

Philippe Ariès

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Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1960) is one of the most influential—and divisive—histories of childhood ever written. Originally published in French, under the title *L'Enfant et La Vie Familiale Sous L'Ancien Regime*, Ariès's study puts forth the controversial claim that childhood, as a concept, was not “discovered” until well after the middle ages.

Ariès himself was not a professional historian; rather, he worked as an archivist for the Institute of Applied Research for Tropical and Subtropical Fruits. However, as an amateur historian, he was greatly interested in the history of the family. Ariès was especially concerned with countering conservative claims that the twentieth-century family was suffering a decline; he sought to prove, instead, that the family as we know it today—a private, domestic circle founded upon mutual affection—is a relatively new concept. To confirm this claim, Ariès chose to study the figure now considered to exist at the very heart of the family: the child. Childhood, Ariès argues, is a relatively new concept that emerged around the seventeenth century, concomitant with such developments as a decrease in infant mortality, changes in the European educational system, increasing class stratification, and a gradual withdrawal of the family from a wider web of social relations.

A Controversial Claim

Ariès's argument regarding the “discovery” of childhood in the seventeenth century is predicated upon another, much-debated point: his assertion that “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist” (125). This claim, which has been both enthusiastically adopted and categorically dismissed by scholars from various disciplines, is more nuanced than it sounds. As Hugh Cunningham points out, the English translation of Ariès's text uses the term “idea” where Ariès himself had used the term “*sentiment*.” The difference between these two terms is crucial. “*Sentiment*” carries with it two meanings: “the sense of a feeling about childhood as well as a concept of it” (Cunningham 30). Ariès did not intend to claim that individual medieval families did not show affection for their children, but rather that childhood was not recognized and valued as a distinct phase of human existence. Thus, he maintained, there was much less separation between adults and children in medieval society.

The Issue of Age

The greater purpose of Ariès's study, then, is to demonstrate how the notion of childhood developed, and what aspects of modernity contributed to its “discovery” as a distinct and special phase in life. He begins *Centuries of Childhood* by arguing that changing notions

of chronological age affected the development of Western European notions of childhood. Today, he writes, we think it is very normal for a child—or for individuals in general—to know his (or her) age and date of birth. Yet, according to Ariès, most people living before the eighteenth century did not know—or care to know—their exact ages. Ariès argues that the “curious passion” for recording dates and calculating ages is a recent development, arguably corresponding to the rise of exact account-keeping by the Church and State around the eighteenth century.

Thus, the concept of age—and, by extension, childhood—was quite different, pre-1700, from what it is today: an individual was deemed an “infant” or a “youth” or an “old person” not by virtue of his chronological age but by his physical appearance and habits. Furthermore, what was considered “infancy” or “youth” in the premodern era was very different from what we might associate with such terms today: in the sixteenth century, for example, a child of seven years might still be considered an “infant” and a man of forty years might still be considered a “youth.”

Such fluid or relatively indeterminate definitions of “infancy” and “youth,” Ariès writes, were due not only to a different understanding of chronological age, but also to the tendency, in the middle ages, to view children as miniature adults. Thus, medieval artists depict children as adults “reduced to a smaller scale [...], without any other difference in expression or features” (33). Ariès also contends that it was not until the seventeenth century that portraits of children in their quotidian, domestic context became “numerous and commonplace”—a trend that indicates a developing interest in children as central members of the nuclear household.

Child Mortality

What factors brought about this newly directed attention toward children? According to Ariès, the high mortality rate in the premodern era caused parents to steel themselves against responding too emotionally to infants who might soon die. Rather than conceiving of their vulnerable offspring as unique individuals, Ariès claims, Europeans followed Montaigne in assuming that young children had “neither mental activity nor recognizable body shape”; they were regarded as merely “neutral” beings poised precariously between life and death (39).

A steady decrease in the infant mortality rate, however, facilitated an inversely proportional increase in the attention paid to children and, consequently, the representations made of them: when it became more likely that children would survive childhood, parents began treating them with more interest and affection. Ariès supports this claim by pointing not only to an increase in family portraits, in which children figure prominently, but to a trend in portraits of *dead* children: such a trend implies, first, that child mortality was becoming more the exception than the rule, and second, that children had become important enough to their families to be mourned (40).

A Culture of Childhood

The rise in the affection and attention paid to children, Ariès argues, produced a kind of culture of childhood. For example, the seventeenth century brought about a newfound interest in children's words, mispronunciations, and expressions, such as the French words *toutou* and *dada* (48). Moreover, certain styles of clothing, as well as certain games and holidays, became increasingly associated with childhood. For example, while pre-seventeenth century children wore clothes that were smaller-scale copies of those of their parents, seventeenth century children began to be dressed in clothes that were slightly different from those of adults. A new fashion was to dress children in robes with "ribbons" that were, in fact, the remnants of sleeves once found fashionable by adult wearers of these robes, but later deemed outmoded: thus, in effect, new trends children's clothing involved the "hand-me-downs" of adult fashion (56).

