

“Standing Up in a Canoe”: Historians’ Unsteady Place in the Public Sphere

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In a 2011 essay entitled “Historians in Public,” Thomas Bender explained that “figuring out the place of history and historians in the public sphere is somewhat like standing up in a canoe. Too much motion.”¹ As one of Bender’s graduate students, I was trained many years ago to think about how my work and my profession intersected the public sphere, to consider ways I might go beyond academia to engage the public. Indeed, I assumed that this was a central concern for many, if not all, historians.

I—like many of Thomas Bender’s students—have personally experienced too much motion. We knew that it would be a challenge to appropriately frame our work within a public sphere. We have discovered that we are in danger of falling down (or, to continue the metaphor, falling out of the canoe entirely) when we try to act outside of the traditional boundaries of historians, outside of classrooms and conferences and archives.

Tom Bender teaches and writes about a profession that is alive, about history that has a history of its own. It is one of Tom Bender’s legacies as a mentor and advisor that his students actively look for ways of advancing the profession, of bringing nuance and complexity and context to expand the historical conversation in as many directions as possible. I suspect it is one of the reasons why his students have pursued so many different paths, inside and outside of academia. Even those who have followed the traditional academic path have often emulated Bender’s example of fully engaging multiple audiences, from organizing new conferences and editing new journals, to creating new institutes and serving as innovative administrators.

I teach at a small private university, a hybrid of liberal arts and pre-professional programs. My history department is primarily service, with a wide range of students who need a history class. One example is providing a historian to teach in our master’s

program in elementary education. I was eager for the opportunity to reach a non-traditional audience, of teaching teachers who could shape ideas about history for the youngest students. I thought about John Dewey, one key example cited by Tom Bender as a model for how a scholar could also serve as a public intellectual. It is one of Dewey's legacies that American teachers, at all levels, are supposed to receive a well-rounded education. Most elementary school teachers are not specialists, and they often have little control over their curricula. But that doesn't mean that they can't be inspired to think more carefully about history, to see that it is not just facts and standardized tests, but a way of seeing the world through different lenses. They can learn that novels are historical sources, that movies are tricky sources, and that it is possible to add a little nuance to a state-mandated heroic narrative. To teach teachers made me feel like I was part of a tradition, walking a path that Tom Bender first taught me.

I reached out to historians at other institutions where similar programs were offered and found that they saw teaching teachers as a waste of time, as a distraction from the "real work" of pursuing research, or teaching history graduate students, or teaching undergraduates. The "star professor" will not be found teaching these types of courses in most universities. Instead, there is the infamous "To Be Announced" or "Staff." The skeptics were, of course, right. My idealism was in conflict with the realities of academia. Advancement in the profession requires following a traditional path. I imagined how the American Historical Association might schedule a conference panel on "Teaching Elementary School Teachers" with the thousands of other panel proposals they have to consider (I do not envy the challenge of running an organization that is responsible for covering all of human history).

Another area that I have pursued has been interviews with news outlets. I have appeared hundreds of times in the media, mostly with local television and newspapers, and occasionally with national outlets. I make myself available for attribution as well as background. I feel honored and excited by the opportunity, because this is a chance to engage the public sphere. The ability to place contemporary issues in a historical context, to see how our politics, culture, and ideas are framed in ways I first thought about in a graduate course that Tom Bender taught is enormously gratifying (full confession: it was called "Politics, Culture, and Ideas"; I prefer to think of what I do as applied learning rather than as plagiarizing Bender's model). I feel like I am successfully standing in a canoe.

I want to emphasize that most of my media appearances have been actively arranged by my university, which has an external marketing office. My school is very supportive of my desire to engage the public sphere as a form of institutional publicity. But my primary goal has been to provide historical context to just about any issue that concerns American history, which means that getting my institution's name in an article has been far less important than in helping a reporter frame a story. If my schedule allows for it, I have almost always said yes (the only exception was when a reporter asked me, when he found out that I was a Korean American, if I had the "true story" on North Korea. I politely said no.) This has meant some difficult hours and strange

situations: My neighbors have stopped wondering why news vans are parked in front of my house, and appearing for the morning news is kind of awful when the studio needs you to do a sound check at 5:30 am.

Adding to the opportunity is the tremendous need for historical literacy in the public sphere. One of the predictable consequences of the transformation of traditional journalism is that journalists have to cover a bewildering range of subjects (I once spoke to a reporter who explained that she was the bureau chief and the entire bureau staff for a national news organization for the state of Florida). They have incredibly tight deadlines with the twenty-four hour news cycle and kaleidoscopic world of social media, and they need support with background information. Historians are ideally suited for this work. I have spoken for many hours to reporters, although my name may not show up at all or just as a short quote. I can see how our conversations have shaped pieces and provided depth, and it has been gratifying to think of how I have engaged the public sphere.

I occasionally get live interview questions that have left me stunned, like “shouldn’t we torture terrorists?” and “shouldn’t we bomb terrorists?” and “why does it matter how the world sees America?” But these are of course what we call “teachable moments.” These are reporters who were given the assignment with no time to prepare, and who are not only juggling stories but sometimes literally trying to balance their camera equipment. I can comment on the significance of images of Abu Ghraib and compare them to My Lai. I can talk about how the United States is enmeshed in the world, and is not simply the leader for which the world waits. I can talk about how diplomacy has served an important role in American foreign policy, not just military force, which might seem the norm for those who have only followed American foreign policy since 9/11.

