

# France – a Nation of Cops?

*by Yann Philippe*

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**Is the French police on a downward slope? A vast encyclopaedia takes a historicist approach to the history of polices in France, while analysing it in light of contemporary challenges. It is a daunting task, made possible by adopting a long-term view and a broader geographical perspective.**

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Reviewed: Vincent Milliot (ed.), Emmanuel Blanchard, Vincent Denis and Arnaud Houte, *L'histoire des polices en France des guerres de Religion à nos jours* ("A History of Polices in France, from the Wars of Religion to the Present Day"), Paris, Belin, 2020. 584 p., €41.

It is rare for the context a book is published in to so strikingly justify the legitimacy of a long-term editorial enterprise – especially a collective one. And yet this was certainly the case of the publication in 2020 of *L'histoire des polices en France des guerres de Religion à nos jours* ("A History of Polices in France, from the Wars of Religion to the Present Day"), written by Vincent Milliot, Emmanuel Blanchard, Vincent Denis and Arnaud Houte. Public reactions to law enforcement operations in the face of the *Gilets jaunes* movement, the international impact of the murder of George Floyd (May 2021) and the increased visibility that was given to its possible French equivalents, the "*rassemblement citoyen en soutien aux forces de l'ordre*" ("citizen assembly in support of law enforcement forces") called for by fourteen trade unions in May 2021, or the controversial success of the film *BAC Nord* ("*The Stronghold*") following its release in August 2021 – all of these retrospectively seemed to support the authors' claim in their introduction that it was necessary to hear the voices of historians from "minority backgrounds, which sometimes struggle to make themselves heard", in the face of the "multiple forms of narratives of policing activities, which are often partial and biased, and linked to communicational, fictional, corporatist, denunciatory and/or activist

enterprises” (p. 8). The contribution made by history as a discipline involves unravelling, over the course of time, the tangle of polarised reactions to the place given to the police in France. The authors’ concern is to “understand the role played by this singular institution in the construction of the state, from the Bourbon monarchy through to the 5th Republic”. The reader thus understands, from the introduction, the point of analysing this problem not just from the psychologising angle of the love/hate relationship between the French people and their police – an angle which is also non-specific in time and functionalist – but also from the perspective of a political question: the construction of the state in France.

Is France, then, a “nation of cops”? However absurd this question may seem, this book certainly allows us to answer it. Taking seriously the damning expression that was coined by Renaud in his song “Hexagone” and then taken up again by the historian Johann Chapoutot in a 2020 column devoted to the structural dimension of the state of emergency under the 5th Republic<sup>1</sup> provides us with one way of reading this book, which is aimed both at a general audience and at the academic world. The authors’ aim presents something of a double challenge: reintroducing some historicity to the history of polices in France, while analysing this history in light of contemporary challenges. A considerable challenge if ever there was one, but one that is made possible by the authors’ decision to analyse this issue over a long timeframe and to take a broad geographical perspective.

## **An Overview from a Mature, Unifying Field of Study**

The book as such bears witness to the progress that has been made in terms of the historiography of the police. In the already excellent *Histoire des polices en France de l’Ancien Régime à nos jours* (“*History of Polices in France from the Ancien Régime to the Present Day*”), which was published in 2011, Jean-Marc Berlière and René Lévy devoted a long section of their introduction to interrogating the “police” as an object, a “lost object of the social sciences” that has suffered from the mutual distrust between the scientific community and the police as an institution and group. These writers were pioneers in revealing how considerably behind the times French historians were, and that there was a “black hole in French historiography”. Almost ten years later, extreme

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<sup>1</sup> “La France est un pays de flics”, “Historiques” Column, *Libération*, 29 April 2020, [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/04/29/la-france-est-un-pays-de-flics\\_1786856/](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/04/29/la-france-est-un-pays-de-flics_1786856/)

epistemological caution seems to have given way to a relative sense of confidence. Thanks to the proliferation of works borrowing from a wide range of approaches (social, political or cultural history, the history of the state), the scientific object constituted by the “police” has largely been normalised and become less sensitive. The authors’ reflections on the specificity of this object are thus reserved for the part of their book entitled “*Chantiers de l'historien*” (“Projects for the Historian”), in the annex.

