The Future of the American Experiment and of the Tea Party Movement from the Perspective of Catholic Social Thought and Catholic Sociology

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This review essay provides a critique, from a Catholic social thought and Catholic sociological perspective, of two important books that offer divergent interpretations of the direction of American civilization and of the significance of the Tea Party movement/philosophy. Specifically devoted to a critique of the Tea Party movement, The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism, by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson (Oxford University Press, 2012), is written from a secular progressive sociological perspective that assumes the inevitability and desirability of an advanced welfare state. While not specifically devoted to analyzing the Tea Party movement, Tea Party Catholic, by Samuel Gregg (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013), quite consciously constructs a public philosophy articulating and defending a democratic capitalist worldview that is compatible, as a prudential application, with an authentic Catholic perspective that builds on the work of Catholic theologian Michael Novak (e.g., The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism [Simon & Schuster, 1982] and Freedom with Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions [Harper & Row, 1984]). Vis-à-vis the Skocpol and Williamson volume, the Gregg volume is more sympathetic to the Tea Party movement, especially with its non-libertarian component. Other volumes are mentioned and incorporated in the review essay insofar as they deal with various cognitive and normative analyses of the present general direction of American civilization and of the Tea Party alternative.

The culture war in American civilization, as first discussed by James D. Hunter in his 1991 volume, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, continues to intensify into the second decade of the twenty-first century. On one side of the barricades stands an increasingly powerful and growing secular progressive movement institutionalized especially within the federal government, academia, and the mass media and orchestrated by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and its present leader, President Barack Obama. On the other side stands a wide variety of groups opposed to the present direction of American civilization regarding the growth of
government and its correlates in taxation, spending, the national debt, and in the authoritarian tendencies associated with statism. The general direction of American civilization that forms the backdrop for this review essay is analyzed in the intellectually impressive and compelling treatise of Stephen M. Krason, The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic (2012).

Central to opposing the move to statism is the contemporary Tea Party movement, which arose toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Internally variegated and constantly evolving, the two most prominent wings of the Tea Party are secular libertarians and religiously orthodox elements of the Judaic-Christian heritage. Other groups, including political independents and the more moderate elements of the “FDR coalition,” while not formally identified as part of the Tea Party movement, share some selective but significant sympathy with the Tea Party in that they recognize and are concerned about the excesses associated with the move toward statism.

INTRODUCTION: THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT

The Tea Party is an example of what can be termed a “revitalization” movement, significantly of populist origin, although, once created, supported by some establishment Republican and conservative organizations. More specifically, the Tea Party movement sees itself as trying to restore a society-wide commitment to the vision of the American Founding and to the basic institutional arrangements of the early American Republic or at least to some conception of American civilization that is in an organic or developmental relationship to the ideals and reality of the American Founding. Rejecting the promotion of any revolutionary option vis-à-vis the historical underlying principles or reality of American civilization, the Tea Party movement desires, minimally speaking, to reverse the present day trajectory in America toward an advanced welfare state veering increasingly closer to socialism. Some members of the Tea Party—I’ll term them “minimalists”—are of a libertarian bent whose involvement in the Tea Party centers on opposition to statism, to conscious attempts at the redistribution of economic resources, and to the corresponding reduction of individual liberty. For many other members of the Tea Party movement—I’ll term them “maximalists”—the reform agenda of the Tea Party movement includes but goes beyond political and economic reform and reaches into issues of religious and cultural regeneration. The “minimalist” argument is made by, for instance, Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe in Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto (2011). The “maximalist” argument is put forth by, for instance, David Brody in The Teavangelicals: The
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One of the books under present review, Tea Party Catholic, is closer, relatively speaking, to the line of thought of David Brody as compared to that of Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe. As Gregg makes clear, “the Catholic case for limited government, the free economy, and religious liberty is very different from that of many self-described libertarians, let alone Randians” (Gregg 2013: 22). Indeed, Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, the co-authors of the other volume under review, note the “uneasy alliance” that exists within the Tea Party movement between, on the one hand, “libertarians and other socially tolerant fiscal hardliners” and, on the other hand, “social conservatives” (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 40). “To make it all work,” Skocpol and Williamson acknowledge, Tea Party “members and leaders alike must bridge differences or fudge them” (2012: 40). This brings up an important question for futurologists: Will the Tea Party coalition hold, especially if the movement in American society toward a soft socialism is arrested? If the latter were to occur, it would not be surprising to witness secular libertarians “switching their guns” in a radically different direction by opposing cultural and religious conservatives and joining in alliance with other secularists by focusing on such issues as same-sex marriage, abortion rights, and the legalization of drugs. Put another way, the fault lines of possible future culture wars in America will undoubtedly shift with new socio-historical developments.

