

The Police of Paris and “Mauvais Discours”: Disagreement on the Idea of Social Order under the Absolute Monarchy in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century

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This article analyses the police files on Jean-Baptiste Manem and Jean-François Héron, unknown members of the Third Estate, who were accused of “mauvais discours”, or seditious speech and behavior, against the royal authority during the Seven Years’ War. The goal of this article is twofold: first, it will uncover the disagreement between the police of Paris and the suspects on the understanding of the social order under French absolutism; second, it will examine the meaning of “mauvais discours” and its suppression by the police in Paris during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Manem was arrested and interrogated for repeatedly sending letters to government ministers, court nobles, and even to the Prussian king in a time of war in order to communicate secrets he pretended to have come across by chance. Manem was fixated on the idea that there was a conspiracy to destroy the French monarchy. His desire to express himself and to be summoned for an audience with any one of the recipients of his letters troubled the police, because in the view of Rochebrune, the commissioner of police, Manem was disrespecting the principles of the Old Regime. Manem’s alleged disrespect of these principles was accomplished first by participating in political matters, which is allowed only to the sovereign, and second, by undermining the society of orders, which assigned specific functions and roles to each group of people. At first glance, Rochebrune seems to have been an advocate for the classical view of the society of orders, but the interrogation disclosed that he supported the right to articulate opinions based on intelligence and merits rather than birth. Manem tried to justify his actions by invoking the traditional image of kingship, namely a king who is eager to listen to his humble subjects, but in the eyes of the commissioner, Manem was not intelligent enough to interfere in political matters.

Héron also attempted to contact the Prussian king because he was disappointed with the ingratitude shown to him by his patrons in France, despite the fact that he had worked hard to achieve expertise as a geographic engineer. The interrogation of Héron reveals his aspirations for social ascension based on social utility and his own merit, ideas which were becoming more popular in France during the Enlightenment. It shows also that Héron disregarded the notion of territorial states, seeking an ideal patron-client relationship outside of France, which could be considered as a traditional characteristic of the military engineers from the end of fifteenth century Europe. This lack of sense of belonging to his own country was conflicted with the notion of a mercantile state on the part of the commissioner.

These two dossiers reveal the disagreement between the police and these two suspects regarding the ideas of social order under the absolute monarchy. As a result, the analysis of the “mauvais discours” reveals various perceptions of the society and authority at the time, not only on the part of the suspects but also of the police, and therefore, it could offer an important insight into the understanding of the political culture during the Enlightenment.