The book thus makes visible the productivity of a dynamic and unifying field of research. The overall coherence of this collective work illustrates the benefits of collective writing when it is so expertly controlled. The writing, which is accompanied by rich, varied and beautifully presented iconographic documents, and includes no footnotes but does have bibliographical information for each chapter at the end, is always clear and accessible. The methodological debates that will mainly be of interest to a specialist readership are moved to the end of the book, in the “*Ateliers de l'historien*” (“Historian’s Workshops”). This streamlines the narrative while allowing a curious reader to have access to a remarkably concise presentation of the field of the history of police according to four themes that are present to different degrees in the overall narrative: “*Croquis historiographique*” (“Historiographical Sketch”); “*Policiers et gendarmes à travers la fiction populaire*” (“Policemen and *Gendarmes* through Popular Fiction”); “*Polices et colonies : chantiers et débats*” (“The Police and the Colonies: Challenges and Debates”); “*Un métier d'hommes*” (“A Man’s Work”). This last workshop reminds us – if we needed it at all – that men can be examined from a gender perspective just as much as women can. In this section, the authors, who are all men, interrogate the construction of an object that has long been defined as male, even if this analysis could have been treated in more detail in the main body of the book.

## **Against a Linear Narrative of Police Modernisation**

The authors set themselves the main aim of bringing some historicity back into the history of polices. In order to achieve this, they have broken down the book according to time periods, into four chronological parts that are treated by a different author in accordance with their area of expertise: the first period extends from the Wars of Religion to the French Revolution (“*Les polices entre villes et États*” – “Polices between Towns and States”); the second covers the years 1789-1830 (“*Le temps des révolutions*” – “The Time of Revolutions”); the third suggests a new breakdown of the nineteenth century (1830-1930) in order to adapt it to the object of study (“*Un siècle*

*d'affirmation policière*" – "A Century of Police Assertion"); and the fourth ends the book by examining the period from the 1930s to the present day ("*Un 'malaise des polices' ?*" – "A 'Crisis of the Police'?").

This historical depth has two main effects. The first is to allow the book to challenge the idea, which doubtless dominates public discourse today, that there has been "a linear, generalised progression towards a 'modern', gentler and more democratic police force" (p. 17). The "professional" world of the police is characterised not just by the inertia of its methods, but also by the historical fragmentation of its constitutional bodies (hence the importance of the plural being used to characterise the word "polices" in the title of the book) and the entanglement of various police repertoires and styles. Revealing the play between these configurations in the short and long term allows the authors to challenge the teleological view of a police that is supposedly growing ever more democratic and liberal, or even the idea of there being a cyclical alternation between periods of hardening and of relaxing. The relative pacification of law enforcement operations in Paris at the turn of the 20th century (no victims were deplored among demonstrators between 1893 and 1919) contrasts with the violence of clashes in the provinces. The development of a new law enforcement doctrine at the turn of the 1930s, which put an emphasis on pacification and restraint, did nothing to prevent the tragedy of 6 February 1934. Conversely, the repeated slowness of reforms, or the difficulties these have had in terms of achieving an in-depth transformation of the police as an instrument, or the practices of the players involved, give us an insight into the heaviness of these institutions and the financial cost of good policing.

Furthermore, police "modernity" has historically had many faces, which are as varied as they are contradictory: from state rationalisation under Colbert to the Enlightenment's project of social improvement, from the new foundation of the police with the 1789 Revolution to its institutionalisation under the *Directoire* and then the Empire; from the ideal of a liberal and transparent police that progressively emerged from the 1820s to the technical and intrusive modernity of *bertillonage*; from the generously-resourced police of the post-1968 years to the Sarkozian results-based culture. Above all, the space devoted in the book to the colonial empires, which were more often "conservatories of police practices" than "laboratories", singularly reveals the coexistence within imperial France of multiple temporalities for policing activities. The first colonial empire revealed how difficult it was to project the forms the police took within metropolitan France into different spaces and societies. This created contradictory dynamics: a tendency towards administrative simplification on the one

hand (an absence of municipal police forces, a tendency to royalisation and to detachment from the judicial authorities of police forces), upholding of a “state police” relying on seigniorial judges and slave-owning plantation owners on the other; and finally, a militarisation of law enforcement that might support the two aforementioned systems.