The "hand-me-down" quality of this newly-developing culture of childhood could be found, too, in children's games and pastimes. For example, today, we generally associate fairy tales, party games, and holidays such as Halloween with children. However, in the middle ages, fairy tales were enjoyed by the young and old alike, games like snowball fights were played by entire communities, and adults as well as children went from house to house asking for money during the November holidays. Gradually, adults lost interest in these activities, and thus, like their castaway fashions, their games and activities became associated only with children.

Children and Sex

According to Ariès, the association of children with certain manners of speech, styles of clothing, and activities came about relatively concurrently with a developing notion of childhood as a time of sexual innocence. Citing the diary of the French royal physician who cared for the young Louis XIII, he argues that attitudes toward child sexuality were much more relaxed before the seventeenth century. For example, he notes the following episodes involving the young Dauphin:

It was a common joke, repeated time and again, to say to him: "Monsieur, you haven't got a cock." Then, "he replied: 'Hey, here it is!'—laughing and lifting it up with one finger." These jokes were not limited to the servants, or to brainless youths, or to women of easy virtue such as the King's mistress. The Queen, his mother, made the same sort of joke: "The Queen, touching his cock, said: 'Son, I am holding your spout.'" Even more astonishing is this passage: "He was undressed and [his sister] too, and they were placed naked in bed with the King, where they kissed and twittered and gave great amusement to the King. The King asked him: 'Son, where is the Infanta's bundle?' He showed it to him, saying: 'There is no bone in it, Papa.' Then, as it was slightly distended, he added, 'There is now, there is sometimes.'" (101)

Ariès interprets such scenes as indicative of a general lack of reserve regarding children and sexual matters before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet this casual attitude was not due to any notion of innate childhood eroticism, but rather to a belief in

children's absolute *lack* of sexuality. It was not considered wrong to fondle a child or to speak explicitly of sexual matters before him simply because the child was "believed to be unaware of or indifferent to sex. Thus gestures and allusions had no meaning for him; they became purely gratuitous and lost their sexual significance" (106).

Toward the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the image of the child shifted from a sexually indifferent individual to a sexually innocent one whose purity was constantly in danger of being corrupted by immoral influences. Such a shift took place, Ariès argues, predominately in response to the rise of the modern educational system. Educators—most of whom were priests who were just as concerned with their pupils' salvation as they were with their acquisition of knowledge—closely monitored their students' sexual habits and behaviors, and took measures to correct those that they deemed unhealthy. The result of such scrutiny, which was subsequently encouraged and disseminated by handbooks on decorum, was a trend that involved the contradictory desires to "coddle" the child—to protect his innate innocence from evil influences—and to discipline him harshly, lest he turn to sin by his own devices.

Disciplinary Schooling

The second section of Ariès's study picks up where the first left off—on the subject of education and its influence on emerging notions of childhood. Ariès begins by asking his reader to reconsider those aspects of education that we, today, regard as normal. For example, we expect young people to begin school at a relatively early age, along with other children their own age. And we assume that, as each year passes, students will perform increasingly advanced work. Yet as Ariès demonstrates, this approach to education is a relatively recent one.

In the middle ages, very few people were formally educated. The only medieval institution reminiscent of the contemporary university or school was the "cathedral school," where boys and men would study to become clerics. However, as the number of students and masters associated with cathedral schools increased, the institution we now associate with the modern educational system began to evolve. Rather than allowing students of various ages to mingle together in the classroom, educators began to divide them up into individual, age-based classes, a practice that contributed to the demarcation of childhood as a specific stage of life.

Such separation also became a means of surveillance and control. Masters, assured of their moral superiority over their child-charges, began to closely supervise students; furthermore, they held their students responsible for informing on each other in order to secure confessions of weakness. Corporal punishment became an increasingly popular means of discipline. Eventually, the day school evolved into the boarding school, where students were subject to observation and discipline around the clock. Thus, while the medieval school made no distinction between the adult and the child, the (proto)modern

school introduced a sharp divide between adult and child worlds and promoted the idea that children were subordinate beings in need of supervision and discipline.

The Rise of the Nuclear Family

According to Ariès, the images contained in the medieval calendar tell us much about the rising importance of the family. Over the centuries, the calendar began to include, not only men, but women, street scenes, and children. Finally, by the sixteenth century, it began to include depictions of families, and the seventeenth century saw a “positive flood” of such pictures (349). By that point, images of families were not only contained in calendars, but in individual portraits, and they were displayed not only in public spaces such as churches, but within private homes. Thus, Ariès concludes that the seventeenth century—which, significantly enough, is the era in which he argues the concept of childhood first flowered—is that point in history in which the family, as we know it, first found “full expression” (353).

The rise of the family, Ariès writes, was the consequence of a general movement, in Western society, from sociability to privacy. Before the eighteenth century, noble families lived in “great houses” in which space was shared between children and adults and servants and masters. Moreover, these wealthy families were surrounded by “concentric circles of relations ... [including] relatives, friends, clients, protégés, debtors, etc.” (395). This, indeed, was a different kind of social life—a crowded, public life that placed more value on the collective than it did on the individual. However, by the eighteenth century, “the family began to hold society at a distance, to push it back beyond a steadily extending zone of private life” (398). An ever-growing partition between the “inside” of the household and the “outside” of the greater social world became more distinct, and, gradually, the family increasingly drew into itself.

