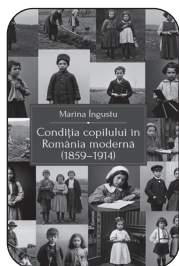


## CHILDHOOD AND THE POLITICS OF MODERN ROMANIA

Marina Îngustu, *Condiția copilului în România modernă (1859-1914): construcția modernă a copilăriei ca instrument al proiectului național*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega, 2025



**Abstract:** In the edited version of her doctorate thesis, Marina Îngustu investigates how the modern Romanian state has reshaped and reestablished the concept of childhood. Historical and sociological accounts, national projects and laws, legitimate or illegitimate terms, ethnicity and marginality, medical reports and hygiene, educational systems and pedagogies, affectivity and parental archetypes are among the main points explored in order to give a detailed and concentrated view over the condition of children in the years between 1859 and 1914, also to show that the child is the main figure around which the ideology of the modern state has acted. The demonstration of the drifting conceptions of childhood is done through statistics, data, laws and literary texts which, in some cases, were the only written documents at the border between premodernity and modernity.

**Keywords:** Marina Îngustu; Childhood Studies; Romanian Studies; Traditional Imaginary; Romanian Childhood Imaginary; Parental Archetypes.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2026.50.28

Starting with the second half of the last century, the history of childhood and the childhood as a concept, are directly linked to the work of Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*. According to him, childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages<sup>1</sup> as a cultural concept. Even though his work is usually regarded as a pillar text in different areas of childhood studies, such as history, education, arts, literature, still, the counter-arguments were not late to appear.

In her work, *Condiția copilului în România modernă (1859-1914): construcția modernă a copilăriei ca instrument al proiectului național* (“The Condition of the Child in Modern Romania (1859-1914): the Modern Construction of Childhood as a Device of the National Project”), Marina Îngustu adopts such a position towards Ariès’s thesis. Her text focuses on the childhood, in its entirety of implications: social, morals, educational, political, medical etc., to show how the utilitarian model changed drastically the child and the idea of childhood. The starting point of Îngustu’s text is the argument of the impossibility of discovering the genesis of childhood, by reference to an artistical change – such as the movement from the medieval iconography in which the child Jesus was depicted as affected by a premature aging, to modern pictures, where the children were idyllically painted – and its limitation to a century, present in Ariès’s text<sup>2</sup>. Still, she agrees with Ariès’s assertions, when it comes to the debates in earlier centuries which

brought closer the idea of childhood to what it is in the present.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Îngustu's work investigates a number of debates around the child, starting from the foundation of modern Romanian state, in 1859 to the debut of First World War, in order to trace the modifications of the child and childhood before and during this period of time. But Ariès's work seems to give a unified vision over childhood in western Europe. Îngustu's work distances from this position, of a possible unified vision over childhood in more than one state, as she considers that each space is consistently different from another, and the stress is the lack of synchronisation on modern Romania in comparison to other western countries. In this way, the author proposes a text which acknowledges the modifications of childhood and the status of the child starting from the western world, but its analyses focuses on the Romanian space and the discrepancies in terms of cultural, technological, philosophical, medical, religious realms.

Along with the theme of child and childhood, the text presents a detailed intercourse in some domains or aspects of the modern Romania, through which the elites of the state have transformed the idea of child, from the premodern view of the child as the bearer of its parents' sins<sup>4</sup> to the main figure around which some of the main prospects of the state were established. The principal points are historical and sociological accounts, national projects and laws, legitimate or illegitimate terms, ethnicity and marginality, medical reports and hygiene, educational systems and pedagogies, affectivity and parental archetypes. Also, the author highlights how these modifications were reflected in literature,

by inserting fragments or with references to the texts of Panait Istrati, Duiliu Zamfirescu, Sofia Nădejde and others.

Structurally, the text consists of six chapters, and the arguments proceed with clarity from one part to the next one. In short, Îngustu builds her arguments and analyses from a period, the first half of the nineteenth century, which was symptomatic for the following seventy years, and continues, through the lenses of a multidisciplinary perspective, to undo the compounding layers of the modern Romanian politics.