After the Second World War, the Algerian War had a profound impact on French polices, not just in the *départements* in Algeria to which many gendarmes and policemen were sent (between 1956 and 1962, half of newly-graduated police chiefs would begin their careers in one of the Algerian *départements*), but also in metropolitan France. On the mainland, policemen, who were identified as enemies by the FLN and were sometimes the victims of terrorist attacks, applied a special legal framework to their repression of Algerian nationalists, and carried out particularly violent and “anachronistic” law enforcement operations. The 17th of October 1961 was thus qualified, just a month after this date, by Pierre Vidal-Naquet as a “pogrom” and a “genuine mystery”, because the event so profoundly challenged the idea one might have of the French republican police without this provoking a major scandal.

A second effect of having chosen to examine a long time frame is that it allows the authors to “challenge the conventional narrative about the advent of a modern, nationalised and centralised police force” (p. 8). The book thus differentiates itself from other synthetic works by adopting a chronological structure that grants a lot of space to the modern period (16th-18th centuries), rather than treating this as a mere prologue to our contemporary period. This choice reflects a historiographical dynamic that is recent both at the French and European level. In 2014, the British historian David C. Churchill put forward the idea of bringing together two historiographies of the police and of the criminal justice system, those of the 18th and 19th centuries, which had long had different objects: the participation of the population, and in particular of victims, in the legal process in the case of the first; and the decisive role played by the new police services created by the state in the case of the second.<sup>2</sup> In parallel, in France, the idea of bringing together modernist and contemporary historians of the police progressively gained traction – of studying the 18th and 19th centuries together, in order to erase the “caesura of 1789”, which is not very pertinent to the history of the police, and to understand its transformations over the long term. Furthermore, by

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<sup>2</sup> David C. Churchill, “Rethinking the state monopolisation thesis: the historiography of policing and criminal justice in nineteenth-century England”, *Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 18, n°1 | 2014, online since 1 July 2017, viewed on 3 November 2017. URL : <http://chs.revues.org/1471> ; DOI : 10.4000/chs.1471.

pushing further back the starting point of this history to the Wars of Religion, and not to the creation of the general lieutenancy of Paris in 1667, the book avoids restricting its argument to the contemporary period and to questions regarding the nationalisation of polices and the Parisian model, both of which have long focussed most of researchers' attention.

Embracing the geographical diversity of France also allows the authors to open up their reflection. Historically, the police is above all an urban police, and the book presents us with a range of highly varied examples from all regions of France. This French police landscape clearly reveals that the Parisian police was long just as much an exception as a model. The book thus reveals historically diverse forms of articulating the police with the state, from the fragmentation of the modern period to the centralisation of the mid-20th century, from the *Ancien Régime* to the Republics, from the Empires to the French State.

## **A History of Polices in Light of the Present**

The second challenge in elaborating this overview is shedding light on the present day. Certain decisions made in terms of its writing and composition underline the authors' ambition of bringing different periods of time into dialogue with each other. The introduction opens by bringing into collision two incidents of rioting: that of the 1750 revolt on the *marché des Quinze-Vingt* market in Paris, and that of the triggering, in 2005 in Clichy-sous-Bois, of a wave of riots that set fire to the French *banlieues*. This comparison, to which are added other emblematic examples, opens up onto a reflection on the variability of the police's legitimacy and social acceptance depending on circumstances, places, social groups and the types of police intervention carried out. This introduction provides an answer to the various questions that have been raised in the media and political sphere regarding the unfathomable versatility of the French population, which supposedly went from singing the praises of the police during the demonstration on 11 January 2015 (in solidarity with the victims of the recent terrorist attacks) to chanting anti-police slogans ("Everyone hates the police") during later demonstrations.

