

On Organizing, Solidarity, and the Enlightenment

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Dare we return to the original meaning of socialism—*socii*, the fellows—as that which people have in common?
— Henry Pachter

La liberté sans la solidarité n'est qu'un mot, et la solidarité elle-même n'est rien, si elle reste un sentiment du cœur, si elle ne devient pas une institution.
— Jean Jaurès

Stephen Eric Bronner has sought to reconstruct the connections between the Enlightenment, the socialist tradition, and the idea of a critical theory, and he has consistently reminded his students and readers that those intellectual traditions find their purpose in a politics of liberty, social justice, and solidarity. Political theorists have written a great deal about liberty and justice, but less about solidarity.¹ Here, Steve has made an important contribution. The problem he has engaged, essentially, is this: What kind of political solidarity is amenable to both individual autonomy and a cosmopolitan sensibility?

The solidarity needed for a “rational radicalism” in the modern world must be different from the ancients’ fraternity and the communitarians’ community, and it cannot be based on a structurally-determined notion of class identity. Accordingly, Steve has called for “an ethical stance fostering solidarity between organizations,” and has pointed out that this ethic “gains life only insofar as concrete proposals emerge for furthering unity by those actually involved” in movements and organizations. Solidarity, he has written, “cannot be imposed by philosophical fiat” but must be achieved politically.²

How is such a solidarity to be achieved? One answer offered by the democratic left of the past century has been that a distinctively modern and modernist solidarity can be fostered through the set of activities that have come to be called *organizing*. Labor and community organizers today are part of a tradition of thought and action that seems to have begun—this should not surprise us—in or around the mid-eighteenth century, as a component of the intellectual and political moment we know as the Enlightenment. Organizing in something like the sense we use the term today seems to have been a constitutive part of modern republican and democratic politics all along.³

In this essay, I hope to convey something about the affinity between the technique of organizing and the kind of political solidarity which the Enlightenment project must incorporate. To do so, I examine the writings of Benjamin Franklin, specifically his *Autobiography*.⁴ In Franklin, I will argue, we can find a useful account of the significance of modern organizing. His organizing efforts depart from previous models of political mobilization, since they entail a method and a sensibility far removed from those found in the oratory of the demagogues who populate Machiavelli's *Discourses* or the sermons and pamphlets of the Puritan radicals. They also show striking similarities to the approaches of recent labor and community organizers.⁵ Franklin has never earned more than a passing mention in Steve's writings, but it seems to me that Franklin is an exemplary practitioner of the "pragmatic idealism" that Steve places among the Enlightenment's best legacies. Franklin certainly "understood politics as a learning process,"⁶ and his egalitarian and democratic republicanism, no less than his wryly satiric assaults on puffery and self-delusion, puts him in the best Enlightenment company.⁷

I should warn the reader that this essay will not offer a polemic or a recommendation for political action. It is simply an attempt to uncover and explore some of what we might often take

for granted about the significance of the work organizers do, and to propose that a politics of modern solidarity is if not easy then at least possible. I intend it as a small contribution to the larger project of thinking through the requirements of a political solidarity that can complete the Enlightenment project, and I like to think that the scholarly solidarity expressed by the contributors to this volume suggests the context in which that thinking through might happen.

Near the end of his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin recounts witnessing arguments among ship captains about the fitness of various ships. He comments:

It has been remark'd as an Imperfection in the Art of Ship-building, that it can never be known 'till she is try'd, whether a new Ship will or will not be a good Sailer...Yet I think a Set of Experiments might be instituted, first to determine the most proper Form of the Hull; for swift sailing; next the best Dimensions & properest Place for the Masts; then the Form & Quantity of Sails, and their Position as the Winds may be; and lastly the Disposition of her Lading. This is the Age of Experiments; and such a Set accurately made & combin'd would be of great Use. I am therefore persuaded that ere long some ingenious Philosopher will undertake it; to whom I wish Success.⁸

Six years earlier, Immanuel Kant had written that the era in which he and Franklin lived was an “age of enlightenment,”⁹ an era in which fewer people than ever before would be willing to accept that the existing state of human affairs was inevitable and unchallengeable. For Franklin, the Age of Enlightenment was an Age of Experiments. In public life as in ship-building, Franklin was eager to seek out new experiences and to interpret them in the light of reason, to participate in a “critical reflection on society”¹⁰ coupled with a critical engagement in public affairs. Franklin’s Enlightenment was something to write and argue about, surely—but it was also something to *do*.

