



The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600-1900 (Haymarket Series)

By Stephanie Coontz

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A highly original account of the evolution of the family unit

Current debates about the future of the family are often based on serious misconceptions about its past. Arguing that there is no biologically mandated or universally functional family form, Stephanie Coontz traces the complexity and variety of family arrangements in American history, from Native American kin groups to the emergence of the dominant middle-class family ideal in the 1890s.

Surveying and synthesizing a vast range of previous scholarship, as well as engaging more particular studies of family life from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Coontz offers a highly original account of the shifting structure and function of American families. Her account challenges standard interpretations of the early hegemony of middle-class privacy and “affective individualism,” pointing to the rich tradition of alternative family behaviors among various ethnic and socioeconomic groups in America, and arguing that even middle-class families went through several transformations in the course of the nineteenth century.

The present dominant family form, grounded in close interpersonal relations and premised on domestic consumption of mass-produced household goods has arisen, Coontz argues, from a long and complex series of changing political and economic conjunctures, as well as from the destruction or incorporation of several alternative family systems. A clear conception of American capitalism’s combined and uneven development is therefore essential if we are to understand the history of the family as a key social and economic unit. Lucid and detailed, *The Social Origins of Private Life* is likely to become the standard history of its subject.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This intelligent synthesis takes careful note of class, race, gender, and region, to illuminate the differing American "family systems" that emerged during the last three centuries. The analysis considers the impact of economic, social, political, and ideological transformations upon the family, itself also an agent of change. Emphasizing both the complexity and the diversity of her subject, Coontz concludes that every family system has always incorporated unresolved tensions. Dense, scrupulously researched, and theoretically informed, this book should be welcomed by historians. Recommended for academic and large public libraries.

- *Cynthia Harrison, Federal Judicial Ctr., Washington, D.C.*

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About the Author

Stephanie Coontz teaches history and family studies at the Evergreen State College, Washington. She is the author (with Peta Henderson) of the highly praised *Women's Work, Men's Property: the Origins of Gender and Class*.

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