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Vincent Denis, *Une histoire de l'identité. France 1715-1815*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2008. 466 pp. Notes, bibliography, annex, and table. €30 (pb); ISBN 978-2-87673-477-7.

Review by Jacob Soll, Rutgers University.

How did the state establish individual identity in early modern France? The famous trial of Martin Guerre is one dramatic illustration of the fact that in a time without biometrics, good imposters were hard to identify. The records that defined the legal existence of early modern French people were comprised of parish records, feudal charters and deeds, assorted business contracts and documents, and the recognition of one's family and peers. In his *Une histoire de l'identité*, Vincent Denis shows that by the Revolution, a number of state institutions created systematized records and paperwork first for the identification of workers, vagabonds, foreigners and then, increasingly, for all citizens. Where did the traditions of state identification come from, and how effective were they? Denis' well-researched book raises these important questions but does not always answer them.

Taking inspiration from Michel Foucault, Daniel Roche, Stephen Kaplan and Giovanni Levi, Denis looks at the modes by which the state sought to regulate the identity of poor citizens, soldiers, workers and foreigners. The increasingly organized police state of the eighteenth century not only sought to create files of vagabonds and foreigners; it also attempted to follow the paths of workers, issuing personal books (*livrets*) which kept the records of all work experience and qualifications. Passports were increasingly issued, not only for foreign travel, but also for internal movements within France itself. The rise of the internal passport, or personal papers, would be one of the defining marks of absolutist government from ancien regime France, the Revolution and Napoleon.

By the mid-eighteenth century, police reformers and philosophes such as Jacques-Joseph Guillaudé looked for a way to control rural vagabonds, deserters and the urban poor. In his *Mémoire sur la reformation de la police de France* (Paris, 1749), Guillaudé suggested making a file on each citizen of Paris, listing their address and issuing them papers. The Ministry of the Army, attempting to limit desertion, began a long process of making identification files for each soldier. In 1722, the army had begun making biometric files on deserters, describing their physical attributes, such as descriptions of body scars, chin size, the form of eyes and even the measurement of shadow portraits, later to be called silhouettes. In the mid century, soldiers moving outside of their regiment were to carry passports that described their origins, family and physical traits. The vicomte de Flavigny, Joly de Fleury, Turgot and Loménie de Brienne helped develop policies for the control of France's poor, soldiering and working population. Thus, two hundred years later, Pansette the deserter might have had a harder time posing as Martin Guerre.

As Denis shows, state officials had an increasing array of paperwork tools with which to identify citizens and foreigners alike. There is little doubt that by the time of Napoleon, the system of identity papers allowed the state greater ability to police the population of France. The rise of such state paperwork was, of course, mirrored by frauds and falsifications. As identity papers became more complex, so did *faux papiers*. Although it was still difficult and now required knowledge of state paperwork, one could find ways of being an imposter.

Denis suggests that identification papers represented a process of rationalization growing out of the administrative traditions of the Enlightenment. He can be interpreted as arguing that the slow rise of *papiers d'identité* can be seen as part of the dialectic of Enlightenment by which administrative rationalization—perhaps the less loaded term systematization is better—went hand in hand with state control, political repression, and possibly a totalitarian bent. The state expanded its control, or, to use Foucauldian terms, “power” over the population.

Yet does the evidence really show the eighteenth century as the central point in a process of rationalized class policing? Perhaps inadvertently, this book illustrates that the Enlightenment propagated and appropriated old, complex traditions that grew from the hodge-podge of medieval and counter-reform absolutist government. Denis’ historical grounding is weakened by the fact that the book is not written in chronological order. The author draws on examples from the reign of Louis XVI and Napoleon and then jumps back to the age of Louis XIV and the Regency, often on the same page (see the jump between chapters two and three, and pages 188-9 for examples). While reading, I found it necessary to make a timeline and write down key moments in administrative reform and innovation. When I did, it became clear that in spite of the book’s starting point—1715—much of the eighteenth-century policy of population identification grew out of administrative policy from the reign of Louis XIV, as the author himself notes (p. 36).

Indeed, it was Colbert who founded the office of Lieutenant Général du Châtelet in 1666 and assigned Gabriel-Nicolas de La Reynie as the first de facto police chief of Paris, who began writing lists of criminals and outlaw scholars and printers. Many of the policies to control vagrant and military populations grew from Colbert’s work to collect information on all aspects of French society. Along with policing and organizing the navy and galley system, Colbert collected information about workers and industry. He had personality and financial files on members of Parlement. Most significantly, he began the reform of the nobility which created genealogical files for each family and verified claims of nobility and tax exemptions. In doing so, he drew on older traditions of identification that grew out of the counter-reform and the church’s management of parishes and the Inquisition, as well as out of medieval traditions of feudal and industrial record-keeping.