Those who live in an Age of Experiments, Franklin suggests, need to try new ways of answering the old question: What do people have in common? Franklin presents an answer derived not from the ideas of tradition or virtue, fear or force, covenant or even contract, but

from political action itself. Franklin understood that an increasingly urban, commercial, pluralistic society obliterated the certainties of place and position that were the foundation for older ideas of the common good.¹¹ Attuned to his modern circumstances, Franklin outlines a technique of “assembling” associations—that is, of organizing—that fits the mood and the needs of an Age of Experiments. Franklin’s account of organizing, in other words, contributes to the Enlightenment project a technique for the practice of solidarity.

The first personal anecdote in Franklin’s *Autobiography* orients the reader to Franklin’s ideas about organizing and solidarity. Franklin recounts that at about the age of ten he rebelled against the expectation that he would follow his father in becoming a candle and soap maker. He had, instead, “a strong Inclination for the Sea.” Against his father’s wishes, he spent much time “in and about” the water, where he “learned early to swim well, & to manage Boats.”¹² Franklin announces the political content of the incident he is about to describe—and begins to explain the political significance of the technique of organizing—through a series of well-chosen words.

[W]hen in a Boat or Canoe with other Boys I was commonly allow’d to govern, especially in any case of Difficulty; and upon other Occasions I was generally a Leader among the Boys, and sometimes led them into Scrapes, of which I will mention one Instance, as it shows an early projecting public Spirit, tho’ not then justly conducted.¹³

To govern, it seems, is not the same as *to lead*. To govern is to exercise the kind of control that one might have over a boat. One who governs a boat may experience the resistance of water to wood and weight, but will find that the use of sufficient force brings success. When the governor of a boat pushes the tiller, the boat responds. To govern is to control the governed as much as one can. To lead, however, appears to be an endeavor without the aspiration of maximal control, and it seems that to show a “public Spirit” has more to do with leading than with governing. We will need to return to Franklin’s notion of public spirit, since it is the opening into

Franklin's account of what organizing can achieve, but we must first see of what this leadership consisted.

Here is Franklin's story of "public Spirit."

There was a Salt Marsh that bounded part of the Mill Pond, on the Edge of which at Highwater, we us'd to stand to fish for Minews. By much Trampling, we had made it a mere Quagmire. My Proposal was to build a Wharf there fit for us to stand upon, and I show'd my Comrades a large Heap of Stones which were intended for a new House near the Marsh, and which would very well suit our Purpose. Accordingly in the Evening when the Workmen were gone, I assembled a Number of my Playfellows, and working with them diligently like so many Emmets, sometimes two or three to a Stone, we brought them all away and built our little Wharf.¹⁴

There are surely several tales of youthful "Scrapes" with which Franklin could have begun his *Autobiography*. It is telling that he chose this one. What is most striking about the situation Franklin describes here is that the boys faced a problem for which any solution that would benefit them individually would necessarily benefit all of them and would require cooperative effort for its achievement. In a quagmire at the edge of a pond, it would be implausible to expect that a single plank or stone could provide dry passage from solid ground to a point far enough into the water to be good to fish from. Only a large and stable structure could do this, and a large stable structure would necessarily provide a space from which more than one boy could fish at once. One boy could not build such a structure—especially not when the available materials were stones so large that it took two or three boys working together to move just one. In Franklin's *Autobiography*, the paradigm for public life is the situation in which individuals' senses of what they want change as they become members of a public, members of a public can get what they want only if the public collectively gets what it wants, the public can get what it wants only if it works together, and the public can become a diligent assembly only if a leader actively brings its members into action together. This is public life understood through the technique of organizing.

How, then, do these boys come to take collective action? Not by being governed as if they were a boat, Franklin suggests. Note Franklin's choices of verbs as he describes the sort of leadership he exercised here. He has a *proposal*, he tells us, but he doesn't make so bold as to *propose* it. He merely *shows* his comrades the stones. We are left to think that he did not instruct his friends on his ideas about those stones but put them in a situation in which they would be likely to think, together, of uses for the stones and thus to conceive of a purpose common to them as a public. Indeed, if Franklin had not shown the boys the stones, they might easily have given up on this fishing spot and left to pursue drier amusements. The most active verb here is *to assemble*: Franklin's chief task, it seems, was to help a group of his "playfellows" become an assembly, to bring them together to take coordinated action, but to do so without *governing* them.

