

‘They have an admirable police at Paris, but they pay for it dear enough’.
Attitudes towards continental policing in nineteenth-century England

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Draft version for advance circulation – subject to change

Introduction

Police reform was the subject of much public debate in England in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. In the course of these debates, commentators often sought to compare policing as practised in England with continental policing. France in particular was a common point of comparison. While a variety of views were expressed, many commentators admired the way policing was conducted in France, viewing the ‘French system’ as one which produced very good public order and a high degree of personal safety for respectable citizens.

Vincent Denis’ paper has already discussed the work of William Mildmay. His *Police of France* expressed the view that the French were happy to find so formidable a force as the *maréchaussee* ‘ready to fight their quarrels, and protect their properties’ and argued that the English should adopt French practices in order to ‘help reform the abuses, that are complained of in our own’.¹ Such views were by no means unusual. The philanthropist Jonas Hanway, for example, was critical of the state of policing in England in a number of publications, wondering whether ‘the people of any civilized nation upon the earth [were] so subject to be disturbed on the highways, and even in their beds, as the *English*’.² For Hanway, this situation compared unfavourably with ‘most civilized parts of Europe’ where ‘the people [...] being more awed by *police*, do not so often commit such monstrous enormities. *They* are in the habit of discipline’.³

The legal reformer Samuel Romilly advocated that the police of France ‘be adopted throughout’, even if this meant ‘the employment of spies and of soldiers’.⁴ To leave out these elements of the system would be, for him, ‘to omit that part of it on which the success of the whole depends’. Even Patrick Colquhoun, perhaps the most influential writer on police reform in England and regarded as one of the architects of the New Police, also held that ‘In France [...] there existed that kind of establishment with regard to personal security and protection against the depredations of the most depraved part of the community, which Englishmen have certainly never enjoyed’.⁵

¹ William Mildmay, *The Police of France*, 1763, p. 32.

² Jonas Hanway, *The Citizen’s Monitor: Shewing the Necessity of a Salutary police, executed by resolute and judicious magistrates*, 1780, p. iv. See also, Hanway, *Defects of Police*, 1775.

³ Hanway, *Citizen’s Monitor*, p.ix.

⁴ Samuel Romilly, *Observations on a Late Publication*, 1785, p. 104. Romilly’s *Observations* was written in response to Martin Madan’s *Thoughts on Executive Justice*, 1785.

⁵ Patrick Colquhoun, *The Police of the Metropolis*, 1796, p. 380

For Colquhoun, prior to the Revolution, the French system had ‘arrived at the greatest degree of perfection’.⁶

Thus many influential commentators were favourably disposed to Continental and French methods of policing. Moreover, this was not simply a niche view. It was also possible to find similar sentiments in travel writings destined for a wider audience. William Jones, writing up his *Observations in a Journey to Paris*, was pleased to find that ‘the police of France is so strict, their people so well classed, regulated, and looked after, and their ports in the towns so well guarded, that criminals rarely escape’.⁷ As a result of this, ‘with all these difficulties and discouragements there are fewer malefactors, and consequently there is more peace, and less interruption, in all the affairs of social life’. Obviously, not every travel writer was so favourably disposed to the French police. Figaro, for example, decried the severity of the law in France and claimed that ‘the police of France endeavours to conceal all robberies and murders that are committed, and hundreds that never come to public light.’⁸ In the main, however, there was a good deal of public and specialist opinion in England which was favourably disposed to the way policing was conducted in France and more widely in Europe.

Given this, and also given the fact that Bow Street Officers (entrepreneurial detectives attached to the Bow Street magistrates court) were already working on the continent at times, it might be expected that the Metropolitan Police as it developed in London from 1829 onwards would have been favourably disposed to learning about and cooperating with continental police forces.⁹ In fact, this was not the case. This paper will consider the few interactions which did take place between the London police and their counterparts in Europe during the nineteenth century, and pose various explanations as to why these remained scarce.

