

CAST ASIDE: Boredom, Downward Mobility, and Homelessness in Post-Communist Bucharest

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A college student sits on a bench with a half-zipped hoodie, a few days' stubble, and a pile of books. Coeds gather around him. They chat with friends. He sighs, not because he is half-awake or aloof or even alone, but because he is bored. The television advertisement, moments later, explains as much. To beat back boredom, the student pours Nescafé instant coffee into his life. A catchy pop song drops with his first sip, propelling the student off his bench and into the quad. His excitement proves contagious. How could it not? His classmates shoot to their feet, forming a well-choreographed flash mob. An impassioned voiceover then closes the commercial: “Învinge Plictiseală! Alege Pasiune! Alege Nescafé 3in1!” (Defeat Boredom! Choose Passion! Choose Nescafé 3-in-1!).

In Romania, during the summer of 2010, the Nescafé Corporation battled boredom. *Învinge Plictiseală!* “Boredom is, for many Romanians, one of their greatest fears,” the campaign’s creative director explained. “They are not worried about their career or even about money but about being bored. And they want to eat so much, to consume so much, that every pause causes them boredom.” “This is why,” he continued, “we positioned the product as a stimulus, like a spark, that helps you avoid those awful pauses that lead to boredom.” And a consumerist spark Nescafé did ignite. The Nescafé Corporation paired its coffee product with regular drawings to win Nokia smart phones and €1,000 cash prizes. Hugely

successful, by industry standards, the promotion solicited 1.7 million entries over fifty-four days (*PR Romania* 2010).

In this battle over boredom, Nescafé offers itself to Romanians as their first line of defense. It is a product pitch to which Romanians are remarkably primed to receive. Two decades after the fall of Communism and in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, Romanians are bored, and they describe themselves as such. Yet, the boredom that bombards this country (and I suspect other similarly positioned societies) does not attack only its leisure class. While the Nescafé commercial and literary greats from Charles Dickens (1853) to David Foster Wallace (2011) represent boredom as a passing affliction of slowed time endured by the wealthy (Spacks 1996; Goodstein 2004), boredom's most vulnerable victim is in fact Romania's homeless population. Chronic under-consumption leaves the homeless defenseless against this everyday affect.

Much of this vulnerability has to do with the novelty of homelessness in Romania. Prior to December 1989, when a mob executed Romania's dictator on Christmas day, the Romanian Communist Party guaranteed every family a home and a job. These state guarantees ensured the baseline wellbeing of the population. It was only after the fall of the Communist government, in the wake of liberalization, that people fell out of work and ended up on the streets. Labeled "homeless" by Western reformers, a new shelter system quickly codified their status. And with this new status came new modes of being, such as boredom. Practically speaking, boredom captures for Romania's newly minted homeless a sense of alienation from work and home, but more saliently, boredom references their exclusion from an urban life that increasingly unfolds through practices of consumption. It is a brutal kind of boredom.

Take Liviu (image 1). An unemployed construction worker in his fifties, he sleeps in parks, stairwells, and the waiting room of the Gara de Nord train station. When he can find work, Liviu earns less than €13 per day off the books. The day we spoke, however, was not one of those days. Instead, Liviu sat with me, for lack of anything better to do. Gazing at the floor, his eyes trained just beyond our feet, Liviu confided:

I feel bored (*plictisit*) quite a bit. 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 (*liniște sufletească*). 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?" . . . I

mean, at times I just feel useless. I think to myself “Why should I go on living?” There is nothing for me to do here that makes me happy. I do not have money in my pocket to buy something to eat or anything else that I might want . . . and in these moments I feel an overwhelming dissatisfaction with life. It is like my organs don’t sense anything around me (*organele nu se implică*). Don’t get me wrong—I am 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 very, very terrible for me.¹



Image 1: “Sitting at Asistență.” Photograph by the author

A troubled economy, compounded by the global financial crisis, pushed a glut of unwanted laborers onto the streets. Pressed to the margins of the city with little expectation of ever returning to regular employment, Romanians such as Liviu do not fit any of the usual scripts. They did not become hustlers in the informal economy (Bourgeois 2003; Rodgers 2009), overrun by addiction (Bourgeois and Schonberg 2009; Garcia 2010) nor did they become mentally ill (Biehl

2005; Luhrmann 2001). Instead, these men became bored, and as Liviu's account suggests, this boredom is something to fear.

This essay, in response, takes this fear seriously by approaching boredom as an everyday affect (Stewart 2007) structured by the politics of consumption in post-Communist Bucharest. At the center of this study sits not simply the inability to consume but also the feeling of being cast aside, of being downwardly mobile in a neoliberal era of supposed ascent. In an increasingly consumer-driven society, boredom, I argue, is an affective state that registers within the modality of time the newly homeless's expulsion to the margins of the city. In this sense, boredom is a persistent form of social suffering made possible by a crisis-generated shift in the global economy, one that has forced tens of millions of people the world over to come to terms with diminished economic capacities (Jeffrey 2010; Ralph 2008; Mains 2007; Ferguson 1999), as well as the all too depressing sense that boredom's antidote, the very answer to it all, is a warm mug of Nescafé.

