



The Way We Really Are: Coming To Terms With America's Changing Families

By Stephanie Coontz

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Stephanie Coontz, the author of *The Way We Never Were*, now turns her attention to the mythology that surrounds today's family—the demonizing of “untraditional” family forms and marriage and parenting issues. She argues that while it's not crazy to miss the more hopeful economic trends of the 1950s and 1960s, few would want to go back to the gender roles and race relations of those years. Mothers are going to remain in the workforce, family diversity is here to stay, and the nuclear family can no longer handle all the responsibilities of elder care and childrearing. Coontz gives a balanced account of how these changes affect families, both positively and negatively, but she rejects the notion that the new diversity is a sentence of doom. Every family has distinctive resources and special vulnerabilities, and there are ways to help each one build on its strengths and minimize its weaknesses. The book provides a meticulously researched, balanced account showing why a historically informed perspective on family life can be as much help to people in sorting through family issues as going into therapy—and much more help than listening to today's political debates.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Once again, as in her groundbreaking study on the American family, *The Way We Never Were*, Coontz cuts through mind-numbing nostalgia and rigid righteousness that has made the debates about the American family's decline even more volatile. Coontz asks if we can learn from history. Never one to disavow the complexity of today's socioeconomic issues and their impact on families, she tackles a gamut; a few of them are: working mothers, the future of marriage, the well being of children in gay and lesbian families, the strengths and weaknesses of single-parent households, and the significant lag between our new social realities and the values, behavior, and institutions struggling to adjust. Coontz calls not for oversimplified analyses or tweaked consensus, but the sensitive assessments of problems unique to the day.

Stressing the importance of using history and sociology as tools to generate solutions to today's problems, she reframes our perception of certain crises. In a discussion, for example, of the classic clash between teens and adults, she isolates the adolescent's lack of role and purpose in society as the major culprit. Finding themselves in a myriad of double binds, "what we often call the youth culture is actually adult marketers seeking to commercially exploit youthful energy and rebellion." What's the point of framing problems in the larger historical context? A larger view diffuses tensions and can place blame in its appropriate baskets. Ultimately, it leads to a kinder way of judging one's circumstances. And it is less lonely.

The Way We Really Are grew out of the discussions, speaking engagements, talk-show gigs and interviews that followed the publication of *The Way We Never Were*. What do people miss about the '50s, our favorite decade? "Nostalgia for the 1950s is real and deserves to be taken seriously," Coontz writes, "but it usually shouldn't be taken literally." Families seemed more cohesive then; indeed, family life seemed easier to shape and hold. Coontz reviews the evolution toward this unprecedented ear of privilege that was the '50s from post-World War II through the end of the "fifties experiment."

Perhaps not as innovative as *The Way We Never Were*, this volume is nonetheless thoughtful, somber, and realistic. It's impossible not to agree that grieving for a misremembered past dulls our wits and incapacitates our imaginations. Coontz asks us to quit kvetching and face the music. "With 50 percent of American children living in something other than a married-couple family with both biological parents present, and with the tremendous variety of male and female responsibilities in today's different families, the time for abstract pronouncements about good or bad family structures and correct or incorrect parental roles is past." A viable future for the American family can be generated based on accepting the truth of where we are today. --*Hollis Giammatteo*

From Library Journal

In chapters like "Working with What We've Got," Coontz provides an antidote to Dan Quayle's "new consensus on the importance of the traditional family." She argues that the traditional family is not the only model; there is also the two-parent primary breadwinner model, a historically new form that is possibly giving way to a postmarriage culture. For Coontz, it is important to go beyond sound bites and ensure that history, sociology, and economics are used, that new consensus thinkers do not invoke selective data or simplified conclusions or create "quack family medicine"?laws in taxation, housing, zoning, divorce, and childcare that favor married couples only. A family historian at Evergreen State College, Coontz references such data as the established correlations between a mother's educational attainment and her children's success, which are not cited by critics of nontraditional families. Although this is Coontz's fourth book about

families, her voluminous notes display all recent research. Zestful and pointed; for all social science collections. Janice Dunham, John Jay Coll. Lib., New York
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From Kirkus Reviews

A historian of the American family debunks the myth that a return to the so-called traditional two-parent nuclear family can provide us with an unassailable refuge from the social, economic, and psychological stresses Americans seem to feel so acutely these days. The latest book by Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992), focuses on the anxieties of contemporary American women and men about their lives, work, and families, and addresses these fears in the context of more accurate historical data and the most recent sociological research. What people really miss about the so-called Golden Age of the 1950s, Coontz points out, is an economy that supported unprecedented growth in real wages. We now tend to blame the instability of families for economic disruptions, when in fact economic dislocations have undermined our families. Furthermore, the prominence of the single-breadwinner, middle-class family so emblematic of postWW II prosperity was actually a short-term anomaly in the history of family structure. The changes we have experienced since the 1970s could even be said to represent a revival of the role of women as family coprovider, a pattern that not only served us well in preindustrial times, but may be better suited to the new postindustrial economy. The burden of housework and child care falling almost exclusively on women has been the primary source of recent marital conflict and family stress, and Coontz points out that the demands of work schedules and the behavior of most men have yet to acknowledge the inability of working women to carry all the weight at home. Coontz's refreshingly grounded perspective encourages the development of a broader social intelligence that would enable us to move beyond, for example, simpleminded scapegoating of the single welfare mother, coming up with social policies that truly assist more of us in improving our lives. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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