The Metropolitan Police and the sharing of police knowledge

In considering the extent of cooperation, coordination, and sharing of knowledge between England and continental Europe, the example of the Great Exhibition of 1851 is perhaps instructive. Known officially as the ‘Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations’, and held in London’s Hyde Park between 1 May and 15 October 1851, this was the first in a series of exhibitions of culture and industry which were to become popular during the later-nineteenth century. Around six million visitors (about 1/3 of the population of Great Britain at the time) attended the exhibition. Such an event obviously necessitated a co-ordinated police operation. To this end, the Metropolitan and City of London police forces were temporarily augmented to cope with the anticipated ‘influx of provincial and foreign thieves, and bad characters’, and officers from provincial cities in England were also drafted in to share their specialist knowledge. In addition, however, 36 police officers from France, Belgium, Germany and America were seconded to the Metropolitan Police, ‘for the

⁶ Ibid, p.387.

⁷ William Jones, *Observations in a Journey to Paris*, 1777, p. 95-6.

⁸ Figaro, *The Novelties of a Year and a Day*, 1785, p.27.

⁹ Some material on these Bow Street activities to be inserted here.

purpose of pointing out to our own police doubtful characters and known thieves from the Continent'.¹⁰

On the face of it, the integration of a cadre of overseas officers, under the temporary command of a multi-lingual army officer especially appointed for the purpose, would appear to be a prime example of cooperation and the sharing of knowledge. In fact, what appears a smooth and efficient process in official reports is revealed as somewhat more grainy when operation on the ground is considered.

In the first place, for example, there was considerable confusion over who was coming, from where, and when. The suggestion to co-opt officers from Europe seems to have come initially from the Home Office rather than the police. There was plenty of interest in this and in all 34 officers were sent over, all to be paid for the duration of the exhibition by the Metropolitan Police. The New York police seem to have taken it upon themselves to suggest attending, requesting via the consulate in New York to be allowed to send three officers.¹¹ This request was declined by the Foreign Secretary, but the officers were sent anyway. Thus the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police (Richard Mayne) was certainly not proactive in seeking the involvement of foreign officers. Indeed, at various points during the Exhibition Mayne, who was worried about costs, was tempted to dispense with the services of the policemen from Lyons, Marseille, Breslau, Karlsruhe and Cologne ('these cities being too distant to induce thieves or swindlers to proceed to London from thence'), and to reduce the Belgian contingent.¹²

During the Exhibition, these foreign officers had no legal powers of arrest, and hence there was very little for them to do beyond walking around trying to recognise known felons from their respective cities. Amazingly, given the numbers of visitors, it appears this did sometimes occur. The New York officers, for example, recognised a known forger and pickpocket, and the Paris contingent identified 'un voleur très adroit à la tire – condamné plusieurs fois à Paris pour ce genre de vol'.¹³ Mostly, however, the daily reports from each country's officers consisted of a succession of 'nothing to report'. A typical report from the Marseille officers read

Nous avons continué le même service qu'hier dans la journée, aux environs de l'exposition, et dans l'intérieur de la ville, même pendant le soir. Rien de nouveau.

The foreign officers also spent some time tracking suspected political dissidents, something the English police less able to do due to lack of a sufficient detective force at the time, but the Metropolitan Police evinced little interest in these findings. Essentially, while there was a limited degree of international police co-operation during the Exhibition, contact was rudimentary with no real sharing of knowledge and

¹⁰ Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 – First Report, Appendix No. XXIV, p. 115. On the policing of the Great Exhibition more generally see Phillip Thurmond Smith, *Policing Victorian London. Political Policing, Public Order and the London Metropolitan Police* (Greenwood, 1985).