Franklin does not tell us what he did to assemble his fellows, although later in the *Autobiography* he suggests what such a process ought to entail. The focus of Franklin's narrative here is on an evaluation of that process. The work of assembling a group that acts together, Franklin writes, "shows [a] public Spirit." Franklin regularly uses the adjective *public* in his *Autobiography*—often in phrases such as "public Affairs" or "public Business"—when he wants to designate a field of action in which common concerns are openly addressed. (He uses the word *politics* relatively rarely, and when he does so it is almost invariably to designate a field of thought and inquiry.) *The public*, a noun Franklin uses several times in his *Autobiography*, seems to indicate a body with a common purpose or at least a common opinion.

To say that the boys' wharf-building project showed a public *spirit*, then, is to say that their collective action reveals the potential for purposes beyond the concrete and the immediate. To build the wharf, the boys had to have some procedures, however informal, for recognizing that they all wanted something in common and that there might be a common means of satisfying

this want. They would then need some way to coordinate their common work to effect those means. They had, in short, to become conscious of themselves as a public. Once they have done so, each might come to think of his own interest in a new way, as being more intimately tied with those of his fellows than he had previously realized.

Franklin admits that something was amiss in his actions: the public spirit it revealed was “not...justly conducted.” In the epilogue to the anecdote of the wharf, he explains—or at least begins to explain—what it might mean for a public spirit to be misconducted.

The next Morning the Workmen were surpris'd at Missing the Stones; which were found in our Wharf; Inquiry was made after the Removers; we were discovered & complain'd of; several of us were corrected by our Fathers; and tho' I pleaded the Usefulness of the Work, mine convinc'd me that nothing was useful which was not honest.¹⁵

The lesson Franklin receives from his father, as he relates it, is subtle. Franklin's father does not counsel him to be law-abiding or unselfish or honest for honesty's sake, but to act on a sounder understanding of what is useful. This is at first glance puzzling. Why should we regard dishonesty as less *useful* than honesty? Franklin does not answer these questions directly, but he hints at an answer when he writes, some pages later, that by the time of his “public Appearance in Business” as a young man he had grown “convinced that *Truth, Sincerity & Integrity* in Dealings between Man & Man, were of the utmost Importance to the Felicity of Life.”¹⁶ Honesty, for Franklin, is a standard that has to do with the quality of relationships among people, broadly speaking, but that is necessary in particular in business dealings. Dishonesty undermines the commercial spirit because it is difficult to do business in a dishonest society. Since it is an honest society—a society generally characterized by honesty—that is useful to us, we ought to be honest in general, and not only when it is immediately useful to us.

Of course Franklin is partly joking when he says that an episode of vandalism and thievery showed a public spirit. But the joke is the sort we should expect from a writer like

Franklin, who plays tricks and conveys serious ideas at the same time. The measure of the young Franklin's wharf-building project is its contribution to the assembling of the small public of his group of playfellows—and thus to this public's newfound capacity for action and its changed conception of its welfare. Franklin has identified a kind of public spirit that he thinks he and his contemporaries can achieve. It is not lofty or disinterested but is rooted in self-interest and (at least sometimes) associated with rebelliousness, and it exists when it is *shown*, when it is made manifest in action. The problem with the boys' actions in the anecdote of the wharf was not that because of their self-interested motivations they failed to enact a public spirit, but that their notion of the public to which they belonged was narrow and thus of limited use. A more useful notion of the public might have included the house builders, the people who were to live in the house, or, perhaps, the entire city. To act in a justly-conducted public spirit, for Franklin, is thus to locate points at which one's self-interest intersects with the set of interests shared by a public, and to be open to considering the shared interests of still broader publics.

Franklin points out that we can change our understandings of the publics to which we belong. Through participation in small publics, we can come to see ourselves as part of broader publics. A public spirit not justly conducted is still a public spirit. To assemble a broad and inclusive public—that is, to show a justly conducted public spirit—is to reconcile interests that seem at first irreconcilable. Telling the story of a time when he abandoned a principle in order to make peace with his fellow press workers in a large print shop, Franklin points out “the Folly of being on ill Terms with those one is to live with continually.”¹⁷ Certainly we might include our fellow citizens within the category of those we are to live with continually. It is surely in one's interest to make peace with one's neighbors and fellow citizens. The question is how we might make peace with them, how we might construct publics inclusive enough to conciliate many

interests and how we might induce more and more of our fellows to set aside uncompromisable principles for the sake of public peace.

