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The Political Uses of Sign Language: The Case of the French Revolution

THE STORY OF THE ABBÉ DE L'ÉPÉE and the founding of the Paris Institute for the Deaf long ago entered the realm of legend. Competing versions of the story can be found in movies, paintings, novels, and memoirs, as well as scholarly accounts spanning more than two centuries. Even today, a modestly revised account of de l'Épée's achievements continues to provide a foundational "creation myth" for the discipline of Deaf history.

The basic facts are easily retold: In the early 1760s, a French Jansenist cleric named Charles-Michel de l'Épée met two deaf sisters. Inspired by the idea of making these girls into "citizens" and "Christians," he set to work learning their natural language. Then, with their help, de l'Épée spent most of the decade trying to "perfect" this idiom, by which he meant expand it to represent abstract concepts important to religion and metaphysics, subject it to the rules of general grammar, and codify it. The result was what he labeled "methodical" sign language. It was also the establishment of a free school that eventually became the first national institution in the world for educating deaf people. One of the reasons de l'Épée's efforts remain so central to Deaf history is that they are so deeply connected to the founding of many of the greatest contemporary institutions for educating deaf people, including Gallaudet University, and to the methods and languages employed therein to this day.

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However, one aspect of the legend of de l'Épée has attracted considerably less scholarly attention over the years. That is the unusual significance that his close contemporaries invested in this story of the invention of a formal sign language rooted in elementary, iconic gestures and of its use in the intellectual and social transformation of deaf individuals' lives. We have largely failed to recognize the impact de l'Épée's experiments had either on late eighteenth-century people's sense of the world or on their fates, especially as a revolution unfolded around them.

Obviously, interest in the education of deaf children was not new in the 1790s. The questions of how best to instruct them and whether to use gestures as tools in this process go back to antiquity. Moreover, in the centuries before the French Revolution, many, many hearing people had had the experience of improvising means of communication and informal methods of instruction for family members, co-workers, and neighbors who either were born or became deaf in the course of their lives. But a qualitative as well as quantitative change in the discussion of deafness and communication occurred as the fame of de l'Épée's enterprise grew in the months that followed his death in late 1789. If you read the newspapers, memoirs, speeches, and political pamphlets produced during the French Revolution, you will not only notice that deaf people and deaf issues crop up everywhere. You will also discover that, in a wide variety of contexts, they take on a symbolic importance that you might not expect.¹

Some aspects of the story of deaf people in the revolutionary era are well known. The opening of the French Revolution in 1789 marked the introduction of representative government in France in the form of an elected national assembly, and we know that the fate of de l'Épée's school was taken up and debated by many of the leading deputies to this body from that very first year. We know that many of those deputies (following an earlier wave of noted scientists, philosophers, and statesmen, including John Adams, the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, and Queen Marie-Antoinette) attended public sessions at the Paris Institute for the Deaf, as de l'Épée's school came to be known. We know that the revolutionary state printed and distributed their speeches in praise of de l'Épée and then the Abbé Sicard, his successor. We know that Jean Massieu and other

deaf pupils at the Paris Institute were invited on several occasions both to plead for financial support for their school and to display their linguistic skills before the whole National Assembly. And we know that the revolutionary state finally nationalized the school in 1791. This is all part of what we might call institutional history.² More astonishing is how often the education of deaf people and the role of sign language in that process were incorporated into revolutionary rhetoric and revolutionary public life even when the topic was seemingly far removed from questions about the administration of the institute founded by the Abbé de l'Épée. The “language of Angels” (as de l'Épée's eulogizer called the methodical sign language that formed the basis of his instructional method) and the “miraculous” accomplishments of his deaf pupils were held up as subjects worthy of contemplation throughout French political culture between late 1789 and the end of the century.³

Consider, for example, proposals for legislation not having anything directly to do with deaf people. In the middle of an extended argument for creating France's first national system of education in 1791, Charles-Maurice Talleyrand, deputy to the National Assembly, managed to work in a tribute to “the language of signs,” which he described as nothing less than “perhaps the first method for making the mind perfectly analytical and for putting it on guard against the multitude of errors that we owe to the imperfection of our [ordinary, vocal] signs.”⁴ Several years later, at the height of the Reign of Terror, the Abbé Grégoire tried a similar rhetorical gambit. In the context of his famous speech urging the use of a single language (French) and the eradication of regional dialects in the nation's public life, he too drew his audience's attention to the deaf pupils of de l'Épée and Sicard. The deaf people alone, he claimed, had learned to think “following the path of nature” as a result of their reliance on signs.⁵

In addition, look at actual plans for developing new methods of teaching across France. When the question of how to train teachers for the future came up, the deputy Pierre Claude François Daunou suggested that every teacher-training institute be partnered with a school modeled on Sicard's and that all pedagogical methods and principles be derived from the education of deaf youths.⁶ Sicard himself was involved in almost all of the new teacher-training initiatives

of the revolutionary era, from the Lycée Républicain to the École Normale, or the first College of Education, because of his experience in using methodical signs and general grammar to educate his deaf charges. Moreover, he frequently used his own pupils in demonstrations of his method.⁷

