Modern Intellectual History, 1, 1 (2004), pp. 111–121. © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S1479244303000088 Printed in the United Kingdom

THEORIZING AMERICA

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James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002)

Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001)

"In the United States there is hardly any talk of the beauty of virtue," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1840. In high society and low, he had heard only an incessant conversation about self-interest. And yet "I have often seen Americans make really great sacrifices for the common good, and I have noticed a hundred cases in which, when help was needed, they hardly ever failed to give each other trusty support."[1] It was a move typical of Tocqueville: generalization and countergeneralization, hypothesis and exception, cascading restlessly onward in an imaginative flow he himself barely held in control. He gave his readers American democracy as a series of conundrums.

Of all Tocqueville's riddles, this one—the relationship of the sovereign self to the common, social good—vexes modern American intellectuals with a special intensity. The wide-ranging debate a decade ago over the rival claims of "republicanism" and "liberalism" as the formative language of American politics was one of its manifestations. The current spate of projects focused on the history and political valences of "civil society" form another. Political debate in the contemporary United States repeats, in another key, the same contentions. Conservative America seethes with rights talk and resentments against intrusive government, even as it disparages other rights and yearns for the nation to march in patriotic common step. The contradictions of the American left are just as palpable, torn between its commitment to the great political community and its libertarian views of cultural and personal authenticity. Little wonder that, viewed from outside, Americans have so often seemed to be the most individualistic and simultaneously the least individualistic of peoples. It is a context that attracts the conundrum breakers.

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 525, 512.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244303000088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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 very frame of American history, he writes, is a narrative in crisis, riddled with misunderstandings: "We have misunderstood the [American] Revolution, and therefore the republic on which it stands" (p. 234). We have misread Hobbes, Locke, and Dewey, misestimated the place of revivalistic Protestantism in the formation of mind and character, and misperceived laissez-faire economic doctrine. We have got it all wrong, most fundamentally, in placing an ideal of autonomous, individual freedom at the center of the American narrative. That place, Block claims, belongs instead to "agency."

By "agency" Block does not mean to invoke the social historians' project of finding historical efficacy in the actions of those on the short end of the distribution of wealth and authority: the subalterns, the "powerless," *le menu peuple*. That project, as Walter Johnson has recently observed, involved a string of uncritical assumptions, not least of which was that historians could "give back" agency to persons in the past, as if it were theirs to offer and restore.[2] Nonetheless, for all its sometimes naive assumptions about the relationship between power and scholarship, the pursuit of agency by the social historians enormously widened the range and identities of actors, voices, ideas, and aspirations to which scholars had to attend. It democratized the historical cast that political historians (with their great men) and intellectual historians (with their great books) had conspired to winnow down to the few. Agency, in this project, meant the power of persons and groups to shape their historical circumstances, to build within them cultural and social worlds of their own making: to turn historical events to collective and moral purposes, not merely to respond to them. It meant escape from mere victim status, inclusion in the roster of historical actors. To have agency, in this discourse, was to act as an agent of one's own social destiny in a world of radically unequal power.

The meaning of agency that Block holds as key to the American narrative is not this but its opposite: agency not as action for oneself but as action on behalf of another. Both meanings are old in Anglo-American usage, but the agent who acted to further the projects of another was certainly the more common understanding of the term. An agent was not a vassal or a liegeman yoked by bonds of fidelity and honor; nor a servant or slave from whom submission, diligence, patience, and self-abnegation were due. An agent was a person whose free, moral will was enlisted in a larger cause than the agent's own. Agency was characterized by a double movement, in which freedom was claimed and, in the very same act, reinvested in a greater entity and purpose. The agent, Block

2 Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003), 105–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244303000088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

writes, was "active, self-reliant, and initiatory yet wholly under orders" (p. 74). Agency freedom consisted in voluntary action, not autonomy; in engagement in a cause, not a co-determinative hand in shaping it. In Anglo-American Protestant rhetoric, agents were the sorts of persons God wanted. And for centuries, Block argues, agents were the sort of individuals Americans wanted to be.