¹¹ The National Archives, MEPO 2/92 – Great Exhibition of 1851 – Arrangements, Foreign Police – Letter, Waddington to Commissioner of Police, 29 March 1851.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ MEPO 2/93, Exhibition of 1851, Officers from America; MEPO 2/95, Exhibition of 1851, Reports of Paris Police Contingent

practice. The whole affair was characterised by a distinct lack of enthusiasm on the part of the British police for this type of engagement

Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, then, this is perhaps the most significant instance of international collaboration. There is some evidence that the British police sought *information* on European practice at various other points. For example, prior to setting up the (detective) Criminal Investigation Department in 1878, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Edmund Henderson, sent a questionnaire asking for details on policing generally (and detection in particular) to, inter alia, the forces of New York, Paris and Vienna.¹⁴ There is also some limited evidence of other European forces contacting the Metropolitan police to ask how certain tasks were handled in England.¹⁵ In general, however, it is fair to say that there was very limited contact between the police themselves and their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, although a number of requests for information and assistance pertaining to policing matters can also be found in the files of the Foreign Office or Home Office.¹⁶

It was not until the very end of the twentieth century that the British police began seriously to consider the exchange of information and expertise with their European counterparts. While the British government declined to sign the protocol produced at the 1898 'International Conference of Rome for the Social Defence Against Anarchists' (itself indicative of prevalent British attitudes), the conference was at least attended by British officers, including Howard Vincent, the former head of the Criminal Investigation Department.¹⁷ Why then were the British police so little interested in how policing was effected in other countries prior to this, at a time when cross-border co-operation was beginning to develop in other parts of Europe?¹⁸

Divergent 'models' of policing?

In the first place, there are of course a number of mundane, practical reasons why police cooperation was rather limited. Obviously, the Channel limited the passage of criminals to a certain extent and the distance involved meant that meeting a counterpart was more complex than walking across the border, as was perhaps the case elsewhere. Equally, policing as a profession developed somewhat differently in England to other parts of the continent. Most officers commenced their careers walking the beat with little real training, and subsequently worked their way up

¹⁴ TNA, MEPO 2.135 'Criminal Investigation Department – Foreign Police Organisation Details, 1871-1877'.

¹⁵ For example, TNA, MEPO 2/163 'Revolvers, arming police with – 1883-1886' contains a letter from the Burgermeister of Amsterdam to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police dated 1 October 1886, asking for details of the circumstances under which officer in London could be issued with firearms.

¹⁶ See, for example, TNA, HO 45/7202 'Extradition: Application to France in case not within treaty: refusal of French police to aid arrest, 1861-1862'; HO 45/5734 'Prisons and Prisoners: Police surveillance of liberated prisoners in France: compulsory residence in one place and periodical reports required'.

¹⁷ Mattieu Deflem, 'Wild Beasts Without Nationality'. The Uncertain Origins of Interpol, 1898-1910, in Reichel, P. (ed.), *Handbook of Transnational Crime and Justice* (Sage, 2005), pp.275-285.

¹⁸ As an instance of cross-border collaboration, see the Police Union of German States, an international police organisation that was active from 1851 until 1866.

through the ranks. Hence, even those achieving a relatively high rank (although not the highest) were often of fairly lowly background. Such individuals were highly-unlikely to have built up a network of personal contacts in the way in which, for example, French officers transferring into the police from the civil service may have done. Lack of language skills may also have been an inhibiting factor. The fact that the Metropolitan Police appointed a multi-lingual army officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Paschal, to co-ordinate the policing of the Great Exhibition perhaps indicates a lack of home-grown expertise in this area.

In addition, the nature of early attempts at international police co-operation (such as the Police Union of German States) may not have appealed to the British. In his work on the genesis of international police cooperation, Matthieu Deflem has argued that the ‘dominant concern’ with regard to international policing during much of the nineteenth century was ‘international policing for political goals’.¹⁹ The policing of political dissidence was a subject of considerable public sensitivity in England during the nineteenth century. There was political policing in England during the period, but it was certainly not seen as a general function of the police. This may also have contributed to a lack of interest in European initiatives on the part of the British police.

All of this, however -the distinctive nature of policing as a profession in Great Britain and the sensitivity over political policing – cannot simply be asserted, it also needs to be explained. In order to understand both some of the distinctive aspects of policing in Britain during the nineteenth century and, particularly, the reticence over international collaboration, it is helpful consider the way in which a ‘model’ or ‘ideal’ of British policing developed around the start of the nineteenth century, one which positioned itself as antithetical to perceived continental police practices.