Franklin suggests that answers are to be found through the technique of organizing. One person alone cannot act in a public spirit, in Franklin's sense of the phrase, and a public that has not yet been assembled—a merely latent or potential public—cannot act. To assemble a broad public takes work. It must be done deliberately, through a certain craft. The fundamental work of modern public life, Franklin suggests, is to engage in that craft, to assemble publics where before there were people who saw themselves as individuals.

Franklin describes a number of “Project[s] of a public Nature” or matters of “public Affairs” in which he became involved.¹⁸ He founded or helped to found a discussion club, the first subscription library in the colonies, a city watch company, a fire company, a public and nonsectarian meeting hall, and a volunteer militia for Pennsylvania. His most sustained description of the technique of organizing is in regard to the last of these projects.¹⁹

Governed by pacifist Quakers, Pennsylvania had no military defenses of its own, and its elected Assembly was not inclined to create them. Franklin writes that given the recent alliance between Spain and France he believed a military force would become necessary, and so he “determined to try what might be done by a voluntary Association of the People.” Franklin reports that he began with a general appeal to the public in the form of a pamphlet. He describes the subsequent steps in his effort to organize the militia:

The Pamphlet had a sudden & surprising Effect. I was call'd upon for the Instrument of Association: And having settled the Draft of it with a few Friends, I appointed a Meeting of the Citizens...The House was pretty full. I had prepared a Number of printed Copies, and provided Pens and Ink dispers'd all over the Room. I harangu'd them a little on the Subject, read the Paper & explain'd it, and then distributed the Copies, which were eagerly signed, not the least Objection being made. When the Company separated, & the

Papers were collected we found above Twelve hundred Hands; and other Copies being dispers'd in the Country the Subscribers amounted at length to upwards of Ten Thousand. These all furnish'd themselves as soon as they could with Arms; form'd themselves into Companies, and Regiments, chose their own Officers, & met every Week to be instructed in the manual Exercise, and other Parts of military Discipline. The Women, by Subscriptions among themselves, provided Silk Colors...The Officers of the...Philadelphia Regiment...chose me for their Colonel; but...I declin'd that Station, & recommended Mr Lawrence, a fine Person and Man of Influence, who was accordingly appointed.²⁰

Franklin's method, as it emerges here, is to provide members of a public with experiences of collective action that start easy and become more demanding, setting the stage for participants to reflect publicly on their common project. Together, these three elements—the progression through stages, the direct participation of members of the public, and the opportunity for reflection—constitute Franklin's technique of organizing.

Franklin recruits participants in his project from the project's inception. No doubt he could have "settled the Draft" of the militia's rules by himself. That he chose to bring "a few Friends" into the project at this point certainly allowed him to present the project to the public as a joint effort, as a project common to a small public from its outset. It most likely also allowed him to win those friends' early loyalty to the project. Franklin does not list these friends or describe the subsequent involvement of each of them in the militia project, but it is not a stretch to guess that they formed the core group of leaders or organizers for the project.

Franklin leaves us to imagine much of what happened at the initial meeting (we can easily suppose, to begin with, that his speech was more artful than the word "harangu'd" suggests), but the one detail he provides—the dispersal of pens, paper, and copies of the "Instrument of Association" around the room—is telling. Franklin wants his readers to realize that he arranged matters so that he alone could not have coordinated the signature-collection; after all, he could only be in one place at any time. Did the friends who helped draft the

instrument position themselves by the several pens and papers? Since Franklin suggests that the papers were not collected until after most of those present had left, it seems more likely that Franklin expected the meeting's participants to spontaneously arrange among themselves some more-or-less orderly system for making sure that each got to sign and that the signed papers were not lost. Those who attended the meeting thus began their acquaintance with the militia having a small but crucial role in the management of the organization.

Franklin also does not describe the process through which the next nine thousand or so signatures were collected, but here, even more than at the initial meeting, we can most plausibly imagine that a large proportion of those who attended the first meeting took it upon themselves to coordinate the signature canvass. The decision to involve women as well as men, albeit in a modest capacity, the responsibility of militia members to equip themselves, the power of militia members to elect their officers, and even Franklin's decision to decline an officership all suggest a strategy of sharing the work, of inviting as much participation as possible from as many people as possible.

