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Dominique Kalifa, *Naissance de la police privée: Détectives et agences de recherches en France, 1832-1942*. Civilisations et Mentalités. Paris: Plon, 2000. 328 pp. Illustrations, documents, notes, bibliography, and index. 139FF (pb). ISBN 2-259-18291-7.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

Dominique Kalifa's *Naissance de la police privée* provides the first scholarly historical treatment of the French "private police"—agencies that conducted, as private commercial transactions, extra-legal investigations into suspected fraudulent activities and clandestine surveillance of individuals. It fills a curious yet important lacuna in the history of private life: the development of private detective companies as agents of social normalization in modern France. In contrast to the volumes of historical monographs devoted to French police and criminal justice systems, the novelty of the book lies in its focus upon private detectives. At first blush the subject appears to occupy a peripheral, if not esoteric, position in French society and culture. Yet Kalifa has succeeded in producing a stimulating and successful microhistory. Ultimately, the marginal story of France's private detectives charts the historical shift "from anxiety to normalization" in the development of the French liberal state and bourgeois society.

In the introduction, Kalifa asserts that the history of private detective agencies is woven into the fabric of French history in two significant ways. "First, the history of the *police privée* is one of the 'invention' of a profession" (p. 14, translations throughout by reviewer). Born in the early nineteenth century from the need for increased financial security in increasingly long-distance and anonymous business transactions, and an accompanying need to guarantee the integrity of the bourgeois family as the social site of the inheritance gained from such commercial wealth, the professionalization of private detective agencies involved a movement from being regarded as a suspect, and even illegal, activity to becoming an accepted and regularized one. Second, at a symbolic level the book is a history of "representations" (p. 15). In a narrow sense, by "representations" Kalifa means ways in which, over the course of a century, the figure of the detective shifted in meaning from early associations with police spies, informers, blackmailers, and crooks, into the image of the valiant and heroic private investigator. But in a broader sense, the private detective is a rhetorical historical figure expressing "an anxious liberalism, driven by an obsessional 'culture of danger,' which ends by imposing surveillance into the very heart of family relations" (p. 17). While this basic observation about surveillance and "policing" has already been made by such French luminaries as Michel Foucault, Robert Castel, and Jacques Donzelot in recent decades, Kalifa's historical handling of the subject provides a much needed critical corrective to the conspiratorial logic spun by his more philosophically oriented masters, an issue to which I return later in this review.

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The chapters of *Naissance de la police privée* are methodically organized. Each begins with a description of the era's detective agencies and their activities, proceeds to contemporary social concerns raised about those agencies, and concludes with depictions of fictional detectives of the period. The opening chapter begins with the founding of "Le Bureau de renseignements universels dans l'intérêt du commerce" in 1832 by Eugène-François Vidocq, formerly chief detective of the Sûreté (the judicial police). Such "offices of information for businesses" had been emerging in Paris since the end of the eighteenth century, but it was Vidocq who added to the equation the notion of a "private detective agency"—a heritage later acknowledged by American detective Allan Pinkerton, who referred to himself as "the Vidocq of the West" (p. 21). For a small annual subscription fee to Vidocq's agency, clients were entitled to purchase prepared profiles of known crooks and fraudulent businessmen. In addition, subscribers could hire the agency's agents to conduct investigations and surveillance into "confidential" affairs, according to Vidocq "not only for commercial interests, but *for those of families* as well" (p. 30, emphasis in original). Such a blending of public and private realms during the July Monarchy took on a particularly indistinct hue when the source was Vidocq, the convicted felon turned police spy, chief detective, and then fired from the Sûreté after it became clear that he had been using his ex-convict pals as agents and was conducting his own blackmailing and kidnapping activities on the side. The publication of Vidocq's *Mémoires* in 1828, chiefly the self-aggrandizement of his life and exploits, had great benefit in the self-promotion of his own detective agency, and the success of his enterprise in turn encouraged others to establish their own agencies. The Préfecture of Police looked askance at the creation of such a private "*contre-police*," and in 1843 Vidocq was tried and convicted for the illegal detention of persons and fraud (although he subsequently received a royal pardon). Vidocq was also vilified in fiction, most notably as Vautrin in Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*. In Balzac's view, the private police was "morally and institutionally unacceptable" (p. 55) insofar as its supposed "insurance" and "security" against blackmailers, crooks, and thieves was carried out by agents drawn from that same underworld milieu.

Under the Second Empire, various "commercial information agencies" sought to distance themselves from the "Vidocq syndrome" of the previous decades by focusing their detective activities on security in commerce rather than private affairs. In an era of rapid industrialization and commercial development, these agencies proliferated, in excess of 350 in Paris by 1862, and new offices spread to major provincial cities such as Lille, Lyon, and Marseilles. Yet despite claims to provide "purely commercial" information, accompanying promises to guarantee "conscientious" and "swift" resolution to matters requiring "absolute discretion" inherently drew the activities of these agencies into the realm of private life. The large measure of confidential inquiries revolved around issues of marriage (ancestry, health, morality, finances) and divorce (adultery). The presumed clientele requesting such services tended toward either the parvenu or the déclassé, and the *agent d'affaires* was called upon to probe the most intimate family secrets. "Far from being an instrument of moralization or a 'family policeman'," Kalifa comments, "by an astonishing reversal of perspective he [*agent d'affaires*] appeared as a supreme risk, a veritable 'danger to family tranquility' " (p. 91). Such a "security agent," who is himself a crook and con man, was given wide circulation through popular fiction, notably in *Les Exploits de Rocambole* by Ponson du Terrail and *Les Habits noirs* of Paul Féval, and through numerous vaudeville plays by Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy featuring swindlers Tricoche and Cacolet, who operated a "confidential information agency for families" in Paris.