While most objective observers of the Tea Party movement recognize the existence of these two wings of the Tea Party movement, there is nonetheless a basic disagreement between progressives and conservatives as to the historical accuracy of the latter’s claims of a fundamental continuity between the contemporary Tea Party movement and the ideals and reality of the Founding period of the American Republic. Progressive historian Jill Lepore (The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle Over American History, 2011) disputes the accuracy of any effective historical connection, referring to Tea Party history as an example of an ahistorical and unreal fundamentalism. Lepore’s position is accepted by Skocpol and Williamson, who argue that the Tea Party movement is determined in its futile effort “to restore twenty-first century U.S. government to the Constitutional principles articulated by the eighteenth century Founding Fathers” (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 48). For Tea Partiers, the co-authors continue, “the invocation of Constitutional authority seems to render particular views incontestable” (2012:49).

Most supporters of the Tea Party Movement would argue that, some specific historical particulars aside, the essence of their movement is quite
consistent with the vision and practice of the American Founding. In their own respective volumes, both Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe (2011) and Scott Rasmussen and Douglas Schoen (*Mad as Hell: How the Tea Party Movement is Fundamentally Remaking Our Two Party System*, 2011) concur with this cognitive claim of the Tea Party. As Armey and Kibbe state, “we believe that Americans have always stood for liberty and possess an innate sense of responsibility to guard their freedoms” (2011: 11). Rasmussen and Schoen similarly claim that “the Tea Party movement embodies . . . the anti-systematic, anti-government, individualistic principles of the Nation’s Founders that influence many of the core principles of modern day populism” (2011: 41). Samuel Gregg, for his part, acknowledges that “one reason for the Tea Party’s success in quickly attracting support from millions of Americans was surely its name. This resonates with Americans because it harks back to the American Founding and the Revolution that gave birth to a bold and (thus far) lasting experiment in human liberty” (2013: 30). Of passing note is that orthodox Catholic scholars like Samuel Gregg in his volume under review and Stephen M. Krason (*The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*, 2012) would demur from any characterization of the American Founding as excessively individualistic and devoid of a significant recognition of the role of the natural law in moderating individualism in the early American Republic. As such, both Gregg and Krason follow Pope Benedict XVI who, in his 2008 “Welcome Address to the White House,” affirmed that, from the dawn of the Republic, America’s quest for freedom has been guided by the conviction that the principles governing political and social life are intimately linked to a moral order based on the dominion of God the Creator. The framers of this nation’s founding documents drew upon this conclusion when they proclaimed the “self-evident truth” that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights grounded in the laws of nature and of nature’s God. (quoted in Gregg 2013: 190)

**THE CENTRAL TASK OF THIS REVIEW ESSAY**

The central task of this review essay is, with a critical eye from a general Catholic intellectual sensibility, to juxtapose and compare the *implicit cognitive and normative assumptions and explicit cognitive and normative interpretations* of both, respectively, the Skocpol and Williamson (*Remaking of Republican Conservatism*) and the Gregg (*Tea Party Catholic*) volumes regarding the general direction of American civilization and the significance of the Tea Party movement and philosophy. It should be noted,
in passing, that the respective volumes are not directly comparable given that the focus of Skocpol and Williamson explicitly is on an analysis of the Tea Party as a social movement from a perspective supportive of an advanced welfare state society while the focus of Gregg is on the articulation of a philosophical worldview derived from a Catholic Social Thought perspective promoting a democratic capitalist society. Despite these somewhat different foci, the comparison of the two volumes provides a stark contrast which itself represents a ringing confirmation and indication of the saliency of the American culture war thesis of James D. Hunter (1991).

**IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPLICIT INTERPRETATIONS**

**On Statism**

For Skocpol and Williamson, the movement of American civilization to its present status as an advanced welfare state society based on a great deal of government taxation and spending implicitly is viewed as inevitable and salutary, and furthermore, the continual movement toward a soft socialism is inexorable and represents a natural evolution toward some unstated vision of progress. Instead of viewing the emergence of the Tea Party movement as a plausible and perhaps expected reassertion of well-grounded American historical principles, the co-authors admit that they view it as a “puzzling outburst” (2012: ix), that is, as a surprising but ultimately transient phenomenon.

