Editor’s Note: The articles in this symposium are revised versions of presentations made during a session at the SCSS’s 20th Annual Conference in New York in October 2012. The session consisted of three commentaries on a newly published book—Stephen M. Krason’s The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2012)—followed by a response from the author.

The Birth, Near Death, and Possible Resurrection of the American Experiment
Joseph A. Varacalli

This article first summarizes the thesis of Stephen M. Krason on the historical transformation of the American Democratic Republic. It then builds on the Krason thesis by providing an introductory analysis of two dysfunctional sectors of American life that must be addressed and corrected if the civilization is to be revitalized. These problematic sectors involve cultural and institutional-organizational life. Solutions can be provided through a Catholic sociology whose work in analysis and social policy formulation is led by the principles of the natural law and Catholic social thought.

INTRODUCTION

In the June, 2012 issue of Catalyst: Journal for the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, I wrote a short summary of Stephen M. Krason’s timely, knowledgeable, comprehensive, complex, and insightful treatise. Catalyst publisher William Donohue titled my short article, “The Evolving American Experiment.”1 The purpose of this additional short commentary, in contrast, is to “start where Krason ended,” that is, to introduce a brief, sociologically-informed discussion of the interrelated and mutually forming cultural and organizational problems that must be confronted if the deleterious transformation that Krason chronicles so well is to be reversed. Hopefully, such a discussion will assist others in spurring on and further developing an analysis of these problems and proposing and implementing solutions designed to resurrect and further perfect the American experiment.
BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE KRASON VOLUME

The Catalyst article portrayed the Krason thesis in the following manner. First, the American Founding, with certain important qualifications noted, was salutary and exceptional in shaping a new American civilization and also had beneficial consequences in world affairs. Second, American history, from 1789 to the present, can be usefully divided into eight historical periods. Third, over time, a host of interrelated and mutually shaping historical events, emerging institutional/structural developments, and the interventions of human actors have led to a dysfunctional transformation of the American project—moving away from the vision and reality of the Founding, including the principles of the natural law. As Krason states clearly, “there has been a transformation of the American Democratic Republic” (2012: xi). Fourth, this transformation raises the key question of whether the nature and degree of social change experienced throughout American history represents an organic development or approaches a revolution—that is, a “death” of the historical principles and practices of American society. On this point, in this reviewer’s opinion, Krason is ambiguous, and perhaps rightly so, as it can be argued that the question is not completely settled. Fifth, given the long term gestation of the forces of social change affecting American civilization, propelled significantly and especially since the mid-1960s, any solution aimed at recovering from its near death and restoring the health of American civilization must necessarily be long-term. Sixth and finally, for Krason, the primary solution to the crisis lies with the possibility of a re-energized, educated, and moral citizenry, cooperating with the dictates of the natural law, who re-enter American public, civil, and religious life working to institutionalize the common good.

While the Tea Party as a social movement is mentioned briefly by Krason as one possible example of an attempt to re-vitalize American civilization, his solutions offered in the volume under review primarily deal at the individual level of character development and moral regeneration and also through the organization-building efforts of the everyday citizen at the local community level. In short, Krason offers “small but doable” (2012: 498) proposals that have the added virtue of incorporating the input of educated and concerned citizens “that could begin to forge a foundation for restoration” (2012: 490). For Krason, then, “the possibility of restoration is not foreclosed” (2012: 498). Krason, as such, focuses on private sphere activities that, he suggests, can redress, over time and eventually, the present-day dysfunctions entrenched in the public sphere of American civilization. Translating Krason’s strategy into sociological terminology,
his hope is that “private sphere” initiatives turn into “mediating structures” that can eventually transform American “public sphere mega-structural” institutions into ones promoting and sustaining the common good. (See Krason’s earlier volume, *The Public Order and the Sacred Order*, in which he provides more extensive suggestions of both a general and specific nature, as to how to restore a healthy democratic republic.) Krason candidly and humbly admits that the suggestions that he offers up in both books “can be improved upon by other scholars and commentators” (2012: 490).