IDLENESS UNDER COMMUNISM

Romania is not a wealthy country. It was for a moment, but only briefly. Between the two World Wars, Romania experienced a boom that earned Bucharest the title "Paris of the Balkans." Stalls and stoppages, however, have punctuated the Romanian economy ever since, leaving Romanians unable to work and, at times, with little to consume. In the 1980s, widespread inactivity in the realm of production and consumption became more than a fact of life. Inactivity became a matter of social policy. It was then that the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu simultaneously undertook two costly initiatives. The first was to pay off Romania's \$11 billion foreign debt within a decade (Petrescu 2002). Ceausescu believed this aggressive fiscal policy was necessary to limit foreign interference in the development of socialism in Romania. The second initiative was a major redevelopment of central Bucharest to herald the victory of socialism. Costing \$1.5 billion, this was a fantastic expenditure for a country whose gross domestic product (GDP) at the time was about \$17 billion (O'Neill 2009). To fund these initiatives, the Romanian Communist Party heightened the exportation of food and durable goods while severely limiting imports. These planning and policy decisions led to the development of what liberal economists call a "shortage economy," whereby the systemic misallocation of resources prevented factories from producing at full throttle (Kornai 1986). Factories, for example, failed to receive the necessary raw materials to meet their production quotas. When inputs

ran short, production stopped. In these moments, workers stood idle on factory floors (Verdery 1996, 22).

These inefficiencies contributed to a lack of consumables. Food grew scarce, homes went dark in the evening, and in the morning Romanians drank ersatz-coffee. Real coffee, when it could be found at all, was reserved for bribing officials and administrators (Chelcea 2002). Coupled with aggressive exportation policies, consumer demand soon outpaced retail inventories. As store shelves ran empty, Romanians had to spend inordinate amounts of time queuing for replenishments (Verdery 1996). Breadlines soon defined most of Romanians' non-working hours. Life in Romania, according to the novelist Dragoş Vociu (2009), turned into an unending line for chicken scraps.² Entire days became preoccupied with waiting in breadlines, forcing social relationships of almost every kind to take place within, and conform to the restrictions of, the breadline. What was the alternative? "No person in power would dare to take the place of a nine-year-old kid or surrender his place to an eighty-year-old," wrote the Romanian sociologist Pavel Câmpeanu. "Disabled persons are treated the same as the healthy, there exists no difference between a young man with a rucksack on his back and a young woman with a restless baby in her arms; well-dressed administrators with briefcases in hand stand without hesitation behind street sweepers dressed in dirty overalls and holding brooms" (Câmpeanu 1994, 41–42). A series of short films, entitled *Comunism pe Burta Goală* (Communism on an Empty Stomach) (2009), further memorialized the difficulties of the breadlines. Produced by Romania's twenty-four-hour news station, Realitatea TV, the series broadcasted the testimonies of everyday workers who completed 12-hour shifts only to spend the remainder of the day standing in long lines for bread, milk, and meat. Black-and-white photos juxtaposed empty store shelves with long lines that stretched outside and around grocery stores. "In the 1980s," summarized the Romanian journalist and critic, Paul Cernat, "queuing for products was an everyday experience and a familiar expression of underdevelopment. . . . You just waited indefinitely" (Cernat 2004, 191).

In the era of communism, deprivation thrust Romanians into a state of idleness. Romanians regularly spent long hours standing around on the factory floor and in breadlines unable to produce or consume. The stalled economy left Romanians with little to do. "There were lines day and night," Sandu, a homeless construction worker, recalled to me in 2011 as he lit a fresh cigarette. We sat in his squatter camp with some of his neighbors (see image 2). "Let's say you needed milk. You had a bottle, and you waited in the evening in front of the creamery,

and you stayed there until morning when the car came with milk. You'd stay up all night to get 3–4 kilograms of milk to give to your children. All night you would wait there.” Tomas, who lives in the same encampment, recounted the rhythm of delivery: “Often shipments arrived in the afternoon around 3 p.m. You'd need to stand in line from dawn until 4, 5, 6 p.m. By 8 p.m. the stores closed, so that was it. You and your family needed to schedule for this . . . you'd go to work while your wife stood in line. Then when your kids came home from school they'd stand in line for your wife. And then when you came home from work, you'd stand in line for your kids.”

