

BOOK REVIEWS

THE SPACE OF BOREDOM: HOMELESSNESS IN THE SLOWING GLOBAL ORDER

BRUCE O'NEILL, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017,
280 pp., ISBN: 9780822363286

Reviewed by MIRELA PARASCHIV,
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Cities in Europe face continuous territorial challenges among which homelessness particularises as the manifestation of extreme poverty in direct connection with the characteristics of the urban space. Bucharest, large city redeveloped under communism and in constant post-socialist transformation, constitutes the urban space of focus for the ethnographic study of homelessness in Romania under the pretext of detailing boredom as significant product of structural factors such as the new economic and social paradigm imposed by globalisation.

Including a description of the social-economic background and the emerging factors for homelessness in Romania, the book starts with explaining the research approach and methodology. The study analyses boredom among the homeless people in Bucharest by investigating the practices of their daily lives in relation to the challenges of the capital city as specific urban space confronting with the territorial effects of the global economic crisis while striving to achieve the final development stages in the transition from socialism to capitalism and through European Union integration. Additionally, the societal impact of global consumerism plays one of the leading roles in the generalization of boredom among the homeless people in Romania due to strong social exclusion. The fieldwork realised for the examination and particularisation of boredom within an Eastern Europe territory constitutes also a valuable assessment of homelessness

in Bucharest. Participant observation, documentary photography and interviews with both homeless people of different categories (rough sleepers, shelter users, youth, elderly etc.) and people working in the homeless sector bring significant details on homelessness as phenomenon and process in Romania.

Homelessness in Romania and its specific features are explained as a construct of the social, political and economic background of Romania starting with the 20th century, being emphasized by the communist and post-communist pace and again shaken by the disturbances of the global economic crisis. Highlighting the statement of a homeless man who feels deeply bored, boredom is theoretically and directly contextualized and differentiated from depression as the frustration of being excluded from the consumerist practices of the current society of living. Following the internalization of boredom by the homeless people with different daily narratives as imposed by the distinct urban spaces they use – squatter camps, shelters, the railway station, the analysis explores the particular manifestation of rooflessness and houselessness within Bucharest, as the most developed city in Romania and, in the same time, the hotspot of urban disparities and extreme social and housing exclusion.

The first chapter of the book follows boredom as a result of living rough in a squatter camp

while highlighting the contrast between the current unstable life of two homeless men and their desirable former communist routine of working and obtaining food from the poorly equipped grocery stores. Ethnic stigma also works as agent of societal disruption finally leading to experimenting continuous boredom in the case of a sheltered young Roma – the highlight on living at the margins of the city both socially and spatially brings new insights on homelessness and the weak efficiency of the current alleviation policies.

The following chapter develops the objective and subjective framework of homeless shelters in Bucharest, functioning as an urban infrastructure of spatial and social displacement, withal producing undisrupted boredom. Supplementary explaining the ordinary paradigm of street homelessness through the relation between the homeless people and the urban space, informal working, the lack of jobs and discrimination represent the main triggers of boredom while being excluded from the global competitive society.

Chapter three explains the dynamics of homelessness among the elderly and the construction of boredom inside their sheltered lives dominated by deprivations. The parallel between the communist and the transition transformation of the pensioning system evidences the poor resilience of the highly vulnerable social system of Romania together with the radical change in the status of the elderly in Romania – at first, the pensioners represented a necessary support for the extended family, and now ageing equals poverty and social exclusion, at general level.

The fourth chapter of the book continues to build in detail the relation between the former communist capitalist city and homelessness, resulting in the social death of long-term homeless people and their accompanying boredom as displacement from the dreamt consumerism of the global economy. The fall into homelessness often leads to a permanent or long-term state of homelessness in the conditions of a globalised city that maintains life at the margins for the poor and vulnerable population by employing in the same time an underdeveloped social prevention and

management system.

Another thread of the interaction between the homeless people and the urban space is represented by the continuous search of ensuring antidotes to boredom. Passing from the use of common distractions such as drinking (both coffee and alcohol) and smoking to the need for sexual satisfaction, chapter five builds the picture of the underground sex market involving the homeless men. Living on the streets and the rough use of the urban space determine the homeless people to find alternative practices with the aim to reproduce the features of a normal social life in the generalised fight with boredom of the urban population.

