

Albrecht Koschnik. *"Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together": Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775-1840.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. xii + 351 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2648-3.



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Voluntary associations provoke fights. From denunciations of social control to celebrations of social capital, historians have battled over the impetus behind and effects of civil society organizations. In the early Republic, Americans sparred for control of African American churches, questioned the propriety of women's charities, debated the purposes of benevolent organizations, and clashed over the legitimacy of partisan political groups. In *"Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together,"* Albrecht Koschnik takes up the struggles to find acceptable forms for partisan organizing and the related division between political and cultural life in the City of Brotherly Love.

Koschnik's work grew out of discontent with Alexis de Tocqueville's portrayal of American voluntary associations, as well as from an interest in studies of the Habermasian public sphere. In place of Tocqueville's "static image of associational activities," Koschnik stresses conflict and dynamism (p. 2). Because factional divisions were seen as harmful in the early Republic, Americans

sought forms for political activism that would meet public approval. After having condemned the Democratic-Republican societies of 1793 and 1794 as illegitimate, Federalists led the way in political associating by setting up militia companies and other societies. Republicans emulated and eventually outdid Federalists in forming partisan groups and, more important, in winning elections. By the 1810s, Federalists had mainly ceded office to the Republicans, but they wielded power in the cultural sphere. Federalists took the organizational know-how they had gained in militias and the like, Koschnik argues, and applied it to creating cultural institutions, which helped keep Federalism alive. He thus credits innovations in Philadelphia's associational life to the experiences of men, especially Federalists, in partisan groups.

Before Philadelphia's Federalists generally stopped looking for renown through politics, they and Republicans wrestled for power in government from the 1790s to the mid-1810s. The intensity of partisan strife during the period, as the

French Revolution and war in Europe pushed Americans into bitterly opposed camps, sparked fears of civil war in the fledgling Republic. Koschnik highlights well the anxiety and acrimony in the forging of civic culture as he explores, over three chapters, an array of organizations from the repudiated Democratic-Republican societies and the hounded American Society of United Irishmen to the more effective Saint Tammany and Washington Benevolent societies to the most successful organizations, the volunteer militias. These groups schooled men politically, provided structures for the nascent parties, and, he also argues, taught members to form and run voluntary associations.

How much credit can we give to partisan bodies for that last function? Koschnik probes the “origins of voluntary action” in the early Republic (p. 2). Yet, while he does refer briefly to organizations in colonial Philadelphia and to the growing number of charities (including women’s groups) after the Revolution, he does not really consider the impact of these other training grounds. In an intriguing appendix, “Organized Partisanship and Fraternal and Charitable Associations,” he asks what, if any, factional tasks various charitable and Masonic groups performed. The evidence is inconclusive, but it suggests that ethnic, fraternal, and benevolent societies were not overtly political. In that case, we could know more about the men who belonged to both partisan and nonpartisan groups. Was it common to do so? What does this flexibility reveal about political culture? And, how did an individual’s participation in nonpartisan philanthropies shape the formation and running of partisan groups? Dr. Michael Leib, a prominent figure in Koschnik’s book, for instance, brought years of experience as an attending doctor in the Philadelphia Dispensary to his involvement in Republican societies.^[1] Did not Leib and his counterparts take lessons about voluntary action from Philadelphia’s tradition of fire companies, ad hoc militias, formal and informal learned

bodies, charities, and religious societies? (Oddly, religion finds no place in Koschnik’s story either to explain political leanings or to illuminate organizational practices.) Further, activists in the early Republic learned much from colleagues elsewhere through far-flung philanthropic networks. These Atlantic connections call into question the “parochial, intentionally circumscribed world of voluntary action [outside of the Democratic societies] in the early republic” that Koschnik perceives (p. 32). Moreover, male partisans could have gleaned lessons about associating by watching their mothers, aunts, sisters, and wives: male and female reformers routinely cross-fertilized each other’s endeavors.

Wherever it was that Americans learned about associating, they learned much. In the final two, especially engaging, chapters, Koschnik explores two cohorts of young Federalists and their public activities. His portraits of Thomas Franklin Pleasants, Joseph Dennie, and other young men involved with the Tuesday Club or the Philological Society sensitively capture their aspirations and frustrations. By the second half of the 1810s, with the help of some conservative Republicans, Federalists channeled their energies into building civic institutions, such as the Philadelphia Athenaeum and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. His analysis of Philadelphia Federalists’ organizational work in the cultural arena is a complement and counterpoint to recent work (for example, Catherine O’Donnell Kaplan’s *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship* [2008]) that stresses long-distance and nonpartisan networks and the failure of young urban Federalists to create an alternative conception of citizenship through belles lettres. By contrast, Koschnik emphasizes local ties, with an insightful look at the socialization of many of his subjects as lawyers, and he highlights their lasting success in shaping Philadelphia’s cultural arena.

Voluntary associations may seem to have mushroomed across the young United States, but

activists routinely faced frustration and failure with their efforts. Scholars have often slighted questions of how novel forms spread, how people learned to associate, and how institutions evolved. Recently, however, these issues have been attracting historians' attention. "*Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together*" makes an important contribution to this direction in the inquiry into how Americans built civil society.[2] With his careful study of organizations and organizers in one city, Koschnik helps us see the trial and error and the discord that Tocqueville missed. His bold claim crediting innovations in associating to Americans' experiences in partisan groups has given historians something new to debate.

Notes

[1]. Philadelphia Dispensary Minutes, 1786-1805, Pennsylvania Hospital Archives, Philadelphia.

[2]. Other studies that explore these issues include Anne Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Johann Neem, *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), chap. 4; Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Conrad Edick Wright, *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

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