, there are many ethnic Roma. These mostly men assert that lack of employment and housing is an unusual for them and expressed

that “[they] might be Roma, but [they were] not gyps[ies]” to differentiate themselves from the negative connotations that the nomad concept of “gypsy” retains in Europe.

In the subsequent chapters, the author explores some homeless shelters in Bucharest. In most societies, the homeless are considered a symbol of the state’s failure to balance the housing needs of the poor. Homeless shelters are supposed to offer a transition to a better life and permanent housing for the people without a roof. However, homeless shelters in Romania do not prepare people on the streets to be successful but rather merely accommodate people indefinitely, leading to a permanent state of boredom. The book shows that the location of shelters, away from the city center, diminishes any opportunities to enjoy the free pleasures that the central areas of a city can offer; people therefore suffer feelings of boredom, and they feel even more bored when they live on the outskirts of the city.

The book also analyzes a specific category of homeless people in Romania, the retired elders of the country. Many of them receive such meager pensions that they cannot afford to maintain a home. This reality began after the decline of the communist regime. In order to qualify for emergency funds from the International Monetary fund, the new government of Romania enacted a series of pension reforms that left many elderly in a state of poverty. Retired people who had previously been to contribute to the finances of struggling families during communist times became a burden to their families during the new market economy. Unable to find a job, younger generations migrated to developed European countries and left their parents and grandparents struggling alone. Inflation and organized crime left many retired people out of the formal housing market, so they turned to the streets or homeless shelters. The author shows how provisional shelters for the homeless became permanent homes for an elderly population that would remain there until the end of their life, thus transforming homeless shelters into retirement homes. As these shelters lack the necessary resources to cater to an aging population, these elderly individuals also experienced extreme boredom.

The narrative of the text explores the consequences of boredom in the homeless population and the entire society they are a part of. According to accounts from homeless found in the book, they “...are bored to death,” “...bored with life.” This state of mind can lead to violence, disconnection, and isolation. When people are displaced from home and work, they may lose family, friends, and their life horizon. Homeless individuals can establish relations with social workers and other homeless, but boredom is always present and leaves them “questioning whether their foreseeable future was worth living.” Interestingly, the author also notes that “there is a general boredom in Romania, which is a kind of resignation” and wonders whether such resignation is also present among the poor and homeless populations in other countries.

One of the book’s hypotheses is how the new open market economy in Romania rendered many people unable to participate in the new consumer practices. In particular, the younger generations feel intense boredom, as they cannot afford to access new consumer products. Among these generations, many vulnerable teenagers leaving] broken families or the infamous Romanian orphanages were unprepared to secure proper jobs. They became the new generation of homeless, contributing to the increase of violence, drug addiction, prostitution, and other social problems. As an example, the book offers the story of young Romanians transformed in male prostitutes working in the public restrooms of the Bucharest train station.

A curious fact analyzed in this book is how homeless are sometimes able to make their way to consumer practices that can move them beyond boredom. The simple act of drinking a coffee in a gas station, visiting a mall or an IKEA store, allows homeless people to cope with their daily routine and escape for a while from the state of being bored. Consumption facilitates

the movement of the homeless from the streets, homeless shelters, or labor market camps to other outdoor areas. They can “escape into mental worlds shaped by the hyper-stimulation of mass consumerism.” A very indicative part of the book is the experience narrated by the author accompanying homeless individuals in Bucharest on visits to places such as McDonald’s restaurants or commercial malls, allowing readers to understand how the homeless can be made to feel more incorporated and defeat boredom by practicing consumerism. For such “field-trips,” homeless individuals made an effort to look presentable and clean in order to outwit commercial surveillance, whose objective is to stop the entry of undesirable clients. The case of the IKEA stores is a typical example of a place at which the homeless visitors could feel “normal”; the IKEA restaurants, with cheap food and bottomless drinks, allowed homeless to partake in the consumer society while enjoying a controlled climate, while at the same time escaping from boredom while spending very little money.

A significant aspect of this book is how the author describes the daily life of the homeless with a noble disposition sharing with readers enjoyable details of the emotions, sufferings, and memories of homeless individuals. The book concludes with the feeling that the transformation of Romania into a player within the global economy came with the associated cost of a permanent sacrifice on the part of its population. Many Romanians who used to have viable careers, stable housing, and savings, became broke, jobless, and homeless after the end of the communist regime. This book shows how boredom is an important aspect to be considered in any homeless study. As one of the homeless participants in this study mentioned, “Whatever you do when you are homeless, you feel bored.” Perhaps scientific readers may censure the lack of data and precise quantifiable methods in the observations and interviews related in this work. However, this book is a brilliant social story, and its real appeal lies in the author’s ability to depict sad stories of homeless people and their experiences of boredom as both a compelling and entertaining socially-conscious narrative.

Jean Martin Caldieron PhD
Florida Atlantic University, School of Architecture
jcaldie1@fau.edu