

James E. Block

*The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing
 and the Forging of Liberal Society*

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In *The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing and the Forging of Liberal Society*, James E. Block suggests that the paradox of child rearing throughout American history has been in shaping the young to believe they are free. From its revolutionary origins in the eighteenth century to the present day, liberal democracy has depended upon the consent of the governed. The making of such consent, the author contends, was located in the nation's youngest inhabitants, where the self-direction and integrative social conduct necessary to legitimize the Republic could be established without inciting suspicion or opposition. Written by a political scientist whose work has focused on political theory and the shaping of modern American society, this book promises to bring a unique perspective to the history of childhood and schooling; and, indeed, while much of the evidence and many of the themes covered may be familiar to historians of education, the book nevertheless fulfills the promise.

Block's book is divided into three main parts that chronologically guide the reader through three main eras in American history. The first part takes the reader from the American Revolution to the early nineteenth century. Block examines closely the revolutionary dream of creating a democratic republic that could uphold the values of freedom and equality. It was in these years that major thinkers and political figures began the great American project to shape the modern citizen from birth. The challenge was to convince an individual that he or she was entirely self-determining and yet fully adaptive in his or her conduct. This could be accomplished, early school advocates argued, by winning the will of the child to demonstrate responsibility for his or her own social integration. In a significant sense, Block thus argues, the history of the United States began with a socialization project. Schools, according to the popular and political rhetoric of the time, would help create a new way of thinking and new principles in

which a republican society could endure (88-99). Such rhetoric, however, also permeated Britain and its colonies, where no republican project thrived. Block unfortunately never looks beyond America's borders to understand the educational rhetoric of this era, leading him to conclude that the "key to the democratic order was equal access to universal schooling and the opportunity for advanced education where appropriate" (105), without considering that school advocates were calling for similar educational opportunities in non-democracies throughout the world.

Part two is concerned with how liberal child rearing was framed in antebellum America. These years would see the rise of capitalism accompanied by a new rhetoric of pragmatism that would ultimately reshape the American dream. The author traces the emergence of what he calls an "agency consensus" in socialization and education through the writing of major nineteenth-century thinkers such as Horace Bushnell and Daniel Wise. Their writings, couched as extensions of earlier principles, reveal to Block the forces and trade-offs necessary to support the growing commitment to a "national project." The result was the rise in antebellum America of a "national civil religion" that was more reflective of popular values than in any previous society. Americans did not just agree to a common education system in these years, but to a common "socialization and educational system" which brought forth the agency society (152). Its shared creation promoted a sense of common ownership in the American project that persists to this day. Through popular reading material such as self-help books, parents were encouraged to take part in this project by "winning" the child's will, and they were instructed in the methods for activating the skills and aspirations necessary to meet the strenuous demands of liberal individualism and republican responsibility (174). All of this culminated in a new national curriculum, promoted both inside and outside schoolhouse doors, which included innovative child-rearing strategies affirming self-development, self-governance, and self-management; hence creating the consummate social agent ready to be released from socialization and into society. The author does not, however, provide evidence which could help tell us how widespread this curriculum was, or how widely, and willingly, it was accepted. The reader is simply expected to trust that it was so.

The third and final part of the book is concerned with how the agency republic was consolidated from the late nineteenth century up to about the 1960s. Much of Block's understanding of children's history in this period is shaped by the work of G. Stanley Hall and the new child study movement of late nineteenth-century America. By then, the popular school advocates had shaped a formidable school system which saw the schoolmaster replace the parent as the central intellectual authority in a child's life. The centrality of the parent, once sacred, was now suspect in America, and by the end of the nineteenth century children had gained "unprecedented power and leverage over adults." The parent's role, now, was to "bring out the best" in their children (288). To no small degree, the future of American liberalism rested in the childhood socialization needed to support the foundations of liberal society, and adults were expected, indeed required, to make the greatest efforts to nourish and nurture the minds of the young. The book concludes with Block's critique of what he calls the "American dream machine" which developed throughout the twentieth century and targeted youth with

“cheap theatres, followed by early motion pictures, department store displays, mass-market newspapers and magazines, fairs and amusement parks, radio and music, direct mail and billboards, and the promotion of fashion, style, and appearance” (335). Here again, however, Block does not connect the dots. The reader is left having to accept the links that the author tells us existed between the ideas of major nineteenth-century school advocates and the ideas of major twentieth-century corporate executives. While mass schooling may indeed be connected to the propagation of mass consumer culture, more evidence is needed in order to fully substantiate that claim.

There are other problems with this book. The historian will be frustrated, for example, that Block does not explain his choice of sources or his methods of analysis. A perusal of the footnotes highlights an abundant reading of the major movers and shakers in American society throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a book that purports to explain how popular consent was won, however, the ideas and writings of ordinary Americans are conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, Block raises challenging questions that have plagued supporters of both public schooling and liberal democracy. The greatest of all of these questions, perhaps, is: can we return to a time where people believed that the dream of free citizens, living in a free society, willingly consenting to their role in shaping, supporting, and fulfilling liberal democracy, and to upholding the values of freedom of equality, was achievable?