Part of the heft of *A Nation of Agents* derives from Block's insistence on putting Protestantism and its political categories back into the core of the American historical narrative. "Free agency" becomes not simply a linguistic marker in theological debates over moral action and free will; not simply a preacher's come-on to conversion and religious discipline. It stands, in Block's view, for a form of social character that wished for the voluntarily chosen yoke of inner transformation and worldly responsibility. The role of a moral "free agent" was as distant from passivity as it was from autonomy. In the language of nineteenth-century Protestant psychology, it was the condition in which "the action of all our voluntary powers . . . every choice, every preference, and every volition . . . [is] in entire conformity to the will of God" (p. 406).

This claim is congruent with the point Barry Shain made in *The Myth of American Individualism* a decade ago, that in Protestant social thought the individual self, standing outside "communal systems of the good," was an object of deep suspicion.[3] But Block's emphases lie on the ontological foundations of those assumptions. In his reading of Protestant political theory, the individual for him/herself was an impossibility: a non-being. Only in relationship to a transcendent scheme and purpose was the self realized—was free action—truly possible. This is a rich vein to mine, and from the English Puritan insurgency through the Second Great Awakening, Block pursues it, always with a particular eye for those Protestant radicals who pushed the possibilities of human will and action hardest without ever doubting the ultimate boundedness of Christian liberty or the ultimate subordination of free human means to the ends of God.

But the real audacity of Block's argument lies not in his treatment of those who imagined themselves agents of the Lord, but in his insistence that their agency model of freedom saturated the culture around them, secular as well as religious. He takes their concept of bounded liberty and runs it hard, even relentlessly, through three centuries of American intellectual history. By the time he has reached the early twentieth century, the liberal canon has all but come undone. Block's Hobbes is not the great antagonist of modern individualism but the writer who most clearly recognized voluntary submission as the formative political act in a world of agency principles. His Locke is not the contractualist philosopher of the *Second Treatise* but the psychologist of the *Education*, whose

3 Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244303000088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

entire project was to find a means whereby the moral authority of the parent could be so silently, voluntarily internalized in the child that it became the template of the child's individual character.

Even as God receded behind natural and social processes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the frame of argument endured. In a brilliant reading of the laissez-faire publicists of the late nineteenth century, Block shows how inextricably enjoined the call to energized free action and to system-upholding behavior remained. The market these writers celebrated was nothing if it was not an arena for self-assertive and self-interested action. It punished lethargy and imprudence with a ruthless hand. But it held no islands for autonomous action. Wishing the world of small-scale economic localism good riddance, the economic publicists heralded laissez-faire for its ability to transmute voluntary action into system and association, to enlist its myriad producers and exchangers as agents of a larger, natural order. It was not left only to the late nineteenth-century champions of "society," who march through the pages of so many accounts of this period's social thought, to introduce the language of socially and collectively bounded freedom.[4] The concepts fell straight out of the Protestant understanding of agency, Block suggests, into the economists' intellectual ordering of commercial life.

The greatest of the agency philosophers, in Block's reading, was John Dewey—heir to the legacy of Protestant moral agency, co-architect of pragmatism's reconstruction of philosophy as active free inquiry, yet deeply committed to an idea of the larger, social whole. His simultaneous commitments to voluntary individual action and to adjustment to larger social ends, his fusion of obligation and freedom into "function," his explicit substitution (on occasion) of "agent" for "individual"—all this recapitulated in secular terms the framework deep in what Block calls "agency culture." Dewey's individuals were never, despite his emphasis on creative intelligence and his pedagogical progressivism, persons in and for themselves. He offered, in modern, liberal terms, a "place where one's autonomy could be subtly exchanged for an (unadmitted) agency, the chance to be a part, to be integrated" (p. 495). Dewey's writings stand, in that sense, as "a *summa theologica*—the great summation and culmination of the agency age" (p. 538).