For Gregg, the acknowledgement of the empirically verifiable movement toward an advanced welfare state is beyond dispute, but unlike Skocpol and Williamson, he consciously considers the movement excessive and fraught with dysfunctions for both society and the individual. Gregg, for instance, documents that “the welfare state has increasingly become a means for disseminating distinctly secularist and materialistic views of the human person” (2013: 25) and notes “the connection now made by many Catholics between economically expansionist government and the often negative implications for religious freedom” (2013: 25). Moreover, and contra any straight-line evolutionary historical process, he notes the existence of the Tea Party movement consisting of secular libertarians and members of the Judaic-Christian heritage who are mobilizing in opposition to the Statist tendencies of the day. As Gregg declares, “The emergence of what came to be known as the ‘Tea Party’ movement . . . was a direct response by Americans from a surprising variety of backgrounds against the general sense that government had become too big, too interventionist, and too dismissive of many Americans’ concerns about the
economic and moral effects of an economically expansionist state” (2013: 18). However, Gregg makes perfectly clear that, given his acceptance of a Catholic worldview and his embrace of the concept of “subsidiarity,” “to be in favor of limited government and dubious about the prudence of extensive government economic intervention does not mean that one is necessarily opposed to government, per se” (2013: 21). Gregg, as a matter of fact, links his own Catholic Tea Party perspective to the worldview of Charles Carroll, the sole Catholic signatory of the Declaration of Independence. For Gregg, “Carroll was quite aware that the Catholic Church had always insisted that the State had certain legitimate functions. Yet the same Church also maintained—and continues to do so—that there are bounds beyond which government cannot go” (2013: 36). More specific to the main concern of his own volume, Gregg focuses on a movement away from an advanced welfare state mentality on the part of the contemporary younger generation of Catholic Americans who take their religious perspective seriously. Gregg notes, in this regard, that, vis-à-vis the immediately preceding generations of Catholic Americans, “a good number of them . . . [have] articulated far more positive assessments of free enterprise and free markets. . . . Without being instinctively anti-government or even ‘libertarian,’ they were more often skeptical of the efficaciousness of government intervention than their parents and grandparents” (2013: 10). Furthermore, for Gregg, “entrepreneurship, economic liberty, and the market economy are not simply more efficient than the alternatives; they also create tremendous opportunities for human flourishing” (2013: 37). To the contrary, Gregg understands present day nominal Catholics—much more accepting of the general processes of secularization—to be more likely to agree with, or be indifferent toward, the movement toward statism.

On the Sources of Social Reform

For Skocpol and Williamson, it is implied that the only effective and enlightened agent of social change is government (especially at the federal level), assisted by other public sphere institutions that are dominated by secular progressives (especially in formal education and in most of the mass media). Correspondingly, any enlightened civilization should be led by a secular cultural elite and not by the populist sentiments of “average citizens.” To refer to the terminology of sociologist Peter L. Berger, what the co-authors imply is that the ascendancy of the “new knowledge class” (or, perhaps, better yet, “gnostic class”) is both inexorable and beneficial. The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act or “Obama-Care,” signed by President Barack Obama on March 23, 2010 (2012: 3), represented a milestone in such statist thinking and action. It is impor-
tant to note, for the co-authors, that President Obama is offering American civilization what they term a “reform” agenda (2012: 5). (Tea Partiers, by contrast, view President Obama’s policies as far more radical in nature, representing an attempt to radically transform the nature of the existing American Democratic Republic.)

For Gregg, the appropriate approach to social order and social change is through the acceptance and application of various interrelated principles of Catholic Social Thought. One is *subsidiarity* which, while focusing on the role of intermediate institutions or mediating structures like the family, neighborhood, and voluntary associations, incorporates an important, but more limited, role for government regarding those social policy issues that can best be dealt with at that level. Gregg quotes Pope John Paul II’s interpretation of subsidiarity in his encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, number 48, as follows: “[a] community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society always with a view to the common good” (2013: 104). As Gregg suggests, “there are better ways for Americans to realize their concrete obligations to those in need than large welfare states (not least through churches and other intermediate associations) and in a manner which contributes to the integral development of those being assisted” (2013: 37). Furthermore, Gregg follows that “the market economy and the ideal of limited government are more reliant on a strong civil society, intact families, and a robust moral culture than many people realize” (2013: 37). Another principle of Catholic Social Thought incorporated in the Gregg volume is that of the *common good*. In *Gaudium et Spes*, it is defined as “the sum of those considerations of the social life whereby men, families, and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection” (1965: n. 74). Yet another Catholic social thought principle employed is that of *solidarity*. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II speaks of solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say to the good of all and each individual because we are all really responsible for all” (1987: n. 38). Gregg skillfully applies these principles of Catholic Social Thought and a general Catholic sensibility in his analysis of what he terms the “Catholic Tea Party philosophy.”

