
H-France Review Vol. 17 (August 2017), No. 129

Vincent Milliot, *“L’admirable police”: Tenir Paris au siècle des Lumières*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2016. 369 pp. Illustrations, maps, and bibliography. 28.00€ (pb). ISBN 979-1-0267-0439-3.

Review by Thomas E. Brennan, United States Naval Academy.

The Anglophone historian soon learns to be cautious when dealing with *la police*. While not exactly a *faux ami*, the French word goes well beyond our Anglo-American concept of police. In addition to an institution—a police force—the word in France and, particularly, in the old regime, also referred to a relationship between ruler and ruled, a social and political order, and a conception of how the authorities ought to reinforce that order. Despite obvious overlaps, these perspectives raise very different issues, so it is perhaps inevitable that studies of *la police* in old regime France tend to focus on one aspect more than another. Some deal primarily with the organizational aspects while most take that as a given and look at the police in action. In addition to mining police archives for evidence about society, some look particularly at the actual relations between police and people, both as a matter of negotiation and of policies, and draw lessons about how each conceived the social order. And when “police” refers to a whole policy, like the “police of bread” or the police of guilds, the study transcends the police force itself and involves intellectual and political debates over what society should look like, how the economy and even nature operated. [1]

Vincent Milliot’s latest contribution to the study of *la police* touches on most of the registers described above. He quotes a dictionary from the end of the old regime defining *la police* as “l’ordre établi dans une ville pour tout ce qui regarde la sûreté et la commodité des habitants” (p. 304). His reference at one point to the police’s “organisation, ses pratiques et sa vision de l’ordre social” (p. 253) offers a fairly useful outline of his multiple approaches. Although heavily grounded in the organizational aspects of the police force, its hierarchy, career paths, and identity, Milliot ties these discussions to larger issues of its relationship to, and vision of, society. Much of the book is also a review of various contemporary reflections on the police. From mundane chronicles of police actions to theoretical debates about an emerging civil society, these discussions push the book into the more esoteric realms of political power, authority, and legitimacy. It is an ambitious book and, if poor organization leads sometimes to repetition, a very impressive one.

The first third of the book begins with the organization of the police force, essentially its Parisian incarnation, in the 120 years following the creation of the lieutenant general of police in 1667. Two principal types of agents illustrate the evolving dichotomy of the police as an institution and as a mission: the *commissaire* and the *inspecteur*. The *commissaire* predated the creation of the “new” police under Louis XIV and embodied a traditional role of law. As a magistrate, with a legal training and focus, the *commissaire* was essentially reactive, providing legal remedy to every level of society that sought him out. Divided among Paris’s twenty quartiers, forty-eight *commissaires* acted as judges of first instance, hearing complaints brought by citizens and dealing with a range of miscreants. They prepared legal reports, *procès verbaux*, to serve as the basis of more elaborate criminal court cases. Many of these reports dealt with civil matters, such as inventories after death, but also with strictly “police” issues such

as regulating the roads, markets, and certain segments of the work force. Milliot sees a growing tension, however, in the nature of their work, between the traditionally “judicial” job of magistrate and an increasingly “administrative” role that he qualifies as a “new police” (p. 71). Their growing subordination to, and collaboration with, the lieutenant general is partial evidence of this shift.

The second type of police agent was newer and had a very different, and more controversial, function. Created by the second lieutenant general, d’Argenson, in the last years of Louis XIV’s reign, the inspectors had an investigative role that ranged from assisting *commissaires* in responding to troubles to a more preemptive goal of identifying and neutralizing potential threats to good order. Milliot sees them exhibiting more clearly the “administrative” aspects of policing “qui se situe ‘en amont’ du délit” (p. 124), but this role was also inherently more repressive. In their preemptive capacity, inspectors were obliged to frequent disreputable places and to seek, but also to cultivate, disreputable people. And, in contrast to the carefully judicial methods of the *commissaires*, inspectors were not magistrates and were known at times for their high-handed practices. Their role excited debate and controversy almost from the beginning of their existence. They abused their vague authority so badly in the 1710s that they suffered an eclipse until their formal reorganization in 1740 with a more carefully defined role. Even then, they precipitated an eruption with the affair of the *enlèvement d’enfants* in 1750 and drew growing condemnation from an increasingly liberal chorus of philosophes. Other studies have discussed the scandals of the early and mid-eighteenth century that tarnished their reputation.^[2] Milliot is more interested in their later evolution and in the later enlightenment debates surrounding them. Unlike the *commissaires*, who had existed before the creation of the lieutenant general of police, the inspectors were both very dependent on his authority and associated with his sometimes arbitrary use of power. Thus, the enlightened criticism of inspectors raised many of the classic issues of liberty versus absolutism.