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. And yet, it would be equally hard to exaggerate its simplification of the historical terrain, as if the very quest to resolve

4 Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1994).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244303000088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the American conundrum overruled detour, contradiction, multiplicity. Block's treatment of that other voice that Tocqueville overheard—the self-referential, interest-claiming, rights-bearing voice—is a striking example. He wades into the debates over the intellectual character of the American Revolution by dismissing both its "republican" and its "liberal" character. In the era's pleas for a republic of virtue, Block can only see a frightened merchant elite, struggling to reestablish its political and institutional authority in the social upheaval around it. But if the advocates of republican virtue weren't revolutionary, the revolutionary masses, in Block's telling, weren't liberals. Mobilized by aspirations for more democratic communities, new-made souls, and new liberties of conscience, the populace were partisans of "agency."

The Declaration of Independence burst into this culture war, Block maintains, as the great reconciling text—its language open enough to the aspirations of the populace to bring them aboard the elite's national project—and, at the same time, the great national obfuscation. By placing a fiction at the Declaration's head—not a story of political society being willed into being in an heroic fusion of free act and voluntary subordination, but political society as simply found in a retrieval of natural liberty—Jefferson's Declaration cut "agency" society off from its past and left it with a myth of idyllic "freedom." So unleashed, the "idyll" somehow swept everything before it, unhingeing institutions, shattering the connection between public rhetoric and the structures of religious character formation that constituted the nation's cultural base. Agency fell silent. "The post-revolutionary society as a result was left to figure out its fate with neither a sense of its past nor any . . . guidance on the institutions, structures, or behaviors now required" (Block, p. 290).

But psychically, the flight from agency understandings of the self was insupportable. Driven by tacit "psychosocial dynamics," early nineteenth-century American society moved slowly, subterraneously, toward a profound "reversal." Institutions returned; religion "resurfaced." Forms of social cohesion were "invisibly" reborn as Americans sought "a way out of [the] disorientation" into which they had been lured (Block, p. 337). Slowly, agency culture revived—leaving only the political theorists of the future to be deceived, naively attached to the letter rather than the substance of the Revolution.

But this is barely history, as if Block had himself been swept up in the very myths he devoted himself to tracking. It radically oversimplifies the Revolution and the thicket of meanings its partisans gave to "liberty." It decontextualizes the Declaration, confounds the chronology of the revivals, and misses the unabashedly vocal ambitions of the early republic's institution builders. Block's categories of "idyll" and "reversal," propelled by deep psychodynamics in the culture, offer psyche in the place of history; they wrap Block's acute textual readings in the gauziest of metaphors.

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At its worst, this categorical overreach produces a form of historical/political theorizing in flight from the actual complexity of its subject. For in Block's brilliantly illuminated agency culture legions of voices are lost. Except for walk-on parts by Edgar Allan Poe and Peter Cartwright, barely a Southern figure, unconnected with the cultural legacy of Puritanism, speaks. Slavery does not exist—though outside of its constitutive relationship to slavery and servitude, as Orlando Patterson pointed out years ago, freedom cannot be articulated.[5] Gender never breaks the forward march of Block's narrative, as if the double agency of women in marriage, as servants to both their husbands and their Lord, were somehow outside the terms of his story. Agency culture progresses, swoons, reverses, and culminates. For a brief revolutionary moment it almost breaks apart. But outside of that context, dissent is almost never heard. It is a deeply curious reading of America, replicated not only in Block's intellectual architecture but in his very prose—paragraphs sewn out of snippets of quotation, unidentified except in the endnotes, stitched and spliced and anonymously run together as if the task of the intellectual historian were to iron out discontinuities and contention, to make a seamless garment out of the whole. The social historians' understanding of the recovery of "agency," as radically multiplying the variety of contending voices and actors in the past, is turned on its head.

