

THE SPACE OF BOREDOM HOMELESSNESS IN THE SLOWING GLOBAL ORDER

Bruce O'Neill



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To Helen

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PREFACE

“Whatever you do when you’re homeless, you feel bored (*plictisit*),” Florin, an unemployed low-skilled laborer (*muncitor necalificat*) in his early thirties, explained to me on an autumn morning.¹ Florin lived in a squatter camp with his wife near Stefan’s Place, a popular nongovernmental organization in Bucharest, Romania, where homeless men and women went to meet with one another, as well as to access a social worker or doctor, or to take a shower. “Especially whenever you think about tomorrow,” Florin continued, “what to do, what to eat, where to go, and where to work. Winter is around the corner, and I think, ‘Where will I live?’ I’m outdoors, the wind blows hard, and the snow is coming. And this is the life that you have to think about, because no one is going to come look after you and make sure you’re all right.” Florin paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. His broad shoulders rolled forward, and his face drooped. “And then I get this feeling of boredom from having to tighten my belt as far as I can manage, until the knife scrapes against the bone. You can’t do anything worthwhile if you don’t have a job and if you don’t have money.” Florin spent the remainder of his morning pacing up and down the main road in an effort to busy himself.

...

THIS IS AN ETHNOGRAPHY about being cast aside to the margins of Europe amid a prolonged global economic crisis. Set in postcommunist Bucharest, Romania, this book explores the internally felt space where the promises and possibilities of European-style consumer capitalism cut

against the limitations of economic turbulence and scaled-back government protections. The nearly three years of ethnographic research discussed in this book began during the optimism over Romania's accession to the European Union and followed the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The ethnography 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. Organizing the book's narrative is a widely shared sense of boredom among Romania's new homeless population. How and to what effect, this book asks, does deepening immiseration come to be understood and embodied through boredom? And how does this ordinary affect provide a window into the cultural politics of displacement in a global economy in crisis?

The voices animating this ethnography are predominantly male, because homelessness is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon.² While the Romanian government did not define homelessness until 2011, much less keep demographic information about the homeless population, ethnographic observation suggested that three out of four homeless persons in Bucharest were male.³ This makes sense given that women displaced out onto the street proved time and again to be more capable of mobilizing relations with family and friends to stay indoors. When these strategies fell short, women also enjoyed better social protections. Bed space in Bucharest's handful of night shelters, for example, was largely reserved for women and children, despite the disproportionate presence of single men living on the streets.

To be sure, those women unable to avoid homelessness also wrestled with boredom. Inside family shelters, I leaned against kitchen walls and took note of how to prepare Romanian dishes, I spent afternoons sitting in a women's dormitory watching Spanish soap operas, and I sat in a shelter courtyard and helped keep watch over playing children. In these moments the gendered dimensions of boredom became clear. Homeless women, both young and old, felt bored with the kind of life homelessness afforded. Homeless shelters placed on women much of the same domestic drudgery that their privately housed counterparts dealt with. The proper functioning of shelters depended on women's unpaid domestic labor without providing any of the creative craft or pleasure of homemaking. Boredom reverberated throughout women's daily repetition of thankless laundering, scrubbing, and child rearing.

Sitting alongside these women in the shelter, but also populating the vast majority of day centers, squatter camps, and black labor markets, were men who also spoke of being intensely bored with life (*plictisit de viață*). In contrast to the boredom of the repetitive and thankless labor experienced by women, the boredom of unemployed men had an inert character. Unable to serve as breadwinners, men were bored not because their labor was repetitive and underpaid but rather because they could no longer find consistent work. Employers no longer found these men to be worth exploiting. Men awoke each morning to the realization that they had little meaningful activity around which to structure their days: no job, no family, and too little money to buy a hot meal, much less a movie ticket. Rather than doing or making something recognizably meaningful, homeless men instead spent their days sitting and reading the classifieds, smoking, drinking coffee, standing and chatting, pacing and thinking. Days dragged into nights only to give rise to more empty days.