**On Culture and Social Structures**

For Skocpol and Williamson, there is an *implied* acceptance of the “structural” argument of sociologists like William J. Wilson (*The Truly Disadvantaged*, 1987) which assumes, in terms of one’s understanding of human

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nature, that all individuals are basically the same in terms of their essential values affirming a positive work ethic and ethical responsibility in everyday affairs. From such an assumption follows the claim that when individuals do not succeed in society it is almost always and predominately a function of a lack of “equal opportunity,” the remedy for which is almost always government intervention and social welfare programs. Conversely, for the co-authors, “in talking to Tea Party activists, you hear echoes of Reagan-era stories of ‘welfare queens’ and Nixonian rhetoric about the ‘silent majority,’ . . . [the latter] for whom Tea Partiers think they speak” (Skocpol and Williamson 2012: 81). In terms of their understanding of human nature, Skocpol and Williamson observe that “Tea Partiers have negative views of all of their fellow citizens; it is just that they make extra-jaundiced assessments of the work ethic of racial and ethnic minorities” (2012: 69).

For Gregg, “culture” counts as an independent force alongside of “structure.” While Gregg consciously rejects the thesis of the classical sociologist, Max Weber, about the economic effects of the Protestant versus Catholic ethic towards the significance of work (2013: 65-71), his analysis is much more open to acknowledging an important role for cultural formation in individual character development. Gregg refers approvingly to the 1987 papal encyclical, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (n. 15), in which Pope John Paul II notes the present cultural and social tendency to suppress economic initiative in the name of equality which produces not equality but a loss of the “creative subjectivity” of the citizen, a “leveling down” of society, and greater passivity, dependence, and submission to bureaucracy on the part of individuals (2013: 75). Furthermore and conversely, Gregg emphasizes the vital moral and ethical shaping ability of healthy family, religious, civic, and other voluntary organizations. Gregg’s understanding of human nature is the classic Catholic Thomistic-Augustianian worldview of “realism” which is situated between a secular utopianism and the traditional Calvinist understanding of humanity’s utter depravity. Pope John Paul II, for instance, reaffirms this Catholic position when he states in Centesimus Annus (1991) that “man tends toward good but is also capable of evil. He can transcend his immediate interest and still remain bound to it” (n. 25).

On the Character of the Tea Party Movement

For Skocpol and Williamson, the Tea Party movement represents an unexpected, unwelcome, and temporary “bump in the road” that opposes the present trend toward the institutionalization of a soft socialism in the United States. Members of the Tea Party “are overwhelmingly older white citizens, relatively well-educated, and economically comfortable compared to Americans in general” (2012: 20) who are resisting the ultimately inevi-
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table immersion into the secular advanced welfare state. Implicitly, the co-authors view Tea Partiers as holding an outdated and backward worldview. As the co-authors state, “it is hard to see the Tea Party . . . hanging together for many more years. . . . [The Tea Partiers] must find ways to appeal to younger cohorts of Americans, who are more racially diverse or their decline is assured. . . . Tea Party activism is a generationally bounded variant of long-standing forms of conservative populism in America” (2012: 203, 205). Put another way, the co-authors cannot envision a future scenario in which a significant percentage of young people or recent immigrants (e.g., Hispanics) or future generations of Americans shift over to conservative or Republican allegiances.

For Gregg, the Tea Party movement (which, admittedly, he refers to only periodically in his text) is a development that comes as no surprise given his understanding of the dysfunctional direction of American civilization and of the historical future as basically open and subject to the influence of the activities of individuals, groups, and social movements. As Gregg states, “The Tea Party’s emergence is . . . living proof . . . that the United States is a propositional nation. . . . By that . . . [is] meant . . . [that] America has the capacity to renew itself by going back to its moral, cultural, and religious founding” (2013: 30). Gregg, furthermore, makes clear that his book is not about the Tea Party movement or any group that claims that name. But the millions of Americans who are, in some way involved or associated with various “Tea Party” ideas and more broadly limited government initiatives have been derided by many commentators as extremists, antigovernment cranks, and, even, in some cases, as racists. . . . But to describe the Tea Party movement in such terms, let alone the millions of Americans who favor limited government, is patently unfair, not to mention empirically questionable. (Gregg 2013: 21)

On the Goals of the Tea Party Movement

For Skocpol and Williamson, the primary goal of the Tea Party movement is to oppose the present existence and further development of an advanced welfare state/soft socialism which promotes a fundamental redistribution of economic resources in the United States, one which takes from both the wealthy and the middle-classes and gives to the relatively underprivileged. As the co-authors state, “in the worldview of Tea Party participants, government efforts at redistribution have skewed the rewards and costs that should rightly be apportioned by the market” (2012: 31). For the co-
authors, the primary economic goals of the Tea Party movement are to cut taxes, reduce public expenditures, limit public-sector unions, and remove many regulations on business. Secondarily, they see much of the Tea Party movement committed to a social and cultural agenda uncongenial to progressive-oriented politics (e.g., opposing illegal immigration, monitoring crime among certain sectors of the immigrant community, protecting gun rights, furthering traditional family values, and promoting a pro-life agenda). Furthermore, for the co-authors, Tea Partiers are not open to intelligent compromise and are unnecessarily unremittent in their harsh political demands (2012: 4).