The first part, *Repere ale copilăriei premoderne* ("Highlights of premodern childhood") is concerned with the situation of the Romanian states, before the beginning of its modern era. Îngustu describes the traditional imaginary by referring, firstly, to violence and death, which are highly present in society. Therefore, the universe of childhood was shaped by these coordinates. For instance, some of the games and songs of children had references to death.<sup>5</sup> Also, there were laws regarding criminality, and the children were not absolved from penal responsibility. The author showed that since the beginning of the nineteenth century, children appeared in written laws. For Îngustu, it signalled the alteration of childhood. Now, it represents a vulnerable period in one's life. The traditional imaginary of childhood was rather full of spiritual or occult meanings, and the transition to the modern one is represented by the shifting perspective over the child, from the caregiver of its old parents to one that sees them as individuals which lack clear judgement.<sup>6</sup>

But, in terms of medical realm, Îngustu noted an opposition to modernisation. The

archaic Romanian culture is rich in spiritual symbolism and rituals.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the new medical ideas brought by foreign physicians, which have considered aggressive some rituals performed after the birth of a child, have not been considered yet to be true. The author argues that the lack of understanding of scientific input and the strong belief in folklore, made the child the main victim. That was the consequence of a poorly educated population. In this way, until the second half of the nineteenth century, the people's refusal to accept the medical advances, "have isolated the traditional family in its own world, dominated by rituals and spiritual explanations."<sup>8</sup> Another problematic point was the "systemic marginality"<sup>9</sup>. The term refers to communities in which there is a "socially constructed system of inequitable relations within a hegemonic order"<sup>10</sup>, based on markers such as class, ethnicity, age, gender. In the pre-modern times, the traditional legislation used to see the child through its descentance, in social and moral terms.<sup>11</sup> That has led to marginalisation or certain minorities or illegitimate children. This type of status was definitory for Romanian society until the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, Îngustu has proved that the condition of children in the premodern period prepared the way for the shift in the modern period, in some respects, but the traditional archaic beliefs were still prevailing.

The second chapter, *Statul roman modern și rolul copiilor în cadrul proiectului național* ("The Modern Romanian State and the Role of Children in the National Project"), traces the major changes of the modern state. The focus stays upon the lack of synchronisation between the ideals of elites, and the impossibility of

socio-economic realities to keep up the pace with the new adopted laws. After a radiography of the statistics of the modern state, Îngustu observes the tendency of the national project to place the child closer to its core. The state acknowledged the need to reorganize, to reform and most importantly, to educate. So, the child becomes central in the future of the national project. The author discusses, in this sense, the idealisation of the army. The masculine imaginary was reinvested with military profession, and the little boys were heavily influenced by it.<sup>12</sup> The imaginary of childhood thus changed: they were the future defenders of the country<sup>13</sup>, so the state had to ensure this possibility. Îngustu notes that until the end of the nineteenth century, there were already two major military schools. Therefore, the fascination for the military universe, created especially for children, was instrumentalised through the national project, with the scope of having a centred and stabile security. It was also due to the new ideas coming from the West, such as the case of the American model of imprisonment, called Auburn, which demoted the desire of the state to re-educate, not just to punish.

Noteworthy, Îngustu discusses this aspect, along others – legitimacy or illegitimacy of children and still marginalised ethnic and religious groups – with reference to Max Weber's definition of modernity. According to Weber, the modern state, in short, is based upon three principals, that legitimate every rule:<sup>14</sup> the "traditional" one, the "charismatic" rule and the "rule by virtue of 'legality', by virtue of belief in the validity of legal Statute and the appropriate [...] juridical 'competence' founded on rationally devised rules"<sup>15</sup>.

Îngustu also stresses the centralised power in the modern state, also taken from Weber, and applies it to the situation of modern Romania.

In the third chapter, *Corp național și corpuri de copii. Condiția copilului în lumea medicală a vechiului regat* (“National Body and Children’s Bodies. The Condition of the Child in the Medical World of the Old Kingdom”), the author focuses on medical aspects, through various points, starting from institutionalised medical education to specialised literature. She asserts, once again, that the national project viewed the child as the future of the state, so the causality of the education and caring for them was of big interest, especially in the cases of rich families. The shift from the precarious hygiene conditions in the premodern state to the modern one is the acknowledgement of the need for deeper medical attention to children. The infant mortality was high, and the hope for life of new-born children was low. By inserting statistics, the author points to the alarming situation which drew the attention of political elites towards a deeper change. Building on the arguments from the previous chapter, Îngustu observed how institutional medical education and hospitals made their appearance into the modern Romanian state. In this period, the child’s body is the miniature version of the national body.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the author analyses the entrance of the *igienism* (it denoted the preoccupation for hygiene in the context of modern Romania): the adoption of public health policies, which were part of the apparition of medical and educational institutes, with the scope of reducing the infantile mortality.

