The Police Between Violence and Literature

by Christian Chevandier

Around 1900, when Paris had absorbed its outlying communes and the city's lower depths were populated by a range of shady characters, police officers oscillated between repression and social chronicle. These bulwarks against crime were also painters of poverty, who did not shy away from poetry.

About: Jean-Marc Berlière, *La Police à Paris en 1900. Plongée dans l'univers violent de la Belle Époque*, Paris, Nouveau Monde Édition, 2023, 296 p. 19,90 €.

France's most famous policeman is undoubtedly Jules Maigret, Georges Simenon's fictional character who began his career as a bicycle officer in a Paris police station and ended it as Chief Inspector of Police. More generally, the fictional police officer remains very popular in France, even when he or she is largely inspired by a real officer—as is the case with Maigret, who was modeled on Chief Inspector Marcel Guillaume.

History and Fiction

In recent years, film fiction has not hesitated to draw explicitly on real-life characters and events, at the risk of indulging in a degree of creative license by

inserting improbable sequences. Thus, in Cédric Jimenez's excellent film about the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris, "Novembre," a policewoman named Inès takes the initiative to tail a suspect—an event that never actually happened.

In a sense, what Jean-Marc Berlière proposes in his book is an instruction manual for the recent series "Paris Police 1900." Berlière notes that the fiction's creator "has drawn on the best sources for knowledge of the period" (p. 5). Yet, he modestly fails to point out that the sources in question are his own works—he has indeed published several studies on the police institution ever since his pioneering thesis on the subject.

Berlière also warns that the series contains some mistakes: No, the prefect's wife, Mme Lépine, did not use heroin and cocaine. Most importantly, he points to the realistic depiction of the turn-of-the-century period: the lingering poverty, the brutality endured by the powerless, the suffering of many women, the political violence exacerbated by a succession of politico-financial scandals.

Indeed, Berlière's work is not limited to a critique of the series; it also provides an overview of the city and of its police force in 1900. In all three parts of the book—respectively, a social history of Belle Époque Paris, a political history of the crisis-ridden early years of the Third Republic, and an institutional and social history of the Paris police—the author draws on police writings to shed light on the place, the time, and the actors involved.

In the Shadows of the City of Light

The first part of the book takes us through the streets of the capital, using a social approach centered on the poorest and the fascination with crime. The police officers' depictions of "the lower depths" of Paris recall neither Maxim Gorky's play (1902)—despite being written at around the same time—nor Jean Renoir's later film (1936). The poverty, the insalubrious dwellings, the rental houses evoke rather Jack London's East End (*The People of the Abyss*, 1903) and even George Orwell's England (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933; *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937). And on reading certain passages in Chapter 4, "Women: the long road to emancipation," one also thinks of Octave Mirbeau.

However, the dilapidated homes and furnished rooms of central Paris—which persisted for many decades—were not the only places of poverty. The destitute did not wait for the demolition of the fortifications to settle throughout the city, which had absorbed its outlying communes (Belleville, Grenelle, Charonne, Vaugirard) in 1861 and still contained rural spaces. And they quickly frightened Parisians, especially journalists.

As for the Seine Department outside the walls of Paris, it was almost free of police: The ratio of police officers per inhabitant was six times lower there than in the capital.

The Republic Under Threat

The second part of the book provides a political history covering three watershed events of the turn of the century: the national crisis, the explosion of anti-Semitism, and the terrorist turn of anarchism. As regards the latter, Berlière notes that terrorist activity was "strongly criticized and condemned in libertarian circles," and that anarchism only extricated itself from it by becoming involved in revolutionary syndicalism—a peculiarity of the French labor movement that has persisted to this day.

A few pages are devoted to Marguerite Steinheil, the demi-mondaine who was with President Félix Faure when he died in 1899, giving rise to all manner of rumors about the circumstances of his death. The president's funeral was the occasion of an outlandish coup attempt by the writer and politician Paul Déroulède, who was arrested, acquitted, retried, and then banished from France until his amnesty in 1905.

The "anti-Semitic frenzy" (as per the title of one of the chapters) entailed the use of biological and olfactory metaphors, a trademark of the far right at the time. It manifested itself in particular during the Fort Chabrol episode: In 1899, far-right militants protesting against the revision of Alfred Dreyfus's trial barricaded themselves in the headquarters of the French Antisemitic League, in a building of the tenth arrondissement, for about forty days. This was the time of the Dreyfus Affair, which the policemen-writers followed with great interest as it troubled both consciences and public order. Police Commissioner Ernest Reynaud was clearly affected by the turmoil:

> And I continued, like the common people, to believe in Dreyfus's guilt based on official reports. What finally shook my conviction was the weakness of the arguments offered by the opponents of the revision. [...] These gentlemen kept on speaking of the honor of the Army, but was not the honor of the Army more interested in repairing a judicial error than in perpetuating it? (pp. 124-125)

The pages devoted to Sébastien Faure, described by Berlière as "a Dreyfusard anarchist" (pp. 171-179), give a sense of the complexity of reactions to these events. They also show that the Third Republic emerged stronger from the turmoil, as its police officers were forced to shed an ambiguity that had worried those in power.