Patriotic societies, particularly those concerned with defining the new language of politics, provide us with yet another set of examples. Urbain Domergue, the founder of the Society of Admirers of the French Language (a club whose membership included Robespierre and many leading Jacobins in the early 1790s), declared that “without a well-made language, there are no clear ideas and without clear ideas there is no happiness.”⁸ To this end he enlisted Sicard’s help in improving the French language and called on the public to interest itself in the language of deaf people. Here, he said, is “true metaphysics,” meaning a language whose principles were entirely clear.⁹ Similarly, when Condorcet and Sieyès, two leading revolutionary intellectuals, founded a prorevolutionary journal aimed at explaining the meaning of the new political vocabulary, they announced that teachers knowledgeable about deaf education would help shape the contents of the journal; deaf students would be responsible for its printing; and proceeds would be donated to Sicard’s school.¹⁰ Indeed, Sicard’s deaf pupils were often called upon to offer “true” definitions of the complex, much-debated terms of revolutionary civic life, such as rights, patriotism, and kingship, both in the National Assembly and in smaller civic gatherings. One example, Jean Massieu’s politically astute definition of the word *aristocrat*, survives in his own hand: “An aristocrat is someone who is unhappy with Good laws, and who wishes to be a sovereign Master and to be very rich.”¹¹ Other examples can be found in journals associated with a variety of political clubs and patriotic societies, from *La feuille villageoise* to the *Journal de la langue française*.

If you are still not convinced, consider the new communication technologies of the late 1790s as well. The decade of the revolution saw a wave of interest in the invention of nonverbal and often iconic means of communication, sometimes as substitutes, sometimes as supplements for written French. From the armlike signifying mechanisms of the new telegraphs to the abbreviations of the new stenography to the hieroglyphics designed for new universal written

languages, the example of the sign language of deaf people was a constant reference point, both rhetorically and conceptually, for inventors of this era.¹² Deaf students were also called upon to demonstrate these inventions in all of the most important learned societies of the period, from the Lycée to the Philotechnic Society.¹³ Such spectacles were intended to underline the connection between these inventions and a sign language that was thought to be at once natural and methodical, economical and accurate. This rhetoric found an echo in the numerous essays, written in response to the first prize contest of the new National Institute in the mid-1790s, that used the example of sign language to illustrate the impact that improved sign systems could have on postrevolutionary public life more generally.¹⁴

Finally, we turn our attention to the theater or the law, where we can even speak of vogues for deaf and mute characters. From programs for plays to printed accounts of sensational legal cases (known as *causes célèbres*), we see in the 1790s a fascination with the stories of deaf protagonists, whether as heroes or criminals.¹⁵ Moreover, we see sustained interest in probing certain similar theoretical questions using the example of deaf people: Can moral concepts exist for someone who hasn't learned the terminology for them? Can such concepts ever be taught without words? And are gestural signs inadequate to convey the meaning of legal and ethical abstractions, or are they clearer, more accurate, and more efficient than ordinary vernaculars?

My point in bringing up all of these examples is only this: Everywhere one looks in the records of the 1790s in France, it seems the fate of deaf people was being linked to politics and to the fate of the nation. Deaf people who signed were widely celebrated as “real republicans” (in the words of the deputy Étienne-Christophe Maignet), and sign language was repeatedly praised as “a miracle of patriotism” (in the words of the Abbé Fauchet, the founder of a patriotic club called the Social Circle) and as one of the great tools as well as achievements of the age.¹⁶ The situation was such that one royalist and counterrevolutionary, a writer named Jean-Claude Gorjy, claimed satirically that it was only a matter of time before the French banned the French language entirely in favor of adopting a silent “pantomimic system.”¹⁷

The obvious question is, why? Why, in the midst of a violent and polarizing revolution, one that was quickly escalating in the early 1790s into something like a civil war and an international war at the same time, was interest in deaf people and especially in their communicative abilities so great? And why was this particularly the case for the most prominent Parisian revolutionaries, men such as Talleyrand and Condorcet? What makes this a good historical question is that the answer is not at all obvious. In other words, precisely because it is difficult to make immediate sense of the revolutionary fascination with deaf education and language, pursuing the answer to this question offers us a chance to discover something new about the political culture that took root during the revolution. Here we have a question with potential consequences for the history of sign language education on the one hand and for the history of modern democratic political culture more generally on the other. In the remainder of this article, I propose an answer to this question of “why.” Finally, I briefly suggest what I take this case study to illustrate about the future of Deaf history and its connection to the discipline of history in general.