For Gregg, the goals of the Tea Party movement serve as a needed corrective to the movement towards a secular soft socialism but should be moderated and corrected in light of an authentic Catholic worldview. Government, unions, regulations, and a concern for immigrants and the disenfranchised are legitimate issues to be reaffirmed, but they must be re-oriented to, and implemented in a manner consistent with, the common good, through intelligent reforms consistent with Catholic Social Thought. For Gregg, more substantial reform of the Tea Party movement is required of its secular-libertarian component than of its Judaic-Christian element.

**On Race and Ethnicity in the Tea Party Movement**

For Skocpol and Williamson, the Tea Party movement and philosophy is *implicitly* viewed as a backward-looking attempt to return American society to a pre-advanced welfare state era of greater social inequality and to one when non-white minorities (and secular elites) with politically progressive allegiances were not as powerful as they now are on the contemporary scene. As the co-authors state, “Tea Party members establish themselves as worthy Americans in terms of the contributions they have made—and contrast themselves to other categories of people who have not worked to make their way in society and thus do not deserve taxpayer funded support” (2012: 66). In this vein, the co-authors speak of a “grey” versus “brown” divide in America “where recent immigrants coexist with older whites who were reared and began their working lives in an era of restrictive immigration” (2012: 204). *Implicit* in the analysis of the co-authors are the related propositions that 1) present-day minorities have unacceptably difficult hurdles to overcome in their attempt at upward social mobility and 2) the larger the federal government and the more “social justice” policy initiatives and programs the latter generates, the better.

For Gregg, the Tea Party movement is an attempt on the part of mostly lower-middle-class and middle-class “average” Americans—significantly but by no means exclusively, consisting of white American Protestant
Christians—to preserve their understanding of the nature of the historic American Experiment. For their part, Catholics who are both religiously orthodox and in some way aligned with, or sympathetic to, the Tea Party movement, also are intent to “take America back” to their understanding of the founding first principles of the American Republic, but organically understood in the direction of natural-law thinking and worldviews consistent and compatible with Catholic social thought. Strewn throughout Gregg’s volume are calls emanating from a Catholic Tea Party philosophy to oppose the present societal dysfunctions in values (e.g., secularism, materialism, autonomous individualism, statism, welfare dependency) and, conversely, to promote those requirements necessary for human flourishing to bloom (e.g., strengthening of intermediate institutions like the family, reform in government and in public-sector unions, resurgence of the belief in truth, morality, goodness, beauty, communion with one’s neighbors, religious liberty).

**On the Economic Policies of the Tea Party Movement**

For Skocpol and Williamson, calls by Republican Party and conservative elites and by the Tea Party movement for tax cuts, deregulation of business, reduced spending, and debt reduction are policies that promote an increase in an unjustifiable social inequality and are, objectively speaking, in the selfish interest of the wealthy and, conversely, are not aimed to stimulate the overall economy and create jobs and save government from insolvency. It is important to note that the research of the co-authors indicates that only some Republican, conservative, and Tea Party elites put forth suggestions for the privatization of Social Security and Medicare and that these calls are rejected by the Tea Party rank and file.

For Gregg, the above social policies, in principle, can be implemented provided they promote the common good, and conversely, do not primarily serve the self-centered interests of any partisan American group or arrangement. Of important note here is Gregg’s distinction between truly competitive markets, as defended in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004: n. 347), and “crony capitalism” (2013: 164).

**On the Tea Party as an “Extremist” Movement**

For Skocpol and Williamson, the Tea Party movement is an “ultra” or “extreme” right-wing movement. Put into sociological terminology, the Tea Party movement is depicted, in some ways, as closer to an American “counter-culture” than it is to an American “sub-culture” vis-à-vis its own value system to that of the dominant value system generated in the American public sphere by progressive elites. While a sub-culture would
represent a legitimate variation of mainstream American life, a “counterculture” represents a group in basic opposition to the general consensus of what America is currently all about. For the co-authors,

“Tea Partiers” would not hear of compromises, and pushed GOP officials to act quickly and unremittingly: to reduce taxes, slash public spending, curb public sector unions, and clear away regulations on business. Policing immigrants, safeguarding Second Amendment gun rights, and promoting pro-life and traditional family values were also important goals for many at the grass roots. (2012: 4)

They add, “compared to other Americans, including other conservatives, Tea Party participants more readily subscribe to harsh generalizations about immigrants and blacks” (2012: 11). Skocpol and Williamson depict the constituency of the Tea Party movement, for the most part, as uncompromising, sect-like, and indifferent and even hostile toward the needs of the relatively disenfranchised lower socio-economic strata for the programs of what they judge as a caring, advanced welfare state. Moreover, the co-authors claim that Tea Partiers view those situated toward the bottom of the American stratification system as “free-loaders who have not earned public support” (2012: 60). As the co-authors elaborate, “Tea Partiers favor generous social benefits for Americans who ‘earn’ them, yet in an era of rising federal deficits, they are very concerned about being stuck with the tab to pay for ‘unearned’ entitlements handed out to unworthy categories of people” (2012: 56).

