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*H-France Review* Vol. 2 (December 2002), No. 129

Philip F. Riley, *A Lust for Virtue: Louis XIV's Attack on Sin in Seventeenth-Century France*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press (Contributions to the Study of World History, Number 88), 2001. xvi + 203 pp. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-313-31708-9.

Review by Robin Briggs, Oxford University.

The first thing that should be said about Philip Riley's very welcome monograph is that the subtitle is somewhat misleading; this is essentially a study of moral policing in Paris, not across the whole of later seventeenth-century France. While this self-imposed limitation does not reduce the interest of Riley's study, it naturally leaves many issues open for further investigation. It is something of a historical commonplace that the capital was always special, not least in the eyes of kings and ministers, and was quite reasonably seen as the key to political success. An exceptional effort was therefore devoted to keeping a finger on the pulse of this febrile city; then policies were devised to prevent major discontent and repress potential troublemakers. Although there are respects in which this style of rule was extended across the whole kingdom, it was largely achieved by indirect means, for the relatively puny administrative resources of Bourbon France were wholly unequal to the task of centralized control over a nation of twenty million people. The role of such agencies as the intendants, the royal officials, the municipalities, and above all the church in mediating the king's wishes is therefore a different story, which only receives a limited number of oblique references in this book. Historians who want to know how the repressive ambitions of the Catholic Reform and the Bourbon monarchy were advanced and resisted in *la France profonde* will need to look elsewhere and, indeed, to go digging in provincial archives themselves.

To some extent similar comments can be made about Riley's approach to the controversies about how best to interpret the whole drive toward moral and social control. In his brief introduction, and at intervals through the main text, he displays a keen awareness of the arguments advanced by Foucault, Elias, Delumeau, Muchembled, and others (including the present reviewer). His attitude might be summarized as ironic; he sees the good points in all these interpretations, yet tends to be skeptical about their capacity for inclusiveness and to suspect several of them of mild anachronism. This enables him to use all approaches in an eclectic fashion while also (perhaps more damagingly) avoiding direct confrontations with them. Since I am myself mildly allergic to grandiose theoretical constructs, I find it easy to sympathize with Riley's stance here and agree strongly with his evident conviction that the first place to look for explanations is in the conventional religious ideas of the period itself. Nonetheless, I would have liked a more determined attempt to evaluate these theories against his material, then some firm choices amongst them. This does not imply that any one grand narrative should be expected to win out, since the position taken by sceptics like myself (and I strongly suspect by Riley himself) is that theoretical clarity is usually won at the price of oversimplification and empirical inaccuracy. The situation was surely one where a whole range of factors operated with variable intensity across both time and space, often working in contradictory or paradoxical fashions; it is this complex reality that is readily deformed by enthusiastic system-builders into plausible but one-sided accounts. A classic example is that of Norbert Elias, whose strengths and weaknesses are the subject of an excellent critical study by Jeroen Duindam that does not appear in Riley's bibliography.[1]

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Riley could understandably complain about the eternal tendency for reviewers to suggest that the author should have written a different book from the one he or she knowingly chose to construct. Yet I do believe that it is a pity that he has not spelled his position out more clearly, in order to make the lessons of his study and its wider relevance more apparent to the reader. The brief conclusion is revealing in this respect, because rather than reflecting on the direct significance of the core of the book, with some attempt to situate this against the interpretations already mentioned, it is mainly devoted to an interesting if frustratingly brief discussion of the longer term consequences of the moral policing of Paris. Here Riley slips into some of the over-generalizations he largely avoids elsewhere; the tone is set by the regrettable *faux pas* of turning the Regent Orléans into a natural son of Louis XIV, followed by the claim that his rule was marked by blatant immorality at all social levels in reaction to the constraint imposed by the old king. Whatever may be true for the court (with Versailles temporarily shut down), this is more a facile commonplace than a proven historical phenomenon for Parisian society as a whole. In this section Riley seems to accept an almost caricatural view of the rapid triumph of Enlightenment and secularisation after 1715, which does not accord with most of the best recent scholarship on the period any more than with the contemporary opinions of such key figures as Voltaire. What is also evident is the continuing influence of the one major study cited in support, Paul Hazard's 1935 book on *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715*. Although this was indeed an impressive pioneering work, which retains genuine interest and value nearly 70 years on, both its methodology and its conclusions are highly suspect. In fact it is high time that some daring intellectual historian should attempt a general re-evaluation of this period of the "pre-enlightenment" that might free us from the icy fingers of Hazard, whose continuing bibliographical (and conceptual) presence is something of an indictment of later generations. [2]