My response begins with an example from the much more recent past. It is now widely accepted that Deaf activism, which has been closely bound up with the field of Deaf history, has played a significant role in recent decades in shaping that large terrain that we call “identity politics.” How we as a society respond today to difference (whether in ability or in culture), and the meanings we attach to difference, stem in part from events that occurred within Deaf communities, such as that defined by Gallaudet University, and the reactions that these events generated on the part of those outside, especially in the late 1980s.¹⁸

Similarly, I think we can also say that more than two hundred years ago across the ocean in France, developments in the world of deaf people, as they were interpreted and manipulated by various internal and external parties, played a critical role in the establishment of a new political vision. However, this was a politics that took little interest in questions of individual or group identity and difference, as we understand them today. Rather, it was what might be considered a politics of language, and it depended upon two related ideas. The

first was the fundamental role of faulty communication in creating misunderstanding and consequently political conflict. The second was the equally fundamental role of effective communication (or, in eighteenth-century jargon, “well-made signs”) in creating intellectual agreement and social and moral accord.

To explain this claim, let me back up a bit in time. Ever since the writing of the late seventeenth-century British philosopher John Locke became well known in France, many Enlightenment thinkers (often referred to then, as now, as *philosophes*) began pointing to what they called “the abuse of words” as a critical problem for both philosophy and daily life. Locke maintained that, in theory, language was equally vital to the development of social bonds and to the expansion of knowledge. Rather than simply reflect what already existed, language played a truly instrumental role in human life. However, in practice, Locke argued, modern languages often functioned as barriers to knowledge, “so much insignificant noise,” as he put it, disconnected from knowledge of, or reference to, any set of distinct things or ideas.¹⁹ Moreover, modern people had turned into parrots, repeating words without truly understanding what they said and allowing others to attach varied, inaccurate, and often misleading meanings to them. The result was that discussions of metaphysics and morals alike had frequently turned into technical disputes about nothing. And eighteenth-century French intellectuals, building on several centuries of critiques of the abstract language of scholasticism as well, followed Locke’s lead in claiming that, at a minimum, the abuse of words had resulted in useless debate and confusion. At worst, it had become a prime source of disagreements that led, in turn, to factionalism, discord, and eventually civil war. As one famous *philosophe*, Claude-Adrien H elvetius, asked rhetorically in his controversial treatise *Of the Mind* (1758), “One sees what an eternal seed of disputes and disasters is ignorance of the true signification of words. Without speaking of the blood spilt by theological hatreds . . . controversies almost always founded on an abuse of words, what other misfortunes has not this ignorance produced, and in what errors has it not thrown Nations?”²⁰

One way to think about the Enlightenment is as a series of attempts to rectify these problems. It is no coincidence that the most

celebrated book of the era, the *Encyclopedia* (1751–1765) of Diderot and D’Alembert, was actually a dictionary, an attempt to remove from the body of knowledge all those terms that failed to correspond to any external reality (they had in mind mainly theological concepts) and then to redefine all of the remaining terms across every field. It is also no coincidence that the philosophes’ preferred method for arriving at truths was “analysis,” a technique that involved breaking down concepts into their constituent, sensible elements and then re-assembling them so that their meanings could be made as secure as possible. Finally, it is surely no coincidence that one of the most common philosophical tropes of the mid-eighteenth century was the state of nature, the world before artificial human laws, and that many philosophes interested themselves in tracing the symbiotic developments of language, social life, and knowledge, beginning with an imagined original language of spontaneous gestures and cries.

Charles Michel de l’Épée was motivated by all of these Enlightenment projects, as well as by his Jansenist faith and grammatical training. What I want to emphasize is that over the two decades prior to the revolution, in his writings and his public demonstrations of his pupils, de l’Épée carefully constructed a justification for his pedagogical experiments that went well beyond the matter of offering much-needed instruction to deaf and, usually, poor children. Certainly de l’Épée intended his “methodical signs” as an aid to the practical and spiritual life of deaf people, a means to form citizens and Christians. His project had strong links to the many other enlightened philanthropic initiatives of the era.²¹ However, de l’Épée also suggested that he had, with his methodical signs, discovered the seeds of a true philosophical language. That is, he insisted that the language he had developed for deaf people was an idiom without any defects, obscurities, or potential ambiguities, a language that could ultimately benefit humanity as a whole—precisely because it did not lend itself to abuse.²² For him and for his successor, Sicard, the deaf pupils at the Paris Institute were a living example of how this might be done.²³

Many, though certainly not all, of de l’Épée’s philosophically minded contemporaries were convinced. The abbé courted and invited a parade of learned men and women to attend the public sessions at his school in the 1770s and 1780s, just before the outbreak of

the revolution.²⁴ None of them described what they witnessed as the flowering of a specialized, minority language or the formation of an alternative language community. They tended instead to believe they were experiencing the overturning of deep-seated and misguided prejudices about the advantages of oral over gestural and visual communication. What de l'Épée's signing students demonstrated to these observers was that "methodical" signs, rather than being an equivocal and insufficient substitute for a complex modern vernacular like French (as his detractors claimed), were, on the contrary, unusually effective tools for communication. They were universally comprehensible, regardless of one's mother tongue or degree of sophistication; they were equally suited to the expression of emotional sensibility and metaphysical abstractions; and they were precise and clear.

