
The middle of the eighteenth century was a vitally important period in the institutional development of the Paris police. Lieutenants General Berryer and Sartine accelerated the centralization of policing powers once dispersed haphazardly across numerous institutions and offices. In the process, they organized départements, each of which was assigned a particular activity or a “beat” (ronde) to police. These assignments ranged from policing specific places like markets or theaters, to policing groups of people such as foreigners or Jews, or particular types of activity such as gambling or sodomy. Exactly how these départements came into existence, how their individual missions were established and executed, how they were managed and supervised, and how men were trained for their jobs is largely unknown. In part, this is a function of the paucity of sources. Many of the documents generated by Old Regime policing were tossed out the windows of the Salle des Archives of the Bastille in 1789, and much of the rest were burned by the Communards in 1871.

But in part, these lacunae are a function of approach. The tendency to focus on the big story of this period -- the consolidation of the police -- obfuscates what was happening on the ground, within departments, between policing agents and between these agents and those they policed. Yet such explorations are critically important. The longue durée, the creation of a centralized, rational police force, was not just the result of the actions of powerful magistrates. In this fertile and flexible moment, institutional formation was also the result of thousands of smaller negotiations, petty power struggles and interpersonal dynamics. When we combine institutional instability with various characteristics of Old Regime administration, where offices were property and personal residences doubled as official business locales, the question of the role and experience of the individual in Old Regime policing becomes pressing.

Using police sources, I propose examining the département concerned with policing femmes galantes. It operated, approximately, between 1740 and 1770, first under the command of Inspector Jean-Baptiste Meunier and then under his former subordinate, Inspector Louis Marais. The two men could not have been more different in character. Meusnier was a wit, sharply intelligent, well integrated into and well respected by the demimonde which he policed. Marais was rude, rough, power hungry, eager to take advantage of his position and largely despised because of it. Though the two inspectors directed the same unit, they two appeared to have almost different missions. They certainly had different policing tactics. Comparing the tenure of Meunier and Marais raises the question of the role of the individual in the
development of policing in this period: Specifically, what were the margins of individual action? Where did the individual begin and the institution end?

In this paper, I propose shifting the emphasis away from a “top-down” examination of policing (how Lieutenants General instructed their men, etc.) to a “bottom-up” approach. The idea is to examine the interactions of these inspectors with those whom they policed, those under their command and, finally, with their superiors in order to interrogate how individual action shaped policing in this period.