To move beyond these perhaps laboured complaints, it is pleasing to record the many virtues of this unpretentious and thoroughly workmanlike book. Riley provides a judicious survey of the existing secondary literature on specific institutions and practices, backed up by well-chosen citations from archival and printed sources. There are a number of very apposite examples, personal histories that enliven and illuminate the more general themes. No doubt it just shows how easy it can be to condone bad behaviour at a safe distance when I confess to enjoying the spectacle of the pregnant Mlle. Boussons, who confessed to multiple sexual liaisons, being rescued from the prison in the Salpêtrière hospital by a besotted Toulousain noble who brought off a secret marriage. Was the *lieutenant de police* d'Argenson hinting that he also saw the funny side of the affair when he told the king the only comparison he could think of was with *Don Quixote*? This is one of the quite numerous occasions when Riley presents his evidence "straight," without entering into the quicksands of questioning just how one should read these statements. One does not have to be a postmodern relativist to think that the types of denunciations recorded in police files are not inherently reliable. In fact it is perfectly reasonable to cite the evidence in this way, which leaves the reader free to think about the possibilities, since the author does not seek to impose any narrow interpretation on his own material. There is certainly no reason to doubt that notorious sinners and criminals were arrested and incarcerated far more efficiently and frequently in Paris under the arrangements pioneered in the 1660s than ever before. Riley also shows most effectively that this repression was always running into difficulties, whether because offenders were protected by the great or because the police could not get husbands or neighbors to collaborate in imposing discipline.

One central contention of this book is that women were seen as the basic cause of most moral turpitude and an endless source of corruption and vice. It would appear that where sexual offences were concerned a particularly vicious type of double standard was applied; men were rarely punished when it was possible to present the woman as the primary agent of sin.

The most flagrant example came with the campaign against prostitution in the city, which does raise the question of how far the king and his principal servants can have believed in the possibility of eliminating the oldest profession by locking up the unfortunate women concerned. Whatever his faults, Louis XIV

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was normally a more realistic ruler than this futile enterprise suggests, while la Reynie and d'Argenson, the two long-serving *lieutenants de police*, were hard-boiled practical men with few illusions. There is a real puzzle here, which one can hardly blame Riley for leaving unresolved, when there seems to be no obvious way to get behind the everyday practice. Perhaps this practice actually constitutes the answer, however simplistic it may seem; the three men arguably shared a basic counter-reformation mentality that made it impossible to back off from the repressive drive without feeling that one was putting one's own soul at risk. Few people can have been unaware of the bizarre paradox whereby a monarch with at least sixteen illegitimate children by several mistresses sought to confine everyone else to strict monogamy. Perhaps, as Riley hints, this was the fairly common situation of fearing those temptations one had been unable to resist oneself? There is a further disquieting aspect to the king's apparent prurience which might strengthen such a view, with repeated marginalia asking for more detailed information on specific cases. Hostile foreign propaganda often picked up on such themes, while Parisian pamphlets mocking Mme de Maintenon could bring death sentences for those involved. One satirical engraving of 1691 showed the royal statue in the Place des Victoires in reverse mode, with the four captives replaced by the four most prominent mistresses enchaining the king (in defence of Louis one should note that he seems to have had misgivings from the start about the duc de la Feuillade's attempt to deify him).[3]

The key issues to emerge from this study appear to be sex, gambling, and sorcery as the major preoccupations of the *lieutenants de police* and the king. These were also problems that worried Louis at his court and among his immediate entourage. Riley provides an efficient and sensible survey of these aspects, discussing the king's own behaviour, the influences on him, and the effects on the court society of Versailles. There is little here which is likely to surprise those who know the previous literature, nor to arouse great controversy; there seems to be widespread agreement that Versailles became progressively more boring and unfashionable as the king aged. A minor quibble concerns the *Affaire des poisons*, which is perhaps rather underplayed in any case; Riley seems to think that Mme de Montespan can be assumed to have participated in black masses, a matter on which the evidence is so unreliable that no certainty is really possible. On the theme of sorcery it is also curious that while effective use is made of BN Clairambault 984, there is no reference to dossier 983, from which a substantial 1702 memoir by d'Argenson on Parisian *faux sorciers* and quacks was printed by Robert Mandrou in his useful collection of documents.[4] It must be admitted, however, that in neither case would there be any obvious need to change the general interpretation given in the book.