In my introduction I referred to approving commentary on French policing towards the end of the eighteenth century. A prominent theme of much of this writing was the good order which the police of the continent were able to maintain. This type of writing can be seen as a subset of more general writings on France during the latter half of the eighteenth century. During this period, as Robert and Isabella Tombs remark, ‘a central theme; or rather, variations on a theme emerged’.²⁰ A key precept running through many writings on the relationship between Britain and France at the end of the century was that Britain stood for freedom and France for order. As Tombs and Tombs further note, ‘this was so pervasive an idea that it shaped experience, and so in a sense became true. It accommodated a range of positive and negative interpretations: for it is striking how admirers and critics agreed about the essence of what they judged so differently.’²¹ Thus, even among commentators admiring of policing in France towards the end of the eighteenth century, it is possible to discern the notion that the French system of policing, while efficient, came at the cost of a certain loss of liberty.²²

¹⁹ Matthieu Deflem, *Policing World Society* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Robert and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy. Britain and France: The History of a Love-Hate Relationship* (Vintage Books, New York: 2008), p. 96.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Several examples from the press will be inserted here.

The Revolution disturbed sensibilities in England. There were plenty of press reports referring to the breakdown of law and order. *E Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor* reported in July 1789 that 'while the attention of the public is engaged in France by the proceedings of the States General, the police has slackened, or rather has been overturned, and set at defiance; and pickpockets, housebreakers, and murderers, have been left to themselves, unchecked and un-awed by the police'.²³ However, the Napoleonic Wars and the installation of Fouché had a bigger impact still and, by the early nineteenth century, the idea that continental policing was typified by state-driven spying, and the infringement of personal liberty by armed police, was taking shape.

The negative connotations of policing in France began to outweigh the positive. Whereas late-eighteenth-century commentators had remarked favourably on the safety of highways in France as compared with those in England, the Earl of Dudley could write in 1811, in the wake of a series of notorious highway murders - 'I had rather half a dozen people's throats should be cut in Ratcliffe Highway every three or four years than be subject to domiciliary visits, spies, and all the rest of Fouché's contrivance'. As he noted, 'they have an admirable police at Paris, but they pay for it dear enough'.²⁴ This quotation encapsulates well the idea that there was nothing worse continental (primarily French) policing. This continued to be the public perception of the matter for much of nineteenth century.

Throughout the century, newspapers printed plenty of examples of the petty officialdom of the French police. Tales of travellers detained unnecessarily by pompous officers demanding their registration details were a staple item.²⁵ The propensity of the police of Europe to arrest the innocent was also a common trope. As one paper noted, 'the Continental police, notwithstanding all their facilities, let criminals slip quite as often, if not more often than, is the case in England. The only difference is that they are much prompter to arrest innocent persons, and much slower to let them go free when their innocence is proved'.²⁶

More significantly, it was common in public debate and the press throughout the century to refer to the 'hellish French system of spy police'.²⁷ In the mid-century, newspapers still harked back to 'Fouché, the celebrated police officer of Napoleon' noting how he 'used to boast that he had a spy in every family, and so perfectly had he organised this monstrous system'.²⁸ This issue of espionage was closely linked to the idea of 'political policing', which was continually presented as an anathema to the British public.²⁹

What is particularly interesting is the way in which these stereotypes of 'continental' or 'French' policing developed *in tandem* with notions of the distinctiveness of English policing. In other words, the ideal of English policing was often defined via

²³ *E Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor*, July 19 1789

²⁴ Quoted in Philips, 'A new engine', p.174.

