Sweet land of agency

reviewed by Robert Westbrook in the February 8, 2003 issue

A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society. By James Block. Harvard University Press, 658 pp., $45.00.

Ambitious, obsessive efforts to see American history whole and anew are rare these days. Some academic historians have lamented the balkanization of the professional study of the nation's past into subspecialties of ever-refined narrowness. Yet hamstrung by postmodern suspicion of "master narratives," even they warily avoid anything that might count as a fresh, big, synthetic idea. Indeed, such wariness has come to be the mark of respectability in the guild. Sweeping stories have been left largely to nonacademics, who may do them well, but these talented amateurs are if anything even more immune to bold theoretical speculation.

What a wonder then is James Block's book, a daring master narrative and bracing theoretical exercise of the first order. It promises and delivers nothing less than a fundamental recasting of "the American path to a modern self and society."

The conventional American self-image that Block endeavors to undermine is that of a "collective experiment in human liberty." Liberty here is conceived as "negative" liberty, that is, individual freedom from coercive restraint and the opportunity to forge one's life as one will, constrained only by a respect for others' opportunity to do the same. This is the ideal of "self-authorization" and boundless freedom enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the most hallowed of American political texts.

This self-conception, Block argues, is an "idyll"--a misleading and impossible dream--and the Declaration of Independence is our most mystifying foundational document. Rather than negative liberty, he contends, the operative--if often obscured--theoretical foundation of American identity has been agency. Agents are not free to pursue their own purposes but rather serve the ends of an authority on which they are dependent. Modern conceptions of agency posit an agent who voluntarily submits to an authority and is granted exceptional latitude in the choice of means by which to serve it.

The seedbed of modern agency, Block maintains, lie in the radical Protestantism of 17th-century England. Such agency was modeled on the willing submission of believers to a God who authorized them to put their various talents and energies freely to use in the service of divine purposes. Early modern liberalism, he argues, offered a modus vivendi of religious toleration to contain the threat to social order posed by the warring notions of God's purposes voiced by Protestant sectarians. Yet at the same time, liberal theorists appropriated the Protestant conception of agency and turned it to secular ends by positing a contractual, voluntarist society in which individuals willingly and prudently consented to agency on behalf of the purposes of a constitutional state, a capitalist market economy and community norms.

In liberal hands, modernity took shape as "the continuing project of reconciling individual prerogatives and normative order" by means of a "bounded" freedom. The philosopher-hero of modern agency civilization (and Block's book) is not John Locke, who tended to muddy the waters with idyllic talk of liberty, but Thomas Hobbes, who left no doubt that liberalism was not a philosophy of liberty but one of thoroughly constrained agency.

Hemmed in and frustrated by traditional institutions and values in England, agency culture and politics began to flourish in the relatively thin social order of colonial America. "The American experiment succeeded," Block says, "by turning individuals into agents with internalized limits and institutional constraints using voluntarist incentives."

Viewing 18th- and 19th-century American history through this Hobbesian lens, Block offers detailed and imaginative interpretations of events such as the First and Second Great Awakenings and the American Revolution, and fresh readings of thinkers from Jonathan Edwards to Charles Finney to Alexis de Tocqueville to Lester Frank Ward. He concludes with a salute to the young (Hegelian) John Dewey as the leader in the 1890s among theorists of a "social self" who finally put paid to the elusive Jeffersonian independence essential to the idyll of liberty and offered theoretical legitimation for a secularized Protestant agency within the confines of a highly organized, bureaucratic industrial society.

Block's assessment of American agency civilization is murky. But he appears to regard it as at once a remarkable theoretical and practical achievement and one that has in our own time grown sclerotic. He laments that without a democratic interrogation of the goals of the Protestant-liberal capitalist order cemented at the

turn of the century, "the project of realizing genuine voluntarism, popular control, and societal equity in an increasingly organized collective remains to be addressed." In this latter complaint, Block ironically echoes the older, radically democratic (pragmatist) John Dewey, whose thinking he slights and who was a good deal less complacent than Block would have us believe about liberal agency that extended merely to the means to taken-for-granted social purposes and not to the formulation of those purposes themselves.

If Dewey calls for fuller and fairer treatment than Block offers, so too does the entire course of American political culture in the 20th century, which he whips through in a few unsatisfying paragraphs. The absence of any consideration of the work of John Rawls, the most significant American political philosopher of this century and the heir to the contractarian tradition of Hobbes and Locke, is particularly peculiar since Block's argument seems tailor-made for wrestling with Rawls's imposing theory of justice.

If Block's story is foreshortened, it is nonetheless exceptionally provocative and unsettling. Unfortunately, it is also turgid, pretentious and nearly unreadable. Block's salutary break with academic timidity is unhappily coupled with a full embrace of unremittingly awful academic prose. When he is not inflicting the clanking, abstract machinery of his own dismal writing on his readers, Block piles quotation upon quotation from his sources, determined never to offer less than five examples where one or two would do quite nicely. This is the sort of gunk characteristic of hapless drafts of long-overdue doctoral dissertations, those fated to remain unfinished or at least unpublished.

That *A Nation of Agents* has seen the light of day is a tribute not just to the forbearance of its publisher but also to the keen intelligence that lurks in its swamp of bad writing. If Block had written a master narrative with the limpid, spare elegance of predecessors such as Lewis Mumford's *Golden Day* (1926) or R. W. B. Lewis's *American Adam* (1955), his argument might secure the wide public hearing it deserves. As it is, he has placed a formidable white whale of a book within the sights of what will no doubt be an intrepid crew of tribal harpooners. It might well elude them.