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Elina Tochilnikova: *Towards a General Theory of Boredom*. Routledge, 2022, pp. 138. ISBN: 9780367484552

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Tochilnikova's book is a significant (but mostly neglected) contribution to boredom studies that constitutes a sociological attempt to analyze boredom and proposes a general theory of boredom based on Emile Durkheim's (2005) concept of anomie. The main thesis that the author is striving to advocate is that social anomie, the state of normlessness, "an imbalance between social regulation and integration" (p. 2), leads to boredom and, as far as I understand, that anomie is the ultimate and universal causal explanation of boredom in modernity onwards. The book consists of a series of theoretical and interdisciplinary essays attempting to support and expound on the main thesis. The author provides evidence for her thesis from case studies of Anglo and Russian society. According to Tochilnikova, boredom is a culturally-dependent state; thus, the experience and feeling of boredom is significantly different in various societies. She claims that

Unlike in the Anglo example where sufferers feel bored from the emptiness of not knowing themselves and the resulting paralysis of executive functions, Russian tedium tends to result from a mismatch between the sufferer's unshakeable identity and her disapproving environment (p. 20).

In Tochilnikova's view, Anglo boredom stems from "an identity crisis resulting from surplus options" (p. 106)—too many choices—while Russian boredom is "an extension of 'I have a solid identity that society ignores or disregards'" (p. 106). Throughout the book, Tochilnikova deals mainly with existential or at least chronic kinds of boredom, yet observes simultaneously that frequently, "if simple boredom is prolonged enough, experienced on a daily basis, and extended to enough spheres of life, it can progress to complex existential boredom" (p. 11). An example of such a mechanism can be solitary confinement or busy work (described by Klapp, 1986).

The book is nicely structured, beginning with introductory remarks about the general theory of anomie-related boredom, through chapters about the definition of boredom (Chapter 1), the historical roots of boredom (Chapter 2), boredom in the arts (Chapter 3), politics (Chapter 4), and liquid society (Chapter 5) being subsequent illustrations of the main thesis. In chapter 2, Tochilnikova describes two major viewpoints in the discussion on the historicity of boredom: essentialism and constructivism. Essentialists view boredom "as inherent to humanity and unhistorical, [and believe] that all people throughout time and across space have experienced boredom" (p. 38), whereas constructivists believe boredom to be a strictly modern phenomenon. The author also provides a deep linguistic analysis of the differences between Russian and Anglosaxon understandings of boredom. Chapter 3 describes boredom as an artistic strategy and an attempt to resolve social anomie, and analyses the cases of Warhol's 'aesthetic of indifference' and John Case's minimalism and contrasts them with Russian/Soviet examples. In Chapter 4, Tochilnikova discusses boredom associated with politics, claiming that both Russians endorsing authoritarian Putin's regime and Americans voting for Trump do so as an attempt to fight anomie and ultimately to remedy their boredom, as such politicians are charismatic and 'fun to watch'. In the subsequent sections, Tochilnikova expounds on her anomie theory of boredom by providing examples of terrorism and war, where the motivational power of boredom is well-documented. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of anomie and boredom from the perspective of Orin Klapp's theory of boredom in the information society. Excess, overload, and unorganized time create "an anomic crisis of meaning leading to boredom" (p. 92). Constant indeterminacy and fluidity produce a quintessentially anomic state of society and this result in boredom which, in turn, further fuels anomie as "it fails to offer structural direction", and because of it "becomes a

condition for maintaining anomie” (p. 95)—it can be called a vicious cycle of boredom and anomie.

The book has several major strengths. It is nicely structured and interdisciplinary. As the Tochilnikova described herself: “I arrived at the study of boredom as a sociologist, a practicing psychotherapist, an avid reader of Western literature and philosophy, as a classically-trained portrait painter with an interest in art history, and as a former immigrant from the Soviet Union” (p. 104). Such a rich background involving diverse sources of inspiration results in an interesting and multi-dimensional analysis of boredom. Some parts of the book constitute a vital contribution to boredom studies, especially the introduction of the concept of anomie in the context of boredom and the analysis of political boredom (which is for me the best and most revealing part of the book), whereas others are useful but purely reconstructive illustrations of the main thesis (e.g., the section on the connection between war and boredom). The most vital contribution is the introduction of a non-Western, i.e., Russian, perspective on boredom, yet because of the relative scarcity of sources used, it is not thoroughly illuminating. All in all, the book has many good points, such as its discussion of the significance of different temporal rhythms for experiencing boredom. It also presents novel concepts, such as the idea and the term ‘conspicuous boredom’ (per analogiam to Thorstein Veblen’s famous ‘conspicuous leisure’ described in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*), which she defines as “maintaining the appearance of boredom in an attempt to enhance one’s prestige” (p. 62).