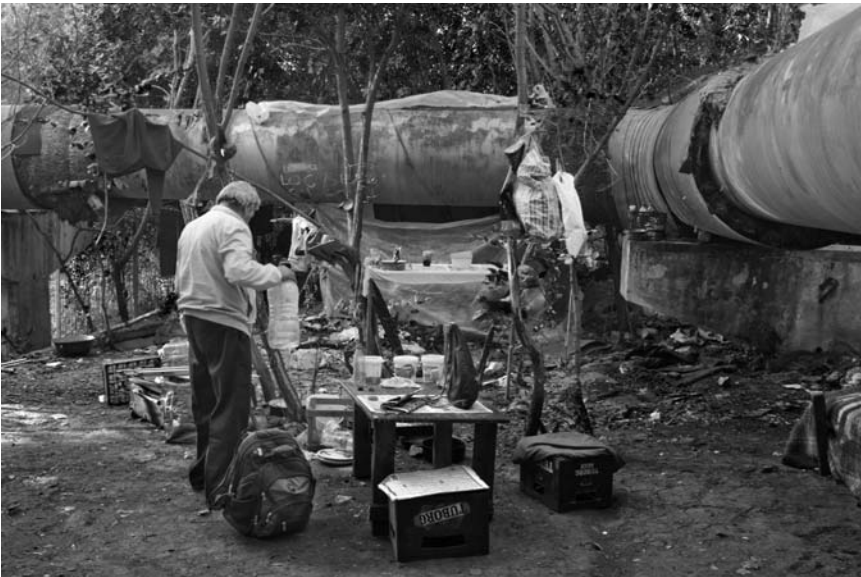


Image 2: “Squatter Camp.” Photograph by the author

Breadlines absorbed much of the non-working day, yet Romania’s present homeless population does not recall the idleness of the queue as having been boring. This is because the breadline was not without a sense of solidarity and forward progression. As Sandu attested, “Standing in line took a long time, but it wasn’t stressful at all. It was a pleasant atmosphere actually. We’d sit with people from the neighborhood and read, play checkers, cards, chess. . . .” “Yeah,” Tomas interjected, “and we drank hard!” As the others in the encampment laughed, Tomas continued: “There was almost always beer nearby—It didn’t matter that it was 2 a.m. or 5 a.m. You could get beer at any hour. And you didn’t lack for wine or *țuică* (plum-brandy).” “And there wasn’t much else to do

otherwise,” another neighbor, Ionel, added. “It wasn’t like today. There weren’t so many televisions, and even then there were only two hours of TV programming each day! The lines were long, but you at least got to bring something to eat home to your apartment.” Romanians endured curbed consumption in a moment of stalled production, leaving Romanians idle for long periods of the day. This idleness, however, was not boring. This is because idleness in communist-era Romania was collectively shared. Stuck in the line, workers preoccupied themselves with friends, games, and alcohol; and however slowly the line moved, each passing moment brought people closer to something that they needed. Idleness, in this instance, was both collectively shared and tied to state efforts of caring for citizens (Kideckel 2004).

FROM COMMUNISM TO CONSUMERISM

The shortage economy, and the breadlines that went with it, came to an end in 1989 with the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu. A new government soon followed that sought to open up Romania’s closed borders and to reincorporate Romania into what is commonly described as the global market. These efforts at liberalization sought to replace the idleness that characterized Romania’s economy under communism with the steady buzz of market-driven production and consumption (Demekas and Khan 1991). Between 1990 and 1995, the Romanian state sold roughly 4.3 million housing units into the ownership of private individuals (Stan 1995 429–30). The state also sold majority shareholder status in all of its non-essential industries, creating by 1994 no fewer than forty-thousand joint ventures with foreign partners, totaling about \$964 million in foreign investment (Stan 1995: 431–35). Peasant markets were completely liberalized to increase the supply of food, and land was distributed from agricultural cooperatives to peasants for long-term use (Demekas and Khan 1991, 18; Verdery 2003).

While Romanian politicians and Western consultants waited for liberal reforms to shift Romanian factories into gear, Romanians themselves became acquainted with global consumerism. Store shelves stayed stocked for the first time in memory. From sugary snacks to blue jeans, increased imports and improved domestic goods provided Romanians with more and better options, even if persistent poverty compelled shoppers to choose the cheapest option among them. Foreign companies repurposed Bucharest’s main *piațe* (public squares)—such as Unirii, Romană, and Victoriei—shifting them from aesthetic testaments to the strength and rationality of Romanian socialism to convenient backdrops for advertising newly available goods. Neon billboards for Coca Cola, Nike, and Sony

competed for public attention in the evening sky. Advertising extended into now-private homes, prompting Romanians to buy products like Nescafé in new hypermarkets such as Carrefour. The introduction of cable television expanded programming from two hours of rhetoric a day under communism to hundreds of 24-hour news and entertainment channels. Cinemas provided uncensored and unrestricted access to foreign films, while developers transformed socialist-era buildings into “American style” shopping malls.³ These malls exposed Romanians to foreign retailers, but also to a distinctly Western shopping experience—one that tethered the acquisition of new shoes to the ingestion of fast food, pop music, and carefully stylized spaces. Within this heightened awareness of consumerism, consumption not only emerged as a site of self-stimulation but also came to compete with production as a means of ordering social relations. As consumer possibilities expanded, consumer capacity and choice became ever more communicative, marking vertical distinctions between emerging classes (Veblen 2007), as well as horizontal distinctions within them (Bourdieu 1987).

Still miles away from the capitalist “dream worlds” of nineteenth-century Paris or twentieth-century New York (Laermans 1993), these developments nevertheless converged to raise hopes that life in post-communist countries like Romania would soon achieve parity with Western Europe (Fehérvári 2001; Drazin 2002). The rise of capitalism aroused within the starved, communist-era worker a desire to consume that seemed to be stimulated everywhere (Humphrey 1995; Patino and Caldwell 2002). As residents of Krakow, Moscow, and East Berlin transitioned into full-fledged consumer citizens, the average resident of Bucharest could not help but think that his or her moment would also come soon.⁴

Anticipation gave way to a sense of endless waiting. It is now well documented that while a small cadre of Romanian elites enjoyed an improvement in their quality of life, the impact of Romania’s move towards privatization was generally disastrous. The privatization of factories, rather than accelerating their output, caused them to stall almost entirely. Just four years into Romania’s transition to capitalism, real gross domestic product fell by 15.4 percent and industrial output fell by 23.3 percent; around one-million workers—a quarter of the industrial workforce—exited the labor market (Harris 1994, 2861). These broad economic forces rendered ever less affordable the basic things associated with everyday life, such as housing and utilities. If in 1989, for example, purchasing a one-bedroom apartment cost the equivalent of 40 average yearly salaries, the value of that same apartment in 2003 inflated to 120 average yearly salaries (Dan and Dan 2003, 5). In 2000, when Romania made a major push towards EU

accession, analysts noted with distress that forty percent of Romanians lived on less than one U.S. dollar a day; that Romania had the lowest GDP of all candidate states, the highest inflation, and the least foreign investment; and immediately before EU accession, analysts pointed out that the country's significant economic reforms still left Romanians with an average monthly wage of under \$350 (O'Neill 2010, 257).