Moreover, rather than contributing to the linguistic and conceptual confusion characteristic of the contemporary, post-Babel world, sign language, as a minor philosophe and Jansenist called the Abbé Copineau put it, could potentially lead to the end of anything "we could call *arguments about words*."²⁵ If such a sign system were taught to everyone, then all and sundry would be so sure about the meanings of their terms that there would no longer be any reason to quarrel. The Abbé de Condillac, one of the great thinkers of the era, went even farther in the mid-1770s. In his opinion, methodical sign language—with its links to the natural, iconic signs of the original "language of action" and its ability to convey those ideas most abstracted from sensations through analysis—should be considered nothing less than a potential means for arriving at secure truths in its own right. In effect, the language of signs made philosophy demonstrable. If hearing children were to learn in this manner rather than via "the articulate sounds of our governesses and preceptors," then they would surely acquire "more exact and precise ideas" than was currently common among the rest of the population.²⁶

Indeed, this message was reinforced by deaf people themselves. The superiority of sign language served as a central theme in the autobiography that a young deaf bookbinder named Pierre Desloges published in 1779 in collaboration with Copineau and a Jansenist bookseller named Benoît Morin. As Desloges cleverly announced to

his presumably hearing readership, “I cannot understand how a language like sign language—the richest in expressions, the most energetic, the most incalculably advantageous in its universal intelligibility—is still so neglected that only the deaf speak it.”²⁷

Such ideas made their way through French intellectual circles at the end of the Old Regime. The bookbinder Desloges, for example, developed numerous contacts in the world of the philosophes, meeting with Condorcet, writing for scholarly journals, and appearing in public debates with other deaf writers at the salon of Pahin de la Blancherie following the publication of his treatise.²⁸ Conversely, in the numerous learned societies and academies that sprang up in France in the 1780s, experiments with sign language found ready use as props to members’ commitment both to civic-mindedness and to the cultivation of new modes of intellectual exchange. We can surely suppose that de l’Épée’s example was fresh in the minds of those many men and women of 1789 who had roots in this world of learned sociability.

Nevertheless, that does not explain everything. For in the context of the revolution, not only the scale but also the significance of these experiments in the cultivation of sign language were transformed. In an era characterized by the explosion of free, uncensored speech and a bitter partisan struggle among competing factions, the example of signing deaf people helped foster and sustain a novel view of the relation of language to politics.

One of the distinctive features of the first years of the French Revolution was the linguistic inventiveness of the revolutionaries. Old words such as “convention,” “constitution,” and “aristocrat” took on new meanings. New words like “national assembly” were invented to convey new realities. But all of these words also seemed to take on ever more various significations, depending on the political opinions of the speaker or writer. The net effect was a widespread sense of crisis in language.²⁹

Opponents of the revolution screamed that these new words were deliberate abuses of the national language and that the existing idiom was being turned upside down. Patriots, or revolutionaries, shouted the opposite: that an outmoded political vocabulary had to be altered or it would continue to convey outmoded ideas—and that aristocrats

and rogues were leading the people astray by misusing new words that were still not properly fixed in the public mind. It was assumed on all sides that ordinary people—most of whom had had little formal education and a majority of whom actually knew little French—were incapable of determining what constituted an abuse when it came to the abstract terminology of revolutionary politics. (Indeed, one interesting element of this discourse is how often analogies were drawn to the uneducated deaf population when it was a question of popular understanding of the new language of politics.) Letters to the National Assembly’s Committee on Public Instruction from 1789 onward suggest that these fears were not entirely exaggerated. Digging in the archives, one can still come across letters calling, in effect, for immediate help. As one unknown writer specified, in his region the local children may have been dutifully reciting the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but “I am sadly convinced by questions that I have posed to the oldest among them that they understand the significance of none of the words used in it.” When this correspondent reproached the fathers, “They replied that they do not understand any more than their children and that they themselves need someone to explain these words to them as well.”³⁰

The net effect was that, for many commentators, the revolution appeared to have become a struggle for control over language, a battle for the power that came from determining and disseminating definitions for all. And as the fighting grew increasingly bitter into the early 1790s, and as it seemed that the successful end of the revolution was ever more elusive, many leading revolutionaries as well as counterrevolutionaries came to an extraordinary conclusion. They decided that the fate of the revolution turned on finding a well-made language of politics that would finally bring stability to meaning and a halt to this ongoing fight over words.

In this context, de l’Épée’s methodical sign language, still touted as an enlightened invention of an intellectually, if not politically, enlightened age, took on a new significance. Not only did it appear to offer a highly effective solution to the problem of how to integrate deaf people, as a minority group, into the dominant religious, economic, and now political community, but it also promised to provide a solution to political strife itself. Surely the revolutionaries did not

really think that sign language would, in the future, replace oral French. Rather, the concrete example of Sicard's students, with their perfect definitions of revolutionary concepts, suggested the possibility that if a similarly clear, methodical, and universally intelligible language could be identified and promoted by the state, then social harmony, on the one hand, and political agreement, on the other, would no longer remain elusive. If the abuse of words, rather than legitimate differences of opinion, constituted the root cause of most forms of conflict and dissension, then a perfected idiom, modeled on the language of signs, could potentially produce nothing less than consensus about the true nature of things and the successful end of the revolution. Perhaps it was only a matter of identifying and inculcating the right signs for the job.

