

Martha Derthick as Paradoxical Postmodernist: A Quarter-Century Reappraisal of *Policymaking for Social Security*

Martha Derthick has long been my favorite bread-and-butter political scientist. If you want to know how the U.S. federal government really works, you can't do better than read her work. But re-reading *Policymaking for Social Security* in 2003, I discovered a Derthick I'd never known: Derthick the Paradoxical Postmodernist.

Here's the Paradoxical Postmodernist credo in a nutshell: "Words and symbols influence perceptions, and political activity is inspired as much by perceptions as actualities" (253). Politics is as much about manipulating perceptions and ideas as it is about tangible resources and instruments of power. Thus, Derthick concludes, "The success of the [Social Security] program's leadership, then, must be attributed in some significant measure to their capacity to define the terms of the debate. They supplied more than a proposal for action; they also supplied the language with which perceptions were shaped" (405).

In the introduction, Derthick poses a puzzle: How could a program that was always expanding and consequently always grabbing more earnings from more people—how could such a program consistently remain so popular and so seemingly beyond dissent? Ambiguity, paradox, and even fiction thread through the book as the real answers to this question.

Social Security program executives knew how to play on ambiguity. It was hard to distinguish when they were acting as technical assistants or as political actors in their own right. When giving technical assistance to Congress, they blurred the boundary between responding to a request for information and pushing their own objectives (77). "[T]echnical assistance sometimes merged into political alliance" (77). For example, SSA employees sometimes drafted bills for the AFL-CIO.

Measurement ambiguity is a central feature of policy politics. Social Security leaders capitalized on this ambiguity to characterize Social Security benefits as increasing whenever they needed the political support of beneficiaries, but as not really expanding whenever conservatives charged the program with growing out of control.

Perhaps the most important paradox in Derthick's story is what I'll call the *Paradox*

of Actuarial Uncertainty.¹ Actuaries make predictions about the future. Their guesses and estimates are uncertain by definition. Yet, Derthick observes, "there was something about the actuarial process itself that fostered an illusion of certainty: the fractions were so refined, the answers came so swiftly from the actuary when committee members asked what a particular change in the program would cost" (56). Chief Actuary Robert Myers supplied estimates "with an air of confidence and mode of exact expression that seemed the very denial of uncertainty" (175). Derthick shows how congressional proponents used illusions of certainty to reassure nervous opponents and gain support for program expansions. They even kidded themselves: "Policymaking for Social Security had always been conducted as if the policymakers could tell what the future held" (282). This faith in actuarial certainty allowed Congress and program advocates to convince themselves of the *Paradox of Fiscal Discipline and Continuous Expansion*. Somehow (because the actuaries said so), program expansion and fiscal discipline were not inconsistent.

Program executives played the *Paradox of Political Neutrality* to the hilt. Robert Ball "would always give technical help to anyone who was trying to develop legislation" (73). Derthick comments, "To give help to everyone who asks for it seems a fair enough rule," but it was biased, of course, towards activists and those who wanted to expand Social Security. "The program executives' notion of neutral behavior was no help at all to the groups that wished to do nothing" (73–4). Derthick understands that apparently neutral rules often serve as loaded weapons for one side in a conflict.

Then there is what we might call the *Paradox of Public Opinion*. Congressional leaders acted with exquisite sensitivity to preserving the public's perception of Social Security. The main influence of public opinion on policy choices, Derthick observes, "is not public opinion directly expressed, but public opinion as policy makers presume it to be" (201). Whoa! In practice, public opinion is what leaders think the public thinks or wants. How recursive is that? And then there's another paradox: Who is "the Public" anyway? When it comes to Social Security (not to mention many other policies), there's the Public as Taxpayer, whose opinion is usually "Hold the

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Line, no more taxes for me,” and the Public as Beneficiary, whose opinion is “Bring on more, more, more for me, me, me.”

Ambiguity and paradox enabled program advocates to sustain the giant fiction that Social Security is not help; it's self-help. “This is not a program in which the Government or the well-to-do help people,” Robert Ball once wrote. “On the contrary; it is primarily a program in which people help themselves, using Government as the instrument” (5). Following from this central fiction, are several subplots: The recipients don't get government benefits; spending for Social Security isn't government spending (231); the payroll tax isn't a tax, it's an insurance premium (232); the system is self-supporting and fiscally responsible (248); there are no winners and losers because everyone is a winner (253).