Denis’ own evidence reveals the artificiality of the eighteenth century as an autonomous temporal period. Eighteenth-century Europeans lived in the old world and though they sought to change it, they did so often within the rich set of traditions that many of them inherited as children of the seventeenth century. For example, it is impossible to view the history of French eighteenth-century state administration without understanding Richelieu’s reforms and the growth of Louis XIV’s administration, both reactions to feudal tradition. This is why, as Lionel Gossman first showed, many philosophes read seventeenth-century history and were also medievalist antiquarians.[1] Figures such as Montesquieu, Boulainvilliers and La Curne de Sainte-Palaye knew that not only did they not live in a new, or distinct age, but rather that their future of liberty lay in a historically conceived past. They fought Louis XIV’s absolutist reforms with medieval, legal scholarship and political, philosophical tracts such as Boulainvilliers’ *État de la France* (1701, published in 1724). The state culture of civil identity was as ancient as medieval hierarchy, and the cultures of imposing state order grew out of the collage of administrative tools brought to bear by Richelieu, Colbert, Turgot and Napoleon. Indeed, the so-called rationalizing tendencies of figures such as Turgot or Joly de Fleury were often as absolutist as they were enlightened. Denis is therefore correct in seeing the Revolution as a major turning point. What remains to be explained is how exactly the successive governments of the Revolution and Empire built on or threw away the deep sedimentarized governmental traditions of the ancien regime.

Enlightened ministers expanded many of the techniques of policing developed by La Reynie and later Nicolas Delamare, as well as Colbert’s legal codes. And yet, in spite of building on the administrative reforms of the police, from the middle ages through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the state still relied on parish priests to record births and deaths and to help identify individuals, which still

meant calling on family members as had been done in the trial of Martin Guerre. It is not clear to what extent eighteenth-century Paris was more effectively policed than it was under Louis XIV. How much did the creation of dossiers, passports and *fichiers* add to or take away from the old modes of identification? If the Intendants and Lieutenants du Châtelet of the eighteenth century were major agents in identifying the population, then to understand the institutions and traditions behind identity papers it is necessary to reach back at least to the into the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries into the development of political economy, state statistical policies, paperwork and identification. To understand this complex administrative tradition and its evolution into the new governments of the Revolution and Napoleon requires not simply a history of the state, but rather a history of relationship between church and state. Throughout the eighteenth century, philosophe intendants still drew on parish records, though Denis does give convincing evidence that they were increasingly replacing church records with their own. There was a trend of secularization, but Denis never examines the process of this central though very slow takeover by the secular state of domains that had once been the reserve of the Catholic Church.

This process did not simply entail the rich oppressing the poor. Rather than posing the problem in terms of class struggle, it might be more revealing to look at civic identity in a wider history of the origins of totalitarianism, following Hannah Arendt.^[2] Or it could be posed in the focused frame of a history of taxation. The state looked not only to use its power over the poor and marginal, but also over its nobility and bourgeoisie. Notably, Colbert's policies of policing the poor were integrated into his system for policing the rich through genealogical regulation. The creation of files on noble families caused noble uprisings and protests, which slowed Colbert's project and continued as a point of contention between the crown, nobles and overtaxed commoners throughout the eighteenth century. By the reign of Louis XV, the genealogical files created and managed by the d'Hozier family grew. They illustrate the links between the history of the state, identity and privilege and taxation. And yet, these genealogical files were not only used to police nobles. Parliamentary antiquarians defending their own rights drew on these medieval registers as tools of political contestation, to identify their rights, as Lionel Gossman, Dieter Gembicki, Blandine Barret-Kriegel and Keith Baker have shown.^[3] The complex and sometimes contradictory equation of politics and power does not always work one way, from the top down. At least in the context of eighteenth-century France, the use of state power could have unintended consequences and create reactive modes of discourse, revolt and possibly counter powers.

The struggle over paperwork was not only about Enlightenment modes of reform: it is also situated at the center of the history of modes of writing, print and the management and dissemination of information. Denis does show the growing centralized apparatus of *fichiers*, or files on individual citizens. Yet the reader does not get enough of a sense of what passports and identity papers looked like. Though it would have been costly, this book would have benefited from images. Even more, detailed descriptions of state archives and their mechanics would show the evolution of technologies of policing and civil administration. More difficult but nonetheless essential would have been to examine the evolution of the establishment of identity from the oral and written forms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries towards possibly printed identity cards and files by the eighteenth century. When did civic identity become enshrined in print? How did oral identification persist (for of course it did), and how then did written, printed and oral identification interact and evolve together between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries? While Martin Guerre was misidentified by those who knew him—they referred to his moles and scars and squabbled over the different size of his feet—how would comparable cases of imposters have functioned in the age of Napoleon? These questions could be more effectively answered by more detailed examples from the rich annals of scandal and law.

All this said, Denis' book has many merits, among them its creative choice of topic and strong base of research. As I have said in other reviews of published French and Italian theses, I feel it a lost opportunity that the book's editors did not do a more thorough job. This work is rich, creatively

conceptualized, yet a jumble, missing key questions and bibliographical references, for example concerning the history of police. As such, it is unfinished. French publishers thankfully still publish monographs, but they would do a service to their authors by setting higher organizational and rhetorical standards. And they would do well to have their authors write indexes—a common practice by the late seventeenth century. The publishing of raw Ph.D.s is not usually the best way to establish talented young scholars. Having learned much from this book, I hope that Denis takes the time to develop the rich topic he has skillfully identified into a mature work outside the historically dubious constraints of the periodization of the eighteenth century and the limits imposed by a simplistic schema of class relations and the concept of power.

NOTES

[1] Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment: the World and Work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966).

[3] See Gossman; Dieter Gembicki, *Histoire et politique à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Nizet, 1976); Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Les historiens et la monarchie*, 4 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976); Keith Michal Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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