To leave it at that would not do justice to Block's accomplishment. *A Nation of Agents*' overreach and exaggerated claims, its misunderstanding of history as psyche, its conflations and omissions, go together with its point of profound illumination. The rhetoric of politics in America and the rhetoric of (Protestant) religion do not occupy distant spheres but intimately connected ones. Their key terms—freedom, justice, right; self, commonweal, nation—spill into each other, draw their meanings back and forth, as it were, across the church house doors. The point takes modern American intellectuals continually by surprise, but it should not. In insisting that the language of bounded liberty and voluntary moral agency be recognized as a powerful structuring element in the discourse of individualism in America, this first book makes a major contribution. It goes a long way toward unraveling Tocqueville's conundrum, how a people so prickly in their talk of individualism, so absent in the discourse of pubic deference and *oblige* that Tocqueville had anticipated, should find in their language of self the very terms of self-abnegation. That would be a great deal, and that would be enough.

Where intellectual history and political theory meet, however, there has long been an ambition to do still more than this: to identify the true, ground pattern in the conversation, to name the authentic metalanguage of America and to restitch

5 Orlando Patterson, *Freedom*, vol. 1: *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244303000088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

all the pieces in the service of that design. That was Louis Hartz's grand gesture, as it was J. G. A. Pocock's, and simultaneously their grand failure. The liberalism–republicanism debate was fired by the same overheated ambition, as if there were one authentic language, one ideational stratum underlying the national whole. When that conceit turned fragile, the historians abandoned the debate. New subjects matter more to historians, ultimately, than new readings of familiar ones, and the market revolution was next in line. In the subdiscipline of historical political theory, however, the ambition to straighten out the contradictions of the past, to bring the cacophony in the historical record into variations on one key idea—rightly and complexly enough understood—endures. It frames debates, makes careers, sets the terms of dispute and the dimensions of intellectual ambitions. The weaknesses of *A Nation of Agents* reflect the weaknesses in the intellectual foundations of its genre.

Political theory-making has not always been that way, as Sheldon Wolin's learned and sinuously intelligent reading of Alexis de Tocqueville shows. Not that Tocqueville was without high ambitions as a theory builder. His longing for the "premier facts" and "general ideas" that would bring out the pattern in the mass of detail, for a position in which he could view panoramically the tendencies of the moment, shaped every piece of his writing. Equality of condition was, from the outset, the most important of these. "In America," he would write with a certain pride in his own accomplishment, "all laws originate more or less from the same idea. The whole of society . . . is based on just one fact: everything follows from one underlying principle. . . . Once you have found the central point, you can see the whole plan at one glance." By contrast, his imagination ran aground in England, where he fretted that he could find "not a single principle from which consequences follow quietly; there are some lines which crisscross, a labyrinth in which we are absolutely lost" (Wolin, p. 145). The genius of his *Democracy in America*, the characteristic that still sets it apart from the thousands of volumes of American reportage that have followed it, was Tocqueville's gift for abstracting from small to large.

That, in turn, has made Tocqueville's writings irresistible to modern theorists, eager to extract the timeless, authentic Tocqueville from the all-too-visible messiness and multivocality of his pages. He has become an authority to claim, a figure to cite on every side of contemporary political debate. But Tocqueville himself was never a man of one idea—rightly or wrongly understood—not even equality. He shifted his thinking with his experience and his second thoughts, with the political events around him, and the tides in his own political fortune. He labored, often with deep anxiety, over his writing. He let *Democracy* sprawl over too many subjects, let himself be drawn into too many real and apparent contradictions, let his reflections unfold over too large a canvas to ever be simply pinned down. "Tocqueville does not merely invite a postmodern

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reading," Wolin muses at one point. "He courts it" (p. 563). "Perhaps . . . this bundle of contradictions, poses, anachronisms, absurdities, and willfulness, this 'Tocqueville,' represented not a single authorial self but a named being, struggling over time to hold together an uncertain assemblage of wayward phenomena, of diverse impulses and frustrated ambitions" (p. 561).