How well does the book hold up 25 years later? Derthick's keen appreciation of symbolic politics, issue-framing, and the centrality of perceptions in politics makes her a political analyst for all seasons. But we can still ask ourselves two questions: Is the social security puzzle still the same one she set out to solve? And are the answers still the same? Since Derthick has such a high tolerance for ambiguity, I can safely answer “Yes and No” to both questions.

Social Security is not entirely consensual and low-conflict any more, what with the Republican ascendancy and the conservative drive for privatization. But Derthick is still right about the puzzle on two counts. First, the program is still hard to contract, and impossible to change when people believe their benefits will go down. Second, major expansions such as Medicare and Disability Insurance, outside of normal Social Security politics, still create high conflict. Witness current turmoil around a Medicare prescription drug benefit and privatization of old-age pensions.

The players in Social Security aren't exactly the same as the ones Derthick described, yet the politics haven't changed all that much. What she called “conservative resistance” consisted primarily of business, especially the insurance industry, and some individual professional experts. Now Wall Street is the primary advocate for privatization (we'd be happy to invest your money), and think tanks such as Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, and American Enterprise Institute have replaced lone professional experts on the firing line. Derthick wrote about an era of largely Democratic control of the White House and divided government. Nevertheless, she noted the “limited effect of party alternation” (191) because competition for political credit made both parties expansionist. Witness, again, the bipartisan rally behind a Medicare prescription drug benefit and the failure of George W. Bush to make an ounce of progress on privatization.

Derthick argued that the “distributive biases” of Social Security failed to generate much conflict because they were “artifacts of the program without foundation in enduring so-

cial differences.” What distributive biases there were favored late entrants over early, retirees over active workers, and participants over non-participants, but they didn't dovetail with gender or class (or presumably race, which inexplicably Derthick never mentions). Other scholarship on Social Security has found it to be strongly molded by race, gender, and class conflicts. This, in my opinion, is the one glaring blind spot (if I may indulge in an oxymoron) of Derthick's book.

Still, even though she misses big fault lines of Social Security, she is profoundly right about why people who are disadvantaged by any distribution might not block the program or revolt later: they need *consciousness* of their position and they need *political organization* beyond being just a statistical group (261, 269). And this is precisely the insight of privatiza-

tion advocates. To foment opposition to this most popular of programs, they play identity politics and foster consciousness of victimhood. The Cato Institute Project on Social Security Privatization produces reports and web sites that tell women, African Americans, and low-income workers how they are purportedly hurt by Social Security.²

Derthick's book explains the political time bomb that is now detonating in Social Security. Privatizers' strategy is to hold Social Security to the test of its rhetorical promise. If, as Robert Ball insisted, Social Security is just helping people to save for their own retirement, then they should be getting their “money's worth.” Is their Social Security “account” beating the returns they could get by investing in the private market? If anything undoes Social Se-

curity, it will be the seductiveness of the money's-worth siren in a bullish stock market. The supreme irony of Social Security is that it was meant to be a redistributive program, but liberal politicians promoted it as if it were not social aid. Now conservatives are using liberals' rhetoric to dismantle the mutual aid and social solidarity that liberals pursued with passion but denied in words.

At the book's end, Derthick raises a question about democratic theory that is as vexing today as it was then. Can we ever regard a politics based on fiction, rhetoric, ambiguity, and paradox as democratic? Derthick rues the politics she so astutely observed as an obstacle to deliberative and open popular choice. As she sees it, Social Security leaders put one over on the people and saddled Americans with a program they might not have chosen had they known the truth. I am rather glad that Franklin Roosevelt and his heirs built a program that “no damn politician can ever scrap,”³ and less troubled than Derthick by the failure of politics to live up to the rational-analytic model, which I believe puts over its own fictions on the people. Nevertheless, Derthick understands that when competing values are at stake, policymaking is “indubitably political,” and no one has a keener analytic eye for the political than she.

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Notes

1. I named this and other paradoxes to highlight them, but the ideas are Derthick's.

2. See the Cato Institute web site at either www.cato.org or cleverly enough, www.socialsecurity.org. That a conservative, anti-Social Security

organization grabbed the "social security" URL is perhaps the most telling indicator of how Social Security politics have changed since the era covered by Derthick's book.

3. Roosevelt's comments about why he wanted to finance the Social Se-

curity system with payroll taxes, even though he knew they were regressive, quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 2, *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), pp. 308-9, and cited in Derthick's book on p. 230.