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Health care policy has attracted considerable attention in recent years from scholars, journalists, and policymakers. After a century-long struggle over health care reform, landmark health care legislation became law in 2010. Enactment of the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—hailed as the most sweeping social welfare measure to pass Congress since Social Security was established in 1935—has, in large part, spurred academics and others to scrutinize, and write about, health policy. The resulting books greatly enhance our understanding of the United States health care system.

This essay examines health care reform and the ACA through a critique of four recent, notable contributions to the literature: Paul Starr’s Remedy and Reaction: The Peculiar American Struggle Over Health Care Reform (2013); Steven Brill’s America’s Bitter Pill: Money, Politics, Backroom Deals, and the Fight to Fix Our Broken Healthcare System (2015); Ezekiel Emanuel’s Reinventing American Health Care: How the Affordable Care Act Will Improve Our Terribly Complex, Blatantly Unjust, Outrageously Expensive, Grossly Inefficient, Error Prone System (2014); and, Stephen Davidson’s A New Era in U.S. Health Care: Critical Next Steps Under the Affordable Care Act (2013). These books highlight the broad interest in health care policy, with authors representing diverse professional orientations and experiences.

Starr, a professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, boasts insider credentials beyond his academic ones—he focused on enacting health care reform as a senior White House health policy adviser under President Bill Clinton. Brill, a writer, lawyer, Yale University journalism instructor and more, is known for delving into complicated and salient policy issues. A generalist, Brill lacked health care policy expertise when he began investigating America’s health care system for his 2013 Time magazine story. In contrast, Emanuel, a professor of Medical Ethics and Health Policy at the University of Pennsylvania and founding chair of the National Institutes of Health Department of Bioethics, has firsthand medical and political knowledge. Trained as an oncologist specializing in breast cancer, Emanuel also was intimately involved with the ACA’s development, serving as a senior adviser on health care to President Barack Obama’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) from 2009–2011. And Davidson, a professor of Health Policy and Management at Boston University, has been engaged in the health care system as well, but from the delivery end rather than the policy making end. Davidson served on the board of a small, non-profit health center in Rhode Island.

This essay is organized into three sections. I first provide some general reflections on health care reform and the ACA through an examination of the authors’ explicit and implicit agreement on several key matters. I then critique each book’s strengths and weaknesses. Finally, I briefly explore a key difference among these four authors’ discussions of the ACA.

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