**FOCUS OF THIS REFLECTION**

My contribution to this symposium focuses on two problematic sectors of American civilization of particular import from the perspective of the Catholic sociologist. I suggest that any possible revitalization of the American Democratic Republic requires ultimately addressing fundamental and serious problems in American cultural and institutional-organizational life. By virtue of its stated intentions, scope of inquiry, and disciplinary focus, Krason’s volume doesn’t develop fully a cognitive analysis dissecting and explaining, or provide a normative analysis of how to redress, the pervasive and dysfunctional consequences of these societal developments. Any chance of restoring the American Democratic Republic in a manner that keeps within the parameters of Catholic social thought and Catholic social science depends, I submit, on finding solutions to the dysfunctions found in these social realms. My comments, again, are intended merely to complement and supplement Krason’s impressive treatise and—hopefully—to make some modest contribution to identifying and jump-starting solutions to the present crisis in American civilization.

**DYSFUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN CULTURE AND LANGUAGE**

The first dysfunctional development, at the level of culture, involves a predictable by-product of a civilization undergoing what sociologist James D. Hunter has aptly referred to as a “culture war” between moral communities and subcultures representing the civilization’s two endpoints, i.e., the religiously orthodox and secular progressives. Of special import to my discussion of the culture war taking place is the reality that the secular progressive wing, while perhaps less numerous than the religiously orthodox, are better and more firmly situated in the politically powerful public-sphere sectors of American life (e.g., government, education, and mass media).

A culture war assumes a fundamental fracture in what the classical sociologist Emile Durkheim termed a “collective conscience,” or over-
arching and unifying worldview, that provides a common set of normative
and cognitive definitions of reality that “bonds” or cements a civilization
together. While all modern (as compared to more homogeneous tradi-
tional) social contexts are pluralistic and contain numerous sub-cultures, 
the issue remains as to whether the present state of American pluralism
provides a healthy “diversity within unity” undergirded by the natural law
or instead leads to significant internal divisiveness, conflict, brutality (“a
war of all against all” in the Hobbesian formulation) and, perhaps eventu-
ally, dissolution. 

In this reviewer’s opinion, the culture war in the United States has ad-
vanced far enough to make meaningful dialogue and intellectual changes
between the significant and defining sectors of American civilization, i.e.,
the religiously orthodox and secular progressives, exceedingly difficult—
and perhaps one day, impossible. The American nation is approaching a
situation that is characterized by “incommensurable moralities.” The cul-
ture war, of course, has implications for another component of culture:
language. In the American social context, and in critiquing the progress-
ive side of the barricades, Catholic scholar Donald DeMarco wonders, as
such, “if language is still serviceable. . . . The word ‘bigot’ is now routinely
used, not to convey meaning but as a kind of verbal slap in the face, as an
expletive rather than as an argument. It signals the end of discourse and an
invitation to violence. Demonizing supporters of marriage between a man
and a woman does not change minds or hearts; it simply terminates dia-
logue and welcomes vandalism and warfare.” The overriding point here is
not only that the present state of American culture works strongly against
the likelihood of the various sectors of American life working together in a
cooperative fashion to solve commonly accepted “social problems.” Even
more fundamentally, the present state of the culture makes the very defini-
tion of a “social problem” itself problematic and contested.

When societal consensus shrinks, one possible reaction is to attempt
to institutionalize a set of common political, legal, and procedural ar-
rangements in which “people agree to disagree.” But even the latter as-
sumes some minimal common worldview or set of sacredly held values.
As consensus about the meaning of the American experiment continues
to unravel, naked power politics tends to fill the void, leading down the
road to incivility, rancor, and even violence among the different sectors of
society. Four ideal-typical responses can be envisioned in response to this
lack of any core consensus. In one possible response, this dysfunctional
state of affairs continues into the future for an undetermined period of
time. A second possibility is that one group becomes dominant enough to
institutionalize, primarily through naked coercion, either an authoritarian
or even totalitarian society under its control. At the present moment, the existence of a still sizeable, albeit reduced, American middle class reduces significantly this possibility. A third possibility is one in which one of the sides in the culture war is able, without resort to coercion, to successfully socialize or “evangelize” the citizenry into an acceptance of its worldview and sacredly held values. The inherent complexity and structured pluralism of modern life makes this latter scenario, if not impossible, very unlikely. Regarding options two and three, for the foreseeable future at least, it is unlikely that America will return to a fundamentally Christian/Judaic-Christian foundation or embrace a full-blown secularism through either coercion or consensus.