Once new participants are drawn in to Franklin's project, he gives them something to do, and makes sure that their involvement increases gradually, through a series of stages. Two paragraphs before he described his "turn...to public Affairs," Franklin had related what he claimed was an old saying: "*He that has once done you a Kindness will be more ready to do you another, than he whom you yourself have obliged.*"²¹ Franklin sees the militia project as one of self-interested action rather than "Kindness" or obligation, but the lesson applies here, too: someone who has participated in a public project in a small way is more likely to participate later in a more substantial way.

The typical militia member's first action would have been to attend a public meeting: a simple, relatively passive form of participation. Next, the member would have signed his name to a document that served as a public pledge to participate further. Perhaps he would also have helped to coordinate the gathering of signatures at the meeting. After that, he might have recruited a few more militia members—about eight or nine, if most of the first 1200 signatories shared in the recruitment of the next 9000 or so. This would have meant for each of them a modest but significant contribution of time, and a decision by each canvasser to publicly associate himself with the militia project. Most importantly, in canvassing for signatures, each canvasser would have found himself convincing others of the militia's worth, and there is no better way to confirm one's own new commitments than to do the work of winning over others. Following that, each militia supporter would have given his membership in the militia a more concrete form through the acquisition of a weapon and other supplies, and he would have had to commit himself to regular attendance at drills, meetings to elect officers, and other events that took up his time and demanded his physical effort or participation in debates and voting. He might even have stood for election as a militia officer. From allowing himself to be "harangu'd" by Franklin to showing up for militia drill, in realization that he was preparing to risk his life—this is a steep climb for a member of the militia, and it is hard to imagine many taking it without being able to do so one step at a time.

Perhaps the most important element of this process, though, is the one that Franklin suggests when he names his era the Age of Experiments. In the sciences, an experiment is a new experience sought out so that it can be discussed and learned from. Franklin has little to say about the rational and reflective moment within the organizing process because he, as an organizer, can do no more than to make this step possible. By assembling a public, the organizer

creates a setting in which this reflective moment can happen. It is up to the members of the public to make it happen. We might imagine arguments among Franklin's boyhood friends about the best spots to place the stones for their wharf, or politicking by members of the Pennsylvania militia as they elect their officers. Once a public has been formed, it is never entirely under its organizer's or organizers' control, since the members of the new public now have occasion and opportunity to argue about—to reflect publicly on—their common actions and common purposes.

Organizing, as Franklin portrays it, is a technique of political action that brings modern citizens to realize the usefulness of common purpose and that treats public life as a series of experiments to be reflected on by their participants. It moves comfortably in a milieu of self-interest and individualism, and seeks to assemble new publics without departing from that milieu.

The assembling of a public is neither spontaneous nor instantaneous. It is a process that must be guided by someone who understands its dynamics. The person who carries out the technique of organizing is a kind of leader quite distinct, as Franklin suggests in the anecdote of the wharf, from one who governs through force. This is the person we might best refer to as the *organizer*. Franklin indicates something of the peculiar leadership of the organizer a few pages after the anecdote of the wharf, as he describes his early efforts at self-education. Wanting to best a friend in debate, he begins reading more widely in “the Arts of Rhetoric and Logic.” What he finds, however, turns him away from a method of “Contradiction, and positive Argumentation.” He discovered, he recalls, “a Specimen of a Dispute in the Socratic Method,” and “soon after...procur'd Xenophon's Memorable Things of Socrates, wherein there are many Instances of

the same Method.” He adopted the Socratic method, putting on the persona of “the humble Inquirer and Doubter.” Although he later shifted to an approach that was not a strict imitation of Socrates’ relentless questioning, he tells us, he always kept “the Habit of expressing myself in Terms of modest Diffidence.” This approach, Franklin comments, has “been of great Advantage to me, when I have had occasion to...persuade Men into Measures that I have been from time to time engag’d in promoting.”²²