The Tocqueville that Wolin gives us is not, in fact, a fractured, postmodern one but something harder to achieve: a writer thinking in time. From his early break with his family to support the constitutional monarchy that they detested, until his timid, fearful confrontation with the democratic revolution of 1848, through the thinking and rethinking of the first and second volumes of his *Democracy*, through his *Souvenirs* and *Ancien Régime*, Wolin traces a mind in action, shifting its ground, doubling back on itself, impressed by its own fears that it was "incomplete," "incoherent," that its "several parts were badly joined" (Wolin, p. 5). In contrast to the sharply reduced Tocqueville that figures in too many readings of American history, Wolin's Tocqueville is a man thoroughly immersed in European intellectual life. Shifting back and forth between the roles of critic, historian, and philosopher, Wolin works to recapture Tocqueville's own engagement and conversation with the texts and authorities around him: the other great readers of politics (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke), of the bourgeoisie (Bentham, Marx, Mill), of method (Descartes, Pascal), custom (Montesquieu), and history. *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* is not a work of historical contextualization, narrowly understood, but rather an intricately and deeply intelligent engagement with a mind and ideas in motion.

Wolin himself is a man of strong general ideas, and the themes of his own masterwork of 1960, *Politics and Vision*, are not disguised.[6] Wolin writes with unstinted affection for Tocqueville's discovery of participatory democracy in the local town meetings and civic associations of early nineteenth-century New England and his realization that democracy was not a formal scheme of allotting sovereignty (as the classical writers had had it) but a form of politics that penetrated deeply into the practices, customs, and *moeurs* of everyday life. Wolin worries with Tocqueville over the new, nameless forms of despotism rising to haunt the modern world. He is embarrassed for the Tocqueville who, in 1848, turned in dread from the democratic critics of property rights. At one key moment, as the regent and her family left the Chamber of Deputies which had refused to hear her speak on behalf of a continuation of the monarchy, Tocqueville was seized with the impulse to dash after her and protect her from the insults of the Paris crowd; but even that gesture, like so many of Tocqueville's actions in the crisis, was unnoticed and ineffectual. Almost imperceptibly, Wolin's Tocqueville

6 Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1960).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244303000088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

diminishes over these pages, as his fears mounted, as his early epiphany about the possibilities of democratic political engagement receded into his past, as he let his liberal convictions finally trump his democratic ones. Claimants for Tocqueville's authority will seize on these passages and worry over the reduction of Tocqueville to a proto-participatory democrat—though this capacious reading of Tocqueville, full of unexpected byways and excursions, is, indeed, anything but reductionistic.

The much more striking characteristic of *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, in fact, lies in Wolin's reflections on theory—reflections that work their way into the very fabric of the book. To Wolin, the looseness that has vexed so many readers of Tocqueville—his "fluidity" and "suppleness," his "vivid imagery" and its "strategic" deployment—was not a flight from theory but theory's realization (p. 100). Theory, Wolin suggests, begins as *theoria*, as journey, as a release of the imagination through encounter with strangeness. Theory for Wolin is a mode of "repicturization," a making visible of possibilities and critical differences. Through it, the mind travels from here to there.

What worries Wolin about modern theory, in contrast, is its power to normalize. Abstracting and dehistoricizing the particular, subordinating detail to rule, excising doubt, political theory (whether as high abstraction or as manipulable analytical elements) is "modernity's way of constituting power" (Wolin, p. 20). It is knowledge in the service of control, "a form of knowledge that could freely construct its objects and their relations" (p. 21). Tocqueville's method was not merely looser and disjointed: it was a way of holding in tension the relationship between the generals and particulars that, at its best, held at bay the "despotic tendency" in the act of generalization (p. 156). The issue "central in Tocqueville's formulation of his ideas," Wolin writes, was "whether theorists would assume the task of normalizing the appearance and presence of [modernity's] huge powers, preserving their impressive and triumphal character while rendering them familiar and, above all, demonstrating their manageability, or whether the powers would be revealed to have certain unsettling and unnatural qualities that portended a continuous discontinuity in the human condition" (p. 133).