European Union accession in 2007 provided a boost to Romania's economy that was all but erased by the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis. By 2009, the World Bank reported that the Romanian stock market lost 65 percent of its value, the Romanian currency, the *Leu*, depreciated 15 percent against the Euro, and Romania's overall GDP dropped by over 7 percent (World Bank 2009, 9). In an effort to stabilize the nation's finances, the Romanian government turned to the International Monetary Fund for a \$27.5 billion bailout that instigated a radical series of austerity measures. These measures cut public wages by 25 percent, increased the Value Added Tax to 24 percent and slashed social services (BBC 2010). While the rise of Western-style consumption fueled the desire for a European standard of living, the onset of the global financial crisis rendered a growing number of people unemployed, out of money, and with fewer government protections upon which to rely. Increasingly, Romanians found themselves cast out of their houses and onto the streets.

CAST ASIDE

"We are the sacrificed generation—those born in the fifties and sixties," Radu started as he struggled to shield his eyes from the summer sun with his hand. In his mid-forties, Radu lost his home and his construction job two years prior, in the wake of the global financial crisis. Now separated from his wife and children, Radu spends his nights alternating between monasteries, squatter camps, and the stairwells of apartment blocks. He has nowhere to call his own. Having failed to get work earlier that morning on Bucharest's market for informal day labor, Piața Neagră, we opted to spend the afternoon at Asistență—a day center in Bucharest where the homeless go to access a social worker, take a shower, or just sit in peace. With only the daily tabloids to read, our regular meetings at Asistență left us with ample time to reflect on the experience of being cast aside. "We did alright until communism ended in '89–90 . . . but now we spend our days waiting at churches and NGOs for a plate of food. And that's all the help we get. We cannot speak of social aid [from the state]." Too old to compete successfully for manual labor positions, too young to qualify for a pension, and

lacking in marketable skills, Radu was unable to find work and was no longer able to make rent. He described how, once on the street, life grew ever more precarious: “A lot of people come here to find work from other cities like Constanta, Timisoara, Brasov—too many people are looking for work and there are not enough jobs.”

The problem, Radu went on to admit, was larger than simple math. Aside from a swelling pool of low-skilled workers tilting the labor market to the employer’s advantage, there was also a larger shift in the type of work on offer in Bucharest. Heavy industry, the base of urban employment under communism, collapsed after the revolution. “I mean, look around you,” Radu continued. “The work we were accustomed to under Ceausescu no longer exists. You had a job, you had a salary, and you had them indefinitely. You were not at a loss for work. Everyone had his fate and he went about his day with a purpose.” A manual laborer under communism, Radu was always in demand. The economy, after all, was structured around universally guaranteed employment, housing, and food rations. There were idle moments during communism to be sure, but this idleness was momentary and passing. Idle workers stood around on reserve. Whether on the stalled factory floor or in the slow moving breadline, Romanians under communism knew they would ultimately be called back into the service of the economy. Their labor was always framed as necessary, and bread for dinner always came, if not later rather than sooner. “That’s not the case anymore,” Radu assessed. “The passing from communism to capitalism was sudden—my generation got caught staring into the sun.”

Radu’s friend from Piața Neagră, Emil, agreed. As he emptied the contents of three Nescafé packets into an empty water bottle recovered from the trash, Emil explained, “Many things have failed us. The government sold the factories, they made people unemployed in ’90–91. That’s when unemployment started. It didn’t exist in ’89. Then, if you didn’t have a job, the *Securitate* would come around and find you in the street. They would put you in jail for *6 months* if you weren’t working. *You went to jail for not having a job.*” Emil emphasized that his present state of unemployment was, not so long ago, widely considered to be criminal.⁵ “Now, I know that’s not the case anymore. The state no longer has any work. You’re responsible for what you do in life. You have to find your own place to work, a house, an income. I don’t have a job but I dream of having one again—to have something to do. To be occupied. To help my family, my children.⁶ But for now, my dreams are shattered. . . . It’s tough with this job market here in Bucharest.”

Raised under socialism and the glorification of the worker, and now subjected to the competitive pressures of a liberal market, Romania's homeless understand the importance of regular, hard work and the harsh consequences of unemployment. Neither the state nor the private market, however, offers these men, as unskilled laborers (*muncitor necalificat*), opportunities to put their work ethic to consistent use. As the Romanian economy shifted from industry to services, manual labor became increasingly flexible rather than a full-time occupation. Normative expectations of a nine-to-five job cut against the uncertainty of occasional day labor. As Radu explained: "Now there is very little work, and the work you can find is for a definite period—a few days, a week, maybe a month. If you get a month of consistent work then enjoy it, because otherwise there is no continuity. You no longer have certainty about tomorrow or the day after."