Franklin’s Socratic method is more than a style of “humble” speech. Franklin summarizes his understanding of the Socratic method by quoting approvingly a couplet by Alexander Pope: “*Men should be taught as if you taught them not, / And things unknown propos’d as things forgot.*”²³ This seems to be what Franklin has in mind when he suggests the possibility of a leader who does not govern. The organizer, it seems, leads as Socrates does, through questions and indirection. It is not just that the organizer refrains from the governor’s forceful role of controlling as much as possible, but that the organizer succeeds precisely by controlling as little as possible. Since the organizer accepts the limits of the Socratic role, the process of organizing is defined by what its participants want and think, and thus it aims at proximate ends and incremental results. Organizing depends on the expectation that what the members of the public think and want might change, but these changes will happen only as members of a public reflect together on the purposes they want the public to serve. The organizer cannot direct this reflection or determine what wants and thoughts the public will generate, and so the organized public always sets limits to the organizer’s leadership. At the same time, the organized public depends on the work, the leadership, of the organizer.

Franklin wrote that the anecdote of the wharf “shows an early projecting public Spirit.” To *project* can mean to plan or design, but it can also mean to scheme or to present a false

image.²⁴ Franklin's organizer is a projector in both senses: the architect of a new public, and a playfully Socratic figure who leads individuals into collective action almost behind their own backs. What the organizer achieves depends not on rational persuasion alone (the power of which Franklin is skeptical about: "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*," he writes, "since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do"²⁵) but on the new experiences of common purpose which the organizer arranges and on which the members of the assembled public can then reflect. Organizing may involve some projecting, and may thus include communication that is less than straightforward, but the political learning it makes possible marks Franklin's technique of organizing as an expression of the Enlightenment project. It is only once they find themselves thinking in terms of a common good and common work, and not before, that members of a public can approach political life as befits those who live in an Age of Experiments. They can propose and effect new designs for the resolution of public problems, construct new forms of association, set and achieve common purposes, argue with each other about what they have done and what they might yet do. They can, in short, create new solidarities.

The process of creating these solidarities begins with a recognition of shared interests, but not all interests are capable of founding broad and inclusive publics. Franklin suggests that the most viable solidarities are likely to be those that expand and include, and thus that organizing is most likely to lead to viable solidarities when it proceeds in a way that allows members of a public to recognize that they might usefully see themselves as members of still broader publics. There is, in other words, an affinity between the technique of organizing and the hope of expansive and inclusive solidarities. But this is only an affinity, not a necessary relationship. There is no reason why organizers cannot try to assemble narrow publics with boundaries that

cannot be expanded, that mark off some outside group as perpetual strangers or even perpetual enemies. The crucial factor here is the set of decisions organizers make about the interests on which they attempt to found new publics and the direction in which they attempt to lead the growth or activity of publics. Organizers matter not only because publics do not assemble themselves spontaneously, but also because publics are unlikely to generate expansive and inclusive solidarities without the Socratic nudging of organizers who have that end in view.

The role of the organizer, as it emerges in Franklin's account, is a bit like the role of a citizen and a bit like the role of a social critic, but not exactly like either. Like the citizen, the organizer engages in collective action. Like the social critic, the organizer stands a bit to the side, questioning and prodding.²⁶ Kant's "public use of reason" was the affair of writers and readers;²⁷ Franklin's public spirit is a project of citizens acting in concert, citizens whom organizers have assembled into publics. This public spirit is possible because an organizer has led the public's members through the first steps of a process of political education.²⁸

In 1731, when he was in his mid-twenties and had most of his organizing projects still ahead of him, Franklin noted that "the great Affairs of the World...are carried on and effected by Parties" each of which is oriented by the "present general Interest" of its members—or at any rate, if we are to leave some room for the organizer's "projecting" leadership, around "what they take to be" their common interest.²⁹ Franklin notes that he wrote these remarks after a day of "Reading History in Library," but his use of the present tense ("are carried on") is significant. The claim he makes is not about human history in some grand sense but about the world as he witnesses it, the modernizing world of the eighteenth century North Atlantic rim. For Franklin

the sort of public spirit most likely to thrive in modern circumstances is the sort he and his boyhood friends had shown when they stole stones to build their wharf.