But why is this public so accessible? A major reason I have this opportunity is because so many historians and other academics have declined requests. I am standing in a canoe that is disturbingly empty or perhaps stuck in place, at least from the perspective of the historical profession. Academic historians are overwhelmed by their teaching, their research, their committee work, their service to the profession. Email alone has become a Sisyphean task. There is not (and never has been) an ivory tower from which to descend, an Olympus from which to offer wisdom. A request to be interviewed by a local television news network, or a small newspaper, or a rock radio station, usually does not lead to a returned email or phone message from an academic, at least according to reporters and producers who interview me. When I think of colleagues—and this includes close friends—who sometimes take weeks or even months to respond to a query, it is clear that most historians simply do not have the time or energy to respond to questions from strangers.

As a tenured faculty member at a supportive institution, I have considerable freedom to choose how I spend my time. I respond to every request, and usually very, very quickly because of the tight deadlines involved (I frequently have less than an hour to prepare for a televised interview). Time spent providing context for a story on

a tight deadline where I get no attribution is challenging to schedule, but it is clearly a way to engage the public sphere.

Speaking with reporters is a natural extension of what many historians see as their primary mission. The National History Center of the American Historical Association recently released a new mission statement, which explains that the Center and the AHA seek “to make history an essential part of public conversations about current events and the shared futures of the United States and the wider world.”² Scholarship might be the purest expression of this impulse, but teaching is the area where most historians see the clearest results. Our job is not—and must not be—to proselytize; instead, we must provide the context to understand our world, past and present, and even future. Do our undergraduates—some of whom we send out into the world after only a semester of study and reflection—have the background to understand contemporary political debates? This is an unfair burden to place on those whose fields are less obviously connected to the present, but it is essentially a categorical imperative for those who practice modern history. As a historian of modern America, every spring is a time of agonizing, not just because of seasonal allergies but because of grading exams that show an incomplete or even completely distorted understanding of the nation and the world. A student who wrote a lengthy, passionate exam essay about how the Iraq War was about revenge for September 11 and how the War on Terror was successful in defeating terrorism represents a moment of teaching failure. I failed the student, not in his final grade (the exam question was a minuscule part of the final course grade) but as a teacher. But in a conversation outside of class, the student commented approvingly about my recent appearance on a local television broadcast where I talked about the guaranteed viciousness of the upcoming presidential election of 2016, and he asked me if my references to “previous brutal elections” were references to the elections of 1896 and 1968 that we had talked about earlier in the semester. I then spent ten very excited minutes talking to him, as enthusiastic as a time-share salesman. In our profession, you lose a lot; but you can win sometimes, too.

I have taken a different path than many historians, doing what I can to engage the public sphere whenever possible. But the path does not easily fit into the professional historical framework. I have been contacted by a handful of academics regarding my publications, a reflection of my very modest standing in the historical profession. I have been contacted by hundreds of readers, listeners, and watchers, a reflection of my engagement with the public sphere. I am still in contact with quite a few of the teachers I have taught, and while they rarely ask me about a specific historical lesson plan, they often ask about how they should place current events in a historical context. But these are just anecdotes, and it is impossible for me to speculate on my impact (a local café owner who sees me often on the local news admits that the volume is usually off; my dentist tells me that he sees me on the news, but only asks about my suit since I dress far less formally at my cleanings). And that is part of the reason why engaging the public sphere does not fit into the definition of a historian: Assessing the impact of an article or a monograph, evaluating the prestige of grants

and fellowships, and looking at conference papers are things that most historians can do reflexively. It is certainly what search committees and tenure committees can assess most easily. But efforts to engage the public sphere are usually—if they are even considered—linked to “service,” the younger sibling of the far more valued “scholarship.”

I don’t always manage to stand up in the canoe. And the canoe is sometimes stuck in the mud. But you get a different perspective on things when you stand up, even if you fall down. I once gave a talk at a local civic group on war, memory, and service. A World War II veteran, in tears, hugged me. I will remember that more than any single moment in a conference. And I am certain that the main reason I am doing any of this is because of the way that Tom Bender taught me—and many others—to be historians, to realize that being a public intellectual meant many things. Whether he was challenging us to remember the “wholes and parts” of historiography, making us think about how American history needed to be placed in a global context, or urging us to directly engage the public sphere, Bender was preparing us for a life of the public mind.

Notes

- ¹ Thomas Bender, “Historians in Public,” SSRC Essay Series: Academia and the Public Sphere, *Public Sphere Forum*, September 5, 2011, <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/bender-historians-in-public/>.
- ² Marion J. Barber, “A New Mission Statement Reflects the Evolution of the National History Center,” American Historical Association, *Perspectives on History*, February 1, 2014, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2014/a-new-mission-statement-reflects-the-evolution-of-the-national-history-center>.

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- Barber, Marion J. “A New Mission Statement Reflects the Evolution of the National History Center.” American Historical Association. *Perspectives on History*, February 1, 2014. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2014/a-new-mission-statement-reflects-the-evolution-of-the-national-history-center>.
- Bender, Thomas. “Historians in Public.” SSRC Essay Series: Academia and the Public Sphere. *Public Sphere Forum*, September 5, 2011. <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/bender-historians-in-public/>.