

# PhD Thesis Summary

**PhD Candidate:** Ștefan Lipan Daniel

At the European level, the Central and Eastern region, with all the 22 countries that compose it, has the highest number of institutionalized children in the world. Approximately 626,000, to be more precise (Unicef, 2010). The practice of institutionalization is still a very common one among these countries. The children who find themselves in this situation very often bear the stigma of the term 'abandonment'.

Romania has had a very 'delicate' history concerning the care of abandoned children. In December 1989, the estimated number of children living in various state-run institutions was around 170.000. After the lifting of the veil that 'blinded' the West's eyes for half a century, Romania has had a rough and abundant international visibility, with a cohort of organizations coming to film, document and save the abandoned children. 'Dreadful', 'inhumane' and 'outrageous' were just a few of the words used to describe the situation.

Children and women's bodies were overexposed by foreign media as the victims of communism, the carriers of trauma, thus embodying a particular image of the post-communist identity. However, in the following months after the fall of the regime, women took a secondary place, but one of great importance. They were portrayed as unable to care for their children, leaving the latter in a hopeless situation. They are the first figures to be accused of immorality, of inhumanity.

The second figures depicted as immoral are those of the caretakers from the orphanages. Borcila (2015) mentions a report from the beginning of the 1990s that emphasizes "the brutality, cruelty, and immorality of the staff, who give these children no attention except for their daily *feeding*, 'a slimy mixture of beans, corn, and rancid fat,' and who lock up, steal, or don't bother to use any of the Western aid when it does arrive."

In a short period of time, the immorality of the women and staff is linked with the immorality of the government who is unable to deal with the situation. This becomes a moral disease of the entire nation, who is unwilling and incapable of resolving the abandoned children's situation.

In the following years after the Romanian revolution, the orphans and their fate became a constant presence in the public domain, either internationally or at the national level. For example, one of the key issues for the acceptance of Romania in the European Union was the situation of the orphans and the large institutions in which they lived. The evaluation report for the States willing to join the European Union from 1999 states that "admission is conditioned by several evolutions, among which the improvement of the institutionalised children's situation" (Arvatu 2004). Abandoned children became a political bargaining subject. On the one hand, the United States conditioned Romania's admission to NATO by demanding the allowing of international adoptions, and on the other hand the European Union conditioned Romania's admission in the EU by demanding the prohibition of international adoption and the resolving of the problems of abandoned children (Denéchère and Scutaru 2010).

Coming closer to our present day, we see that Romania has witnessed a wholesale restructuring of social service delivery in general and of child care in particular – through the adoption of strategies such as decentralization and de-institutionalization, followed by regulation based on the enforcement of quality standards and licensing (Negoita, 2010).

However, if we look at the official official statistics provided by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption, this number of abandoned children is almost the same in 2016 as in 2002<sup>1</sup>. Also, if we look at the total number of children in Romania, in 2016 there 2 million children less than in 2002<sup>2</sup>. Put in this context, the percentage of children dependent of the system has actually grown.

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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed statistics please see: <http://www.copii.ro/statistici/>

<sup>2</sup> In a press release from 2016, the National Institute in Statistics mentions that the total number of persons with ages between 0 and 18 is approximately 4 million. If we look at the 2002 statistics offered by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption, the total number of children reported was 6 million. For more details please see: [http://www.insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com\\_presa/com\\_pdf/1iunie\\_ziua\\_copilului\\_2016.pdf](http://www.insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/1iunie_ziua_copilului_2016.pdf) and <http://www.copii.ro/statistici/>

Moreover, a brief look at the contemporary public discourse about this issue presents us with an interesting situation. The same discourse about the horrific fate of these children and the incapacity of the state to take care of them is repeated each year, over and over again: “*Lost in the system. The orphans: the laughingstock of all governments in Romania.*”<sup>3</sup> (excerpt from newspaper article)

Romanians have lost their morality, their humanity even, and the children became a possible site of Western salvation and heroism. Talking about child care, a news report published in *The Guardian* at the beginnings of the 90s opined that Romanians needed to relearn how to be compassionate in their child care approach (Lennon 1991). Romanians needed to relearn how to be moral.

This thesis is an exploration of this process of moralization that Romanian society has had to undergo after the fall of communism. The thesis has three main pillars that act as starting points for a more indepth analysis of the phenomenon.

Thus, *the first* starting point is the NGO sector that gravitates around the child protection system, the persons that give in acts of compassion, and how they construct their identity in relationship with the institutionalized children. This section discusses how the care for others (Das 2010), in this case, the care for institutionalized children, becomes one of the ways through which middle classed persons establish themselves as the moral middle. I follow how through a particular aesthetic turn, the usage of the trope '*beautiful people*', the middle class becomes a moral category, one that has incorporated the idea that their well-being, and that of others, is something for which they, and not the state, are primarily responsible (Larner 2000). Moreover, this rhetoric of morality normalizes middle-class privilege (Liechty 2003) and establishes the middle-class as the legitimate source of morality in the society.