The final chapters of the book are dedicated to unveiling the hidden setting of the contact between the homeless people and different commercial urban spaces. The homeless people in Bucharest experience the same social pressure for consumerism as the general population. The manifestation of the global economy within the urban space of Bucharest tends to strongly support the highly referred boredom among the homeless people – boredom which in the particular case of homelessness is associated with the lack of formal productivity and daily living.

The book is written and organized in an attractive style that can make it to be read even as a novel. The chapters' titles are short and suggestive, the photographs are numerous and complementing the text by depicting both people and places, and the references and additional comments of the text are gathered at the end of the book allowing a fluent reading and maintaining the atmosphere of the book. All these make the book interesting for readers interested in non-fiction. At some point, scholars and specialists concerned to keep up with the additional information offered by the references and the author's comments may find it difficult to combine the two while reading the book and constantly consulting the final pages of the book. Also, from the same perspective of research interests, it may appear the need for the photographs to be integrated through comments and specific references to them in

the text.

The study of boredom in the framework of homelessness in Bucharest represents an insightful investigation of extreme housing exclusion in a post-socialist context dominated by a current global dynamics. Bringing

valuable scientific contribution for pluridisciplinary interests and approaches, the book stands also as useful tool for policymakers involved in the integrated alleviation of homelessness and the general development process of the city.

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

GÁBOR LUX and GYULA HORVÁTH (eds.),
Routledge, London and New York, 2018, XVI, 326 pp., ISBN: 9781472485717

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The reviewed book represents a reference work summarizing the main characteristics of regional development issues in Central and East European countries, members of the European Union. It is a synthesis of the structural characteristics, differences and common features of regional development with a focus on the socio-economic processes.

The book is edited by Dr. Gábor Lux of Institute for Regional Studies (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), who continued the work of late Professor Gyula Horváth, former Director-General of the Centre for Regional Studies HAS. The volume represents a collection of outcomes of a research project on the driving forces of spatial restructuring and paths of regional development within Central and East European (CEE) countries. There are other publications, both books and papers, resulted from the same project, among which it is worth noting the book of G. Horvath (2015) on the historical perspectives of regional development in the broadly defined CEE region.

Being based on the outcomes of a research project given to the Institute for Regional Studies, the book gathers mainly the authors affiliated with the Institute. Some particular topics are elaborated by foreign scholars and teams representing Finnish, Czech, and Polish universities.

The idea of this book appeared from two premises: (i) the necessity to show that the CEE group of countries is just as heterogeneous as the EU15, and any regional development policy 'one size fits all' would actually not fit any of the regions it is designed for; (ii) the need of both a comprehensive research on the post-crisis period in CEE and a synthetic view on regional development issues considering the CEE region as a whole. Thus, in the editor's opinion, one of the negative patterns of regional development research in CEE is related to the prevalence of individual case studies fitted into the western (mainly, Anglo-Saxon) theories: the RD issues were considered from the viewpoint of western theories, even if the research was realized by scholars with affiliations in the CEE countries. The reviewed book intends to provide an alternative view on the issue, a look from inside that is meant to 'repair' the flaws of the previous fragmented, excessively western-oriented, comparison-lacking studies. The aim of the book is to present the regional development issues and challenges in CEE countries (i) highlighting the aspects which are common and different for the CEE countries, (ii) taking into account the up-to-date trends in the regional development thinking, (iii) focusing on the empirically sound aspects, and (iv) embedding them in the national and regional historical contexts.

The book is divided in three parts, each of which includes chapters on a specific issue. The first part, introduces the reader to the consequences of post-socialist economic transformations, considering the 2008 economic crisis as a pivot event, which significantly complicated the transition patterns and trajectories. The second part is focused on spatial structures (urban networks and regional disparities), as well as on regional governance in the narrow CEE countries and the neighboring regions. The third part, the most heterogeneous, gathers analyses of the most important topics for the regional development process in the region: labor market, regional actors and processes, transportation, spatial planning, and resilience.