In addition to this, Îngustu analyses the problem of racial degeneration. At that

time, infant mortality was considered a threat to demographical development and to the purity of the race. The new laws adopted and the progress in terms of institutional development, were meant not only to preserve the race, but also to increase the natality and the condition of birth, early childhood and maternity.<sup>17</sup> The mother and the child were the new essential figures in the medical literature.<sup>18</sup> Îngustu dedicates a section to the changes affecting children’s and mothers’ private lives. Techniques of caring and clothes are analysed, with the scope of highlighting the process of modernisation, which found its way into the basics of people’s lives. Even if the system brought modifications, the author argues that some ideals were still far from socio-economic reality, such is the case with Dimitrie Cantemir’s recommendations for clothes, during pregnancy and new-born children. Still, Îngustu considers the slow acceptance of the new ideas – especially the ones that came from the external territorial space or from foreign individuals, that came into the state, which is the case of Iacob Felix, a physician highly quoted by the author – as markers of the new condition of children and mothers in this context, in the modern Romania. Now, the child is seen more vulnerable than before and new scientific ideas, once completely denied or ignored, are slowly put into practice.

The next chapter, *Sistemul de educație din România modernă* (“Educational system in modern Romania”), analyses not only the ideological instrumentalization of the educational system, also it looks upon administrative and legislative aspects, as well as to foreign influences, that deeply shaped the objectives and pedagogies of the education in modern Romania. Firstly,

the author argues that primary education was the best suited for ideological instruction, by proving that the system of education was the principal operational instrument of the state. With references to the western educational systems, Îngustu notes major upgrades, which is for, instance, the introduction of exams and the *baccalaurate* – taken from the French.<sup>19</sup> The secularisation of education is another point discussed in this chapter. Îngustu notes that the secularisation of education was natural for a modern state, which reflects the tendency to deny some moral values to satisfy the national ideal. Still, Îngustu highlights a different situation in modern Romania, in comparison to France, for example. Even though the state was going through a major phase of modernisation, once again, the modern ideals could not meet the reality. The religious and traditional imaginary and beliefs were still prevailing, and the schools were dependant on the help of the church and priests. Îngustu signals the deficiency of teachers in this period, and the only solution were the priests.<sup>20</sup> Also, the faith in religious or spiritual forces was higher than the trust in the national forces, so the author concludes that the school could simply not keep up with its own educational ideals. Despite the decalage between the modern Romania and western countries, the tendency to reevaluate the condition of marginalised children, such as orphans or mentally ill kids, could happen. In this sense, Îngustu pays attention to reflections of this phenomenon in literature, by exemplifying Iulia Haşdeu's text: *Domnişoara Ursuza* (1881). Noteworthy is also the economical role of children in modern Romania. Îngustu showed that through the development of the educational

system, the children could hope for better opportunities, such as professional schools, which have given them the possibility to climb higher in the hierarchy of status. The author explains the different layers of rang hierarchy, in which the elites were, obviously, privileged. Îngustu concludes that, despite the opportunities, the unnatural social-economic advances, and still dominated by traditional beliefs, could not satisfy many points of the national project.

The fifth chapter, *Un nou tip educație: 'grădinile de copii' și pedagogia jocului* ("A New Type of Education: 'Kindergartens' and the Pedagogy of Game"), investigates philosophical and pedagogical approaches in education and describes the imaginary of Romanian childhood through toys and games. Îngustu explains that the stereotypical image of children in premodernity was rather one that lacked care and the child was superficially or completely not educated. Modernity is characterized by re-evaluation of the first years of childhood, via modern education: introduction of kindergarten.<sup>21</sup> At first, Îngustu describes a few major pedagogues and asserts that F. W. Fröbel's concepts of education – nature as the main educator – stayed at the base of many pedagogical strategies, applied in kindergartens and primary schools, alongside J. P. Florantin's. According to the last one, the game was the main pedagogical instrument.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the role of kindergartens, Îngustu argues that these types of institutions aimed to educate very young children, in conformity to the nationalist project. Particularly, the political elites tried, through the democratisation of kindergartens and schools, in the beginning of the twentieth century, to instill values in accordance to the process