A public spirit of this sort might achieve much, but must remain limited by its public's internal pluralism and friction. "[W]hile a Party is carrying on a general Design, each Man has his particular private Interest in View," Franklin writes. The problem is even greater as the party begins to achieve its immediate purposes, since at that point "each Member becomes Intent upon his particular Interest; which, thwarting others, breaks that Party into Divisions."³⁰ No organizer, however effective, erases the individuality of the members of a modern public—indeed, we might wonder whether the experience of associational life might foster if not more individualism then perhaps more confidence and rebelliousness on the part of those who participate in and are educated by the public spirit. To organize is not to eliminate conflicts but to conciliate them, and Franklin recognizes that this process of conciliation is never complete. Whether members of a public can be brought to act with an eye toward the good common to them, let alone toward the good common to some broader public to which they are not yet committed, are questions with no pre-determined answers. If the process of organizing succeeds in teaching its participants to recognize themselves as members of wider publics than those they could at first conceive of, it does so step by step.

Older republican traditions had spoken of civic virtue as a self-sacrificing commitment to the common weal, but Franklin insists in his 1731 notes that in modern circumstances "an united Party for Virtue" could come into being only as a more ambitious organizing project, beginning with narrow notions of self-interest and moving step by step toward a more justly conducted public spirit. He imagines that it should be possible for the "Virtuous and good Men of all Nations" to be assembled into a "regular Body...govern'd by suitable good and wise Rules" that

would “act with a View to the Good of Mankind” rather than toward the “private Interest” of any of its members or even toward the “present general Interest” of the party as a whole.³¹ But neither love of wisdom nor good will alone could found this cosmopolitan project. The members of the party of virtue would join it not only because of their desire to act “with a View to the Good of Mankind” but also, Franklin concedes, for the “Advice Assistance and Support” they could provide “in promoting one another’s Interest, Business, and Advancement in Life.”³² This is organizing on a different scale, but it is still organizing.

Reflecting on these ideas some fifty years afterwards, Franklin comments that his idea for a party of virtue may well have been a “practicable scheme,” but in case his readers have underestimated its difficulties he dryly offers this account of his decision not to carry out the plan:

[M]y then narrow Circumstances, and the Necessity I was under of sticking close to my Business, occasion’d my Postponing the further Prosecution of it at that time, and my multifarious Occupations public & private, induc’d me to continue postponing, so that it has been omitted till I have no longer Strength or Activity left sufficient for such an Enterprise.³³

Since even a party of virtue must be organized, then like all modern associations it is possible only insofar as it is compatible with the circumstances, needs, and occupations of its individual—or, better, individualist—members.

A reflective public comes about differently from the ways that families, organic communities, friendships, marketplace contracts, or totalizing collectivities do, and this difference has consequences. Organizing is not a means that can be applied with equal ease to every end. It has affinities with liberal and egalitarian purposes, and it also has limits: for the organizer, a cosmopolitan public can never be an immediate expectation, but must remain a regulative ideal. Franklin’s argument is bracing but not without hope. A politics of universal values or cosmopolitan aspirations, he suggests, is a project only for the most patient of

organizers. It is not impossible, but it involves long and hard work, and is never likely to succeed completely.

Organizing, as Franklin explains it, treats political action as experimentation, as a search for new experiences of common purpose and for a structure that allows public reflection on those experiences. Organizing is a distinctly and consciously modern way to arrive at decisions about what people have in common. Experiments do not always succeed, and Franklin makes no promises about the success of this technique. But he suggests that organizing can show a public spirit that is fallible but expansive, limited but capable of stretching beyond its initial bounds. It can construct forms of solidarity within which modern individualists can come to feel at home. Even a public spirit not yet justly conducted is still a public spirit, Franklin suggests, and it can still, under the influence of good organizers, provide its participants with an apprenticeship in solidarity.

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¹ Among the notable exceptions are Hauke Brunkhorst, *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community*, trans. Jeffrey Flynn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), and Sally J. Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

² Steven Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), x and 157; Steven Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2002), 243. See also the extended discussion of the “class ideal” in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, Second Edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

³ Note that according to the Oxford English Dictionary the usage of the verb *to organize* in question here—to set up or coordinate an association—developed between the 1690s and the 1790s.

⁴ References to Franklin’s *Autobiography* here will be to the version included in *The Portable Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Larzar Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 3-164. On Franklin’s political thought, see: James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); Paul W. Conner, *Poor Richard’s Politicks: Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order* (NY: Oxford U Press, 1965); Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Lorraine Smith Pangle, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2007); Jerry

Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence: U of Kansas Press, 2005). Houston's chapter on "Association" (60-105) and Pangle's on "Philanthropy and Civic Associations" (91-126) provide the most extensive discussions of the themes in Franklin's work that I address here. Houston's depiction of Franklin as a thinker who is neither a Lockean liberal nor a civic republican and Campbell's reading of Franklin as a predecessor of American Pragmatism are allied with my arguments.

