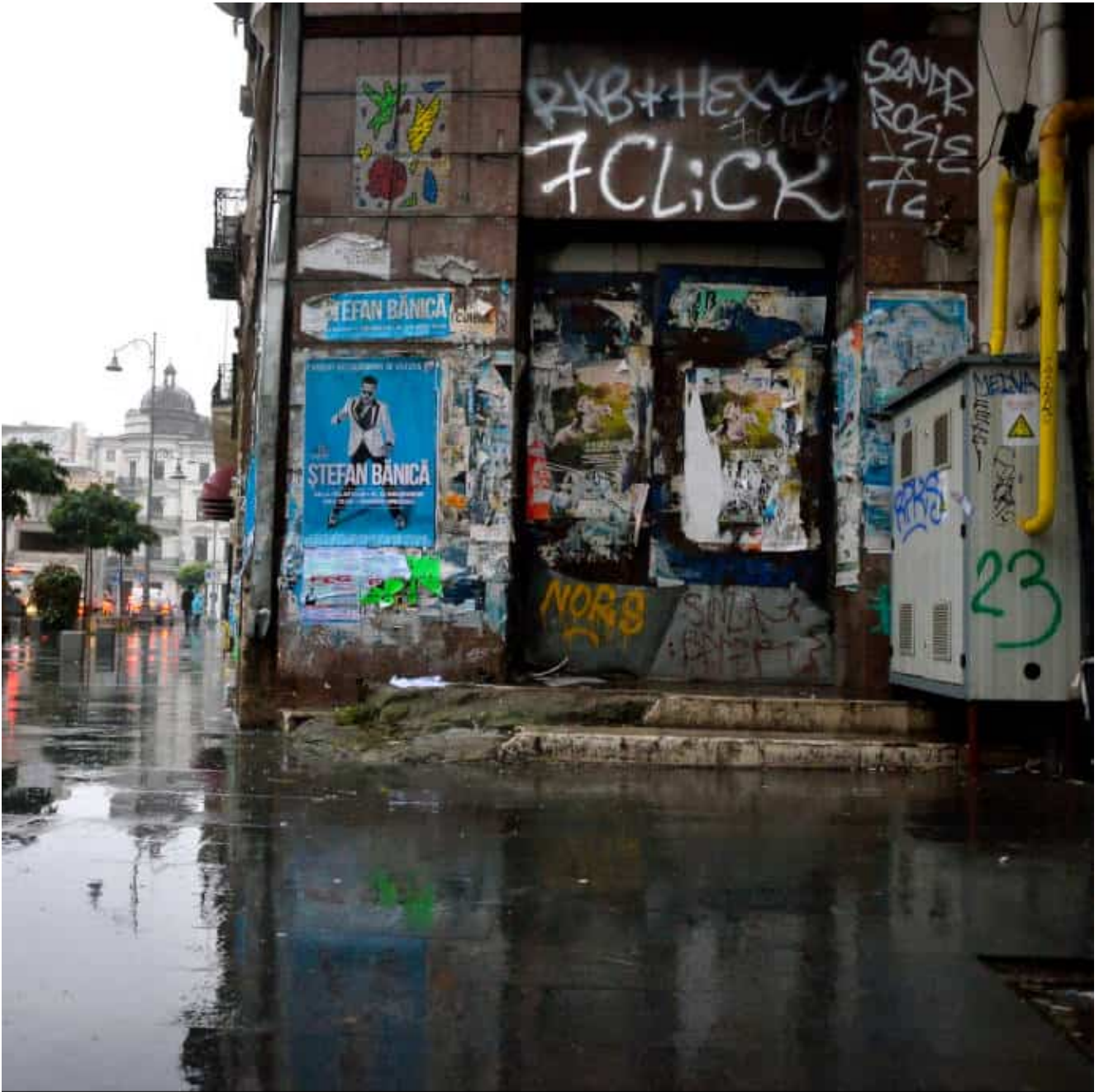




#review: space of boredom

Peter Soles Muirhead
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Bruce O'Neill's (2017) *The Space of Boredom* is a historically rich and theoretically innovative ethnography of contemporary homelessness and social exclusion in Bucharest. O'Neill spent nearly three years in the field with



homeless Bucharesters as well as interviewing public servants and NGO workers between 2007 and 2012. O'Neill, trained in both anthropology and urban geography, pinpoints in his interlocutors' repeated expressions of boredom an affect that is distinct to Bucharest and its postcommunist history. Such boredom is always in conversation with geopolitical decision-making, labour selection, and shifting economic paradigms. This boredom that results from being displaced to the outskirts of one's home city and unable to engage in its newfound hyperconsumerism is distinct, O'Neill argues, from the alienated labour of an office job, the collective deprivation of communist austerity, or from simple idleness.