²⁵ See, for example, 'Police Severity' in *Reynold's Newspaper*, October 24 1852;

²⁶ *Daily News*, October 31 1881

²⁷ *Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser*, 13 June 1840

²⁸ 'The Police and the People' *Reynolds Newspaper*, December 1 1850

²⁹ Insert a press example or two on this subject here.

negative comparison with French or continental policing. In debates about what policing in England should be, comparisons with the continent were often used to make a point negatively. For example, the Metropolitan Police was set up as a primarily preventive force. While plain clothes officers were used, no official ‘detective branch’ initially existed. When one was set up in the early 1840s, following a series of notable failures by uniformed officers, it was the subject of considerable public debate.³⁰ A *Times* editorial noted that ‘there was and always will be something repugnant to the English mind in the bare idea of espionage. It smacks too strongly of France and Austria; and the powers it entrusts, often to unworthy hands, are liable to great abuse’.³¹

The same type of comparison can be seen repeatedly with reference to political policing – surveillance by plainclothes officers at political meetings was always something of a hot topic. In the 1880s, for example, a letter published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* complained that ‘a most bitter system of *Continental* police supervision’ existed which was ‘calculated to ruin every Socialist individually’.³²

Again, in relation to a debate in the mid-1880s over the possibility of arming the Metropolitan Police (following a series of burglaries during which officers had been shot), much public debate was focussed on idea that ‘nothing could be more distasteful to English ideas of freedom than the establishment of a gendarmerie on the model of that which is found necessary for the security of life and property in most Continental countries’.³³ As the *Telegraph* noted it had ‘hitherto been one of our national boasts that we in Great Britain were free from the quasi-military guardians of law and order who about on the Continent’.³⁴ The British policeman’s alleged popularity was contrasted unfavourably with ‘the hatred with which the same functionary abroad is generally regarded’.³⁵

Thus nineteenth-century public discourse on policing in Britain was constructed in such a way as to place stereotypes of ‘European’, ‘Continental’ or ‘French’ policing as the ‘other’ against which the British ideal was defined. This is not to say that these stereotypes were in any way accurate (the myth of Fouché, for example, was largely just that).³⁶ Rather, my point is that this powerful stereotype had the power to shape perceptions of the British police and its role within Europe. If serving policemen imbibed the notion of a distinctively ‘English’ style of policing (a debate in the *Police Service Advertiser* in the 1860s confirmed the belief among officers in a ‘continental system under which the police become either political agents or partisan politicians’) then it seems likely that this perception must form part of any explanation as to the

³⁰ Robert Morris, ‘Crime does not pay: Thinking again about detectives in the first century of the Metropolitan Police’ in C. Emsley & H. Shpayer-Makov, *Police Detectives in History 1750-1950* (Ashgate, 2006).

³¹ *The Times* December 2 1845. In addition, see letter in the times a few days later – Dec 4 1845

³² ‘Police Persecution of Socialists’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, August 4 1888

³³ *Chronicle*, 11 November 1885. On this debate more generally see C. Emsley, ‘The Thump of Wood on a Swede Turnip. Police Violence in Nineteenth-Century England’, *Criminal Justice History* 6 (1985), pp. 103-23.

³⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 29 September 1883.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Howard Brown, ‘Tips, Traps and Tropes: Catching Thieves in Post-Revolutionary Paris’, Emsley & Shpayer-Makov, *Police Detectives*.

lack of international collaboration on the part of the British police during the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, there is evidence of some rudimentary contact and information sharing between the Metropolitan Police and forces within continental Europe during the nineteenth century. However, there was very little interest/enthusiasm on part of English police for actual collaboration and cooperation. It was not until well into the twentieth century that the British police become properly integrated into international policing networks.³⁷ There are a range of practical reasons why this might have been the case – not least the enthusiasm of European forces for collaboration on political issues, something which was a subject of great public sensitivity in England at the time. However, a further key factor preventing greater collaboration was the development of a particular stereotype of ‘continental’ policing, against which an ideal type of English policing was counterpoised in public discourse. This stereotype served to fuel an English belief in the uniqueness of their own police system, and hence allowed them easily to set aside the idea that collaboration and the sharing of information might be beneficial.

³⁷ See, for example, TNA, MEPO 3/2036, ‘Sir Norman Kendall’s report on his visit to police forces in Vienna, Dresden and Berlin’, 1930.