However, the book also has a few severe weaknesses. The chief one concerns the central thesis of the book. I strongly agree with Eduardo Bericat (2022) that the statements about the connection between boredom and anomie “scattered throughout the text” are excessively “broad” and “generic”, “lacking the necessary empirical support”, which “may be proper for an essay book, but not for a sociological investigation” (p. 3). If Tochilnikova wanted to propose ‘a general theory of boredom’, as she claimed in the title, and if it would be a good idea to aim for such a theory (of which I am not sure), the argumentation should be much more rigorous and empirical evidence more fully developed. The author based her work mainly on the boredom literature (such as Klapp’s, Goodstein’s, and Toohey’s books) and literary fiction (predominantly Russian) and, as she confessed blatantly in the conclusion, she “did not think that designing my own in-depth interview, survey, or ethnography would offer me additional findings or assist in better answering my queries” (p. 105). After all, Tochilnikova has never conducted empirical research on boredom, nor has she done a genuine literary or theoretical investigation. In my opinion, the book should instead be published as three separate journal articles—the first on the anomie theory of boredom as a theoretical proposition for further discussion, the second on the boredom of politics and the role of boredom and anomie in terrorism, and the third about the differences between Anglo-Saxon and Russian concepts of boredom. These are, from my perspective, the most original parts of the book—the rest is a compilation of more or less well-known ideas about boredom and various aspects of modern and late modern social life.

Another weak spot is the classification of boredom created by mixing Durkheim’s suicide types (altruistic, egoistic, anomic, fatalistic) and Goetz et al.’s (2014) categorization of boredom. I fully agree with Bericat (2022) that this proposal is not convincing. I do not understand why Tochilnikova did not propose just types of boredom based solely on Durkheim’s theory. I feel

that the typology of Goetz et al. (2014) is entirely redundant here, not adding anything to the attempted conceptualization. Their types have, I believe, no explanatory power in the presented context, especially given that it is not at all clear what situations exemplify each type. The only clear example given was terrorists in ISIS who joined the organization out of anomic boredom, the boredom caused by unemployment, economic crisis, political uncertainty, and cultural disorganization. For altruistic boredom, Tochilnikova gave the example of the “Greek mythological case of Sisyphus, who spent his life aimlessly rolling a boulder up a hill” (p. 29), which reveals a profound misunderstanding both of the myth and the nature of boredom. Moreover, Tochilnikova emphasized that most real-life instances of these types of boredom will be mixed types. Each instance will combine various kinds of boredom (from indifferent to reactant). Thus, it is unclear what the concrete, real-life differences are between adjacent types (such as searching and reactant boredom), and, as a result, the whole typology is a bit vague and even redundant (it is never used throughout the book).

The next problem I see in the book is a poor conceptualization of boredom. Tochilnikova devoted the whole chapter to definitions of boredom, but she did not use much of the relevant literature here (such as Barbalet, 1999; Darden and Marks, 1999, etc.), and also did not provide a clear description of existing conceptualizations or propose her own. Moreover, in many places, she seems to understand boredom as a close synonym for apathy, even though she elsewhere claimed that boredom has no actual synonyms because all of them cover only one aspect/dimension of boredom (such as dullness, listlessness, doldrums, etc.) and connects it with lack of engagement and disconnection with oneself. She wrote, for instance, that boredom “refers to an emotion of apathy [apathy is not an emotion] and low arousal” (p. 27). At other times, she seems rather to treat apathy as a consequence of boredom, but it is unclear.

I also have some reservations concerning Tochilnikova’s linguistic analysis of differences between Anglo-Saxon and Russian boredom. I am in full agreement that there are linguistic differences in understanding of boredom that represent more general historical and cultural differences regarding the concept and the experience (I showed the differences in the etymology of expressions for boredom between Romance and Slavic languages in my book [Finkielsztein, 2021, pp. 38–42]). Yet, I find Tochilnikova’s analysis simplistic and one-sided. She boldly claimed that

Unlike English, which offers one word for ‘boredom’, Russian has at least four commonly used equivalents [skuka, tomleniye, khandra, and toska] which may speak to the particularly complex emotional experience of Russian society, cultural bias towards emotional introspection and communication, and to the precision of its language (p. 45).

Reading this passage, even as a non-native speaker of English, I experienced mixed feelings. First of all, it creates a simplistic vision that the Russian language and Russian sensibilities (and, along with this, presumably, culture) are rich, spiritual, and profound, while the English language and Anglo-Saxon culture are superficial and shallow. Russian people are such sophisticated human beings that they have four words to express their deepest spiritual anguish, but English people allegedly have only one, implicitly because they are not so emotionally and spiritually sophisticated. And even if such a picture were, to some extent, correct, Tochilnikova did not provide convincing argumentation for that. Secondly, this is an egregious falsehood that English

has only one expression for boredom and lacks Russian richness in expressing various existential dimensions of the experience. We have at least two other expressions—tedium and ennui (and even third, spleen, which is similar to the Russian khandra)—something that Tochilnikova did not mention in her linguistic analysis. Thirdly, the above analysis is based mainly on Russian literature (Tolstoy, Pushkin, Gogol, etc.). Tochilnikova never analyzed comparatively rich English literary sources and did not employ relevant literature on the subject (e.g., Pease, 2012; Spacks, 1995). Thus, there is an enormous imbalance in sources between Anglo and Russian cases.

Critical comments aside, I believe that this is an interesting book for readers new to the subject. It summarizes several significant issues in boredom studies, such as the historicity of boredom, the relationship of boredom and modernity, and the functioning of the feeling within a fluid society context. It introduces some vital points for the sociology of boredom and offers an interesting anomie theory of boredom, which should be discussed and developed. It is well-written and nicely structured; thus, it is, for the most part, enjoyable to read. Boredom experts can have more reservations about the substantive content of the book, but still, the book constitutes an opportunity for engagement with an interesting perspective on boredom.

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