These homeless men and women, furthermore, did not identify as Roma, or so-called gypsies as many Romanians initially assumed. This is because being homeless and being Roma are not the same thing. Although imagined across Europe as an uprooted and transient population, only a small portion of the Roma can correctly be described as such.⁴ Those Roma who do regularly move from opportunity to opportunity, furthermore, do not necessarily identify as homeless, a social and bureaucratic category that pathologizes the absence of a stable residential address. To be sure, some of the men accessing services in night shelters and day centers, and hanging out in public parks, were ethnically Roma. These men also insisted that being without formal work and housing was both unusual and distressing for them. Without prompting, ethnically Roma men would detail their employment histories and list their previous home addresses. “I might be Roma, but I’m not a gypsy,” an ethnic slur loaded with connotations of deviance, was a common refrain. The importance that homeless Romanians placed on differentiating themselves from “the gypsies” no doubt contributed to the boredom of their everyday life, as acts of self-policing to maintain some semblance of a working-class respectability curtailed much of the rule breaking and excitement so often associated with life at the margins of the city.⁵

Although particular to Bucharest, this study of boredom and homelessness resonates in many direct and indirect ways far beyond Romania’s borders. At the time of this research, a debt crisis was reverberating across the

European Union. The unemployment rate for the euro area hit 10 percent, indicating that some twenty-three million men and women across Europe were unemployed.⁶ The crisis in the Eurozone destabilized the economies of the very places homeless Romanians imagined moving to in order to establish a better life, with unemployment rates as high as 19.1 percent in Spain, 10 percent in France, and nearly 8 percent in the United Kingdom.⁷ At the same time, persistently high unemployment in the United States following the collapse of its housing market resulted in equally troubling (and persistent) unemployment levels of 10 percent, prompting the economist Paul Krugman to lament that “for the first time since the Great Depression many American workers are facing the prospect of very-long-term—maybe permanent—unemployment.”⁸ Scholars studying cities across the global south also raised concerns about the development of populations of unemployed men with little to no prospects of being folded into the formal labor market.⁹ Simply put, these men had been expelled from the local, national, and global economies.¹⁰

At the onset of the twenty-first century, in both the global south and the global north, people wearing both blue and white collars found their lives held in limbo by unemployment, their spending curtailed by strained savings accounts and mounting credit card debt, with no hope for a quick solution. Faced with scaled-back government protections and the predominance of flexible, lean-and-mean production styles, millions of men and women around the world lived through an economic stagnation not unlike that experienced by the people described throughout this book: they were unemployed, broke, and skeptical about the future and felt as though there was nothing to do in the present. Left to wrestle with long moments of quiet reflection, they undoubtedly experienced worry, anxiety, and self-doubt, but there was also the ambient and difficult-to-shake sense of boredom.

The Fieldwork

This ethnographic study was based on the classic anthropological methods of participant observation, recorded interviews, and documentary photography detailing the daily lives of homeless men and women in Bucharest, Romania. These efforts captured not only the grinding routines, strained relationships, and thoughtful insights of Bucharest’s homeless but also the collectively shared feelings and emotions that showed what it meant to inhabit a changing city, particularly in its most marginal dimensions. This

work began at a pair of institutions catering to homeless men and women. One was a government-administered night shelter located outside the city limits of Bucharest that I call the Backwoods Shelter. The Backwoods Shelter offered its homeless beneficiaries little else beyond basic accommodation and two meals a day. The facility had no educational, employment, or entertainment programming of any kind. The toilets clogged regularly, the halogen lights flickered, and cockroaches (*gândaci*) crawled across walls and bedspreads and down shirts and pant legs. A single bus line stopped immediately outside the front gate. Otherwise, a cemetery, a gas station, and a kennel housing stray dogs surrounded the shelter. The austere utility and isolation of the shelter called to mind a warehouse.

