

The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap

Coontz, Stephanie. (1992). *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York, NY. BasicBooks, 391 pp. ISBN 0-465-09097-4, \$14.00 (Paper).

Reviewed By

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In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Coontz explores two centuries of American family life. She attempts to dispel many myths and stereotypes about what the “typical” family structure that has been idealized since the time of “Leave it to Beaver” and the 1950’s era. Through tracing the American family throughout history, Coontz shows that the idea of family has always been a diverse and changing, and many factors contribute to this diversity that include economic, demographic, and political changes.

The first chapters of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* lay the groundwork of some of the myths about family forms in the past,

showing how difficult it is to make generalizations about current family structures. She discusses the idealized “Leave It To Beaver” family structure and how it was an invention in the 1950’s rather than a symbol of tradition. The next chapters dispel the myths that the changing family structure is a result of changing gender roles—with the women leaving the traditional housewife role—showcasing the different gender divisions of labor throughout history and that even in a “typical” household in which the male is the primary breadwinner, these families were seldom economically or emotionally self reliant.

The next chapters trace the complex relationship between family privacy and state intervention, and Coontz shows that families have never been immune from outside interference and that modern standards of family privacy are largely a product of state intervention itself. The following chapter zeroes in on several important factors that contribute to the myth of the collapsing family, including the role of the mother, changes in the ideas of marriage, how to properly raise children, and the family structure of African American families.

I found the ideas in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* to be very interesting and informative. Coontz’s research was incredibly thorough and contributed well to the overall thesis of the book. The idea of a typical family structure is shown to be more myth than reality, given that there have been so many family types throughout and history and that families continue to change and diversify. Where I felt that *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* fell short was in the presentation of an overwhelming amount of research. Coontz takes readers through decades of American history without much

chronology or order in anyway. She would make a statement, go through years of history to substantiate this claim, and somewhere stumble on another statement to make without ever fully explaining her first. I felt as though she tried to address too many issues without going into specific enough detail on any one topic. The idea of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* is a valuable read for teachers who must remember that each of their students come from varying family structures, not from a “Leave It To Beaver” perfect stereotype. I learned a lot from this book despite the difficulty in staying with Coontz’s ideas. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to teach or study the American family.