We can easily see the benefits of such an approach. Diving into the depths of history encourages the reader to cool down a hot topic while testing the intellectual and argumentative caution of each of the book's authors. Thus, the idea of attributing

the ethnic and racial profiling practices used by today's French police forces to their colonial heritage – an argument that is put forward by some sociologists, but is difficult to prove – is left open to debate, and to any future progress that might be made in terms of research. Any reader alarmed by what they see in the current situation (references to a disintegration or “descent into savagery” of society, the threat of a spectacular rise in criminality and of a powerless police force) will find reasons to put their worry into perspective in this book. In fact, insecurity has often been a fashionable topic, to paraphrase an article that appeared in *La Petite République* in 1907. By putting forward a long history of security-related fears, the book reveals the structure of supply and demand in the field of policing. In the 18th century, fears related to nomadic groups led to an intensification of population identification procedures. In the second half of the 18th century, the fear that the – statistically modest – arrivals of black individuals from the colonies on metropolitan soil (mainly in Paris and in ports in the West of France) would “disfigure France” (as one Crown Prosecutor to the French Admiralty put it) led to the setting up of a specific police force (which was made official by the *Déclaration du roi pour la Police des Noirs* – “King’s Declaration for the Black People’s Police” – of 1777), whose task was to monitor the movements of individuals identified as black and to facilitate their return to the colonies.

The long 19th century was marked by a fear of recidivism that was largely fed into by more or less phantasmatic representations of delinquency, be it in literature in the second third of the 19th century (crime literature) or those found in the various mass media of the turn of the 20th century (human interest news stories, literature and then cinema). The threat of urban delinquency embodied by the “*Apaches*” combined with that of rural delinquency (with the return of the ancient spectre of the “*chauffeurs*” or “unscrupulous bandits who attack isolated farms, whose owners they torture in order to force them to reveal where their loot is hidden”) and of political delinquency (the *Bande à Bonnot* anarchists). This created a context of media panic, commissions of inquiry and passionate debates at the National Assembly, which led Clémenceau to encourage the creation of regional criminal police brigades (the notorious *Brigades du Tigre* – “Tiger Brigades”). The turn of the 20th century also saw the beginning of the political surveillance of foreigners, which, with the First World War, progressively developed into a general and obsessive monitoring of foreigners and colonial subjects, who were required to return to their countries of origin after having been brought to metropolitan France to fight or work. An office of indigenous North-African affairs was thus created.

Although the reader is constantly tempted to connect such examples to the present day, they are nevertheless never encouraged to conclude that there is some kind of eternal essence of the police: meaning a practice of the reason of state that is difficult to define, one that is technical if messy, and that requires, in order for it to be effective, that it hovers on the boundary between the shadows and the public support of the people ruling the country. This view, which is partly depoliticised and impermeable to scientific study, and is shaped by a mythology inspired by Fouché and Vidocq, continues to permeate the worldview of the national media (from the “*cabinets noirs*” (“black chambers”) frequently referred to by politicians to the many crime fiction heroes who play fast and loose with the law). In contrast, the idea that the history of the police is “a history of political choices” is the cornerstone of this work, allowing it to combine its project of historicisation and of shedding light on the present day. This partly explains the persistence of certain forms of political police forces in regimes that are supposedly reluctant to have them (the Republic) and under the aegis of rulers who were themselves formerly victimised by them.

But more generally, the long-term perspective reveals political challenges related to the various forms that policing activities can take. The broad definition that was given of the police in the modern era, as an art of governing the population, reveals in contrast the great difficulty in our contemporary period of formulating a technical definition of the police reduced to safeguarding security. Depending on the period, the particular moment in time and the circumstances, concurrent definitions of what constitutes good policing thus enter into competition with each other, with a constant tension between the protection of individual rights and the expansion of the powers of a police force charged with defending the state and its citizens. The social acceptance of the police cannot be decreed, it must be earned.