The other institution was a day center, which I call Stefan's Place, administered by a nongovernmental organization. Located fifteen minutes by bus from the city center, this organization offered access to doctors and social workers, the opportunity to shower and to change one's clothes, and a place to spend the day in relative peace. In the summer men and women followed the shade as it shifted across the center's parking lot. In the winter, in lieu of an indoor waiting room, Stefan's Place made available an unheated toolshed where homeless men and women huddled together. The hours of operation were nine o'clock to five o'clock, though people could be found waiting to enter as early as six thirty in the morning.

In both places, the topic of boredom was unavoidable. "*Plictisit*" (bored) was how almost every person at the Backwoods Shelter and Stefan's Place day center responded to my initial salutation: "Hey—how are you doing?" As I came to understand boredom as a window into the cultural politics of exclusion in a moment of troubled global consumerism, I detailed when, where, and with whom people spoke of being bored. I also became attentive to absences, inquiring as to who or what was missing from people's lives in moments of boredom as well as where people would rather be and what they would rather be doing. Boredom, though, is a slippery fish for an ethnographer to catch. As an American whose research took him throughout the city, whose presence brought questions to be answered, conjectures to be corrected, and (more importantly) a comparatively full wallet that could (within reason) be lightened, I proved endlessly entertaining. It was not uncommon, in fact, for even my most distant acquaintances to greet me on the street with exclamations like, "Thank God you're here—I was so bored! Let's go get a coffee!" In a testament to the reflexive nature of ethnographic research, my presence proved to be one powerful antidote

to the boredom that otherwise shaped life on the streets. I became mindful that small gestures, like providing a shot of Nescafé or photographing someone's portrait, were great distractions. These gifts beat back people's boredom, and, in exchange, I received gratitude and patience. These gifts also led to invitations to hang out beyond the social worker's gaze. As the study evolved, I spent my afternoons eating lunch in squatter camps, my nights drinking beer in transit stations and public parks, and my mornings waiting for work on black labor markets before dawn. The research also took me to unexpected parts of the city, such as high-end shopping malls and IKEA furniture stores, where homeless persons attempted to not look homeless in order to gain access to cheap food, washrooms, and climate-controlled spaces.

My capacity to distract left me with the methodological balancing act of knowing when to create diversions, in the form of buying snacks or staging interviews, and when to hold back and allow "nothing" to happen. I came to view the moments of diversion as a kind of photographic negative, capturing through their inverse the boring times and places that my informants spent so much time and effort trying to escape. I balanced this perspective with attempts to confront their existential state of boredom head-on. In these moments I tried to fade into the background and to allow empty time, silent spaces, and idle fidgeting to press in on us. I then observed the practices, moods, and ideas that unemployment and poverty brought about, and I shared, as best I could, in the social condition that the homeless described as boredom. As it became apparent that my informants genuinely suffered from this state of boredom, this balancing act became shadowed by my own ethical questions and concerns.

Contributions

Most concretely, this book is an ethnographic account of the production and management of homelessness in Bucharest, Romania, the capital of one of the European Union's newest (and poorest) member states. It details who is homeless, and why, as well as how they get by in a perilous economic climate. It also explores the various ways that the homeless are (and are not) governed and raises important implications for urban planners and policy analysts alike. But the study also makes an additional set of interventions, the first of which is contributing to the theorization of downward mobility. While a thick literature theorizes the historical and material forces repro-

ducing entrenched poverty, less well understood are the effects of falling into it.¹¹ This study, conducted in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008 and within a broader history of postcommunist transition, traces the effects of becoming poor. It provides ethnographic insight into how men and women with stable work histories and high expectations for their quality of life come to terms with the lost ability to earn a paycheck and to spend it, as well as how a contracting capacity to participate in the economy reorients relationships not only with family and friends but also with the city, with Europe, and with globalism more generally.