For Gregg, the Tea Party movement and philosophy represents a clear example of an American sub-culture whose ideas and activities deserve respect and represent legitimately debatable prudential options for serious American citizens to contemplate. (Given the existence of the present-day culture war which, more or less, evenly divides Americans, it is implicit in Gregg’s analysis that there are no reasonable criteria outside of Catholic or natural law analysis that can be fairly employed to assign more or less status or respect to the cognitive or normative claims of either American progressives or to those of American conservatives and traditional religionists.)

On the Tea Party’s Relationship to Party Politics

For Skocpol and Williamson, the Tea Party movement has pushed the Republican Party sharply to the political right and has brought a great deal of financial support into the coffers of both Republican and conservative organizations. Furthermore, Tea Party influence represents a distortion of
the true character of the Republican Party as representative of a major, moderate, and respectable political party in America. As the co-authors declare, “Tea Party activists at the grass roots and the right wing advocates roving the national landscape with billionaire backing have designs on the Republican Party. They want to remake it into a much more uncompromising and ideologically principled force. As the Tea Party forces make headway in achieving this ideological purification, they spur movement of the Republican Party ever further toward the right” (2012: 155).

For Gregg, it is implicitly assumed in his analysis that the current Democratic Party is presently captivated and manipulated by extreme secular progressives unrepresentative of any American sector claiming an organic or developmental relationship with the founding American political, cultural, or religious heritage.

**On the Populism of the Tea Party Movement**

For Skocpol and Williamson, the Tea Party movement is manipulated significantly and supported cynically by American corporate and conservative ideological elites. They assert this despite acknowledging, as an aside, that regarding the “age-old staple of grassroots civic activism, . . . the Tea Party of the early twenty-first century really does have elements that go all the way back to the Founding Fathers—and to the Founding Mothers” (2012: 44). The co-authors believe, in other words, that the Tea Party claim that it is a mass movement of “regular” Americans is only a small part of the truth. . . . The Tea Party, understood in its entirety, includes media hosts and wealthy political action committees, plus national advocacy groups and self-proclaimed spokespersons—elites that wield many millions of dollars in political contributions and appear all over the media claiming to speak for grassroots activists who certainly have not elected them, and to whom they are not accountable. (2012: 11)

As the co-authors state, “the challenge of spreading and germinating the Tea Party idea was surmounted with impressive ease because a major sector of U.S. media is openly partisan—including Fox News Channel, the right wing ‘blogosphere’ and a national network of right wing talk radio programs” (2012: 123). As a matter of fact, the co-authors admit in their Introduction that one of the co-authors, Vanessa Williamson, “had originally presumed the Tea Party to be little more than a media phenomenon, pushed by conservative big-money fundraisers” (2012: x).3

For Gregg—and without denying the existence of elite and wealthy conservative and Republican individuals and organizations involving
themselves in the current culture war—the Tea Party movement, through its populist, grassroots, and community organizing, represents, in larger part, an example of a resurgence of the exercise of democracy in the United States. Furthermore, the Catholic Tea Party philosophy, critical of both a secular-libertarian perspective and secular-socialist-like ideas and programs, recognizes the inherent and fundamental dignity and flourishing of the human being. Implicit in Gregg’s analysis is that the authoritarian and (perhaps, one day, totalitarian) impulse of the secular progressive movement is shaped by highly secularized and progressive ideological elites in government (and by extension, in education and the mass media) who are presently attacking and restricting religious liberty in the United States. For Gregg,

a federal government that successfully emasculates the Catholic Church’s liberty in America—a Church that formally counts over seventy million Americans as members; which operates the largest number of religiously-based schools and universities, hospitals, and welfare services throughout America; and which has a long history of resisting assimilation by governments—will find other religious organizations in the United States to be easy game. The suffocation of substantive religious liberty for the Catholic Church in America means the marginalization of substantive religious freedom for everyone: Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, agnostic, or atheist. (2013: 156)

A Final Note on Tone

For Skocpol and Williamson—and despite their initial claims made in their Preface about Tea Partiers and the “respect they deserve as active and committed fellow American citizens . . . [who are] admirable and likeable in many ways” (2012: xii), language is implicitly used as a tool to shape or bias the mind of the reader against the Tea Partiers in what is otherwise, in certain respects, an impressive treatise. Their volume is replete and saturated with such loaded modifiers and phrases depicting the Tea Party and its leadership, membership, and supporters as “ultra-free market,” “unremitting,” “rambunctious,” “vitriol,” “rant,” “arch-conservative,” “harsh,” “ideologically extreme,” and “far right.”