While workers in their twenties and thirties could leverage their relative youth and strength to manage growing economic precariousness, the middle-aged came to understand themselves as not merely *displaced* into the informal economy, but rendered, in Zygmunt Bauman's (2004) terms, *redundant*: an unusable remnant of a bygone era. "I know I have to adapt," Radu explained to me. "I readjusted myself and I try to learn new things along the way. I'm trying to reapply my knowledge elsewhere, to change my entire mentality. I know I cannot expect something from the state above, and I don't want to sit around all day doing nothing. But what can I do? At my age, who wants to hire me for physical work? Even if you're educated, employers prefer the young." Marius, who often sits and talks with Radu and Emil at Piața Neagră, bluntly concurred: "No one wants to hire me. My legs aren't well—I have water in my knees. There is no work for me to do. At fifty-three my life is over. There's work for a handful of younger men, but the rest are finished. We sit on the streets, unwanted and empty handed, while everyone else waits for simple biology to take care of us."

In a state of redundancy, inactivity for Romania's homeless became decoupled from the industrial notion of the reserve army of labor. Radu, Emil, Marius, and the others no longer believe they will be called back into the service of production in any substantive way. They have little reason to think otherwise. In the absence of an income, much less government aid, no one is investing in them. Like a still-functioning typewriter in the digital age, it is not quite clear what purpose they still serve. Temporary idleness under communism gave way under neoliberalism to near-permanent unemployment and new levels of deprivation; and unlike with the breadline, relief from this deprivation no longer comes with

time. Afternoons spent sitting in the parking lot of Asistență do not bring the homeless closer to food rations or a job or a home.

While their productive value has passed, their capacity to consume never came. While under communism, Bucharest's homeless joke, idle workers had money to spend but nothing to buy, there are now things to buy but the homeless have no money to spend. At the surface, the homeless's joking suggests that their life circumstances did not change after the dramatic fall of communism. They continue to do without. Yet this joking points to a fundamental shift in the structure of deprivation. Surrounded by restaurants and shops, the newly homeless can only stand on the outside since they lack the means to participate in the consumer practices that others enjoy within. This inability to consume does not affect the neighborhood, as communist austerity once did, nor does it tie the homeless to a paternalistic state. Instead, deprivation now identifies the homeless as unnecessary producers and articulates their exclusion from social spaces and practices of consumption. Rather than idleness, deprivation in a moment of heightened consumerism leaves those thrust to the margins feeling bored to death.

BORED TO DEATH

"There is nothing to do here but eat, nap, and do your paw (*fac labe*)," Vasile, a twenty-something resident of Magazie, a state-administered shelter in Bucharest, quipped while making a jerking motion with his left hand. Although run by one of Bucharest's central districts, Magazie existed outside of the city's municipal boundaries.⁷ The layout of Magazie called to mind its former usage as an army barracks. A combination of walls and chain-link fences marked the perimeter. Fences also cut through the complex, spatially affirming population segments invented by the staff. In this way, the shelter kept apart the infirm from the healthy, the elderly from young families, and the well-behaved from the disruptive. A private security firm enforced these demarcations, questioning beneficiaries living in one zone about their request to visit a medical office, for example, located in another. Guards used their own judgment to deny or permit such requests. In addition to the guards and the doctors, the shelter kept social workers, a kitchen, and a custodial staff. Empty fields, a public cemetery, and a kennel that housed stray dogs collected from the city streets neighbored Magazie. The dogs' barks echoed throughout the shelter, inviting homeless beneficiaries to make the obvious and uncomfortable parallel between the two spaces. A Nescafé machine sat at the shelter's front gate, providing residents with one outlet for treating themselves. Otherwise, a single public bus serviced Magazie. A gas station

existed just off the first stop, providing a place to buy cigarettes or the occasional beer. Otherwise, even with light traffic, it took an hour and a half to reach the city center. By all accounts, the complex felt removed from city life.

"I'm very bored! Terribly bored! Each day I'm bored! But what can I do?" lamented Bogdan, a divorced and unemployed worker a few years away from his pension eligibility. "I walk around the shelter's courtyard as a way of keeping busy. I'd like to go out, but to leave the shelter you must have money in your pocket. You need ten *lei* (a few dollars) in order to leave and come back with something: a cake, a drink, a Nes[café], or whatever. . . . As it is, I feel better when I am asleep in bed—when I cannot think about anything." Sleep was a common escape from the confines of shelter boredom. Bogdan's neighbor, Elena, for example, slept fourteen hours a day on average. "What else is there to do?" Elena asked me rhetorically. "All I have to look forward to each day are coffee and cigarettes. When I run out, I try to go back to sleep." Amidst tight budget constraints, Magazie did not offer educational, vocational, or entertainment programs for its two-hundred homeless beneficiaries. Rather than reform or retrain the homeless for new types of employment (see Desjarlais 1997; Hopper 2003; Lyon-Callo 2008), Magazie only offered basic accommodation. Shelter residents often gathered in the hallway to share cigarettes and mugs of Nescafé. Conversation, however, was sparse and punctuated by long silences. New topics of discussion were hard to find. About five televisions existed among the complex's homeless residents, affording access to Spanish soap operas and American action films to the lucky few. Bogdan was not one of the lucky. "I sit here in this shelter, staring at the walls and thinking about my troubles. And that only makes life harder."