Let us, then, briefly return to the examples with which this article began in order to see how sign language was used, both rhetorically and practically, to foster a distinctive revolutionary political vision. When we look again at the varied uses of the example of deaf people, we start to see repeated tropes linking them. This is true whether we are talking about a public demonstration of the connection between a new stenography and the language of signs or a discussion of deaf patriotism in the revolutionary press.

The first common strategy was to paint educated, signing deaf people as the archetypal “new men” of the revolution. In all of these texts and settings, Sicard's students were transformed into perfect patriots and republicans precisely because of their exemplary relationship to language. At one level they were imagined to remain close to the “noble savages” of eighteenth-century literature: innocent, attached to natural law, and (in the words of the deputy Prieur de la Marne) “unsullied by any of our past prejudices,” including the ambiguous, prejudice-laden jargon of ordinary conversation.³¹ On another level, however, they were thought to have unusually clear conceptions of things, including the concepts of the revolution that they had just been educated to know, and an unusual propensity for logical thought (remember Talleyrand's claim that sign language was “perhaps the first method for making the mind perfectly analytical.”). This was the theme of any number of public displays of Sicard's method. It also explains the desire for patriotic definitions along the

lines of Massieu's explanation of the contentious term *aristocrat*. One could hold up both the simple naiveté and the political precision of his definition to demonstrate the link between linguistic and moral regeneration.

Moreover, if certain deaf people were given the role of “new men” or ideal citizens in revolutionary political culture, deaf communities were frequently conceptualized as utopian spaces. Even the misguided experiment in combining deaf and blind children in one school in 1791 was celebrated as an ideal, a blueprint for the true revolutionary world to come when there would no longer be any barriers to perfect, error-free communication. “What a picture this lively meeting of talents and arts makes in a place where one saw, just a few years ago, only silence, shadows, misery, and desolation!” exclaimed a member of the National Assembly's Committee on Mendicity.³² Again, the reason lay in the role assigned to sign language—and the distance it allowed from a corrupted outside world.

Indeed, the most common theme in the discourse around deaf education was the one inaugurated well before the revolution by de l'Épée: that sign language pointed the way to the perfect language of the future. In the context of the revolution, however, this assumption became attached to politics. On the one hand, methodical signs (or a similarly planned language) promised to be a weapon of revolution, a way to help “consummate the regeneration of the social order” in the words of Fauchet and make the concepts of the revolution secure and uncontested.³³ On the other hand, such a language could be construed as a goal of the revolution; as Talleyrand also pointed out, the gestural language of deaf people was the one sign system discovered thus far that seemed to be “the living image of thought, in which all the elements apparent to the eye show nothing arbitrary, through which even the most abstract ideas become almost visible.”³⁴ He believed it was up to a revolutionary age finally to do what no society had done before: institute a truly philosophical language as a matter of political will. Such faith in a linguistic solution to politics and a political solution to problems of language constituted a distinctive aspect of the nascent democratic culture of the late eighteenth century. But more than that, this attitude toward signs (whether gestural, written, or oral) needs to be understood as one of the key

principles that first helped make a revolutionary change seem possible and then determined the form this transformation would take, for better and for worse.

There is, certainly, a profoundly negative aspect to this whole picture. Despite what we know of the extraordinary intellectual and professional accomplishments of a few celebrated deaf people of the era, including Desloges and Massieu, we have to acknowledge that the young deaf charges of de l'Épée and then Sicard were largely turned into rote performers for a hearing audience eager to witness civilization, which really meant normalization, through language education. Sicard, much more than de l'Épée, insisted on presenting uneducated deaf youths, including his beginning students, as the most lowly and pitiable and even immoral of humans. That way he could better display his advanced students, the products of his method, as ideal revolutionary citizens men and women devoted to revolutionary principles but disengaged from current linguistic and ideological power struggles. Sicard required his students to help keep alive this story and to dramatize the transformational process that now allowed them to think in complete harmony with the new revolutionary leadership. And more generally, this kind of thinking about the political function of language prevented the revolutionaries from ever accepting debate or plurality, either of various idioms or ideas. (At the height of the Reign of Terror, when the desire for unanimity and a single national will was at its greatest, even the idea of the translation of official decrees seemed potentially threatening because of its connection to interpretation.) Here two histories—of deaf people and of revolutionary ideology—reinforced one another to negative effect, creating a democratic political culture without space for difference or dissent.