Some important questions remain, on which Riley's particular choice of approach and source material make it hard for him to offer very much. As he briefly recognizes, the *lieutenants de police* had to work by co-operation with the other established powers in the capital. Although the king would certainly back them in specific disputes, such seventeenth-century administrators would never have imagined that they could sweep away their rivals. Moral policing was a classic case where help from the community was indispensable, not least because police informers could only work effectively with the grain of local feeling. The excellent study of the Paris police in the eighteenth century by Alan Williams showed how the parlement, the Châtelet, and the municipality were integrated into a more general repressive power, which dealt with a wide range of offences.[5] One issue would be what was happening within the other jurisdictions, in terms of the range of offences handled, the punishments handed out, and the way cases were initiated. Another would involve public opinion, reactions to police behaviour, then ultimately the degree to which the Parisian clergy were participants in these matters. The behaviour of nobles and other privileged persons who could overawe or bribe the police also threatened to undermine the policy, both morally and practically. Since the tasks being attempted resembled that of Sisyphus with his rock, the extent to which campaigns could be sustained needs investigation. Better record-keeping made it possible to identify recidivists, but both costs and bitter experience might discourage a systematic policy of incarcerating them for long periods. Riley describes some long-term prisoners without being able to say how typical they were; most information on the prisons suggests that the vast majority of sentences were very short. The system had probably reached saturation point very rapidly, with the imposing new

penal institutions unable to offer more than cosmetic solutions. Continuity also comes to mind when one wonders what happened after the spectacular attack on the *Cour des Miracles* in 1667. One such assault was hardly going to eliminate the criminal gangs who infested the quarter, even if they were less organized than sensationalist accounts would suggest.

Ultimately I am sure that Riley is on the right track when he suggests that the type of heavy-handed repression that Louis XIV evidently wanted was likely to be counter-productive. Historians working on London have reached similar conclusions, showing that attitudes to prostitution and other moral offences underwent a complex evolution over the period 1660-1760, itself much influenced by perceived abuses in law enforcement. There are signs, reported by Riley, that the Paris parlement was already reacting in similar fashion in the 1700s. Royal justice had a brutal underside where Parisian deviants were concerned, when they might be locked up by a simple administrative decision, then left to rot, or sent to the galleys. The magicians and unfrocked priests who were left untried when the king decided to halt proceedings in the *Affaire des Poisons* may have been a seedy and criminal crew, yet this hardly justified chaining them to the walls of the citadel of Besançon until death released them. Behind such arbitrary treatment lay the jurisprudence developed by the parlement, which made a sharp distinction between capital sentences and lesser punishments, as a way of getting round the strict requirements of the law of proof and avoiding excessive use of judicial torture. The king and his agents apparently drew the conclusion that although they must not impose death sentences without formal trials, any threat to the moral or social order was sufficient warrant for summary incarceration. The resulting policies were prone to misuse and corruption, without any guarantee of delivering long-term improvements, and the eighteenth-century record suggests that they might create real difficulties for the government. Who agreed and disagreed with this repressive drive, and how these attitudes changed, remains a fascinating, elusive, and important topic for further investigation. No relatively short book could answer such a host of difficult questions, so Riley deserves our gratitude for exposing much material that is good for thinking with, in so readable and economical a form.

#### NOTES

[1] J. Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the early modern European court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994).

[2] For some initial thoughts, see the chapters by myself and by Norman Hampson in E.K. Cameron (ed), *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 171-205 and 265-97. There is of course the important book by Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), but this comes at the subject from a new angle rather than dealing with the problems posed by Hazard.

[3] R.L. Cleary, *The Place Royale and Urban Design in the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 84, reports this engraving.

[4] R. Mandrou, *Possession et sorcellerie au XVIIe siècle: textes inédits* (Paris: Fayard, 1979), 275-332.

[5] A. Williams, *The Police of Paris, 1718-1789* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

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