It was over the course of the long Third Republic that the dubious image of the *police privée* was superseded, familiarized, and somewhat legitimized into the figure of the professional *détective*. The shift began with inspirations from abroad during the late nineteenth century, from the fictional British detective Sherlock Holmes and the real detective from America, Allan Pinkerton, as well as the fictionalization of Pinkerton-type exploits in the *Nick Carter* weeklies translated into French. Within France, the Belle Époque was the era of *fait-divers* press, and newspapers readily added the *souvenirs* of former police detectives to its crime sensationalism columns. In turn, actual policemen discovered a second profession as private detectives, and a few ex-Sûreté officers, such as François-Marie Goron and René Cassellari, successfully rallied their police credentials to establish credible and lucrative detective agencies. The 1909 French translation of American detective Ralph Morton's *Comment on devient détective* ("How to Become a Detective") contributed to the acceptance of professional detectives, perhaps most spectacularly realized in the career of Eugène Villiod. The vast majority of private detective companies were small and failed within their first year, and a few passed serially from person to person. Yet by the interwar years, "night guards" and "private investigators" had become commonplace in both Paris and the departments, accepted and used as supplemental agents in addition to the official police. With the creation of the "Parisian Surveillance Society" (SPS) in 1927, private detectives began to enter into formal agreements with municipal and national police. In 1942, under Vichy, legal requirements for private detectives were formally adopted, completing the process of professionalization.

At the level of popular reception, however, Kalifa asserts that the figure of the private detective was not as readily accepted. Despite the early twentieth-century vogue for *Nick Carter* and its spin-offs—*Nat Pinkerton*, *Ethel King*, *Tip Walter*, *Miss Boston*, and others—French popular authors of crime and detective fiction generally scorned the Anglo-American detective model. In Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain's *Fantômas* series (1911-1913), the archvillain twice assumes the identity of American detective "Tom Bob." Early in Maurice Leblanc's *Arsène Lupin* series (1906-1908), the gentleman-cambrioleur repeatedly outwits British amateur sleuth "Herlock Sholmes." In Leblanc's *L'Agence Barnett et cie* (1928), Jim Barnett is a private detective straight from the blackmailer and swindler mold. The first fictional police *privée* protagonist to gain popular acceptance was Léo Malet's private investigator Nestor Burma, of the "Fiat Lux" agency, who debuted in 120, *rue de la Gare* (1943) and became well known through the *Nouveaux mystères de Paris* series of the 1950's. Yet, Kalifa astutely notes, in sharp contrast to the reality of "normalized" private detectives, the Burma character is an anti-hero, an aging anarcho-syndicalist suspicious of "law and order" attitudes (indeed, Malet is regarded as the *père* of the contemporary French "hard boiled" *roman noir* or *polar*).

Ultimately, it is this disjuncture between the reality and the image of the private detective in France that draws out the richness of *Naissance de la police privée* in terms of the history of representations. In France, the imaginary figure of the private detective retained something of its "Vidocq syndrome" and *rocambollesque* features throughout, while it was the actual private investigator who became legitimized as an agent of social control. In this way, Kalifa's historical treatment provides a valuable corrective to the logic of repression that runs through the more philosophically oriented "policing" works of Foucault and company. While economic and institutional forces may conspire to coalesce the liberal state into an "iron cage of reality," as is the case with the professionalization of *police privée*, Kalifa emphasizes that the figure of the private detective retained a counter-discourse of transgression, uncertainty, pleasure, heroism, and individual liberation. More generally put, he recognizes that social and cultural processes interrelate, but are not reducible to each other.

The primary weakness of the book, Kalifa freely acknowledges, stems from the difficulty of obtaining source material to put together such a history. Police archives retain very limited information on private detective agencies (primarily materials from the criminal prosecution of fraudulent agencies), few agencies kept extensive records of their own, and those who did are largely unwilling to share them with the historian in order to safeguard the privacy of their clients. Consequently, most of the evidence for the book comes from contemporary imprints, self-published by detective agencies themselves, magazine and newspaper articles, fictional and non-fictional books (conserved principally, it appears from the notes, in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris). "The discontinuous character of these sources prohibits establishing a full historical account," Kalifa observes, "so the approach necessarily remains pointillistic" (pp. 161-162). That said, he has rallied an impressive volume of evidence to produce this historical portrait. Kalifa's methodical treatment and reasoned judgements concerning this dimension of private life suggest that modern French social and cultural history, schooled by Alain Corbin and Michelle Perrot, continues to thrive in a new generation of scholars.

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Robert Castel, *The Regulation of Madness: The Origins of Incarceration in France*, trans. W. D. Halls (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1979).

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