And yet, it is important to note that this is not simply a story about victimization and forced consensus. For in the history of attitudes toward both the mental capacity of deaf people and the potential for gestural language, the French Revolution also obviously marks a real and positive turning point. Deaf persons, as a collectivity, were one more segment of humanity brought into the political fold for the first time as sovereignty was transferred to the people; a similar story could be told for people of color, servants, Jews, and various

other social groups. In addition, what de l'Épée called methodical signs not only gained validity as a “real” language. This idiom was also widely touted at the end of the eighteenth century, at least in France, as superior in many regards to the corrupt vernaculars of the modern age, and it was used as a spur to the development of better language education and better communications technology up to the beginning of the Napoleonic age. More broadly, this is also a story about the emergence of a then utopian and now seemingly natural faith in state-supported public education for all kinds of children as one of the obligations and one of the pillars of a democratic political culture. We must think about discipline and normalization in this narrative, but it is also important to consider the establishment of education as a path to a new kind of independence. Indeed, it is the dualism of the language politics of this era—the coexistence of both the individual right to free speech and the ideal of language planning to limit dissent—that needs to be stressed. The same applies to the fundamental role that the deaf people and their language played in both halves of this story.

What larger conclusions might we draw from this example about the future direction of Deaf history? Clearly, in uncovering the paradoxical story of the French revolutionary celebration of the sign language of deaf people, both the insights and the pathbreaking research associated with Deaf history have been vital. All of us with any interest in the role of deaf people and sign language in the historical record are indebted to the work of pioneers in this field such as Harlan Lane in the early 1980s and John Vickrey Van Cleve and his collaborators in the book *Deaf History Unveiled* in the early 1990s, as well as collections such as Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane's *Looking Back* of the same era.³⁵

Nonetheless, I believe that Deaf history has now become so established that it is time for it, and for larger field of disability history, into which it sometimes fits, to become much more closely linked with the broader field of history pure and simple. What is clear is that the story of deaf people and their language can help illuminate the main historical narrative in all sorts of exciting ways. Something similar has been going on for a while in fields such as women's history (as it has evolved into gender history) and the history of racial

minorities, where the incorporation of insights from those subfields has led to a rewriting of the main narrative in certain fundamental ways. Clearly, this process is already well under way for the history of deaf people as well. Consider recent work by Douglas Baynton on the cultural significance of the campaign against sign language in nineteenth-century America, or Jonathan Rée on the fascination with deafness in the history of Western philosophy, or Nicholas Mirzoeff on the significance of sign language to the development of French visual culture, or Jill Lepore on deafness and the creation of American English.³⁶ Historian Cathy Kudlick, in an important review essay in the *American Historical Review* titled “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” writes as follows: “Just as gender and race have had an impact well beyond women and people of color, disability [and she includes the study of deafness here, while also acknowledging the controversial nature of that inclusion] is so vast in its economic, social, political, cultural, religious, legal, philosophical, artistic, moral, and medical import that it can force historians to reconsider virtually every concept, every event, every ‘given’ we have taken for granted.”³⁷ The French Revolution is, to my mind, one of those moments. It played a vital role in shaping the modern history of deaf people, especially in the realm of education. But what also needs to be emphasized is that the example of deaf people and their language proved to be central to the course of the revolution and, I do not think it an exaggeration to say, the emergence of modern, democratic political culture. Our postrevolutionary conceptions of education, language, morality, pluralism, and progress cannot be understood apart. My goal in this article has been primarily to indicate how these two stories intersected in France in the 1790s. But I also hope that historians in years to come will keep probing the many intersections that have shaped the world—ancient and modern, Western and non—that hearing and deaf people live in together.

Notes

1. For a fuller account of this subject, see S. Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), especially chapters 3–5.

2. The chronology of the state's dealings with the Paris Institute can be reconstructed from the *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, ed. M. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent (Paris: Société Anonyme d'Imprimerie, 1867–1896); the *Procès verbaux et rapports du comité de mendicité de la constituante, 1789–1791*, ed. C. Bloch and A. Tuetey (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1911); and the *Procès verbaux du comité d'instruction publique de la convention nationale*, ed. J. Guillaume (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1891–1907). For synthetic accounts, see A. Karacostas, "L'institution nationale des sourds-muets de Paris de 1790 à 1800: Histoire d'un corps à corps," thèse de doctorat en médecine, Université René Descartes, Paris V, 1981; and D. B. Weiner, *The Citizen-Patient in Revolutionary and Imperial Paris* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

3. Abbé C. Fauchet, *Oraison funèbre de Charles-Michel de l'Épée . . . prononcée dans l'église paroissiale de S.-Étienne-du-Mont, le mardi 23 février 1790, d'après la délibération de la commune de Paris, en présence de la députation de l'assemblée nationale, de M. le Maire et de l'assemblée générale des représentants de la commune* (Paris: J. R. Lottin de S. Germain, 1790), 34.

4. C.-M. de Talleyrand, *Rapport sur l'instruction publique, fait au nom du comité de constitution à l'assemblée nationale, les 10, 11, et 19 septembre 1791* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1791), 100–101.

5. Abbé H.-B. Grégoire, *Convention nationale. Instruction publique. Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française: séance du 16 prairial, l'an deuxième de la république* (1794; repr. in *Une politique de la langue: la révolution française et les patois: l'enquête de Grégoire*, ed. M. de Certeau, D. Julia, and J. Revel [Paris: Gallimard, 1975]), 316.

6. P. C. F. Daunou, *Convention nationale. Essai sur l'instruction publique* (1793; repr. in *Archives Parlementaires* 68: 177).

