



Malcolm Anderson, *In Thrall to Political Change : Police and Gendarmerie in France*

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- ¹ *In Thrall to Political Change* is an ambitious book. In it Malcolm Anderson addresses a series of ostensibly basic, but in reality highly complex questions : how did the various forms of police in France develop into their contemporary forms ? How have these institutions reacted and responded to events, to social and political pressures and change across the period since 1870 ? Why do the Police and the *Gendarmerie* appear so often to be violent, incompetent and a threat to civil liberties as well as, as might be expected, the defenders of the public order and upholders of the law and of the ideals of the Republic ? He provides no easy answers ; indeed, he stresses that there are no simple lessons to be learned. He does, however, offer balanced, thought-provoking assessments to each of his questions ; and these assessments are based on careful consideration of all the issues and a mastery of the primary source material and secondary literature.
- ² The book is divided into six parts. An introduction, which addresses perceptions of and myths about the French Police and *Gendarmerie*, is followed by a broad chronological account of police institutions and policing since the Franco-Prussian War. There follow three other substantial sections that focus on the inter-action between the Police, the *Gendarmerie*, and other organs of the state, the recurring controversies about political policing and municipal control, and a succession of other recurrent problems such as

accountability, violence, private policing, and international collaboration. There is also a vital list of acronyms – ‘the scourge of police systems’ Anderson calls them – invaluable to those who do not know FASP from SCHFPN or ECPT from RAID, and useful appendices detailing the organisation of the Police and *Gendarmerie*, their ranks, how research has developed and providing various key statistics.

- 3 It is often asserted, invariably by conservative politicians or senior members of police institutions, that France has both the Police and the *Gendarmerie nationale* since they act as counterweights and impede anyone planning some kind of coup. This is an attempt to provide a legitimacy and rationale for accidents of history. Anderson does not discuss the assertion directly, though he clearly recognises it for what it is and the sporadic *guerres des polices*, that began under the first Napoleon and recurred at least until the new millennium, are commented upon throughout, along with a careful distinction being made and maintained between the two institutions and their development. The accusations of high-handedness and brutality have been levelled by both the Right and the Left and, while the Left was the principal complainant, the accusations have generally reflected who held the reins of power, and who was in opposition at the time of the charge. Among the other issues that Anderson highlights as recurrent across the whole period are first, the way that arguments over accountability and reform have also shifted between Left and Right depending on who was in power and who saw advantage in the reform, and second, how both most rank and file police officers and *gendarmes* have sought to do what they understood as their duty often in extremely difficult and uncertain circumstances, such as the anti-clerical campaigns of the Third Republic and the wartime Occupation and Vichy. And if at times police and *gendarmes* have made a mess of things or have become embroiled in scandals, as in the case of the municipal police in Lyon during the late 1960s and early 1970s when they appeared singularly incompetent and corrupt in their handling of serious crime, crafty and cunning politicians were also often at fault in the orders they issued and the behaviour that they sanctioned. Quite why in the spring of 1999 an experienced *Gendarmerie* colonel ordered his men to burn down two Corsican *paillotes* (unauthorised beach café-restaurants) if it was not, as he claimed, on the orders of the local prefect, is difficult to say ; the prefect, of course, denied the matter and went on to allege an unlikely plot directed at him from the prime minister’s office. Paradoxically, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, while political scandals involving the Police and the *Gendarmerie* seem regularly to have hit the headlines there were, at the same time, various opinion polls that began to portray the two institutions in a much more positive light and that put their reputations above that of all other public services.
- 4 Anderson admits that most of the lessons in his book seem to be negative ; yet he is also at pains to stress that, over the past century and a half, the Police and the *Gendarmerie* have played, and continue to play, a central role in ensuring decent conditions of life for the majority and in maintaining orderly government. The question then arises : is this not what police in Liberal democratic societies are supposed to do ? And if so, what is it, if anything, that makes the French Police and the *Gendarmerie nationale* different ? There are several parallels that can be drawn with other countries – parallels that Anderson does not attempt – and probably with a book coming in at almost 500 pages his publishers would have forbidden more. French *Gendarmes* like Italian *Carabinieri*, are both often portrayed as non-too-bright, but generally hard-working, helpful and sticklers for duty. The cinematic and television portrayals of British police during the 1970s took the same turn as in France during the 1970s when Clint Eastwood’s Harry

Callahan became a role model ; and both Britain and France witnessed a growth in private sector policing in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Towards the end of the book Anderson describes the increasing internationalisation of police across Europe and beyond. French Police officers and gendarmes are currently deployed with other western police officers to advise, guide and train in failed states and states emerging from civil and international conflicts – yet other than relatively basic technical training, what can they really provide ? There seems little doubt that police officers are in thrall to political change, but they are also in thrall to political and social cultures. Police forces cannot change those cultures, and perhaps the key lesson to emerge from Anderson's book is how much it is political culture that, outside of what might be considered a normal run of events such as war and occupation, shapes a disproportionate amount of policing.

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