The book also contributes to the politics of displacement by foregrounding its entanglement with heightened consumerism. Social theorists have long understood how social distinctions are made hierarchically and horizontally through consumption within a capitalist society.¹² With the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and with the introduction of consumer capitalism to the region, anthropologists have taken considerable interest in how consumption practices emerged as a critical site for making claims to belonging to the nation, to a struggling middle class, and to Europe.¹³ Less well understood is the inverse: 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. This study, set in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, details how the politics of social exclusion, and ultimately of social death, gets interpreted and embodied as a lack of consumer stimulation.¹⁴

At its most abstract, the book contributes to a rethinking of the global, a scale of social and material relations most frequently defined by market-driven production and consumption. During communism, Western academics and politicians alike pointed to market competition as the necessary engine to reanimate Eastern Europe's stagnant economy. The market was seen as the solution to the failures of communism, from the prevalence of breadlines to the problem of stalled factory floors: communism wasn't productive of anything.¹⁵ Yet two decades after the fall of communism and the introduction of political and economic reforms, there appears to be an escalation of inactivity. Anthropologists studying cities in Eastern Europe, but also in the global south, have observed growing populations of men displaced from a globally competitive marketplace and struggling with near-permanent unemployment.¹⁶ The global financial crisis of 2008 only compounded the growing problem of inactivity. Without a steady paycheck, these men struggled to fulfill familial obligations, maintain a household,

or develop professional expertise. Rather than accelerating the rhythm of everyday life, the pressure of competitive markets wore on the senses of millions of displaced people in unexpected ways. Disrupted daily routines and stalled life narratives left people with a sense of boredom that was difficult to shake. *The Space of Boredom* enters into this boredom, which is so central to the way tens of millions of people worldwide experience globalization, in order to understand the quiet ways in which the global impresses itself on individual subjects.¹⁷ Ultimately, this book explores the affective ruins of the global economy to advocate for a different orientation of the everyday, one that seeks to incorporate people into, rather than discard them from, urban life.

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INTRODUCTION

“I feel bored (*plictisit*) quite a bit,” Tomas confided. We were sitting in a patch of shade in the parking lot of Stefan’s Place. The July heat radiated from above and off of the asphalt, making the humid air especially sticky. Tomas, a stout man in his fifties, had been living on the streets since his wife divorced him four years earlier. Since then, he slept in public parks, the stairwells of apartment buildings, and the waiting room of the Gara de Nord train station, among other places. When he could find construction work, Tomas earned up to sixty lei (about \$18) per day off the books.¹ This was not one of those days. Instead, Tomas sat with me for lack of anything better to do. Gazing at the floor just ahead of his feet, Tomas continued, “I feel bored when I think about the kind of life that I have to live here in Romania. I mean, it’s an ugly life on the streets. You have neither perspective nor peace of mind. You look at your watch and see that night is coming, and you wonder, ‘Where should I go?’ ‘What should I eat?’ ‘Who can I sit and talk to?’” Tomas looked up from his feet and around the parking lot. About a dozen men in the twilight of their work trajectory were scattered about. Some slept along the fence line. Others sat on the curb of the driveway reading the tabloids. A handful spoke quietly on the stairs that led to the clinic inside. All looked firmly anchored in place. “I mean, at times I just feel useless,” Tomas added with a heavy sigh as he returned his attention to the space just beyond his feet. “I think to myself, ‘Why should I go on living?’ There is nothing for me to do here that makes me happy. I don’t have money in my pocket to buy something to eat or anything else that I might

FIGURE INTRO.1.
Sitting. Photo by
Bruce O'Neill.



want . . . and in these moments I feel an overwhelming dissatisfaction with life. It's like my organs don't sense the world around me." Tomas lightly rubbed his hands against the rough concrete of the retaining wall beneath him before returning them to his lap. "Don't get me wrong—I'm a religious man, and I believe it is a sin to kill yourself; but sometimes I just feel like I want to die, or perhaps that it would be better to be dead. These feelings of boredom are pretty terrible for me." Tomas sat quietly for a moment. He used his sleeve to wipe away the sweat that had accumulated on his brow, and he arched his back until his spine cracked and popped loud enough for me to hear. The sound of a car engine zipped past along the side road. "Hey, do you want to get out of here and maybe drink a coffee?" Tomas asked with a forced upbeat tone, as though trying to change the conversation.