Rejecting violence and selfishness, the Catholic vision offers a fourth option. It is one going beyond the creation of a set of mutually agreed upon procedural rules and norms. It also rejects the unethical exercise of power politics and the temptation to consciously attempt to socialize all into one monolithic worldview. The Catholic vision, instead, works toward the institutionalization of a public philosophy undergirded by the principles of natural-law thinking. Such a public philosophy incorporates the idea of diversity within unity, provided that absolute moral norms regarding the fundamental dignity of the human being, especially but not exclusively on right to life issues, are not being violated. This project, exceedingly difficult to enact but worthy of an all-out attempt, would require: 1) a strengthening of the Catholic Church as a “mediating structure” and its ability to implement the “new evangelization” of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI; and 2) an ecumenical outreach to religious and cultural communities which are based, even if the nomenclature isn’t immediately recognized as such, on the natural law. Such a vision, while requiring consensus on issues of universal moral import, allows, even encourages, pluralism and prudential disagreements on issues that are legitimately debatable.

**DYSFUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL AND GROUP DEVELOPMENTS**

The second development is at the level of the institutional-organizational life within the modern social context. It involves the spread of inward-looking, self-serving, constantly expanding, and ever more powerful, mega-structural bureaucracies of the public sphere administered, variously and especially, by a socialist-leaning class of gnostic elites in government and by capitalist leaders in the large corporations. Such an analysis builds on the work of two classical sociologists. The first is Max Weber, through his related discussions of the “rationalization of the world,” the spread of “rational” forms of social action, and the growth of bureaucracy. The
second is Georg Simmel through his discussion of the move toward expanding social circles and the abstract society, with its implications for the increasing individualism and unfettered freedom of the individual, at least in the private spheres of social existence, and the move away from transparency and accountability in morality and human relations.8

The discipline of sociology has had much to say about both the positive and negative features of bureaucracy in modern society. For Weber, it was rationalization that marked the move from traditional to modern social contexts, the latter characterized by a general increase in the material level of well-being in part precisely because of the spread of bureaucratic means of production and distribution. A bureaucracy, at its most simple, is the attempt to organize human beings in a machine-like fashion in order to produce, ideally at least, goods and services efficiently, effectively, and in large quantities. It would be inconceivable, for instance, for a Weberian sociologist to imagine a modern “mass” American society of well over 300 million individuals surviving in an orderly fashion and in some cases flourishing, without the application of certain rational procedures in organizing social life in such fundamental areas as food and housing production, education and health care, military and police protection, and, in the case in point, in government/politics and in business/corporate life. As such, a Weberian sociologist would certainly agree to the proposition that “a modern society can’t live without bureaucracy.”

Prominent among Weber’s numerous distinctions on the nature of rationality is that between “substantive” rationality and “formal” rationality. The former refers to the logical pursuit of a value or normative orientation. Put another way, substantive rationality entails the “rational” choosing of means to ends, with the ends being guided by some larger ethical system (e.g., Catholic social thought, the social gospel, conservative Protestantism, or secular humanism). Formal rationality refers to the application of “in-house” rules in a bureaucratic setting, whether governmental or in private enterprise. Put another way, for Weber, in the exercise of formal rationality, the choice of means to ends is not shaped by any ethical system but by the rules and laws of the bureaucracy in question.

