

compared to Philadelphia's prominence. Therefore, by positioning Allentown and Youngstown as economically grounded in similar urban markets, the author assumes too much, thus promoting a regional comparison between two cities that are incomparable.

Despite this problematic structure, historians will find much to admire in Safford's examination of social capital theory. His emphasis on Allentown's effective adjustment to a postindustrial, global economy provides historians with a discussion of identifying the reasons "why some places have had an easier time reknitting . . . [and strengthening] the fabric" of industry (16). Drawing from recent innovations in metropolitan histories, Safford considers not only the inciting incidents behind a community's push toward postindustrial society, but also how the society's historical backdrop and its leadership determine the path that the society will take. Therefore, Safford links *Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown* to the broader themes of historical research, while advancing the means by which the research can be framed.

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Lorraine Smith Pangle. *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Pp. xi, 277. Notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00; Paper \$20.95.)

Alan Houston. *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xi, 321. Maps, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$35.00.)

From today's vantage point, Benjamin Franklin appears omnipresent in the American eighteenth century. A son of Massachusetts who can seem instrumental in almost everything central to the period, Franklin made himself pivotal—and wealthy—in the most dynamic and diverse province of British North America, helped to define its culture through bestselling almanacs, involved himself in imperial politics and bureaucracy, achieved scientific fame across the Atlantic, became a leading voice for American independence,

and participated in designing constitutions for both Pennsylvania and the United States. And nearly alone among the founders, he had matured and made his fortune at the height of Walpole's decentralized and war-prone empire of "benign neglect" and lived to see the new national government begin its work.

For all his ubiquity, however, Franklin remains mysterious at his core. This was true in his own time; he was an object of intense suspicion whom many thought especially devious. And the sense of his essential unknowability has seemed to grow since then. Like Washington but unlike many others, he did not survive to participate in the nation's epochal reorientation away from the seaboard, and his tremendous versatility and a persistent misidentification of him as a proto-Babbitt contribute to the mystery. But the most essential reason for it lies in the written stance he adopted. With one major exception, he studiously avoided straightforward systematic argumentation; rather, almost all his nonscientific expressions—even in argumentative pamphlets, personal letters, and public statements—are indirect, arch, ironic, didactic, and presented through a near-seamless persona. This deliberate and habitual use of personas frustratingly veils what we, descendants of the Romantics, like to think of (and often desperately want to see) as the authentic person behind that authorial mask.

Franklin's importance, ubiquity, and unknowability have given rise to a steady stream of scholarly and popular books about him, immeasurably aided since 1959 by the ongoing Yale edition of his papers. These include at least sixteen general biographies since 1970 (seven since 2000) and large numbers of more specialized works on his role as a scientist, diplomat, man of the Enlightenment, and political figure; a significant literature has also developed around his *Autobiography* as a literary work.

Until the two books reviewed here, however, none had directly approached the question of Franklin's political philosophy. In part, this is for source reasons: his one attempt at anything like a philosophical treatise, the *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, was a youthful work he later disavowed. His reliance on personas, described in the *Autobiography* as a deliberate tactic adopted to gain people's cooperation toward achieving mutually beneficial goals, means that a political philosophy must be reconstructed from other genres. But the very reasons behind the growing literature on Franklin make increasingly important the question whether he had a coherent political philosophy behind it all and, if so, what it was. And, too, approaching Franklin this way can take us constructively back to the nation's

cultural and political origins without succumbing to the tautological given that Franklin must perforce be “America” prefigured.

Political philosophers Lorraine Smith Pangle and Alan Houston have taken on the challenge of reconstruction, and each perceives a coherent political philosophy behind Franklin’s public life and writings. But they represent very different approaches and reach very different conclusions.

Pangle’s approach will be less familiar and perhaps less congenial for readers accustomed to historical writing. Her aim is to offer a preliminary introduction to Franklin’s political philosophy and a preliminary evaluation of its suitability as a guide for contemporary Americans beset by the increasing fragmentation of public life. This effort fits, in turn, in the context of a larger discussion about modern Enlightenment rationalism descending from Hobbes—which Pangle views as ultimately disastrous for human excellence and liberty, particularly in its relationship to contemporary government and capitalism—against Socratic rationalism, which she sees as truer to the real nature of human beings. Her interest in Franklin in particular arises from his importance as a political actor and from the insights his writings offer on “the habits and qualities of heart and mind that need to be fostered in order to sustain liberty” and his “unrivaled insight into the individual human soul” (3). To reconstruct his political philosophy, Pangle has chosen to treat his lifetime output as a single source.

Five central chapters attempt a philosophical construction and evaluation of Franklin’s positions on economic life, on personal virtue, on civil association, on government, and on religion and the ultimate meanings of life. On economic life Pangle is sympathetic to Franklin, seeing him focused not on small-minded capitalist acquisition but on productive work as the basis of personal independence and fulfillment. But his approach to virtue clearly frustrates her. Though a son of Puritans, he did not regard virtue as individual striving against recalcitrant human nature to achieve moral perfections; rather, he approached it as a process of developing habits and an even demeanor that would lead one to be useful, and by the *Autobiography* Franklin essentially removed moral categories altogether. As a Socratic, Pangle finds this unacceptable. But her observation that he left behind no statement on free will, no developed theory of justice, and no consideration how his views related to other systems of virtue surely reflects unhappiness with the genre mismatch (71).