Milliot rehearses many of these debates in part to advance a claim for the growing legitimacy of this branch of the police. He compares the recruitment, training, and career paths of the inspectors to those of the *commissaires* to argue for a growing convergence. In both chapters, he supplies detailed investigations of the finances, residences, duties, and identities of each type of agent. This is painstaking research that points to a gradual improvement in the qualifications of the inspectors, in their training and oversight, and a more bureaucratic quality of their work. To the extent that the criticisms objected to brutal and even corrupt behavior, Milliot’s evidence shows considerable professionalization. But the debates went beyond misbehavior to question the very nature of the police’s authority and its right to intervene in society. These issues are raised in the rest of the book.

What follows is an extended effort to understand how the police saw their role and, just as important, how they conceived of society. In response to the rhetorical question “Prévenir ou réprimer?” that headlines the whole middle section, Milliot argues firmly for the first option. He emphasizes the police preoccupation with “risks” to good order and ways they could be mitigated, a “politique de prophylaxie des risques sociaux et politiques” that obliged them to “maîtriser espace et population”(p. 197). That the police were obsessed with dangerous people and places is well established. Milliot refers briefly to the panic over the *cour des miracles* and its denizens that helped to create the first lieutenant general. But he is not particularly interested in the other kinds of spaces that the police routinely warned against and spent much of their time inspecting. Instead he sees a desire to reform the whole geography of the city, to impose a rational system that would make the whole city “transparent.” He points to the reorganization of the city into twenty *quartiers* at the beginning of the eighteenth century, then to a plan for the “réformation de la police” in the middle of the century and to a lieutenant general’s project in 1776 to completely redraw the traditional districts, partly to bring order to a city deprived of guilds. This “new division” of the city was short-lived but at least reveals an ambitious vision. Most of what Milliot describes, however, is a much less ambitious effort to encourage police agents to work more effectively in their existing *quartiers*. He maps the residences of the inspectors and the geography of their duties to argue for their “insertion au sein de la population” (p. 221). Some duties kept agents close

to home while others had larger beats, making less for a mastery of space than for learning to deal with it.

The risk from people was felt more acutely and spurred more contentious police practices. Beggars, vagabonds, thieves, ex-offenders, concubines, “bad subjects”: an appendix lists dozens of categories for the hundreds of people swept up in a kind of preventative arrest, the *enlèvement* that defied any precise definition but which provoked growing controversy. Milliot analyzes the contemporary perceptions of some of these risky people. At one point, he notes he is attempting not “une plongée dans les archives pour faire une histoire sociale” but “apprecier un contexte et un discours” (p. 261). The discourse of poverty, for example, which animated much of enlightenment thought, had a direct impact on the police perceptions of, and response to, the problems of mendicancy. The repression of thieves formed a large if humdrum part of the inspectors’ duties, but they were also haunted by the more phantasmagoric fear of criminal bands. There was also a whole world of risk in the many economic activities that had never become guilds. Generally unskilled, unstable, and unrespectable, a large portion of the Parisian population made a living by menial tasks and the recycling of goods, food, and clothes. Again, the risk was partly discursive, in that their lack of “incorporation” implied a lack of hierarchy, of order, and of obedience.

The police responded to the various levels of risk with various levels of “prevention.” Agents were encouraged to keep records of the many unincorporated workers: “l’enregistrement se substitue à l’incorporation parce qu’il donne à la police le moyen de contrôler professionnels et activités” (p. 289). And with the temporary abolition of guilds in 1776, the police were prepared to extend this control to all professions. The police tried to impose a similar system of recording onto what Milliot calls their “auxiliaires” (p. 293), including *aubergistes*, *mères maquernelles*, and *revendeuses*, in the hope of using them to keep track of a shadowy world of anonymity, sin, and crime. But prevention also meant preventative arrest, the *enlèvement* condemned by philosophes and simple citizens alike.

In discussing the *enlèvement*, Milliot lays out his principal thesis most clearly. Throughout the book, he rehearses the published criticisms of the police, usually returning to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Pierre Manuel, and Jacques Peuchet, but occasionally bringing in heavier hitters, like Malesherbes or Turgot. The *enlèvement* was an easy target for their outrage, an abuse of authority, and a violation of their concept of legal rights. Police agents sent “suspicious” people to a variety of prisons without formal charges or trials. Their legal authority, the *ordre du roi*, was usually obtained after the fact and was, in any case, an arbitrary authority that also provoked increasing controversy. Milliot claims, at one point, to hold himself “à égale distance de l’anathème préconçu comme du révisionnisme hagiographique” (p. 234), but his judgments fall clearly on the side of the police and their defenders.