## **A History More Imperial Than Global**

Putting forward a globalised history of the French police, by opening up onto the imperial dimension, is one of the main aims of this book. It is therefore regrettable that the widening of this perspective is limited to the borders of the national territory of France, and leaves little room for international comparisons. The comparative perspective does admittedly spark several lines of argument, but it only has a marginal influence on the overall narrative. And yet, the structuring at a local level of the police – which long dominated the French landscape – is frequently seen at the global level.



The question of “police models” shook up the 19th century, and shaped political and cultural representations, in particular at moments when reforms were carried out. In addition, the study of such models has been singularly reinvented through connected history approaches which aim to combat any essentialising of the concept of models. Finally, the pressure to coordinate between police forces and the structuring of local and national authorities intensified at the turn of the 20th century in France as it did elsewhere. These elements could have sparked wider “denationalised” reflections on the developments undergone by French polices. This unequal globalisation of the perspective is all the more surprising given that the authors have all done powerful work on the comparison and europeanisation of the historiography of the police. Doubtless constraints linked to the nature of this book had a big role to play here.

Similarly, the plurality of public and private structures aimed at producing security, which anglophone sociologists have started referring to using the term “plural policing”<sup>3</sup> is present to unequal degrees in the book. The first part describes the diversity of institutions imbued with policing powers under the *Ancien Régime*. The second outlines the creation, from the Revolution onwards, of various forces that tended to become added to rather than replacing each other over the course of successive regimes. Finally, the sections devoted to the colonial realm devote a large amount of space to private security outfits created at the initiative of the colonisers. However, private security forces are only referred to episodically and allusively as far as metropolitan France is concerned, which suggests that they mainly exist within the context of the colonial exception. It would have been instructive to be provided with some elements pointing to the existence or absence of any regulatory intervention on the part of the state in this area from the contemporary period. In addition, the long timeframe provides an ideal framework within which to study the distribution of security-related activities between different agents throughout history. It can serve to correct the sociological myopia that leads to viewing plural policing as an effect of the privatisations of security policies carried out over the past forty years, whereas in fact this plurality, as the book shows, has a long history.

The authors make a brief reference to the paradigm of plural policing in their conclusion: “This neoplural policing, founded on the renewed diversity of agents of a security whose borders grow ever more extended due to the appearance of ‘global’ threats and of a feeling of insecurity that is presented as ever more widespread, shows that the nationalisation of the police does not constitute an obligatory and irreversible

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<sup>3</sup> Trevor Jones and Tim Newburn (ed.), *Plural Policing*, Routledge, London, 2006.

step in the development of polices” (p. 637). This approach through a negative underlines a challenge that has been pointed out by David C. Churchill: while there is now a consensus among historians to criticise the paradigm of the monopolisation of security by the state, it is much more difficult to put forward a new paradigm. Could that of plural policing, which has the advantage of working both over a long time period and in a very contemporary one, but less so in the first two thirds of the 20th century, constitute such a new paradigm? Only the future directions taken by research on this topic will tell us.

Finally, the book sheds little light on the observation it makes in its introduction that historians’ voices are little heard in contemporary debates about the police. The field of police history has developed, but its influence on public debate remains very modest. The book’s conclusion could have provided an opportunity to analyse this lack of attention and its possible specificity compared to the other social sciences (sociology and political science). While the “quality of relationships between the population and those who are in charge of the police remains an essential indicator of the democratic intensity within a society” (p. 639), some reflection is required on the possible ways of articulating the various disciplines of the social sciences with each other, but also on how these disciplines should relate to the political and governmental world, as well as to the general public.

But these are very minor criticisms given the general excellence of a book that will doubtless be a milestone in the field of the French and international history of the police. The extent of the knowledge thus gathered, as well as the quality of its overview, will make it a reference both for students and historians of the police, and for researchers in other fields (in particular in social history) wishing to know more about the institutions that have produced the archives they are using.

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