Her chapter on civil association focuses largely on whether voluntary association as a mode of leadership, however well suited to a democratic

society, provides enough scope for truly outsized ambition; based on 1726 and 1729 pamphlets, Pangle doubts that Franklin addressed this question adequately. Her review of his philosophy of government presents his experience as a series of challenges to the philosophical positions she has reconstructed in earlier chapters; a theme that emerges clearly is her conclusion that Franklin counted far too much on reasonableness among political entities.

A final chapter on “ultimate questions” rounds out Pangle’s essay. It portrays Franklin as a believer in Enlightenment rationalism who occasionally despaired over people’s ability to act rationally, and who took an instrumental view of religion and avoided questions of ultimate truth. She acknowledges Franklin’s deism but is disappointed that his works do not address transcendence of death or, seemingly, even acknowledge the force of passions and ambitions.

In sidestepping or denying the value of such ultimate questions, Franklin stands for Pangle as an archetypal Enlightenment rationalist. Civic cooperation for practical mutual benefit, the antidote he offers for what she characterizes as the soul-sickness induced by modern rationalist individualism, falls woefully short. “What should we think,” she asks, summing up Franklin as an insufficient alternative to the classical philosophers, “about a vision of citizenship that actively seeks to make human beings forget the crucial fact of our mortality and concentrate only on the problem we can do something about, like street lighting?” (220). Franklin’s charm and insight cannot, for Pangle, ultimately paper over the essential shallowness of what she has reconstructed to be his political philosophy, particularly in comparison with the standard she relies on and which provides the structure within which she has reconstructed and evaluated Franklin. She sees in this philosophy no call to greatness.

Alan Houston offers contextualization and explication rather than evaluation. His starting point is that what we know of Franklin does not fit comfortably into either of the currently influential interpretations of early American political thought, republicanism and liberalism, but that his importance requires us to understand him on his own terms and in the context of his times. Houston’s method is Skinnerian, based in attention to the discourses surrounding Franklin, supplemented by attention to the social and political events and issues affecting him and that he was attempting to address. Finally, Houston proposes to consider Franklin in four aspects: as a man of the Atlantic world, a public intellectual, a highly sophisticated writer,

and an actor who spoke his intentions and beliefs in what he did as well as in what he said and wrote.

In Houston's view, the overarching discursive and event context within which Franklin confronted particular issues was the development of a society, mores, and behavior patterns based in commerce, a newly emerging stage of civilization that met the human need for social contact through interactions rooted in mutual usefulness rather than in hierarchy, obligation, or faith, and this new pattern demanded new practices and new habits of thought. "Improvement" was the underlying unity in Franklin's approach to this new world of interdependence and mutuality, "not a rigid ideology or a program but a set of priorities expressed in decisions and actions" (189) that people learned by performing, and which his writings taught indirectly.

To live in this new world, Houston argues, Franklin thought overt behavior—"habits of virtue"—much more important than older virtues of inner character; they would also translate into reputation and monetary credit. In the right circumstances Franklin could also credit "emulation"—the envy that spurred consumption—with encouraging industriousness, following Mandeville and further rendering old virtues obsolete. Interaction, not the inner states and opinions behind observable interaction, needed to be the focus of attention.

Houston argues that Franklin's approach to civic association expresses the same underlying notion of mutual interchange for mutual benefit appropriate to commercial society. In a Quaker-dominated polity, defense was the thorniest issue and Franklin's solution to the 1747 invasion crisis was a model of mutuality: a carefully staged campaign among the middling sort authorized a voluntary militia that was funded by public lottery and run on unusually egalitarian lines. Houston views this episode as teaching through experience.

The following chapter situates Franklin's pioneering demographic work within the practice of contemporary science, discussions about population growth and distribution within empires, and internal Pennsylvania politics at the time he published *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*. Particularly striking here is Franklin's proffering of the reproductive model of jellyfish—a hiving off of small but fully formed offspring—as a metaphor for harmonious and productive imperial growth. Houston relates Franklin's notorious strictures on German immigrants to a neutralist movement among them during King George's War.

Consistent in Franklin's public career, Houston then shows, were interrelated efforts to build political systems that encouraged improvement and commerce, and the development of commerce and improvements to encourage political cooperation. They could be imposed from outside, as the Albany Plan of Union proposed, or structured internally. But, believing a commercial empire would be harmed by centralization, Franklin strenuously opposed such tendencies within the British empire and later in American political design. In emblems and arguments, he proposed instead egalitarian and responsive government structures that would encourage commerce and improvement. In such a polity successful politicians could seem personally unsavory; the intransigence of republican heroes was another obsolete virtue in a commercial age.

A final chapter discusses Franklin's acquiescence in, then opposition to, slavery, which Houston argues was explained in the language of commerce rather than natural rights and may have been influenced by exposure to schools for African children. An instructive short appendix demolishes Max Weber's influential interpretation of Franklin as a prototypical money-grubber.

To recover political philosophy in Franklin is a tall order, and both Pangle and Houston deserve credit for undertaking that arduous work. For this reader Houston's is the more productive and suggestive. The role of philosopher was known to Franklin, though it would not have been lucrative; he chose instead something more akin to *homme engagé* and sage. Houston respects this choice, deftly and gracefully situating Franklin's positions in the discussions of his own time, working with Franklin's many genres and his use of personas and unearthing an underlying coherence. By contrast, to evaluate Franklin as an orthodox philosopher can seem somewhat Procrustean, and it is difficult to picture the Franklin who smoothly negotiated the byzantine French court and deviously provoked the final peace settlement as bound by naive expectations. Then too, Franklin lived his long life under the constant threat of war, and he lived through and amid—and had a hand in—King George's War, the Seven Years' War, and the Revolutionary War. That such a man sounded no trumpets may be a point worth pondering.

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