7. On Sicard's participation in the Lycée Républicain, see C. Dejob, *L'instruction publique en France et en Italie au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1894), 420, and the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Papers of the Lycée, ms. 919. Sicard's lectures and the participation of his students in his lessons at the École Normale of Year III are recorded in *Séances des écoles normales recueillies par des sténographes et revues par les professeurs*, 7 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie du Cercle Social, 1795).

8. *Journal de la langue française* 4 (Nov. 5, 1791): 122. On Urbain Dommègue and the Société des Amateurs de la Langue Française, also see W. Busse and F. Dougnac, *François-Urbain Dommègue: le grammairien patriote, 1745–1810* (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992).

9. *Journal de la langue française* 3 (July 2, 1791): 96.

10. The relationship of the *Journal d'instruction sociale* to the Institut des Sourds et Muets is spelled out in issue 1 (1793): 12. On Sicard's abortive

role, see the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France (Paris), Papers of Condorcet, ms. 872, folios. 571–72. Ultimately, many of the essays in the journal were written by one of Sicard's hearing disciples, Julien Duhamel, who was also the author of *Un essai analytique sur cette question: Quelle est l'instruction nécessaire au citoyen français?* (Paris: Imprimerie de l'Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets, 1792) and an assistant teacher at the Paris school for deaf students.

11. Archives Nationale (Paris): F15 2584: note signed Massieu, n.d.

12. See, for example, J. de Maimieux, *Pasigraphie, ou premiers éléments du nouvel art-science d'écrire et d'imprimer en une langue de manière à être lu et entendu dans toute autre langue sans traduction* (Paris: Bureau de la Pasigraphie, 1797), including an introduction by Sicard; H. Blanc, *Okygraphie, ou l'art de fixer par écrit tous les sons de la parole avec autant de facilité, de promptitude et de clarté que la bouche les exprime* (Paris: Bidault, 1801); C.-C. Montigny, *Alphabet universel, ou sténographie méthodique* (Paris: Ballard, 1799); anon., "Des Télégraphes," *Décade philosophique* (Sept. 15, 1796): 525–33; and Belprey, *De l'optilogue, ou du cylindre parlant, appliqué à la transmission des idées chez les sourds-muets* (Paris: Dabin, 1801).

13. On the presentation of stenography by deaf students at the Société Philotechnique, see the Archives de la Sorbonne (Paris), Papers of the Société Philotechnique, ms. 1938; on their demonstration of a new form of telegraphy at the Lycée Républicain and the Lycée des Arts, see the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia), Papers of the Athénée de Paris, ms. 506.44/At4 and the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, Papers of the Lycée, ms. 920 respectively; on Massieu's assistance in demonstrating a "lexicology" at the Institut National des Sourds et Muets, see *Décade philosophique* (Nov. 21, 1800): 326–31 and (Dec. 1, 1800): 395–98.

14. The question announced in July 1796 was "What is the influence of signs on the formation of ideas?" The prize-winning responses of Joseph-Marie Degérando and Pierre Prévost were ultimately published. The rest remain in manuscript in the Archives de l'Institut de France (Paris), Institut National, Classe des Sciences Morales et Politiques, cartons B1 and B2.

15. On the law, see my article "Deaf Men on Trial: Language and Deviancy in Late Eighteenth-Century France," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21(2) n.s. (May 1997): 157–75. On French theater and deaf characters, see R. Bernard, *Surdité, surdi-mutité, et mutisme dans le théâtre français* (1941; repr., Geneva: Slatkine, 1977), as well as specific plays and pantomimes discussed in *A Revolution in Language*.

16. E.-C. Maignet, *Convention nationale: Rapport et projet de décret sur l'organisation des établissements pour les sourds-muets indigents décrétés le 28 juin dernier* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, an II), 21; and Fauchet, *Oraison funèbre de Charles-Michel de l'Épée*, 31.

17. J.-C. Gorjy, *Ann'quin Bredouille, ou le petit cousin de Tristram Shandy*, vol. 5 (Paris: Louis, 1792).

18. See C. Padden and T. Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), and J. B. Christiansen and S. N. Barnartt, *Deaf President Now! The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1995).

19. J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (1690; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 407–408. On the problem of the abuse of words more generally in the eighteenth century, a good starting point is U. Ricken, “The ‘Abuse of Words,’” in *Linguistics, Anthropology, and Philosophy in the French Enlightenment*, trans. R. E. Norton (London: Routledge, 1994), 160–73.

20. C.-A. Helvétius, “De l’abus des mots,” in *De l’esprit* (1758; repr., Paris: Fayard, 1988), 48.

21. See C. Duprat, “Pour l’amour de l’humanité”: le temps des philanthropes: la philanthropie parisienne des lumières à la monarchie de juillet (Paris: Editions du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1978).

22. This argument is spelled out by de l’Épée in his *Institution des sourds et muets, par la voie des signes méthodiques; ouvrage qui contient le projet d’une langue universelle, par l’entremise des signes naturels assujettis à une méthode* (Paris: Nyon, 1776). On this dimension of de l’Épée’s project, see J. R. Knowlson, “The Idea of Gesture as a Universal Language in the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26(4) (Oct.–Dec. 1965): 495–508, and, briefly, Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. J. Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 173–74.

