

April 16, 2007

Call the *flics*! -- but which ones?

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. A sunlit bistro on the boulevard Saint-Germain. A student demonstration rock-and-rolls endlessly by. A woman by the cash register screams, a man howls as she stomps her stiletto-heel on his foot: he claims she stole a postcard. A fight ensues, with insults impugning the sexual charms of both. Soon a police van glides up, and a dashing young *flic* casually drops off the back with white-gloved hand in the air to settle the fuss.

A fine memory for thinking about France's legions of men (and women) in blue. For no democratic country seems to have so many cops, kinds of cops, and obsessions with cops, as the land of Inspector Maigret (or Clouseau, as you wish). In the current election campaign for a new president on May 6, police are front and centre. For a crucial issue – tied to immigration and national identity – is law and order.

France's first real police began with Louis XIV in 1667. Before, public order was often private disorder. Brigands roamed free, vigils and law officers were corrupt and/or incompetent, jurisdictions a rat's nest, citizens' arrests common. Louis XIV assigned his police a multitude of tasks: catching criminals, but also upholding edicts, fighting fires, regulating business, cleaning streets, censoring, and watching potential enemies. His police played politics as much as they fought crime.

Under Bonaparte, serving the political master became all. Napoleon's much-feared police boss Joseph Fouché, a clerical dropout then raging atheist, made his name by helping push Louis XVI and scores of others to the guillotine, and by crushing royalist peasants. His ruthlessness, scheming and sprawling network of spies made him irresistible to Napoleon – even through multiple fights and betrayals.

Throughout the 19th century, police got increasingly professional, and spread all over France. Their political missions expanded. In 1855, Paris created les *Renseignements Généraux*, -- the still-shadowy *RG* -- a domestic espionage and "analysis" service reporting to every Interior Minister. (Current presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy held that job twice, until last month.) In the last half of the 1800s, the Industrial Revolution led to both more crime and social-political tensions. Victor Hugo's vengeful Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables* sharpened the police's hated image. As the century ended, communists and anarchists became prime police targets. This continued until some shamefully collaborationist French police in 1940-44 eagerly helped Nazis round up Jews, even children.

Since 1945, the French police have become as modern and professional as the best anywhere else. Not counting the 17,000 members of the mainly rural *Police Municipale*, consider the two main police bodies:

* *Police Nationale*: Its 150,000 members play many roles: counter-espionage and counter-terrorism; border policing; uniformed patrol and response; traffic duties, and criminal investigations (Maigret-Clouseau). It also advises politicians on public opinion and conducts domestic spying, including on private lives of public figures. Its *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS) are the much-feared bash-first, ask-questions-later riot cops you see by the busload around “sensitive” streets. No sense of humour at all.

* *Gendarmerie Nationale*: France’s 104,275 gendarmes (slang: *pandores*) work with investigating judges in criminal cases. They also act as sea and air police. But to the average Frenchman, they act as small town, village or countryside police, catching highway speeders or drunks, rescuing citizens in disasters, and handling airport and train-station security. More thrillingly, they supply the 3,300 members of the elite *Garde Républicaine*. Apart from protecting president and prime minister, the *Garde* parades in gleaming, plumed silver helmets on splendid horses. Eyeing them on the Champs-Élysées, you’d swear France was a monarchy.

More than ever, police roles are a political football. Friendly beat cops or nasty beat-‘em-up cops? Citizens’ protectors or politicians’ spies and bully-boys? As French public opinion moves dramatically to the right, you find even traditionally anti-cop left-wingers admitting that too many ghetto kids are running wild. Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal demands a “just order” and military supervision for delinquents. A recent riot of 200 ghetto youth at Paris’s huge Gare du Nord only made police -- and their right-wing backers -- look welcome.

Almost every poll says Mr. Law-and-Order himself, Nicolas Sarkozy, will become France’s president on May 6. His furious adversaries caricature him as psychologically unstable, a crypto-fascist, a fanatic who would secretly love to deport all immigrants, then put everybody else in the slammer.

All of this is highly flattering for Sarkozy. For it shows that he frightens his anything-goes, soft-on-crime rivals. But he also scares many ordinary folk. The trick for Sarko will be to show he’s not just on the side of the law, but sides with the law-abiding. Preferably with a touch of charm. Surely he should get some white gloves and practice casually hopping off the back of a paddy-wagon.