Two decades after the fall of communism in Romania, and in the after-

math of the global financial crisis of 2008, a profound boredom drew back and forth across the streets of Bucharest. Political and economic reforms intended to transition Romania out of state socialism and into global circuits of production and consumption resulted in a chronically unstable economy. While an elite class of professionals emerged with the means to rejuvenate Bucharest's historic downtown and to sustain the newly developed shopping malls, prosperity eluded most Romanians. Instead, life became ever more insecure: steady work grew scarce, personal savings drained, and support networks stretched as the young and capable moved abroad in search of better opportunities. Once unthinkable in the time of communism, when state guarantees ensured a baseline subsistence for all, thousands of low-skilled workers, such as Tomas, found themselves unemployed and pushed onto the streets. Cast aside by heightened market competition, a shrinking state, and struggling families, homeless men and women lacked the means to participate in a world increasingly organized around practices of consumption. Empty hours gave way to endlessly dull days. Boredom abounded.

In the pages that follow, this book details the life stories of those left in the wake of efforts to integrate Romania into a global network understood to be ever accelerating, one where labor flows across borders, where slick production chains radically expand what is buyable, where digitization renders trade instantaneous and simultaneous, and where those caught up by it all guzzle caffeinated energy drinks, pop Adderall, and snort amphetamines in an effort to keep up.² While the global conjures a politics of speed, promising the “annihilation of space through time,” the global wears differently upon the senses of many Romanians.³ Market pressures intended to heighten production and consumption instead had the opposite effect. The Romanian economy buckled as formerly nationalized industry proved unsustainable in a brutally competitive global economy. Heightened market competition rendered millions of Romanians un- and underemployed and without the savings to support themselves. The introduction of the global did not incorporate these men and women into a frenzy of market-driven activity, as they had expected, but instead displaced them from it. Once they were displaced, life slowed down, and it slowed down quite a bit. A growing number of Romanians, in fact, describe endless days without work and speak of feeling stuck in place. Rather than speed and excitement, boredom defines downwardly mobile men's and women's engagement with the global economy. It is an affective relationship that is most clearly visible among

Romania's most vulnerable population (the homeless), but that resonates more broadly. A feeling that time has slowed down and that one is stuck in place is the result of a brutal politics of displacement within the global order.

This book's guiding assumption, then, is that boredom correlates in ever-cruel ways with downward mobility. This makes sense, given that the two arose simultaneously. Homelessness, as an official social and bureaucratic category, did not exist during communism. There was also very little concern with boredom. Universal housing, employment, and food rations took care of basic needs, while widespread austerity tamped down expectations for leisurely consumption. However, with the fall of communism, the Romanian government scaled back its guarantees, a competitive labor market was introduced, and the cost of living rose. Whereas, under communism, the state had taken care of all, Romanians now had to care for themselves within a new and highly competitive marketplace. Those unable to compete successfully in the new environment found themselves moved out of work and onto the streets, but also into a marginal space marked by profound and persistent boredom.

Importantly, Tomas and other homeless persons in Bucharest were not by and large depressed (*deprimat*); they were observably and self-consciously bored (*plictisit*). This is an ethnographic fact that is easily misconstrued, given that Bucharest's homeless narrated their boredom with such dramatic language. Tomas's desire for death, for example, cut against the triteness of popular depictions of the bourgeois ennui affecting the well-to-do in between parlor games and parties.⁴ Tomas's account was not unprecedented, however. It resonates with an alternative tradition for thinking about boredom, one that ties boredom to poverty, solitude, and despair.⁵ Time and time again, even in the darkest of moments, Bucharest's homeless described themselves as bored. Rather than pathologize themselves as depressed, homeless persons attributed their existential crisis to a series of social and structural conditions. These conditions brought about a perfect storm of decreased opportunities to earn a wage or receive a state guarantee at the very moment consumer capitalism took hold in postcommunist Romania. New needs arose just as individual capacities to consume dipped. Those filtered out by liberal reforms became constantly aware of the new consumer possibilities and pleasures that existed, both for Romania's small but growing cadre of professionals and also in other cities across the European Union (EU). The homeless, however, had no means of accessing them. This resulted in a gnawing sense of isolation from work but also from

social worlds that were made up of family and friends but were mediated by consumer practices, and boredom took hold. While at times homeless men and women might have felt depressed—a clinical diagnosis linked to its own ontology—depression is distinct from the difficult-to-escape boredom with which these men and women identified and which they described from their place at the margins of the global economy.