For Gregg, and despite the fact that his analysis is opposed strongly in significant respects to that of Skocpol and Williamson, the language he employs is far more moderate and measured and his approach more open to the existence of legitimate prudential disagreements in social analysis and in social policy formulations. For instance, Gregg speaks of those
Catholics who “lend their support to expansions of government activity and into the economy . . . [as] in no sense illegitimate. Many of them were—and are—in good faith voting and acting in ways that reflect their prudential application of the principles of Catholic social teaching in the public square” (2013:13).

**TOWARD A CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND CATHOLIC SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT**

Allowing for a wide variety of historically based prudential interpretations, Catholic Social Thought and one of its more empirically based social-scientific applications, that is, a Catholic sociology (Varacalli 2013), provides a set of eternally valid principles for analyzing the right ordering of a society, a group, or, in the case of the Tea Party, a social movement. Given the consequences of the Fall, the first thing that a Catholic critique of the evolution of American society or of the Tea Party movement can posit, a priori, is that no human social construction of reality can mirror perfectly the Catholic/Christian ideal, whether the former is found in the historical/empirical cases of American civilization, the Democratic or Republican Parties, progressive or conservative thought, the Tea Party movement, or the empirical, “worldly” face of the Catholic Church, among a seemingly infinite number of other examples. The relevant issue, rather, is the *degree to which* the historical and empirical social construction in question approximates the Catholic ideal (Varacalli 2001).

The analysis in this review essay suggests that, all in all, the Tea Party movement is a salutary force trying to arrest developments in American civilization that are moving further and further away from social arrangements and an understanding of human nature consistent with both Catholic social doctrine and the natural law. This statement is significantly more true for the Judaic-Christian component of the Tea Party than it is for its secular-libertarian wing, the latter promoting something akin to an “autonomous individualism,” an ideal antithetical to the Catholic vision. As Gregg clearly points out,

> In fact, the Catholic argument for freedom is *not* autonomy for the sake of autonomy, or “liberty for liberty’s sake.” Rather the end is the excellence that every person is capable of realizing through the reasonable use of their freedom—all excellence is rooted in our very nature as *imago Dei*: a being called to freely embrace all those goods that make us flourish precisely as human beings rather than embrace mediocrity. (2013: 23)
But even the secular-libertarian wing of the Tea Party movement is playing a useful role, at the moment, at least, in the present-day American culture war, given its strong opposition to the present escalation toward a full-blown statism, with its authoritarian, and possibly one day, totalitarian character.

Samuel Gregg, as a matter of fact, makes an excellent case that there is an urgent need for serious Catholics to foster and support a coalition of groups opposed to a virulent statism that threatens the continued existence of the American experiment in ordered liberty:

It is . . . an experiment that cannot be defended by Catholics alone. There are many times and occasions when we can—indeed, must—form strategic and often long lasting alliances with Eastern Orthodox, Evangelical, Jewish, Mormon, and secular-minded Americans . . . as they seek to roll back the State’s undue encroachment upon free economic activity, its efforts to unreasonably constrain religious liberty, and its steady undermining of freedom more generally. (2013: 190)

Gregg qualifies himself immediately in an important manner by noting that “the need to work with people with whom free enterprise Catholics may not always be in perfect agreement isn’t a reason, however, to refrain from seeking to persuade their coalition partners by words and example of how the Catholic view of human liberty and human flourishing can animate the broader limited government movement and infuse its policy positions with deeper moral argumentation” (2013: 191). As I’ve previously argued (Varacalli 2012), Catholic participation in the Tea Party movement might not only save the American Experiment but also serve as an evangelizing opportunity for Catholics vis-à-vis their coalition partners among secular libertarians and non-Catholic members of the Judaic-Christian heritage.

Given its intrinsically wide latitude for prudential applications, what can a reasonable interpretation of Catholic Social Thought say, with some confidence, about the Tea Party movement, what it represents, and what it opposes? The following propositions—much more likely to be favorably received by supporters of the Gregg volume as compared to those sympathetic to the line of argumentation put forth by Skocpol and Williamson—are offered for consideration and critique regarding one possible set of acceptable prudential applications:

1. The present-day Democratic Party and its progressive leadership should be opposed given that they are promoting a soft, secular socialism (e.g., the institutionalization of “ObamaCare”) that is contributing to moral
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decay, economic insolvency, and practical incompetence in the increasing number of sectors of American life administered or affected by government.

2. The dysfunctional policies of the Democratic Party and its progressive leadership hurt all Americans but, ironically, disproportionally harm those Americans at the bottom of the stratification system, i.e., the very same sector of American life that the Democratic Party and secular progressives claim constitute their primary concern.