Police and Police Officers

In the third part of the book, Berlière takes us to the heart of the administrative and human machine. He begins with an overview of the situation in Paris—one of the few communes, along with Lyon, where the police depended solely on the central state. This arrangement incidentally explains why rivalry still exists between the Paris Police Prefecture and the national police, despite the 1966 reform which was supposed to merge them into a single entity.

Berlière then details the different police ranks, from the gardien de la paix, (who had replaced the Second Empire's unpopular sergent de ville in 1870) to the various chiefs of police. Some officers formed the brigades d'arrondissement, while others made up the compagnies de réserve. "Populated by giants" (p. 216), the compagnies specialized in maintaining order and accomplished their task with some brutality.

Most of these policemen were former army volunteers, often non-commissioned officers. This led Dr. Edmond Locard, the true inventor of forensic science, to write that:

> A man who, for ten years of his life, had as his motto "Do nothing, don't give a d… and report back" should stay where he is and not clutter a profession where initiative, risk taking, and decision making are a necessity (p. 224).

The reader will appreciate the biographies of the main police actors (and writers) of the book. Prefect Louis Lépine, a "monomaniac obsessed with order" (p. 171), is now very well known, thanks in particular to the book Berlière devoted to him.[1]

[1] Last edition: *Naissance de la police moderne*, Paris, Perrin, 2011.

Another familiar name is Alphonse Bertillon, chief of the Police Prefecture's Department of Judicial Identity and inventor of anthropometry, who even tried his hand at graphology.

Less well known, and therefore especially interesting, are the other figures. One thinks in particular of Louis Puibaraud, Chief of the Prefecture's political police (Directeur Général des Recherches), who wrote columns about the Police Prefecture for *Le Temps*, the most prestigious daily at the time. This convinced and active republican campaigned—without much success—for the reform of the Prefecture, which made him the bête noire of monarchists, anarchists, anti-Semites, and even some of his colleagues.

Special commissioner Jean France, also a member of the political police, was likewise concerned, as he himself wrote, with "safeguarding the Republic" (p. 253). Other men with the atypical profile of policeman-writer included Officier de Paix Gaston Falaricq and Chief Inspector Gustave Rossignol. The latter did not hesitate to claim that "every profession has its risks: the roofer falls from the roof, the mason from the scaffolding, and in my opinion the police officer must come under fire" (p. 251).

And yet, it is the police commissioner of a deprived neighborhood, Ernest Raynaud, who, thanks to his detailed and moving portraits, made the most important contribution to Berlière's book.

Police Literature

Although the Paris police was, as Berlière demonstrates, at a political and institutional turning point, it also operated at a time when misogyny and violence reached levels that would be completely unacceptable today. The zeitgeist of the time also manifested itself in the headgear of the petty bourgeoisie—the bowler hat worn by Police Prefect Lépine and by police officers Dupont and Dupond.

Our perception of police and police officers is indeed largely shaped by representations, which makes the texts reproduced in the book all the more fascinating. These texts, however, are not the only turn-of-the-century police writings to have been rediscovered a century later. Thus, historian Quentin Deluermoz recently unearthed, in the archives of the Paris Police Prefecture, the notebooks of a gardien de

la paix of the district of Père-Lachaise in the twentieth arrondissement.[2] Overall, the police officers figuring in the book—the most endearing of whom was Police Commissioner Ernest Reynaud, the Parnassian poet and close friend of Verlaine—were what would be considered today educated elites with a taste for writing.

A word of caution is in order here: Although turn-of-the-century police writings seem to have provided the basis for other types of literary works, they were in fact inspired by them. Take, for instance, this description of La Chapelle district by a police officer: "A whole swarm of filthy, shivering, and despondent children destined to perpetuate human suffering were heading toward school, slowly and with resignation, as if crushed in advance under the weight of their future lamentable destiny" (p. 29). How can we fail to recognize in this the influence of Léon Frapié's *La Maternelle*?

While the description corresponds to the 1890s, and while Frapié's novel—whose plot was set in Belleville, a neighborhood not so different from La Chapelle at the time—earned him the Prix Goncourt in 1904, the police officer's book was published only in the 1920s. Yet, even when turn-of-the-century police writers allowed themselves to indulge in the anecdotal, they generally proved more desperate and despairing than their contemporaries in writing about poverty and misfortune, which they witnessed on a daily basis. Their contemporary successors, who also write a lot, are not so different in this respect.

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[2] *Chronique du Paris apache (1902-1905)*, presented and annotated by Quentin Deluermoz, Paris, Le Mercure de France, 2008.