

[PDF] The Way We Never Were: American Families And The Nostalgia Trap

Stephanie Coontz - pdf download free book

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Description:

Did you ever wonder about the historical accuracy of those "traditional family values" touted in the heated arguments that insist our cultural ills can be remedied by their return? Of course, myth is rooted in fact, and certain phenomena of the 1950s generated the *Ozzie and Harriet* icon. The decade proved profamily--the birthrate rose dramatically; social problems that nag--gangs, drugs, violence--weren't even on the horizon. Affluence had become almost a right; the middle class was growing. "In fact," writes Coontz, "the 'traditional' family of the 1950s was a qualitatively new phenomenon. At the end of the 1940s, all the trends characterizing the rest of the twentieth century suddenly reversed themselves." This clear-eyed, bracing, and exhaustively researched study of American families and the nostalgia trap proves--beyond the shadow of a doubt--that *Leave It to*

Beaver was not a documentary.

Gender, too, is always on Coontz's mind. In the third chapter ("My Mother Was a Saint"), she offers an analysis of the contradictions and chasms inherent in the "traditional" division of labor. She reveals, next, how rarely the family exhibited economic and emotional self-reliance, suggesting that the shift from community to nuclear family was not healthy. Coontz combines a clear prose style with bold assertions, backed up by an astonishing fleet of researched, myth-skewing facts. The 88 pages of endnotes dramatize both her commitment to and deep knowledge of the subject. Brilliant, beautifully organized, iconoclastic, and (relentlessly) informative *The Way We Never Were* breathes fresh air into a too often suffocatingly "hot" and agenda-sullied subject. In the penultimate chapter, for example, a crisp reframing of the myth of black-family collapse leads to a reinterpretation of the "family crisis" in general, putting it in the larger context of social, economic, and political ills.

The book began in response to the urgent questions about the family crisis posed her by nonacademic audiences. Attempting neither to defend "tradition" in the era of family collapse, nor to liberate society from its constraints, Coontz instead cuts through the kind of sentimental, ahistorical thinking that has created unrealistic expectations of the ideal family. "I show how these myths distort the diverse experiences of other groups in America," Coontz writes, "and argue that they don't even describe most white, middle-class families accurately." The bold truth of history after all is that "there is no one family form that has ever protected people from poverty or social disruption, and no traditional arrangement that provides a workable model for how we might organize family relations in the modern world."

Some of America's most precious myths are not only precarious, but down right perverted, and we would be fools to ignore Stephanie Coontz's clarion call. --*Hollis Giammatteo*

From Publishers Weekly The golden age of the American family never existed, asserts Coontz (*The Social Origins of Private Life*) in a wonderfully perceptive, myth-debunking report. The "Leave It to Beaver" ideal of breadwinner father, full-time homemaker mother and dependent children was a fiction of the 1950s, she shows. Real families of that period were rife with conflict, repression and anxiety, frequently poor and much less idyllic than many assume; teen pregnancy rates in the '50s were higher than today. Further, Coontz contends, the nuclear family was elevated to a central source of personal satisfaction only in the late 19th century, thereby weakening people's community ties and sense of civic obligation. Coontz disputes the idea that children can be raised properly only in traditional families. Viewing modern domestic problems as symptoms of a much larger socioeconomic crisis, she demonstrates that no single type of household has ever protected Americans from social disruption or poverty. An important contribution to the current debate on family values.

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