This “inward move,” made by the family, Ariès argues, was coincident with the increasing attention being paid to the child. First, a waning in the practice of apprenticeship—and a concurrent increase in local day-schools—meant that children were more often home with their birth-families, and therefore increasingly subject to special attention and affection. Moreover, the upper- and middle-class’s growing preoccupation with etiquette became increasingly focused on the proper upbringing of children: parents began to share with schoolmasters and religious officials the responsibility of appropriately molding the child. The child became the center of the family’s attention—so much so that, by the nineteenth century, its status within the family (and within society generally) would become almost divine.

Criticism of Ariès

While Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood* is widely considered a landmark text in family history, it nevertheless has been subjected to severe criticism. Many critics of Ariès’s work have reacted especially strongly to his claim that “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist.” Indeed, as Hugh Cunningham notes, medievalists “never seem to tire of proving Ariès to be wrong” and thus “set themselves the task of showing that

the middle ages did have a concept of childhood, not perhaps the same as in later centuries, but a concept nonetheless” (30). Such objections are in keeping with Adrian Wilson’s critique of the “present-centeredness” of Ariès’s study. To adopt a “present-centered” approach is to view the past exclusively from the point of view of the present. Ariès’s mistake, Wilson contends, is to argue that medieval society had no awareness of young people simply because they lacked “*our* awareness” of what children are like and how they should be treated (143).

Readers have also argued that Ariès’s “present-centeredness” is characterized by a degree of sentimentalism and nostalgia. For example, Joan Acocella observes that the “pictures of the family suggested by [Ariès’s] book ... are full of Bruegelesque life and variety, tumble and zest” while the images of *modern* life suggested by his text are comparatively dark and severe. In other words, Ariès romanticizes the medieval period as a time of greater sociability and observes in the modern era only negative developments, such as an “obsessive love” for children and (paradoxically) a simultaneous desire to discipline and punish them. While such a view of the modern era does not initially seem “present-centered”—it is, after all, a rather negative view of the present—it nevertheless can be read as such, insofar as its nostalgic turn involves a valuation of the past in terms of the present.

Yet another major criticism of Ariès’s study involves his use of aesthetic artifacts as historical evidence. While Ariès does occasionally make reference to school rosters, laws, and statistics—sources that most historians regard as relatively objective and reliable “hard evidence”—the great majority of his sources are paintings, sculptures, poems, and other works of art. Critics view his decision to appeal to these sources as problematic for several reasons. First, as Wilson notes, Ariès seems to assume that art directly reproduces or reflects life, but doesn’t take into consideration that an artist’s depiction of a theme may be deeply subjective, or that the content of an aesthetic piece might tell us more about an artistic trend than it does about popular notions of childhood. Moreover, as Cunningham notes, Ariès cites only those aesthetic objects which support his argument concerning the “discovery” of childhood in the modern era, and seems quite “unaware of other medieval sources showing a naturalistic portrayal of childhood” which might complicate his argument.

Why Study Ariès?

Given the degree of criticism leveled at Ariès’s work, one might wonder whether there is any value in studying his history of childhood. Yet even those who voice strong reservations regarding Ariès’s study nevertheless recommend it, if only because of its status as a foundational work in the field of children’s history. While Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood* was not the first published history of childhood—that honor belongs to George Henry Payne’s 1916 text, *The Childhood in Human Progress*—it is nevertheless widely recognized as a classic and foundational text. The degree to which Ariès has been cited by scholars in various academic fields—and, moreover, the degree to which his work has inspired similar arguments concerning the “discovery” of childhood—suggests the indelible impact he has had on historical studies of childhood and family life.

Centuries of Childhood has served as an invaluable catalyst for rich and enduring theoretical debate. Therefore, an acquaintance with its arguments is a prerequisite for a greater knowledge of the field of the history of childhood.

Another important aspect of Ariès's text is its insistence upon the historically and culturally contingency of notions of childhood. Even those who reject Ariès's argument regarding the relatively recent "discovery" of childhood would agree that childhood was experienced and imagined differently in the middle ages than it is today—that is, that material conditions, power relations, religious beliefs, and cultural mores have a profound impact on the formation of notions of childhood. Therefore, one might credit Ariès with furthering a notion that we might take for granted today: that childhood—and with it, family life—is not a universal constant or natural category, but rather an ever-shifting concept.

Recommended Reading

- Acocella, Joan. "Little People." *The New Yorker*. August 18 & 25, 2003: 138-142.
- Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*.
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- Crawford, Sally. *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*. Stroud, UK: Alan Sutton, 1999.
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- Vann, Richard. "The Youth of Centuries of Childhood." *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*. Vol. 21:2 (1982): 279-297.
- Wilson, Adrian. "The Infancy of The History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès." *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*. Vol. 19:2 (1980): 132-153.