Taking a phenomenological approach to affect that draws on theorists from Heidegger to Lauren Berlant, the author posits boredom as an "internally felt space" (O'Neill 2017, ix), as well as an urban space that is dislocated from those of consumer capitalism.

Through O'Neill's historical and ethnographic description, we learn that today's boredom manifests in the material, social, and affective spaces of homelessness, but is itself dependant on an historical deceleration of lived experience. Inverting David Harvey's (1992) usage of Marx's "annihilation of space by time," O'Neill asserts that "redundant workers are fixed to the unwanted spaces of the city, where they experience boredom and stasis rather than accelerated mobility" (O'Neill 2017, 227). The process of creating space by clearing time of meaningful activity is animated by two "moments of deprivation" (O'Neill 2017, 22) in Romania's larger history of protracted economic instability and crisis. The author first explores how the Romanians recall the austerity of Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist government, as well as the boredom of waiting in the breadlines. Before the violent end of Romanian communism (1947-1989), boredom was shaped by policies of economic centralization and foreign debt repayment, but Bucharesters experienced it with their social networks left relatively intact.



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Second, the author investigates the deprivation at work in the lives of his interlocutors. At present, boredom is produced through the postcommunist state's integration into global capital, the increased labour migration optimistically expanded by EU membership in 2006, and an economic boom in the 2000's that ended in the 2008 financial crisis. Romania's bailout by the International Monetary Fund in 2010 meant major cuts to public wages and social programs, deepening the crisis. Building on Marx's argument about capital's generation of "superfluous labour" (Marx 1973, 325), O'Neill maps the shift from the communist valorisation of sociality and work—along with the illegality of unemployment—to the isolation and social death of superfluous lives under neoliberalism.

After setting the historical and theoretical backdrop in the introduction and first chapter, O'Neill turns to a series of perspectives on the lived experience of boredom, with each remaining chapter centred on one of its facets.

The "homeless persons" (2017, 4) he interviews are (with well-explored



exceptions) predominantly middle-aged men, often incorrectly labelled as Roma, detached from their pre-capitalist social networks, casualized and priced out of Bucharest's once-public housing market. By engaging with shelter and street homeless people in several key sites around Bucharest, O'Neill captures an "infrastructure of displacement" (O'Neill 2017, 69). For example, Chapter Three: "The Grey Years" takes up the failure and marketization of the Romanian pension system following the end of communism, which means the new, underfunded shelter system functions in large part as nursing homes. The need for cash-strapped shelters to select low-cost tenants (who are expected to pay rent) exacerbates this effect. In Chapter Five: "Bored Stiff", O'Neill turns to the sexual practices of homeless men in the Gara de Nord train station, which he analyses as an opportunity to accelerate their experience of time and engage in something akin to the consumerist sociality from which they are otherwise excluded.

The last chapter, "Defeat Boredom!" plays with the slogan of a ubiquitous Romanian Nescafé ad. O'Neill depicts his interlocutors pushing past the margins of Bucharest's urban landscape and engaging in limited forms of consumerism—in this case a trip to the supermarket. The linkage between a temporality of boredom and space is further entrenched by shelter users' inability to escape the outskirts of the city. O'Neill beautifully captures such displacement in a quotation from Homi Bhabha: "The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome" (Bhabha 1992, 88). Along with the prohibitive cost of bus trips to the city centre, the age-old figures of the "homeless bum[...], the addict[...], or the 'gypsy'" (O'Neill 2017, 43) provide additional grounds for stigmatization, abuse, and dislocation.

Some of O'Neill's most compelling analysis appears when he historically and politically locates the social problem of homelessness, a term that was not officially defined in Romania until 2011.

