

BOOK REVIEW

HIDDEN COMMUNITIES FERENTARI*

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The book *Hidden Communities Ferentari*, published by Express (Bucharest, 2011) in Romanian and English, is an innovative and present-time approach of the sensitive aspects of the marginalised urban communities, pauper and lacking resources – the **slums**. The book describes, within a multidisciplinary framework, several essential dimensions of the social and economic life in an urban area living at the societal periphery of the Romanian Capital, using the methodologies specific to the field research. Such a diagnosis is close to the analytical style in which the Anglo-Saxon literature describes the “classical” slums.

The book analyses the relationship between the social exclusion and space, within the context of the slum located in Bucharest, Ferentari district, area of the Livezilor Lane. As the coordinator motivates this study, “the respective area has many of the characteristics found in specialized literature as defining ghettos, because, in the public conscience, this territory is a ghetto” (p. 18). The authors show from the very beginning that “But the main issue we currently have in Romania is not the issue of solutions, but the fact that there is a lack of knowledge and public recognition of these areas. Neither the public authorities, nor the researchers show any special interest in this type of community, which is very difficult to enter. Authoritative data on these areas are scarce, since many of the residents have no identification papers and no ownership or rental documents for the houses they live in.” (p. 18).

The coordinator of the book – Florin Botonogu, expert of the foundation Policy Center for Roma and Minorities (PCRM), participated in the first initiatives, beginning with 2010, to implement the project targeting the children from this community, having

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thus the opportunity to observe and work with the people living in the slum. Consequently, the book argues the complex approach needed by such goal and integrates the efforts of specialists in the different dimensions of the analysis: urbanism and dwelling (architect Cătălin Berescu), good governance (Florina Presada), justice administration and prevention of the illicit drug consumption (Victor Nicolăescu, Adrian Marcel Iancu, Gabriel Oancea, Andreea Faur, Diana Șerban, Daniela Nicolăescu), educational policies (Florin Botonogu), occupation (Simona Maria Stănescu), criminality (Valeriu Nicolae). Starting from this organisation of the area of knowledge one can notice that the longitudinal discourse correlated with the different sequences leads to an integrating approach of the identified problems next to various solutions which have priority for decreasing the risks of social exclusion in Ferentari-type the urban slum. The work represents a concrete analysis which has been previous revealed theoretically and sectorial by diverse authors (Precupețu I., 2001; Cace, S. & Vladescu, C., 2004; Neamțu G., 2009).

The first chapter highlights the importance of the space in the debate on poverty and social exclusion within the economic, politic, social or cultural globalization. It also shows the fast changes which took place in the social policy of Romania, with obvious consequences for the local community development on the background of the economic crisis. The authors draw attention that the pauper population will be confronted with serious problems of social inclusion by localisation in these “urban pocket of poverty”. Another observation refers to the high poverty rates of the Roma population, which proves a close relation of the Romanian slum with the ethnic affiliation.

The urbanistic and architectural description, completed with the history and situation of dwelling in the slum from Livezilor Lane are the subjects of Chapter 2. Within this context, additional data are given regarding other disfavoured living areas from Romania and from other (Roma) slums across Europe. The conclusion of the chapter shows the difficulty of intervention and particularly the limits of the sectoral intervention: “Any immediate program which, for example, only proposes improving the thermal insulation or waterproofing restoration but does not take into consideration an intervention for the entire area and is not supported by a coherent social and urban integration policy cannot produce lasting improvements. Such intervention would only prolong a visible agony of the unsafe and insecure buildings.” (p. 54).

The importance of the good governance for the establishment and administration of the slum is analysed in Chapter 3. It shows the social organisation, the community and its relation with the politic and social formal bodies, the social actors from the community and the type of relations of the public administration from District 5 with the citizens. The specificity of the chapter is given by the lack of official analyses, as the author stated: “The public administration of District 5 has not investigated

Ferentari area and does not have an official situation which can show the status of the neighborhood. Therefore, our only source of information was the community.” (p. 58). From this perspective, the actual situation from the slum is conclusive: “The local public authorities continue with a standard approach without responding to certain specific needs identified within the community, with sporadic, superficial interventions, inefficient on average and long term. The community perceives the authorities negatively, as discriminatory, and showing a total lack of interest.” (pp. 83).

The next two chapters approached two correlated problems, the administration of justice and the traffic and consumption of drugs in Ferentari district. An important aspect is that the penalties ruled on the people from the poor areas are disproportionately higher in relation with the penal crimes ascertained by the police. The authors show that “we can state that the social reaction to the category of individuals coming from the poor areas of Ferentari is nourished, just as in the case of American ghettos, by repressive conceptions, which are completely disproportionate to the actual social danger. Public opinion has often pronounced in favor of harsh punishments, of isolation of these individuals, but this attitude probably represents only the reflex of the false beliefs that these individuals can no longer be socially recovered in any way and there are no chances of reintegration.” (p. 130). Otherwise, the formulated for justice administration within the community (Abraham P., Nicolăescu V., Iașnic B., 2002) are restate, by the fact that “By its social and criminal complexity, we estimate that the Ferentari area— as an area of high community risk—deserves special attention and needs special programs and interventions, customized both for the purpose of reducing criminality and increasing citizens’ safety, as well as at the level of attitudes and mentalities—within that community, as well as outside it.” (p. 163). The chapter gives statistics regarding the traffic and illicit drug consumption and shows case studies worth of particular attention and requiring special programs and interventions as shown in the literature (Iancu, M.A.; Nicolăescu, V., 2010; Abraham P, Nicolăescu D., 2006).

Chapter 4 approaches the school education in the slum. The improvement of school attendance and of the quality of the educational services should become a priority; it is important, in the case of the slums “... is that of knowing how to “sell” education, against the background of poverty and ghetto culture.” (p. 180). The chapter dealing with employment gives a sketch of the socio-economic conditions from the community, showing that living in the slum influences the process of insertion of the labour market. The chapter fills in the diagnosis of the slum and shows that “The interconnected social problems of the ghetto residents (unhealthy living conditions, poor access to health, and low levels of education) reduce their chances to find jobs and negatively influence maintaining jobs that are often found with great difficulty.” (p. 200).

The second part of the book shows briefly other aspects from the life of this slum such as drugs, the prostitution, the attitude of the teachers or situation of the aids received from the state. The final part of the book focuses not necessarily on the solutions, as much as on the directions of analysis and intervention required in order to produce a coherent policy of development of these disfavoured communities within the context of promoting the social inclusion of the slum's inhabitants.

The book gives a glimpse of the communities at risk of social exclusion, offers an applied framework for the operationalization of the slum concept and establishes opportunities for debates by other specialists in the fields of social sciences. Thus, even though there is no understanding agreed both by the specialists and by the authorities, there are several common characteristics which distinguish it from the other types of communities, leading us to the recommendation of a comparative analysis of the problems and of the identified solutions.

In this light, the capture of the main socio-economic features of the slum from Ferentari District invites the public at large and the specialists to look for the differences existing between it and other dwelling areas of this type.

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