I approach this matter starting with a theoretical discussion about class and middle-class in Romania. As in most of the former communist countries in Eastern Europe ( Saar, E. & Helemäe, J. 2015; Crowley, S., 2015; Ost 2015; Gagyí & Éber 2015; Anton & Stanojević 2015), in Romania, class talk has been seen as the discourse of the 'enemy', a category which reminded

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<sup>3</sup> Source:

<https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/in-premiera-pierduti-in-sistem-orfanii-bataia-de-joc-a-tuturor-guvernelor-din-romania-248782.html>

of the 'old' regime, not suited for the new, modern one (Ost 2015a). However, the topic of middle-class has been much more visible within the public sphere. As with other countries in Eastern Europe (Crowley 2015; Saar & Helemäe 2015; Ost 2015b; Boyadjieva & Kabakchieva 2015; Drahokoupil 2015; Fabo 2015), the middle class has been glorified (Chelcea & Druta 2016; Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley 1998) as the class that will save society, the class that breaks with the communist past and is the carrier of democracy and modernity (Vasile 2008). I discuss here in more depth the difficulty in conceptualizing the 'middle-class' in Romania, a difficulty also discussed and approached in other anthropological studies of the middle-class around the globe (Donner 2017). In this context of conceptual vagueness, I show that middle-class is more of an aspirational category. Also, I propose following charity work or the engaging in compassionate acts - a phenomenon ascribed to the global middle-class (Heiman et al. 2012) - as a fruitful path in understanding middle-class practices and middle-class as a moral category.

I thus move towards the issue of compassion and I discuss why “there is nothing simple about compassion apart from the desire for it to be taken as simple, as a true expression of human attachment and recognition” (Berlant 2004).

Starting from examples from my fieldwork and interviews, I approach the issues of the aesthetics of giving and care, of fundraising, and that of programs developed for the institutionalized children. Also, in this latter part of the chapter, I look at the practice of extracurriculars, and I show how the middle-class ideals of education are found in how care for institutionalized children is conceived.

*The second* pillar of this thesis takes the focus away from the ones who engage briefly with the children, towards the system itself and the persons that work each day as caretakers in family type apartments in Bucharest. Through an extensive fieldwork in one of the family type apartments and in one NGO working with institutionalized children, I have tried to show how the actual work of caring for others is perceived by the staff and what ethical issues arise in the process of caring. Starting from Foucault's (1990 [1984]) views on morality, I discuss how the child protection system explicitly imposes a set of moral rules, of what is good care and how it should be done, while the staff become the main ethical subjects of those impositions. The system enforces those rules in the conduct of staff through constant supervision and

penalizations. The latter often take the form of moral judgements directed at individual persons. The points of interest followed throughout the research are how the staff perceive and do their work, how they perceive the children in their care, and the practice of formation courses the staff has to undergo constantly. Through these aspects, I argue that the persons employed in family type apartments, besides having a multitude of task to do, including physical and emotional work, engage in extensive and consuming ethical work. They are faced on a daily basis with situations of moral breakdown (Zygon 2008), when they have to step out of their established moral habitus and do ethical work on themselves (Foucault 1990 [1984]). This means doing some fine adjustments to the way of being, and posing moral questions like what should I do in this situation, what is the best action to be taken, will this benefit the children or not, will I be judged or not?

*The third* path followed in this thesis again moves the focus from those working around the children (the NGO and middle-class persons), those working with the children (the staff) to the ones doing social science research with and about children. This chapter is structured as a selective collection of research practices and reflections from our<sup>4</sup> fieldworks involving children in Bucharest and their families, between 2012 and 2017. I use data gathered through various methods and instruments: semi-structured and in-depth interviews with children, parents, teachers and therapists; materials produced by and collected from children – weekly routine journals, photos and operationalized drawings<sup>5</sup>; participant and direct observation in contexts ranging from educational institutions, state run institutions of care to private homes, playgrounds and homeschooling camps; content analysis on data collected from forums and online groups discussing topics related to family, education and childhood. The issues discussed include: getting access to and consent from children, confidentiality and intimacy, connection, and communication with children in the research process. Also, I show how methodological and ethical guidelines are lacking from the Romanian legislation, but also that social science research done so far with children in Romania, with few exceptions (Iluț: 2016, Cojocar: 2013), has neglected the particularities of doing research with and about children.

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter has been written in collaboration with my colleague Alin Savu, who is also a PhD candidate and has focused his research on children.

<sup>5</sup> Basically a piece of paper divided in 6 or more boxes where children could draw about different moments from their daily routine, free-time, school work and so on.

The thread that links all these perspectives together is the making of moral selves, the construction of morality in contemporary Romania. It has at its core Lambek's (2010) idea that "human beings cannot avoid being subject to ethics, speaking and acting with ethical consequences, evaluating our actions and those of others, acknowledging and refusing acknowledgement, caring and taking care, but also being aware of our failure to do so consistently. As a species, given our consciousness, our socialization and sociality, and our use of language, we are fundamentally ethical."

The structure of the thesis follows the 3 main points described above, which are preceded by a chapter concerning the research methods used throughout the research. Concerning the latter, the main methodological tool used was participant observation. However, in my particular case, the 'classic' way of doing ethnography and participant observation, more precisely spending and sharing a lot of time with people, was inaccessible. This was due to the fact that the institution and its representatives were quite suspicious about my work and about what I will do with the data gathered. It took me many months to get approval from one of the DGASPC of an administrative district of Bucharest to take part into the day to day activities of children and staff living in family type apartments. This was possible mainly because of my affiliation with one of the NGO's implementing different projects with institutionalized children. I thus benefited from an already established relationship of trust between this NGO and the authorities. I received permission to visit one of the apartments on a regular basis in order to help out the children with their homework or any other kind of tutoring. Therefore, for about 10 months, I visited this apartment twice a week and spent about 2 to 6 hours in the presence of the staff and the children

However, my time spent there was quite limited, so I resorted to other methods in order to complete and deepen the data collected. These included document analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus groups.