of nationalisation. Still, Îngustu concludes that in rural territories, this ideal of education was still hard to reach, due to lack of space or masters. Though, Îngustu sees in the democratisation of kindergartens not just a strategy of the political elites, but a means of changing the dynamics of traditional families; and through the pedagogy of the game, appeared a few changes of mentality. In the case of bourgeoisie, the family and the domestic space have changed. The childhood is lived in a protective ambiance, and the toys or games supplemented the universe of childhood.<sup>23</sup> Îngustu compares games and toys from German and British spaces to the Romanian one, in order to note, once again, the lack of synchronisation with modernist ideals from the West.

The last chapter is concerned with childhood as a cultural concept and its reflections in literature. The modern concept of childhood embodied the individuality of the child, the ludic element, the family which protected the child and parental affectivity. The result of Îngustu's analyses indicates limited resources for documenting the Romanian family life, unlike other European spaces. Still, the author notes the rigidity of the father in the relation of father-son, and the daughter remained still a marginal figure. The figure of the grandfather is associated with affectivity and indulgence, as it appears in Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea's *Bunicul*, or Zamfirescu's *Tănase Scatiu* and others. Besides, in addition to archetypes of the father and the grandfather, Îngustu analyses maternal archetypes, in the following texts of Panait Istrati: *Codin* and *Neranțula*. The highlight is on the controversial mothers, from "heroines to devoted mothers"<sup>24</sup> who

use their capacities of seduction or "the archetype of the *femme fatale*, an enigmatic and misunderstood woman, with a strong will and a life lived to the fullest, in a story frame."<sup>25</sup> The death of a child, in times when infant mortality was still high, was perceived as something natural, and the mourning provoked by it could be met only through a religious perspective. In this sense, Îngustu associates the death of a child with a biblical correspondent: Virgin Mary saw the death of her Son.<sup>26</sup> In literature, she signalled reflections of this theme in Sofia Nădejde's novel, *Patimi*, or in Radu Rossetti's memoirs. Thus, Îngustu concludes that at the end of the nineteenth century, the responses to mourning came from religious and spiritual areas, rather than the advantages offered by the modern psychology, such as Sigmund Freud's responses to grief: the dichotomy mourning-melancholy.<sup>27</sup> Still, Îngustu observes that the birth of another baby, immediately after the death of the first one, was a consolation at the end of the nineteenth century.

In short, Îngustu analyses the fusion between the imaginary of modern Romania and the traditional and religious imaginaries of the premodern state. In this process, the child became the central figure in the national project of political elites; the development of education and medical institutions had the scope to assure a prosperous future for the country, and the nationalist ideologies shaped the ideals of the state. But the delay between the plans and the socio-economic realities have led to non-linear and unorganic developments, in which the child was merely a victim, and the cultural concept of childhood was continuously reshaped.

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## NOTES

1. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*, translated from French by Robert Baldick, Great Britain, Johnatan Cape Ltd, 1962, p. 33.
2. Marina Îngustu, *Condiția copilului în România modernă (1859-1914): construcția modernă a copilăriei ca instrument al proiectului național*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega, 2025, p. 11.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 12.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 23.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 31.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 33.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 40.
9. Assefa Mehretu, Bruce Wm. Pigozzi, Lawrence M. Sommers, in "Concepts in Social and Spatial Marginality", *Geografiska Annaler, Series B*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2000, p. 91. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/491067>, accessed at 6.02.2026.
10. *Ibidem*.
11. Marina Îngustu, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 91.
13. *Ibidem*.
14. Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics", in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. by Peter Lassman, Ronald Speirs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 311.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 312.
16. Marina Îngustu, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 130 and *passim*.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 122.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 158.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 161.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 198.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 200.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 220.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 239.

25. Ionela-Cernat Mihai, "Female Archetypes in Panait Istrati's Work", in *Journal of Danubian Studies and Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2021, p. 44. URL: <https://dj.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/JDSR/article/view/1369/1534> , accessed at 7.02.2026.
26. Marina Îngustu, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 237; Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV (1914-1916), The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1917, p. 243.