⁵ For a sense of the relationship between Franklin's account of organizing and those of recent organizers, see manuals of community or labor organizing such as: Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max, *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists* (Washington: Seven Locks Press, 2001); Virginia R. Diamond, *Organizing Guide for Local Unions*, ed. Marilyn Sneiderman (Silver Spring, Md.: George Meany Center for Labor Studies, 1992); Si Kahn, *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982); Rinku Sen, *Stir It Up: Lessons in Community Organizing and Advocacy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). Despite the many points of comparison, Franklin's approach to organizing is different in some respects from those of unions and many community organizations today, not least in that Franklin organized to directly fulfill needs, not to exercise power. The exercise of power involves strategic decisions about an organization's position in relation to both opponents and allies, and thus demands a degree of centralization and bureaucracy. Franklin, unconcerned with power, does not confront the tensions between participation and centralization that worry organizers today. (As an introduction to one recent iteration of that dilemma, see Max Fraser, "Labor's Conundrum: Growth or Standards?" *New Labor Forum* 18.1, Winter 2009, and the responses in that issue by Stephen Lerner and John Borsos.) Franklin's account of organizing does not lose its value because of this, but we should read him with the awareness that he is commenting on some of the problems that have defined the organizing tradition, not on the whole set.

⁶ Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, 157.

⁷ These characteristics also put Franklin in the best American company, and it is worth noting that Franklin's technique of organizing may be as much an American as an Enlightenment innovation. That possibility is not the subject of this essay. I would like to note here, however, that it was Wilson Carey McWilliams who suggested to me several years ago that Franklin might fruitfully be read as the founding figure of an American community organizing tradition and thus as a crucial figure for all modern political organizing. I regret that I have taken up Carey's insight too late to hear what no doubt would have been his profound challenge to the notion of Enlightenment solidarity towards which I am working here.

⁸ *Autobiography*, 159.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'," in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 58.

¹⁰ Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, 7.

¹¹ On these themes, see Andreas Kalyvas & Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹² *Autobiography*, 8.

¹³ *Autobiography*, 8-9.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, 9.

¹⁵ *Autobiography*, 9.

¹⁶ *Autobiography*, 55.

¹⁷ *Autobiography*, 44.

¹⁸ *Autobiography*, 66, 99, and passim.

¹⁹ On these projects see, respectively, *Autobiography*, 56-57 and passim, 66, 99, 100, 100-101, 105-112. Houston points out (85-86, and 259 n. 63) that some crucial details in the *Autobiography's* account of the militia project—notably, the number of men who "subscribed" to the militia at the first public meeting—are different from those he gives in other writings. Noting this, I will confine myself here to what Franklin says in the *Autobiography*. The numbers Franklin gives elsewhere do not change the lessons he imparts here about his technique of organizing.

²⁰ *Autobiography*, 106.

²¹ *Autobiography*, 98.

²² *Autobiography*, 16.

²³ *Autobiography*, 17.

²⁴ Houston, 11-12, introduces this distinction, although I also draw here on the Oxford English Dictionary.

²⁵ *Autobiography*, 34.

²⁶ My use of the term "social critic" is informed by Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

²⁷ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

²⁸ There is some similarity between Franklin’s public spirit and Alexis de Tocqueville’s much-cited concept of “self-interest properly understood”. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, trans. Gerald Bevan (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 609-613. Tocqueville has little to say, however, about how associations are formed. The “art of association” he lauds seems to arise spontaneously, and his claim that self-interest properly understood is a “doctrine” of which Americans become “convinced” because they are able to “prove” its validity to each other (610-611) further distances his argument from the questions Franklin raises about the unique role of the organizer. For these reasons, Tocqueville’s work is of limited use for organizers and scholars of organizing. Nevertheless, much of the contemporary literature on theories of associations and virtually all of the (rare) literature on theories of organizers and organizing relies heavily on Tocqueville. See, for example, Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Association* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and the chapter on the organizer in Andrew Sabl, *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Autobiography, 89.

³⁰ Autobiography, 89-90.

³¹ Autobiography, 90-91.

³² Autobiography, 90-91.

³³ Autobiography, 91.