23. The continuities and discontinuities between Sicard’s and de l’Épée’s methods and ambitions are a focus in Sicard’s *Second mémoire sur l’art d’instruire les sourds et muets de naissance* (Paris: Knapen, 1790) and his *Cours d’instruction d’un sourd-muet de naissance, pour servir à l’éducation des sourds-muets, et qui peut être utile à celle de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent* (Paris: Le Clère, an VIII).

24. On the vogue for attending these public sessions, see M. F. Pidanzat de Mairobert, *L’Espion anglaise, ou correspondance secrète entre Milord All’Eye et Milord All’Ear* (London: J. Adamson, 1784–1786), vol. 6, 136–39, and L.-V. Thiéry, *Guide des amateurs et des étrangers voyageurs à Paris, ou description raisonnée de cette ville et de tout ce qu’elle contient de remarquable* (Paris: Hardouin et Gattey, 1786–1787), vol. 1, 172–74. The English linguist Sir William Jones is typical of these philosophically inclined guests in that he was already familiar with de l’Épée’s “universal signs” before he began attending de l’Épée’s lessons “pretty constantly” in the summer of 1782; see *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, ed. G. Cannon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), vol. 1, 540, and vol. 2, 560.

25. The Abbé Alexis Copineau, the author of *Un essai synthétique sur l'origine et la formation des langues* (1774), was almost certainly also the author of the extensive notes to P. Desloges' *Observations d'un sourd et muet sur "Un cours élémentaire d'éducation des sourds et muets," publié en 1779 par M. l'abbé Deschamps* (Amsterdam and Paris: Morin, 1779), reprinted in full in *The Deaf Experience: Classics in Language and Education*, ed. H. Lane, trans. F. Philip (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 206–12 (notes); see 207.

26. Abbé de Condillac, *Cours d'études pour l'instruction du Prince de Parme: la grammaire*, in *Oeuvres de Condillac* (Paris: C. Houel, an VI (1798) [1775]), vol. 5, 13.

27. Desloges, *Observations d'un sourd et muet*, in *The Deaf Experience*, 29–48 (text); see 46.

28. See, for example, Desloges, "Lettre à M. le Marquis de Condorcet, Paris, 16 novembre 1779," *Mercure de France* (Dec. 18, 1779): 146–50, and "Lettre à M. Bellisle . . . en réponse à celle que lui a écrite M. l'abbé Deschamps au sujet des observations de M. Desloges," *Journal encyclopédique* (Aug. 1780): 125–32, as well as articles by others about Desloges' activities in the *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* (Dec. 15, 1779): 198–99, and in the *Nouvelles de la république des lettres et des arts* 7 (Jan. 4, 1780): 71, and 10 (Jan. 25, 1780): 98–99. The later biography of this extraordinary figure, from his participation in the Republic of Letters, through his political activism during the revolution, to his end at La Bicêtre, the notorious Parisian poor-house and hospital, deserves more sustained investigation than it has received to date.

29. On French revolutionary thinking about language and politics, see W. Busse and J. Trabant, eds., *Les Idéologues: sémiotique, théories et politiques linguistiques pendant la révolution française* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986); B. Schlieben-Lange, *Idéologie, révolution, et uniformité de la langue* (Liège/Sprimont, Belgium: Mardaga, 1996); and especially J. Guilhaumou, *La langue politique et la révolution française: de l'événement à la raison Linguistique* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1989).

30. Archives Nationales (Paris): F17 1010C, no. 3031, letter from a correspondent in Seine-et-Oise to the Committee of Public Instruction of the Convention (21 floréal an II).

31. P.-L. Prieur, *Rapport sur l'établissement des sourds-muets, fait à l'assemblée nationale, au nom des comités de l'extinction de la mendicité, d'aliénation des biens nationaux, des finances et de constitution* (Paris: Imprimé par les sourds-muets, 1791), 3.

32. J.-B. Massieu (no relation to Jean Massieu), *Rapport sur l'établissement des aveugles-nés, et sur sa réunion à celui des sourds-muets, fait au nom des comités de l'extinction de la mendicité, d'aliénation des biens nationaux, des finances et de constitution* (Paris: Imprimerie de la rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, 1791), 12.

33. Fauchet, *Oraison funèbre de Charles-Michel de l'Épée*, 38.
34. Talleyrand, *Rapport sur l'instruction publique*, 100.
35. H. Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Random House, 1984); J. V. Van Cleve, ed., *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University, 1993); R. Fischer and H. Lane, eds., *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages* (Hamburg: Signum Press, 1993).
36. D. C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); J. Rée, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language, and the Senses, a Philosophical History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999); N. Mirzoeff, *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign, and Visual Culture in Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and J. Lepore, *A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (New York: Knopf, 2002).
37. C. J. Kudlick, "Review Essay: Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *American Historical Review* (June 2003): 767.