Though bored with shelter life, residents hardly ever left; it was free from the costs of the outside world. "Sure, I could go and visit one of the parks in the city center: Herăstrău or Cișmigiu. It's beautiful there," acknowledged Ivan, an unemployed father of five living at Magazie. "But if I go I'll have to take my kids, and kids just ask and ask for things. There are go-carts, food, and games at the park, but you need money to buy tickets for these things. If you don't have the money, then it is better to just stay in the shelter. . . . Without money nothing is possible." Unable to afford a hot meal, much less a carnival ride, Ivan, Bogdan, and the others concurred, it was better to stay indoors. Stuck at the margins of the city without much work and with even less to spend, shelter residents could only repetitively cycle through a set of activities—sleeping, masturbating, drinking instant coffee, pacing, and reading the papers. They also listened to the dogs

barking next door in their cages; and in these moments, shelter beneficiaries came to understand as self-evident what Giorgio Agamben observed so profoundly: “the man who becomes bored finds himself in the ‘closest proximity’—even if it is only apparent—to animal captivity” (Agamben 2003, 66). Both the bored individual and the captivated animal are stuck in spaces lacking in meaning and purpose.

To be sure, boredom also exerted a deathly dull force upon homeless persons living on the street. Not confined to a shelter, Bucharest’s street homeless are mobile in a way those living in the shelter could only dream. They reported walking between fifteen and twenty kilometers per day. Sometimes this movement was directed, such as between soup kitchens, public bathrooms, and black markets. At other times the direction was arbitrary, moving only to avoid police harassment. In sharp relief to the fences enclosing the shelter, the street extended in all directions. The open-ended quality of the street did not relieve boredom, as those in the shelter imagined, but rather rendered boredom into a free-floating mode of being.

“Let me give you an example of what I mean,” Radu started. “You wake up at 6 a.m. [at the monastery], you eat, have some Nes[café]. In exchange for your stay, you have to do some cleaning, so you grab a broom or a mop and make the place clean. At 8 a.m. you have to leave. You are not allowed to stay any later, but where are you going to go? You look this way and then that way, and then you slowly move where your eyes settle, because there is nowhere else to go. Eventually you find yourself at a park. Again, you look left, and then you look right. You read the newspaper, smoke some cigarette butts you found on the sidewalk. It’s the most boring thing that one can do. You see what you can do for food. When it rains or it’s cold in winter, you sit on the bus. You pace in the supermarket. You do that and wait for night when you can re-enter the monastery, if you have a spot, or you find a stairwell in a block to spend the night. The next day you have to do the same thing. . . . And so my life is saturated with total boredom. I am bored with life (*plictisit de viață*). I no longer have desires. . . . It’s a situation in which you have nothing to do and nowhere to go. It makes you want a sudden death, or if I could, to die by a lethal injection so that I could be done with this life.”

Marius concurred: “I walk through the city everyday and everyday I’m bored with it. I probably walk fifteen kilometers a day, but what else can I do? I walk here and there and try to forget my problems, but my problems follow me. My entire day is spent walking like this. It’s boring, but it leaves me tired. At night,

I fall down from fatigue and get to sleep like wood.” Shorn of the bourgeois connotations of Walter Benjamin’s *flaneur*, this endless walking appears neither as a distraction nor a mental stimulant, but as an expression of boredom itself.⁸ The redeeming quality of this walking is that it brings about sleep—a deathlike state in which existence is, quite mercifully, it would seem, reduced to wood.

There are, the homeless quickly learn, limitations to where they can walk. While Bucharest is not a city of walls (Caldeira 2001), class distinctions keep the homeless pacing the margins of the city. Bucharest’s struggling working class mobilize a set of distinctions based upon hygiene to keep the homeless outside of their view. Given that only a few steady paychecks separate the one from the other, these moments confirm Pierre Bourdieu’s observation that micro-distinctions are the most adamantly upheld (Bourdieu 1987). The yellowing of the homeless’s whites, dusty hair, or a sour odor often trigger visceral and very public outbursts from working class Romanians.⁹

The stakes of such transgressions crystalized for me when I accompanied Catalin, a thirty-something-year-old man living on the streets, onto a minibus. We were headed to Cernica, a small monastery just outside of Bucharest, where the homeless often go for food or a night’s rest. Filled to capacity, with grown children sitting on the laps of their parents, Catalin and I had to stand in the aisle. Shortly after the door closed and the minibus got rolling, riders began to yell at Catalin. A woman in her fifties asked Catalin with a disgusted tone, “Where did you sleep last night? I can smell you! You smell awful! You’re stinking up the bus! Oh, I want to vomit!” Others in the minibus nodded in agreement as I stood momentarily speechless, both at the woman’s visceral tone, but also because Catalin did not strike me as particularly un-fresh. Although it was summer and one could not help sweating in the city’s heat and humidity, Catalin made an effort to bathe daily. He either climbed into the Dâmbovița River that runs through Bucharest or washed up in public restrooms. The outcry in the minibus continued as another man yelled, “Why did they ever let a homeless man (*un boschetar*) on the bus! You make me want to vomit! Someone open a window!” As the windows opened, riders in the middle of the minibus begged to switch seats with those sitting next to a window. As bodies shifted begrudgingly, Catalin popped open an emergency hatch on the minibus’s roof to improve airflow, prompting the minibus to erupt in cheers. Reddening eyes betrayed Catalin’s stern face as he spent the remainder of the ride looking away from me.