In *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, Wolin offers theory in its second, nonsovereign form: theory as a journey, rich in images and intellectual suppleness. Like Tocqueville, he lets his analytical vocabulary shift and double back on itself, works up a multitude of categories and lets them go. He is profuse, almost recklessly so, with general ideas, even as he works to tether them to the singularities of Tocqueville's life and intellectual surroundings. The discontinuities of Wolin's short chapters deliberately mimic the famous form of *Democracy* itself, illuminating but not containing his subject. On a terrain that has been simplified so often, he gives us a sprawling, magnificently multivocal

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Tocqueville, a repicturization of theorizing as a form of thinking, and a powerful example of nonreductive intellectual history.

How, then, do we hold these contributions to the history of ideas together: the one by the seer of one thing (Block) and the other by the seer of many (Wolin)? The mapper of a single idea across the centuries, and the nester of a multitude of powerful ideas in a single political moment and intellectual career? The young normalizer and the old disrupter? And how do we write the history of American political ideas and argument under the sign of either?

Finding a point on which to stand was never a finished business for Tocqueville. But to one conceptualization of such a vantage point, the "tableau," he continuously returned. He meant by it a place where the mass of details came into ensemble, and the "whole seizes the imagination" (Wolin, p. 146). He yearned for that unifying experience against his own sense of its temporariness and his own "incompleteness." But a tableau has not only a central focal point, toward which all its lines and meaning rush. It also has edges. It is a setting, an image contained in a social frame.

Tocqueville was, in fact, wrong to think that in all social settings in early nineteenth-century America the lines of force ran toward the equality that so caught his imagination. In other tableaux—slave auction, counting house, workshop, prayer meeting, birthing bed, cotton field, Euro-Amerindian border, and the rest—powers and principles were often radically differently arranged, as generations of social historians have long insisted. What is true of power is also true of language. Even the largest of general ideas, though they mask their limits, are scene- and purpose-specific. They take form as scripts for place-specific social theaters. The talk of equality that caught Tocqueville's imagination on his American journey was one such script, swelling in the theaters of electoral politics, in the stump speeches, the state legislatures, and the nervous, reactive talk of the northeastern lawyer elite who bent Tocqueville's ear. But it was not the only arena in which ideational production was going on full blast—nor the only language that nineteenth-century Americans knew and were capable of practicing, as they shifted from scene to scene of social action and moved between scripts and parts.

The same, we should recognize, was true of talk of the self. "Agency" was one of the setting-specific ways in which a great many Americans imagined—and still imagine—the meaning of individual freedom. Like all protean vocabularies, this one could not be confined to the church houses in which it originated, or to the purposes of discipline, conversion, and moral incitement for which it was invented. It spilled over into other arenas to be deployed in other arguments, injected into other scripts and purposes—as Block so persuasively shows. But it would be foolish to suppose that it dominated them all, or that the scripts of social life were not filled with different versions of the self, just as thick with

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meaning and as passionately articulated within their action frames: the rights-holding self, inviolable and sovereign; the virtuous self invoked in those settings where "republican" rhetoric had work to perform; the pliable self, vibrating to another's tune; the self invested with ownership of other selves; the self linked one-for-all-and-all-for-one with his comrades.

Ideational life has, in short, not merely its contradictions and diremptions, not only, at times, its great overarching categories. It has its tableaux, its discontinuities, its scenes and places. To take those seriously means renegotiating the Faustian bargain which, Wolin suggests, lies deep in the modern, post-Tocqueville meaning of political theory. It means imagining a "nonsovereign" form of theorizing, and a reconnection, on new terms, of intellectual history with the social historians' worlds of action and "agency." Fewer conundrums will be slain, but the journeys will be all the richer.

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