Due to the millions of state apartments constructed by the communist state, it was not until the privatization of housing and Bucharest's tourist boom that the



homeless emerged as a relevant population under the state's gaze. O'Neill's interviews with government and NGO workers provide insight into this perspective. Unlike, for example, homeless shelters and day programs in Canada and the United States (e.g. Bridgeman 2003; Desjarlais 1997; Hopper 2003), Bucharest's programs do not seek to motivate, retrain, or otherwise morally educate their clients for future work. In fact, through O'Neill's work we learn that the selection process for who can stay in shelters is geared toward those individuals who have the least expensive issues (such as a disability or chronic medical condition) since they make the most predictable, low-cost tenants. Chapter Four, "Bored to Death", gives special attention to the issues of "letting die" in and out of government care. In O'Neill's analysis, boredom is an affect endemic to specific social circumstances and temporally and ethically tied to nostalgia and shattered optimism. There is a Weberian (2002) ethical imperative to use the resources of the self to surpass boredom by seizing inspiration and opportunity, but it is impossible to fulfil.





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What, then, does it mean to discuss homelessness, unfulfilled potential, and strong emotion without recourse to madness or mental illness explanations?

O’Neill rules out the most formal of these discourses early on, stating that “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”(O’Neill 2016, 5). In contrast, much of the ethnographic work on homelessness in the United States has addressed a close—if not quite causal—relationship between homelessness, psychological distress, and medical systems (e.g. Desjarlais 1997; Hopper 2003).

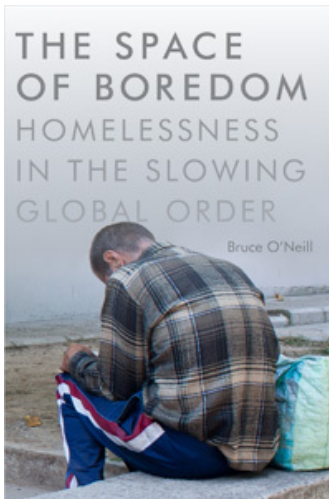
This means that in Bucharest homelessness is defined by a different infrastructure with different priorities at the population level. Bucharest’s social service infrastructure—itsself a system of labour selection and the warehousing of surplus bodies—creates very real boundaries for O’Neill’s interlocutors with meaning outside of psychiatric ontologies.

In the absence of psychiatric language, it is refreshing to see a clear and rigorous argument about space, temporality and affect emerging from O’Neill’s ethnography, and intriguing to think what other configurations of ethnographic form and content it opens by its own example.

As for what *The Space of Boredom* leaves out: While O’Neill’s photographs throughout the book help conjure thoughtful scenes of fieldwork and spaces of boredom for the reader, the politics of their capture is not addressed. The presence of the author in the text is well balanced with the topic at hand; as a reader, the narrative moments where I wondered what the ethnographer was doing, thinking, or reacting were always quickly followed by statements of careful self-reflexivity and clarified positionality. He describes the tension between observation and participation as placing him in the role of the “distraction”, and at several points his otherness as an American elicits powerful



common-sense assumptions about homelessness from Romanians. Within the ethnographic subgenres on homelessness (social defeat and abandonment) O'Neill's calculated presence in the text and choice against obeying the apparent genre convention of tagging on a hopeful ending were particularly refreshing.



In sum, O'Neill's ethnography reveals homeless Bucharesters' boredom as a spatial affect inextricably tied to globalism. The surplus of capable workers and formerly socially supported dependants are emblematic of a protracted social breakdown under several masters. This text might be read in productive conversation with the growing ethnographic literature on state affects, displacement, and waiting, as well as the established ethnography of homelessness mentioned above. As an ethnography of both communist memory and postcommunism, it reveals the heterogeneity in human ideas of work, boredom, and usefulness, and the ethnographer moves adeptly from the historical to intimate characterization and humour in his fieldsite. It remains to be seen what postcommunist boredom will mean for present social movements and politics in Romania—especially given the use of Bucharest's public spaces for anti-corruption protests in the first half of 2017—and whether the disastrous combination of reforms and crises can be ameliorated.

Bruce O'Neill. 2017. *[The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order](#)*. Duke University Press. 280 pp. Pb: \$25.95. ISBN: 978-0-822-36328-6.



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