3. Many of the social programs of the Democratic Party and of the progressive movement falsely claim to operate in the name of the common good, while they actually promote the self-centered and selfish political, status, and economic interests of the so-called “new knowledge class.”

4. The Republican Party’s “shift to the right” is attempting to provide much-needed political opposition to the dysfunctional policies of the present-day Democratic Party and secular progressive movement.

5. The Tea Party’s “cooperative but critical” relationship with the present establishment Republican Party leadership is defensible in light of 1) the need for a Republican Party “check” to the present political power of the Democratic Party and its policies and 2) the Republican Party leadership’s not insignificant secularism, pragmatism, and disdain for the non-elite sectors of American life.

6. Opposition to the Tea Party movement is not merely because of the policy positions it advocates but also because its populism irritates the elitist sensibilities of both the leadership sectors of the Democratic Party/progressive movement and the Republican Party/conservative movement. Note should be taken here of a version of populism that is compatible with an authentic understanding of the Catholic religion. The Catholic historian, Dominic A. Aquila, coined the term a “rehabilitated populism” to refer to a populism shorn of any tendencies toward racism, provincialism, and an unreflective patriotism while simultaneously respecting and promoting the moral and economic welfare of the average person (referred to in Varacalli 2001: 102).

7. In principle, the programs of the welfare state that manifestly claim to operate in the public interest should be formulated and implemented inclusively with the intent to assist all Americans, rejecting, as such, the present Democratic Party’s policies of economic redistribution, i.e., of “winners and losers,” that currently promotes class warfare, furthers unnecessarily moral and cultural disintegration, and threatens the health and well-being of, to use Krason’s terminology, the American democratic republic.

8. It is the case, conversely and empirically speaking, that a democratic capitalist society is more likely than an advanced welfare state to
expand economic wealth, assist the greatest number of Americans, address
the needs of the poor, and resist a culture of dependency.

9. While a certain amount of taxation and regulation of business is
necessary for government to play its role in the promotion of the com-
mon good, it is at the same time the empirical case that a certain amount
of tax cutting and deregulation in business affairs can stimulate economic
growth and wealth, a certain portion of which can foster the common good
through job creation and tax revenues for legitimate and needed govern-
ment programs.

10. In principle, and while many Tea Partiers (according to Skocpol
and Williamson (2012: 61) apparently presently reject this option, the
privatization of such programs as Social Security and Medicare eventu-
ally must be at least considered if (and only if) it becomes apparent that
this is the only way to keep such important programs viable for future
generations of Americans.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A MORE
COMPREHENSIVE AND DETAILED ANALYSIS

This review essay represents a second, modest step towards a proposed
full-length monograph that intends to satisfactorily analyze the relation-
ship between a changing American civilization, the Tea Party Movement,
and Catholic Social Thought. This present analysis builds on a short com-
ment previously published in the Catholic Social Science Review, “Ca-
tholicism, The Tea Party Movement, and American Civilization: Ques-
tions, Propositions, and Proposals” (Varacalli 2012). The tentative title of
the anticipated full-length monograph is American Civilization, the Tea
Party Movement, and Catholic Social Thought: A Catholic Critique of the
Contemporary Culture War. Hopefully, this review essay is suggestive of
the important issues that will be treated in the proposed monograph.

Notes

1. An interesting question that cannot be pursued at this point is whether
there is “middle ground” between positing universal significance to the American
Founding and the historicist leanings of progressive thinkers who increasingly
feel less and less inclination to make reference whatsoever to Constitutional au-
thority. Might serious Catholic lawyers and political philosophers one day con-
struct some version of an “organic development” of the principles of the Ameri-
can Founding that combines both universal elements and historical particulars in
its construction?

2. An interesting line of inquiry that can’t be pursued here would be to
compare Gregg’s understandings of those factors that suppress economic initia-
tive with those of the “culture of poverty” thesis of Edward C. Banfield (The
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3. While the assertion of Skocpol and Williamson regarding the role of capitalist elites in the Tea Party movement undoubtedly contains a not-insignificant degree of truth, the immediate response is to point out that all social movements of any significance involve a significant role for elites of one nature or another. Do Skocpol and Williamson believe, for instance, that the present-day significant minority and immigrant support for progressive policies was generated without the assistance of the Democratic Party and a host of associated organizations and groups representing a great deal of the basic sociological trilogy of power, prestige, and economic wealth? As a matter of fact, James D. Hunter (1991) has argued that the major public sector social institutions of America, including especially the mass media, are considerably more aligned with the political Left than with the political Right. Skocpol and Williamson do not see it that way, arguing that “certain major institutions such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, USA Today, and National Public Radio—still follow twentieth century norms of objectivity and balance in their coverage of politics and policy-making” (2012: 124).

**Bibliography**


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