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In this sweeping reinterpretation of American political culture, James Block offers a new perspective on the formation of the modern American self and society. Block roots both self and society in the concept of agency, rather than liberty, and dispenses with the national myth of the "sacred cause of liberty"--with the Declaration of Independence as its "American scripture." Instead, he recovers the early modern conception of agency as the true synthesis emerging from America's Protestant and liberal cultural foundations. Block traces agency doctrine from its pre-Commonwealth English origins through its development into the American mainstream culture on the eve of the twentieth century. The concept of agency that prevailed in the colonies simultaneously released individuals from traditional constraints to participate actively and self-reliantly in social institutions, while confining them within a new set of commitments. Individual initiative was now firmly bounded by the modern values and ends of personal Protestant religiosity and collective liberal institutional authority. As Block shows, this complex relation of self to society lies at the root of the American character. A Nation of Agents is a new reading of what the "first new nation" did and did not achieve. It will enable us to move beyond long-standing national myths and grasp both the American achievement and its legacy for modernity.

Table of Contents:  
Preface  
1. The American Narrative in Crisis  
Part I. The English Origins of the American Self and Society  
2. The Early Puritan Insurgents and the Origins of Agency  
3. The Protestant Revolutionaries and the Emerging Society of Agents  
4. Thomas Hobbes and the Founding of the Liberal Politics of Agency  
5. John Locke and the Mythic Society of Free Agents  
Part II. The Ascendancy of Agency and the First New Nation  
6. The Great Awakening and the Emergent Culture of Agency  
7. The Revolutionary Triumph of Agency  
Part III. The Dilemma of Nationhood  
8. The Liberal Idyll amidst Republican Realities  
9. From the Idyll: Liberation and Reversal in a World without Bounds  
Part IV. The Creation of an Agency Civilization  
10. National Revival as the Crucible of Agency Character  
11. From Sectarian Discord to Civil Religion  
12. The Protestant Agent in Liberal Economics  
13. John Dewey and the Modern Synthesis  
Conclusion: The Recovery of Agency  
Notes  
Index  
Reviews of this book:

A Nation of Agents is a work of extravagant erudition and originality. James E. Block has read voraciously in the sources, seen things that few have seen before, and put them together as none have done before. He sets forth a new view of American culture, threading his thesis through three centuries of American thought and the preceding century of English thinking besides.--Michael Zuckerman, *Journal of American History*

Reviews of this book: 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.'--Robert Westbrook, *Christian Century*

Reviews of this book: James Block's big, ambitious A Nation of Agents leaves no doubt about its aspirations in the contest to solve the Gordian knot of the relationship between the one and the many in American social thought. The subtlety and acuity with which Block develops these themes through scores of thinkers and over 500 pages can scarcely be exaggerated. A Nation of Agents is a genuinely prodigious work of scholarship.--Daniel T. Rodgers, *Modern Intellectual History*

This is an original and exciting work of scholarship, in which the idea of agency takes on the characteristics of a deep cultural imperative in American life. Block's agency thesis is at once a genealogy of modern American

identity and a theoretical exploration of the horizon within which American political and moral self-reflection is conducted.--Eldon J. Eisenach, The University of TulsaThe most remarkable aspect of this book is the author's ability to weave a single thread -- the thread of "agency" -- through four centuries of Anglo-American intellectual history. Block's great achievement is to propound a new "common theme" to American history. A Nation of Agents is a beacon for scholars seeking a usable past. If ever intellectual history is to regain its prominence in the field of American history it will require works like this.--Harry S. Stout, Yale University

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