Introduction—Reconsidering *Policymaking for Social Security*

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Each year political scientists publish many excellent new books, some with an empirical focus on the politics of the United States. Very few of these books, however, offer serious, theoretically engaged analyses of the political foundations of major U.S. public policies. One reason works in this genre are so rare is that such books are extraordinary demanding to write. Their authors must have a policy analyst's command of the technical features of complex government programs together with a political scientist's skill at investigating the value choices and material conflicts that are at the heart of politics.

For a quarter-century, Martha Derthick's *Policymaking for Social Security* has set the standard for this kind of work. Derthick's 1979 book remains the definitive account of the political development of Social Security from its enactment in 1935 through the Social Security Amendments of 1977. In one sense or another, virtually every study of U.S. social policymaking published over the past 25 years has been in dialogue with Derthick's book.

This is an opportune moment to take a fresh look at Derthick's classic analysis. A great deal has changed since the book's publication. In the years since the book was published, public confidence in the Social Security program has declined, beneficiaries' rates of return have fallen, and conservative think tanks and influential politicians like President Bush have endorsed the program's partial privatization. In the concluding chapter of *Policymaking for Social Security,* Derthick predicted that Social Security politics would evolve over time: "Whatever political analysts may prescribe or executive leaders of the program strive for," she wrote, "more conflict over Social Security is on the way—is, indeed, already here" (426). Derthick recognized during the late 1970s that the economic and social context of Social Security policymaking and the program itself were both changing. Still, much about Social Security has *not* changed over the past quarter-century. Social Security remains hugely popular with the public, the program's annual spending continues to be largely insulated from normal budget pressures, and politicians seem as unwilling as ever to face up to the hard choices inherent in the program's design. As Derthick suggests in her own reflections, there is no crisis today to force policymakers to confront the long-term costs of the system's built-in commitments.

But *Policymaking for Social Security* is not only a monograph on the politics of public social provision. It also is an analysis of the dynamics of state building and organizational maintenance more generally. Long before "historical institutionalism" became fashionable, Derthick explored the role of formal structures and temporal forces in governance. The book offers powerful insights into the politics of incremental expansion, the distinction between boundary issues and distributive issues, the manipulation of public perceptions in order to cultivate program support, and the influence on policy elites of anticipated public reactions.

Policymaking for Social Security has received a great deal of professional recognition and won the Gladys M. Kammerer Award for the best book in the field of U.S. national policy. Famous as the book is, its scholarly contributions may be *under-appreciated*. Because Derthick wrote in matter-of-fact journalistic prose, because she eschewed technical jargon, and because she focused her attention on only one government program (albeit a very important one), casual readers sometimes fail to pick up on the broader theoretical implications of her analysis. These implications resonate with very current work in the discipline. By meticulously exploring the historical development of a major public institution, Derthick provided enduring insights into the dynamics of governance in the American democratic polity.

The other articles in this forum offer a variety of perspectives on the contributions of *Policymaking for Social Security*. R. Kent Weaver places Derthick's analysis in historical context, arguing that the political dialogue about Social Security choices has been considerably broadened over the past quarter-century, very much as Derthick hoped it would be. Weaver traces the opening of this dialogue to long-term changes in the political underpinnings of the program. The political puzzle is that major changes in Social Security's policymaking environment have not led to important shifts in Social Security itself. Weaver suggests that demography, policy feedbacks, and interest group pressures have combined to inhibit major policy change.

In their essays, Deborah Stone and Paul Pierson step back from current policy debates

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to examine the book's contribution to political science theory. Stone argues that *Policymaking for Social Security,* often viewed as the product of a hard-boiled realist, actually should be read as a brilliant example of "post-modern" scholarship. According to Stone, Derthick sought to explain how Social Security managed to remain popular and beyond dissent even while it was constantly expanding and claiming higher and higher amounts of public revenue. Derthick's post-modern answer was that Social Security program executives strategically deployed symbols, rhetoric, and outright fictions to convince ordinary Americans that the program was a form of "self-help" and thus one even good individualists could support.

Paul Pierson argues that *Policymaking for Social Security* is best read as a cogent analysis of public-policy development over time. According to Pierson, Derthick's analysis of the Social Security case helps us understand that institutional evolution is simultaneously a story of change and continuity, that high-level bureaucrats can be massively influential political actors, and that some of the most important political processes unfold *after* the curtain falls on the high drama of legislative enactments. These are fundamental insights about politics and policymaking that younger scholars like Daniel Carpenter, Jacob Hacker, Eric Patashnik, and Kathleen Thelen are pursuing in their work.

In her concluding reflections, Martha Derthick expresses her appreciation for the insights of Weaver, Pierson, and Stone, but denies that she is a post-modernist, institutionalist, or grand theorist. She modestly insists that she has always been more journalist than social scientist, and that she simply tried to capture the reality of Social Security policymaking she observed. Looking back on her book 25 years after writing it, Derthick remains satisfied with her analysis as history, but is struck by how much the political and economic contexts of Social Security have changed. Looking to the future, Derthick concludes that it is much easier to conceive of plausible Social Security reform packages than to imagine the political circumstances that would enable them to be enacted. On this point, as on so many others, she is surely right. It is easy to find flashier political scientists than Martha Derthick. It just isn't easy to find better ones.

SYMPOSIUM AUTHORS' BIOS

Martha Derthick *retired in 1999 as the Julia Allen Cooper Professor of Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia. She wrote* Policymaking for Social Security *when she was a senior fellow in Governmental Studies at the Brookings Institution, and it won the Gladys Kammerer Prize of the APSA as the best book of the year on U.S. public policy.*

R. Kent Weaver *is professor of public policy and government at Georgetown University and a senior fellow in the Governance Studies Program at the Brookings Institution. He is the author of numerous works including* Ending Welfare As We Know It *(Brookings, 2000) and* Automatic Government: The Politics of Indexation *(Brookings, 1988). He is currently completing a book on what the United States can learn from the experiences of other advanced industrial countries in reforming their public pension systems.*

Eric Patashnik *is associate professor of politics at the University of Virginia. He is the author of* Putting Trust in the U.S. Budget: Federal Trust Funds and the Politics of Commitment *(Cambridge, 2000). His research focuses on U.S. economic and social policy making and he is currently writing a book about the political sustainability of general interest reform legislation to be published by Princeton University Press. He can be reached at* ericpat@virginia.edu.

Paul Pierson *is professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, where he holds the Avice Saint Chair in Public Policy. His most recent book,* Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis, *has just been published by Princeton University Press.*

Deborah Stone *is formerly the David R. Pokross Professor of Law and Social Policy at Brandeis University and now an independent scholar and research professor of government at Dartmouth College. She is author of* Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making *(W. W. Norton, 2001) and* The Disabled State *(Temple University Press, 1984).*

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