Such scenes regularly played out on buses and in Metros, in public squares and parks, rendering Catalin and other homeless persons into *personae non gratae*

of the city. While Catalin's unemployment can be overlooked easily enough, his severe under-consumption cannot. It emanates from the stains on his clothes and the sweat on his skin. These elements quite publicly convey his inability to consume washing machines and showers, detergents and deodorants. The public's condemnation of this basic failure to consume is unforgiving. Along the open space of the street, the (barely) better off yell at the homeless. They call them filthy (*jegos*), dirty (*murdar*), and lazy (*leneș*), and the homeless are told their presence induces the desire to vomit. Such condemnation over the failure to consume prompts homeless persons to place themselves outside of the public's view and firmly in the margins of the city. Routing themselves away from public condemnation, Bucharest's street homeless have little more to look forward to than their sheltered counterparts. Radu, Marius, Catalin, and others spend their days "standing around," "reading a paper," or, they say with a simple shrug of their shoulders, "doing nothing."

BOREDOM AND THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE

"There is a general boredom that is now in Romania, which is a kind of resignation," the creative director for the Nescafé advertisement mentioned. "Maybe you were twenty when the revolution came and you were full of hope, but now you have this sense that politics has disappointed a lot. Now you are pretty bitter with society because this is it. Communism was better. Now you just have to cope and wait to die." Because it lacked in marketable appeal, the creative director did not structure his commercial around this face of boredom. Nevertheless, the general boredom that he described widely resonates with Bucharest's homeless population. "My life is a disaster. It's humiliating," Radu assessed. "The world looks at you, everyone sees that you don't have money, good clothes, a place to wash up, and it changes a man. You come to understand that there's no God, you don't feel anything—pure and simple. Your life gets spent waiting unendingly for nothing. It's profoundly boring."¹⁰

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a new economy has brought about a new engagement with boredom that is particularly visible in post-communist Romania but that resonates well beyond Romania's borders. This boredom articulates a violent shift in the relationship between the self, the city, and broad socio-economic processes. No longer a sense of disenchantment weathered by the upwardly mobile upon their ascent into the middle class (Lefebvre 2008; Benjamin 2002), boredom is now tied to downward mobility and the experience of exclusion from practices of consumption (Ferguson 1999; Bauman 2004; Sassen 2010).

Boredom is a traumatizing social relationship born out of having been cast aside, and it materializes through the practices and shelter infrastructure that keeps homeless persons sitting at the margins of the city.¹¹ Again, boredom abounds amongst the homeless because they are excluded from the consumer-based activities and spaces that are now central to contemporary city life.¹²

It is little wonder that the trauma of downward mobility in Romania takes meaningful shape around the denial of consumption. As Daphne Berdahl pointed out, consumption was the organizing metaphor for the end of socialist rule in Eastern Europe (2005, 239). Long waits in interminable breadlines for rations of unpredictable quality evidenced for many the perceived failure of socialism to provide for its citizens. Liberalization, by contrast, appealed through its ability to supply coffee, cigarettes, and televisions in abundance. Market reform, Romanians and others across Eastern Europe hoped, was to bring a materially better life marked by the end of austerity. Two decades of neoliberal reforms invited communist workers to imagine themselves as consumers in a planetary marketplace (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 304). As the act and aesthetics of consumption gained importance in shaping one's sense of self and one's relationship to society, Bucharest's homeless found themselves consuming less than they had in the darkest moments of communism. In a city where everything seemed to be for sale, the right to the city, in any substantive sense, became dependent upon discretionary spending.¹³ The bored subject emerged as the result of a new process of social stratification within neoliberalism that is made knowable through patterns of consumption.

At its depths, boredom proves to be a place where the inflicted entertained death; after all, as Radu, Marius, Tomas and others insist, there does not appear to be anything to do in what is left of life. Massive economic change unleashed a traumatized structure of feeling (Williams 2005), one that held those at the margins in limbo between a nostalgia for a brutal past and a resignation toward a hopeless future. This bottomless boredom only begins to make sense when situated within what some have called a "continuum of violence": the overlapping structural, symbolic, and normalized violences that wreak havoc upon the everyday lives of the vulnerable (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). The homeless's boredom speaks to a distinct set of economic and historical relations that drove them to, and keeps them at, the margins of the city. There, the homeless struggle to stimulate senses dulled to the core. Examples abound. "One night, about three years ago," Augustin, a resident of Magazie (image 3), recounted to me, "I tried to drink a whole canister of Nes[café]. What else was there to do? I mean this

shelter is a filthy place.” Augustin spoke while making a broad gesture with his outstretched arm that seemed to reference the flickering halogen lights above, the mildew-and-graffiti-stained walls, and the cockroaches scurrying across them. “I just wanted to feel something! So I drank three large mugs really quickly—as fast as I could, one right after the other. I then kept drinking Nes for four more hours. By then my heart was pounding really hard. My entire body was shaking with powerful tremors (*șoc puternic*.)” Augustin shook himself to illustrate. “My wife took me to the hospital, and I got pills to help me calm down. The doctor said I might have had a mild heart attack. I’m supposed to feel lucky to be alive.”