In the modern context Weber saw substantive rationality waning at the expense of the waxing of a formal rationality as the former becomes harder to implement and institutionalize in societies dominated by public sphere bureaucracies with their tendency toward dominance and monopoly in societal affairs. Conversely and correspondingly, for Weber, the modern movement is toward relegating increasingly residual ethical thought to the non-public or private-sphere sectors of society (e.g., family, friends, neighborhood). Simply put, for Weber, modern-day individuals,
when operating in the public sphere, are increasingly less likely to make
decisions based on large-scale ethical systems and issues of ultimate con-
cern and personal commitment and more likely to do so on the basis of
rules and regulations associated with the bureaucratic imperative. This led
Weber to pronounce his famous claim that modern man is increasingly
trapped within an “iron cage of mechanized petrification” associated with
a general de-spiritualization or “disenchantment of the world.” As such,
many contemporary sociologists influenced by Weber accept the paradoxi-
cal claim that “apparently we can’t live with bureaucracy either, or at least
live easily with it.”

A Catholic sociological response to Weber would not deny some sig-
nificant element of truth in Weber’s formulation but would demur from
its heavy pessimism and seemingly ironclad determinism. (I say “seem-
ingly” because Weber does admit of the slight possibility in the future of a
rebirth of the once-great ethical systems of the past.) The Catholic vision,
as fundamentally incarnational and sacramental and without succumbing
to a false utopianism and denial of original sin, posits that interventions
based on universal principles of social life (e.g., solidarity, subsidiarity,
fundamental dignity of the individual) can humanize social relations and
bring the light of the Gospel, albeit it in attenuated form, into any sector of
the societal framework, including the public sphere of modern societies.

Since Weber’s initial forays into the topic, sociological research has
added numerous and more specific examples of the dysfunctions generic
both to 1) bureaucracy as a special type of secondary group and 2) group
life in general, which, when operant within bureaucracies, represent seri-
ous obstacles to the reform of public-sphere institutions. Part of the expla-
nation for these dysfunctions can be discovered by employing standard so-
ciological reasoning involving the issues of power and authority, structural
issues like spatial and moral distance from the average citizen, and flawed
or inoperative procedures in bureaucratic review and accountability. How-
ever, part of the explanation must be obtained using reasoning outside of
a secular sociology but well within the purview of the Catholic sociolo-
gist. This involves the existence of: 1) a human nature, to some significant
degree inherently ethnocentric and self-serving; and 2) manifestations of
original sin and supernatural evil (the Nazi concentration camp as a bu-
reaucracy representing just one prominent example of the latter).

Regarding bureaucracy, the classical sociologist/political scientist Ro-
berto Michels analyzed what he termed the “iron law of oligarchy” or how
organizational elites make the ideological claim that they are concerned
with the common good but are actually promoting their self-centered inter-
est. In his volume, Political Parties, he debunked brilliantly the activities
of socialist elites; as Michels puts it so tellingly, “socialism may fail, but the socialist will triumph.” This insight of Michels is oft-times relevant to a host of governmental, educational, and business organizations. Similarly, sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, through her analysis of “corporate culture,” points out that individual opportunities for important assignments and advance in a bureaucracy are affected by the existence of cliques and in-groups and are not necessarily based on merit. Sociologist Irving Janis discusses the reality of “group think” that operates in many organizations, in which an organization’s leadership circle believes that there is only one correct answer to any policy question and views alternative suggestions and ideas as a sign of disloyalty and betrayal. Sociologist Philip Selznick coined the term “goal displacement” to argue that whenever a bureaucracy meets the goals it was created to address, it will almost inevitably look for substitute goals, whether worthy or not. In other words, bureaucracies too often exist not merely as a means to realizing needed societal goals but rather as ends unto themselves, for purposes of power, employment, and status. In his portrayal of the “McDonaldization of society,” sociologist George Ritzer documents, in both government and private enterprise, the movement toward standardization, homogenization, monopolization, and political correctness. Conversely, this produces a social context not conducive to authentic individual creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit. Paul M. Harrison notes a form of unofficial “rational-pragmatic” authority, not fully legal in nature, which points out that often, bureaucrats, removed from public sight and accountability, make policy and create programs simply by pursuing them with single-minded enthusiasm, even though the authority on which they are based is very ambiguous and debatable. Put simply, the bureaucrat, short of some vigorous and overwhelming opposition, fills a void in authority with his/her own designs.

