When it first appeared in 1992, Stephanie Coontz’s myth-shattering book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, gained wide attention, both inside and outside the academy. It arrived just in time for the 1992 presidential campaign, when “family values” rhetoric filled the airwaves. The book offered an important antidote to Reagan-era celebrations of the “traditional” American family, which harked back to a mythic golden age that presumably reached its apex in the 1950s. Decades of scholarship in family history had shown conclusively that there never was a “traditional” family that resembled the idealized vision of the self-sufficient domestic unit with the breadwinner father, full-time homemaker-wife-and-mother, and children—all fulfilling normative expectations of gender and age behavior. But until Coontz’s sweeping and politically charged synthesis, the insights of family historians did not permeate other areas of scholarship; nor did they fully enter the public policy debates that swirled around “family values.” Stephanie Coontz effectively brought the lenses of race, class, and gender to focus on the political uses and abuses of family history, providing a thorough critique of the myth of the self-sufficient American home. Today, nearly a decade after it first appeared, these insights are as important and timely as ever.

In her preface, Coontz writes that she began the book as a history of the family in the twentieth century, but that she quickly realized that to tell that story, she would need to confront the widespread myths that prevail in our society about the past. She found that the model of the family that held the most power in the national imagination was grounded in a glossy vision of the 1950s, in which affluent white middle-class families lived in tidy single-family suburban homes behind trimmed lawns and white picket fences. Dad went to work in the city, while Mom took care of the house and the kids. Presumably, these families adhered to proper gender and sexual codes, and provided the basis not only for social order but also for the American way of life, the essence of democracy, the foundation of the Free World during the Cold War. Coontz points out that very few families actually lived according to this model, and those who were able to do so were supported by a vast array of government programs that subsidized this way of life, from the GI Bill of Rights that gave federal low-interest loans to veterans to tax laws that rewarded homeownership. Government funds poured into suburban developments and highways, while red-lining policies and racial exclusions prevented people of color from participating in the “good life” that defined the essence of what it meant to be an American.
The Way We Never Were argues that families in the United States have never fit the myths that surround the “traditional” family in the popular culture, political rhetoric, and common assumptions. Most important, Coontz demonstrates that families have always relied upon various forms of support – from the government, the community, and wider kinship and fictive-kin networks – in order to survive. In popular memory today, the 1950s still represent the last gasp of the “traditional” self-sufficient nuclear family. Some people applaud this ideal and struggle to restore it; others claim that it thwarted women’s opportunities, put too much pressure on male breadwinners, and stifled children’s independence. But either way, the myth of the “traditional” family rests on the notion of self-sufficiency, which has influenced political debates, public policies, and cultural wars. Coontz demonstrates that the post-World War II suburban ideal, propped up by massive government funding and restrictive public policies, was neither “traditional” nor “typical,” yet it quickly grew into mythic proportions, further marginalizing “nontraditional” families, such as single-parent families or gay and lesbian households.

Coontz’s powerful synthesis illuminates the deep assumptions about class, race, and gender that have shaped debates about the family. Because the model of the mythical family is white and middle class, families that do not conform to the model are often denigrated as morally lacking. Such assumptions allow policymakers and privileged citizens to blame the nation’s most vulnerable families – those most exploited by capitalism, and most disadvantaged by racism – for their own marginality. Political rhetoric about “family values” implies that anyone whose family life does not conform to the mythic ideal causes harm to themselves, their children, and the society at large. Coontz makes it clear that the society bears some responsibility for the wellbeing of its families. She neither laments the “decline” of the family nor celebrates the diversity of family forms. Rather, she acknowledges that many American families are struggling for a variety of reasons, and she calls upon citizens and policymakers to move beyond the myths and address the structural and economic factors that cause domestic hardship.

The book is a model of academic writing for a wide public audience, written with the intention of shaping current debates about the family and influencing public policy. Considering that this is a historical investigation loaded with data, the book achieved considerable attention in the public press, with reviews in major newspapers and magazines. Coontz traveled and spoke widely on the lecture circuit. She continued to engage in spirited public debates around policy issues affecting American families, with op-ed pieces, revisions of the book to keep it current, and a follow-up analysis of contemporary families, The Way We Really Are. Coontz has become an activist public intellectual since the initial publication of The Way We Never Were, putting to rest any arcane academic claims that if a book is “popular” or “relevant,” it is not serious scholarship.

The book remains important today because the political impulse toward privatization has accelerated. Democrats as well as Republicans have called for smaller government and the “end of welfare as we know it.” Few would argue that the welfare system worked perfectly – the work of Linda Gordon and other scholars of welfare has shown its flawed logic from the beginning. Yet underlying the debates around welfare reform and a host of other public policies is the assumption that healthy families are and always have been self-sufficient. In the current political climate, that assumption reinforces the conservative argument that most Americans are better off
when the government steps back and lets individuals take care of themselves and their families through private effort, with the help of unfettered capitalism. As the new century unfolds, George W. Bush, heir to Reagan-era politics, tacitly accepts the widening gap between the rich and poor by calling upon the nation’s wealthy to take care of the poor, through faith-based initiatives and private charity, in the classic noblesse oblige tradition of aristocratic societies. This laissez-faire approach does nothing to alleviate the structural causes of poverty, and ignores the fact that much of the wealth of today’s affluent elite rests on the benefits reaped by white suburban families in the 1950s, when property ownership and capital accumulation was facilitated by generous government subsidies. Filled with evidence of the government’s historical role in helping as well as hindering family wellbeing, Coontz’s book is as relevant to public policy debates today as it was when it first appeared.

In addition to its essential political message, The Way We Never Were remains important for scholars as well as students. Coontz brought the insights of feminist scholarship, labor history, and studies of race to reshape the history of the family. Her book provides a model for scholars on how to integrate analyses of public and private life, demonstrating that it is virtually impossible to understand one side without the other. The book is particularly useful as a classroom text. Although the analysis is complex and sophisticated, the book is written in a clear and accessible prose that encourages students to think in new ways about the world around them, especially their most immediate and familiar environment.

The book also provides an excellent introduction for students to the field of family history. The field has produced scholarship that illuminates the history of the family itself – its many different forms and structures, the various roles of family members, the functions it serves – as well as the political, cultural, social, and economic purposes American families have been expected to fulfill in American society. It is by now well understood by scholars that there never was a single family form, and that factors such as religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, occupation, sexual orientation, and a host of other factors and characteristics affect what families look like and how they function, both for their members and within the larger society. Coontz synthesizes these findings into a book with a powerful political argument, allowing students to critique and debate her thesis as well as their own assumptions. The Way We Never Were also raises a number of questions that call for further study. The task for scholars is to take up where Coontz left off. She does an outstanding job of demolishing the myth of the traditional family, but she does not explain how and why that myth emerged and why it continues to hold such power. Why is it that the family continues to be the source of so many illusions, the center of so many controversies, the flashpoint in the culture wars? What is it about American society and history that places such heavy ideological weight on the family as the foundation of American citizenship and identity? For these future investigations, Coontz’s book provides an essential foundation upon which to build.

REFERENCE