Image 3: “Drinking Nescafé in his room at Magazie.” Photograph by the author

To be sure, the trauma of homelessness leaves its mark upon the body: underfed, exhausted, and over-exposed to the elements, Romania’s homeless suffer from malnutrition, tuberculosis, and gangrene, among other ailments (see Stillo 2011). Yet poverty also devastates inner worlds. Social exclusion, unmet desires, and a lost sense of belonging corrode all that once animated the homeless’s sense of personhood. This affective suffering is not inflicted by spectacular trauma but wrought through the mundane (yet persistent) grind of life without work, without home, and without the ability to participate in a social world that increasingly unfolds through practices of consumption. Rather than partaking in a European standard of living comprised of Ikea furniture, smartphones, and eve-

nings spent drinking at terrace bars, as middle-class Romanians aspire to do, Romania's homeless spend their days sitting empty-handed (*stau degeaba*) at the margins of the city. There, without socially meaningful ways of passing the time, the homeless come to fully realize what it means to lose one's foothold in a competitive global economy. Amidst the quiet moments of the day that never seem to pass, a feeling emerges. *Mă simt plictisit*. I feel bored. Punctuating the darkness is the occasional mug of Nescafé—a modest spark that Bucharest's homeless have come to rely almost entirely upon in their uphill battle against boredom. It is pitched as the antidote but should be seen as part of the problem.

ABSTRACT

The homeless, in post-Communist Bucharest, Romania, are bored. They describe themselves as bored all of the time. Drawing upon nearly three years of ethnographic fieldwork that moves between Bucharest's homeless shelters and squatter camps, day centers and public parks, this article approaches the homeless's boredom as an everyday affect structured by the politics of consumption in post-communist Bucharest. At the center of this study sits not simply the inability to consume but also the feeling of being cast aside, of being downwardly mobile in a neoliberal era of supposed ascent. In an increasingly consumer-driven society, boredom, I argue, is an affective state that registers within the modality of time the newly homeless's expulsion to the margins of the city. In this sense, boredom is a persistent form of social suffering made possible by a crisis-generated shift in the global economy, one that has forced tens of millions of people the world over to come to terms with diminished economic capacities. [boredom; urban homelessness; downward mobility; everyday affect; Romania]

NOTES

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1. Bucharest's homeless, importantly, do not identify as depressed (*deprimat*) but as bored (*plictisit*). Rather than pathologize their boredom as depression, homeless persons at-

- tributed their existential crisis (as does this study) to a series of social and structural conditions. (Unless noted otherwise, all translations are by the author.)
2. Voicu's book received the 2008 Award for debut fiction and was heralded on Romanian literary blogs as an "x-ray of the psycho-social form" (*radiografie psihosocială*) of the breadline in Ceausescu's Romania (Miheț 2009).
 3. The Bucharest Mall is a case in point. A Turkish development firm reopened, in 1999, a communist-era pantry (*Circ al foamei*) as the first mall in Romania to "meet international standards for retail and leisure" (Bucharesti Anchor Group 2005).
 4. Roughly ten years after the fall of communism, global media accounts depicted Berlin, Moscow, and Krakow as the centers of robust economies in line with Western Europe, evidencing the success of the transition (*Economist* 1999; Riding 1999; Stephen 2007).
 5. For a broader discussion of the politics of Romania's communist-era prisons and labor camps, see O'Neill (2012).
 6. Emil separated from his wife soon after becoming homeless. She lives with one of Emil's adult children. Emil visits the household about twice a week to wash up and have a hot meal. Such visits to housed relatives and friends are common weekly occurrences amongst Romania's homeless.
 7. Shelter policy permitted each beneficiary to stay indefinitely until the shelter abruptly closed on March 15, 2011. The complex later reopened as a convalescence home.
 8. The *flâneur* is a typically male and well-educated figure poised to develop his own experience of the city through walking (Frisby 2001, 31; Benjamin 2002). To be sure, class distinctions exist among Bucharest's homeless, and *flâneurie* evidenced them. Those who worked as day laborers abroad often walked through certain neighborhoods in Bucharest that reminded them of their travels, offering this segment an escape into a distant mental world that was not available to all on the streets.
 9. Better-off Romanians, by contrast, are not vocal. When confronting the homeless, the well-to-do move around the homeless with dramatically wrinkled faces or rolled eyes. These exaggerated gestures are performed for other middle-class Romanians who wink or chuckle as they pass.
 10. Despite boredom's centrality to the experience of homelessness, boredom has received only passing analytical attention. See Orwell (1933), Desjarlais (1997), and Bauman (2005).
 11. Rodgers and O'Neill (2012) develop the term "infrastructural violence" to theorize the regular harm that comes about through the planning and development of collectively shared infrastructure, such as water pipes, roads, and cemeteries. This also applies to the unbearable boredom felt by Bucharest's homeless once placed in state shelters developed outside of the city limits.
 12. This center-periphery interpretation of boredom is inspired in part by Saikat Majumdar (2013), who conceives of boredom in colonial-era literature as a sense of lack as compared with life in the imperial center.
 13. The right to the city, in the tradition of Henri Lefebvre, is "the right to live in a society in which all persons are similarly free to fulfill their own desires and in which all are supported in doing so" (Marcuse 2010, 88). The right to the city in this ethical sense is the very solution to the boredom and marginalization felt by Bucharest's homeless.

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