There are also generic group tendencies as discussed by social scientists that affect the bureaucratic and corporate world and that make true cultural and organizational reform difficult. Solomon Asch observed that most people succumb to peer group pressure and are willing to say things they know are not truthful. This tendency exponentially increases when employment and promotion considerations are involved. Stanley Milgram noted that too often individuals are capable of cooperating in acts of evil as they tend to accept the “authority” of those in leadership positions in organizational life. Robert Merton argues that the existence of “in-groups” and “out-groups” in social life, including bureaucracies, tends to produce “double-standards.” In other words, bureaucratic in-groups tend to favor the vision and interests of some groups over others based not on merit or need but on characteristics that are overtly particularistic and partisan and
involve the naked exercise of power to reward those with whom they agree or are in alliance with, either overtly or not. A general point from the sociological social-psychological perspective of “symbolic interaction” is here relevant and implies a criticism of Weber’s more formal or structural analysis: Bureaucracies may indeed be founded on rules but oft-times clever and willful bureaucrats can successfully manipulate them for their own interests and causes.

In sum, on the one hand, bureaucracies are necessary in the modern context. On the other hand, their programs and activities are necessarily implemented by human beings who have a selfinterested side and are also motivated by various non-rational and emotional considerations, sometimes completely subverting the normally noble justifications offered for their existence.

There are certain requirements that will ensure that bureaucracies are a more positive rather than negative force in society. For one, they require virtuous, self-reflective, and self-critical personnel to administer them—dependent, in part, on the cultural imperative to strengthen the American moral system. Secondly, there is a need for some significant degree of de-centralization in which the Catholic concept of subsidiarity must be employed prudentially as a way to determine which legitimate social goals 1) should be pursued by more local agencies in the community, by voluntary associations, and the family versus public-sphere bureaucracies, and 2) should be implemented at the state and local versus the federal level. Thirdly, certain safeguards must be instituted and grounded on a realistic understanding of human nature (e.g., transparency, a vigorous system of both internal and external review, public accountability and input, effective checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the American government). In short, bureaucracies should exist as a rational means to reaching noble human ends and not as entities existing for themselves and for those who control them.

IS RESTORATION POSSIBLE?

Viewed from the framework of many secular social thinkers and scholarly paradigms that emphasize the existing state of cultural and institutional arrangements, the prospect of any resurrection of the American Democratic Republic along the lines envisioned by Krason is not particularly hopeful. However, those who trust in human cooperation with divine providence have more cause for hope. History has continually shown that, many times, the “inevitable” has proven to be anything but that. One may simply cite the fall of the seemingly invincible Soviet Union, a socio-political system that President Ronald Reagan aptly referred to as an “evil empire.” Seri-
ous Catholics, for their part, should follow the injunction of St. Ignatius of Loyola: “pray as if everything depends on God but act as if everything depends on us.”

**CONCLUSION**

Humanly speaking, Stephen M. Krason’s hopes of resurrecting and further perfecting the American democratic republic requires, among other things, cultural revitalization, decentralization along the lines of the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, and the instituting of procedural reforms in the way that bureaucracies, governmental and corporate, operate in society. And it is important to remember that cultural revitalization and organizational reforms and safeguards are mutually related. In short, virtuous bureaucrats socialized in a life-affirming culture can reform bureaucracy while bureaucratic reforms can put a lid on the abuses of those bureaucrats who are not particularly virtuous in their character. The call here is to expand Dr. Krason’s indispensable research in *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*. The membership of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists is particularly well suited to take up this call for scholarship that is interdisciplinary, competently executed, ethically informed, and led by the principles of the natural law and Catholic social thought. Such scholarship can incisively analyze and propose solutions to reform American civilization, arguably still the world’s “last, best hope.”

**Notes**


11. “Symbolic interactionism” is a major “micro” or “social-psychological” approach to studying social interaction and hence more attuned to the machinations oftentimes employed by individuals in group life. Also see the intellectual corpus of the sociologist Erving Goffman, starting with his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959).