Milliot makes several arguments, some based on an extensive reading of police treatises. He is, after all, the editor of a recent and very welcome edition of the *Mémoires* of the Lieutenant Général Lenoir and has written extensively on Lenoir’s view of the police and their practices.^[3] The first point is the familiar one that, in the context of the old regime, the *enlèvement*, like the *lettre de cachet*, was a logical expression of a system that emanated from the judicial authority of a paternalistic monarch protecting society. Less familiar is the argument for a “réformisme policier” (p. 244), that police practices were changing through the second half of the eighteenth century in response to their critics. Inspectors were obliged to synchronize their *enlèvements* more closely with a magistrate, the *commissaire*, and the pecuniary incentives for such captures were slowly reduced, if not eliminated. Milliot sees a growing “souci des formes” as “une façon de construire la légitimité de l’action de la police” (p. 249), which harks back to arguments he made earlier for the growing professionalization of the *inspecteurs* and for their gaining “legitimacy” in the eyes of society. “Cette évolution est probablement l’une des clefs d’un compromis nouveau entre police et population” (p. 275). Yet the evolution he is invoking is not merely the “professionnalisation,” the “stabilisation et l’officialisation” of the police, but refers also to the growing dichotomy between respectable society, “la population stabilisée,” and the lower, dangerous

orders. Here is a third theme, developed at some length in a discussion of the *Journal* of Siméon-Prospér Hardy.[4]

Insatiable consumer of news, rumors, and gossip covering everything from the royal family to the local pickpocket, Hardy recorded and reacted to many of the events of the late eighteenth century. Amidst the reports on high and low society, a “non-negligible place” was devoted to the police, everything from executions to riot control to changing policies on the “police” of bread. Hardy also described “des gens inquiets pour la sûreté de leur personne et de leurs biens...l'évolution des attentes sécuritaires au sein de la population établie,” all of which “conduirait à légitimer davantage l'action de nouveaux corps de police”(p. 314). Although attached to an older, more judicial, model of the police, Hardy accepted a more interventionist, “administrative” police because “les transformations que connaît la police contribuent à préserver un ordre social”(p. 326).

Milliot's arguments are subtle, ambitious and very interesting. *La police* is such a rich concept that it deserves to be studied from the many perspectives that Milliot adopts. Unfortunately, the book is not particularly well laid out. Part of the problem is that more than half of the chapters have already appeared in earlier form elsewhere. Themes, arguments, and evidence are repeated and recycled, though they also reinforce. Another mild reservation is due to the nature of the evidence. Milliot is particularly interested in discourse, which means he turns frequently to discursive sources, both published and unpublished. Chief among these are a number of texts written by policemen, such as those by Lenoir, Guillaudé, and Lemaire, which debate with the texts of the police critics mentioned above. Milliot is anything but naive about the strengths and weaknesses of these texts, noting the agendas, contexts, and conceptual framework of their authors. Yet these sections are very much a view of the police from above that is greatly enriched when he turns, rather too sparingly after the first couple of chapters, to archival material. The debates for and against police practices in the writing of the time tell us important things. But the archives might tell us more about the attitude toward the police held by the man and woman in the street, which was probably quite different from the texts he has chosen. It is revealing, for example, that Milliot spends so much time discussing Hardy's journal and has so little to say about that of Ménétra.[5] In his life-long resistance to authority, Ménétra was frequently quite caustic about the police and would probably not concur with the title of this book.

NOTES

[1] Alan Williams, *The Police of Paris 1718-1789* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) is still a basic reference for the organization of the institution. Arlette Farge has mined the police archives in many works, such as *La Vie fragile. Violence, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1986) or *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). Paolo Piasenza, “Opinion publique, identité des institutions, “absolutisme.” Le problème de la légalité à Paris entre le XVIIe et le XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue historique* 290 (1993): 97-142 and “Juges, lieutenants de police et bourgeois à Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles,” *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 45 (1990): 1189-1215 explores the political and constitutional implications of police practices. Steven Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); and “Réflexions sur la police du monde du travail, 1700-1815,” *Revue historique* 261 (1979): 17-77, has mapped the larger implications of *la police*.

[2] R. Cheype, *Recherches sur le procès des inspecteurs de police* (Paris: PUF, 1975); Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *Logiques de la foule. L'affaire des enlèvements d'enfants, Paris 1750* (Paris: Hachette, 1988).

[3] Vincent Milliot, *Un policier des lumières, suivi de Mémoires de J.C.P. Lenoir* (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2011).

[4] Six volumes of Siméon-Prosper Hardy's *Mes Loisirs, ou Journal d'événemens tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connoissance* have thus far been published (Quebec: Presses de l'Université de Laval, 2008-12).

[5] Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal de ma vie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

Thomas E. Brennan
United States Naval Academy
brennan@usna.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172