The global, this book argues, is more than a geographic scale or material set of flows. It is a feeling that shapes ordinary life.⁶ And for millions of people in Romania, and for tens of millions more in similarly positioned societies across the globe, this feeling is about slowing down rather than speeding up. Boredom captures the way a brutally competitive global economy affects those it discards in pursuit of ever-greater profitability and efficiency. The aftermath of the global financial crisis brought this changing global affect into clear relief. As corporations streamlined payrolls, the national and municipal governments slashed budgets, and families struggled with doing less with less, a growing number of people found themselves dumped out of the global economy. Still surrounded by its trappings, these now-superfluous subjects were no longer shaped through their participation in global production and consumption but by their irrelevance to it.⁷ Tossed to the margins of the city, the displaced spent their days in a state of “letting die.” As Michel Foucault notes, letting die is not as simple as “murder as such” but is instead a form of “indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.”⁸ Letting die is a slow process that opens up spaces in which people live every day, just not in a recognizably meaningful way.⁹ The deathly dull boredom reverberating across the senses captured this cruel impasse between the fantastic promises of global capitalism and the brute materiality of displacement from it.

This book, in the end, does not trivialize boredom—the painfully mundane form that abandonment takes in Bucharest—but rather confronts it in order to raise a simple question: What does it mean that life now stands in such a way that a profound boredom draws back and forth over us?¹⁰

An Economy in Crisis

Economic struggle has defined Romania’s economy since the full onset of industrial capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century. In that period, city administrators made investments in rail lines, paved roads, and piped water

to support the growth of industry.¹¹ Land reform measures ended serfdom in the countryside, turning peasants into petty landowners.¹² While urban centers developed, the standard of living steadily deteriorated for Romania's overwhelmingly rural population as small peasant landholdings fragmented amid population growth.¹³ Inequality grew between peasants and wealthy landowners until tensions erupted with the peasant rebellion of 1907, which was not quelled until some ten thousand peasants had been shot.¹⁴ A period of neo-serfdom followed, in which large landowners exploited the economic vulnerabilities of peasant farmers.¹⁵ Lacking the means to achieve self-sufficiency, peasants borrowed grain and seed from wealthier landowners at usurious rates. The arrangement generated increased revenues for already wealthy landowners while leaving peasants bogged down by unmanageable debts that could never be fully worked off.¹⁶ By the interwar period, the appropriation of peasant labor had contributed to an uneven distribution of wealth, one that allowed the center of the capital city, Bucharest, to garner a reputation for being the "Paris of the Balkans," at least up until the onset of communism in 1947.

With the onset of communism, economic struggle shifted from the fields to the factory. The Romanian Communist Party, in its effort to build an industrial proletariat, oversaw a program of village consolidation, reducing them from thirteen thousand to six thousand, which encouraged the transfer of rural peasants from the countryside to cities.¹⁷ A process of rapid urban expansion swept across Romania's major cities, where newly relocated rural migrants took up residence in newly constructed housing blocks, to be sent to work in newly constructed factories. These efforts at urbanization and industrialization generally improved the quality of everyday life for former peasants, until communism took an unusually austere turn following a major earthquake in 1977. It was then that making do without became a fact of everyday life in Romanian cities as the then-dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, undertook two costly initiatives simultaneously. The first was an attempt, in the name of advancing state socialism in Romania, to pay back all of Romania's outstanding foreign debt (\$11 billion) within a decade.¹⁸ Ceaușescu believed this aggressive fiscal policy was necessary to prevent debt relations with foreign creditors from interfering in the development of socialism in Romania. To generate the necessary currency reserve, the Romanian Communist Party heightened its exportation of food and durable goods while severely limiting imports. Store shelves quickly