Among the topics covered by the book, we should also mention the overview of structural shifts, resulted not just from the post-socialist transition process, but from the global processes as well (Chapter 2). The transformations of specific economic and industrial sectors in the context of path dependency are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is concerned with the business and financial sectors, which are located in only few metropolitan areas. In chapter 5, the author focuses on the transition processes in rural areas, in which agriculture plays significant role. The entrepreneurial activity is examined in chapter 6 and the role of qualitative factors, localization characteristics and endogenous development is highlighted. The reproduction of uneven development due to differences in culture and creativity is the focus of chapter 7. The second part of the book starts with analyzing the changes in the urban networks of CEE countries (Chapter 8). The current trends and the future perspective of regional governance represent the topics discussed in the next chapter (9). In chapter 10, the authors emphasize the contradictions between the purpose and the outcome of EU regional policies. Chapter 11 focuses on the fluctuating issue of cross border cooperation, which experienced a sharp rise in the past, but recently started to decline. Some characteristics of ethno-regional movements within CEE countries, as well as in some neighboring regions, are examined in the next chapter (12).

The last part of the book opens the discussion with probably the most sensible topic in EU regional development: migrations and labor market (Chapter 13). The rising role of universities and their contribution to the innovation performance of the regions constitute the subject of the Chapter 14. The next chapter (15) is concerned with the trendy topic of regional resilience in the (so significant) context of post-socialist transition. Transport issues and the promotion of the motorway-oriented transport system represent the subject of Chapter 16. In chapter 17, the contribution of spatial planning on environmentally-concerned policymaking is discussed. As a logical continuation of this topic, in the next chapter, the authors examine the representativeness of spatial research in CEE countries.

The book concludes (Chapter 19) with a series of questions addressed to the European regional policy, asked from the 'theoretically-informed' regional perspective. It calls for community of interests between the EU core and its Mediterranean, Central and East European peripheries as well as for making the EU development strategies more 'spatially aware'. The editor recognizes though that historical legacies still influence the present day economic and social processes in post-socialist countries. And from the perspective of the debate on the varieties of capitalism (Peck and Theodore 2007), the book seems to embrace the idea that the 'dependent market economy' (Nölke and Vliegenthart 2009) would represent the most precise reflection of capitalism in CEE countries.

Among the most effective parts of the book, I would like to mention its synthetic character: the authors managed to provide a comprehensive view on regional development issues in the CEE region. Such a study closes a significant gap in the scientific knowledge of this region. Of particular interest, in my opinion, is the cross-cutting issue, which can be identified across all the chapters of the book, namely, evidencing the role of capital cities and metropolitan regions, which seem to be more integrated into the broader European urban system than within their own hinterland: "The missing tier of large cities is a

development challenge emphasizing the importance of polycentric development scenarios and the role of territorial cohesion" (pp. 311).

Among the least effective parts of the book, I would like to mention the instability of the geographic scope of the analysis. The analyzed CEE region included the different countries presented below, as the editor mentions (pp. 5) "in order of emphasis": (1) Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary); (2) Romania and Bulgaria; (3) former Yugoslav republics excepting Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, the geographic scope is not the same across the chapters: under the umbrella notion of "CEE countries", some authors include Bosnia and Herzegovina, others consider Latvia and Estonia; just Visegrad countries are present in all the analyses.

The book is, also, subject to flaws inherent to any synthesis, namely, the presence of small mistakes/gaps scattered across the chapters (e.g. the Suceava-Paşcani border crossing on the Figure 16.1, pp. 264, or presenting too narrow views on the ethno-regional perspective of regional development in CEE countries, just to name a few). If examined in detail, they raise questions about how well the authors are informed about the variety of opinions presented in the regional development debates in each of the country under consideration. Although these flaws do

not undermine the overall soundness and quality of the findings, including, among the authors, scholars from each of the examined country (partly, solved for the Czech Republic and Poland), would have increased the impact and the importance of the results.

In order to discover the detailed findings presented in the book, I would invite the potential reader to get through the chapters of the book. It is worth of being included in the library of each institution and research center, whose research activity concerns regional development issues. Thanks to its lofty goals and scope (both theoretical and geographical) the book will be of reference for any researcher in the field (geographer, territorial planner, economist, sociologist etc.) for the next 10 or 15 years.

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