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Pierre Karila-Cohen, *Monsieur le Préfet. Incarner l'État dans la France du XIXe siècle*. Ceyzérieu, France: Champ Vallon, 2021. 363 pp. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-267-0973-2.

Review by Roger Price, Aberystwyth University.

The creation of the prefectoral system in the Year VIII represented a means of restoring a strong, centralised state in response to a post-revolutionary *crise de l'autorité*, to the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the weakening of traditional forms of authority—monarchy, the Church, and family. The prefect, a figure of authority appointed to each department as the representative of the State within a strictly hierarchical structure, as a vital link in the chain of government, was responsible for the flow of information to the centre and for publicising and executing instructions from the various governmental ministries. He possessed broad competence to control public opinion, maintain order, recruit troops, and secure the provisioning, health and well-being of diverse communities—employing as his auxiliaries a secretary-general, a *sous-préfet* in every *arrondissement*, a *conseil de préfecture* made up of between three and five councillors, as well as closely supervised communal mayors. During the following century, and especially during the Second Empire, socio-economic change together with mass politicization would reinforce the perceived need to reinforce the effectiveness of the administrative machine.

Substantial contributions have previously been made to the history of the administration, including most notably Bernard Le Clère and Vincent Wright, *Les préfets du Second Empire*.^[1] They stressed the significance of prefects as figures of authority within the administrative machine and explained the development of the myth of the all-powerful prefect, whilst identifying the gulf which frequently existed between the powers legally attributed to prefects and day-to-day local realities. Karila-Cohen is especially concerned with practice and interaction, rather than legal responsibility. His work adds considerably to our understanding of the day-to-day workings of the system and particularly relations between prefects as possessors of both bureaucratic and charismatic authority, their subordinates, local elites, and populations in general. He employs a rich array of archival sources, including ministerial enquiries and numerous personnel dossiers, to reveal the conceptions and expectations of higher authority. These documents are supplemented by a wide range of prefectoral reports, various other official documents, together with manuals on administrative practices and technical publications on such issues as decentralisation consider the impact of official interventions. Memoirs assist in defining the psychology of the officials involved. The press, novels, and plays in which prefects frequently appeared as figures of intrigue and ridicule provide further information on public perceptions of official activity.

Considerable care was taken in the appointment, supervision, and subsequent promotion of members of the prefectural corps. The first appointments were made by Napoleon Bonaparte as premier consul on the advice in particular of the Interior Minister, his brother Lucien, the consuls Lebrun and Cambacérès, as well as Talleyrand and General Clarke. As well as personal and familial contacts, they were able to employ biographical information, carefully presented in tabular form, which took account of, in particular, the likely local influence of candidates. Direct appointments to prefectures on largely political grounds were especially likely in moments of crisis and change of regime. Otherwise, a gradual professionalisation of appointments occurred to reflect seniority and assessments of competence. Prefectures and sous-prefectures were classified according to their presumed importance and salaries varied accordingly. The criteria included the social background and connections of nominees—and of their wives—their incomes, education and culture, religion, political opinions, social relations and sociability, administrative competence, and likely relationships with departmental elites, deputies, mayors, and *administrateurs* in general. As Karila-Cohen points out, the establishment of these criteria contributed to the definition of the model prefect and to the normalisation of administrative behaviour. Regular and detailed assessments throughout their careers judged their performance and suitability for promotion. Physique and bearing, aptitude for public speaking, as well as administrative ability were considered relevant.

Prefects and *sous-préfets* were regarded as public figures and, with the support of their wives, would be expected to exercise social influence as a means of reinforcing their political influence. Their status as representatives of the state was reinforced by the symbolic architecture and furnishings of the prefectures from which they wielded authority. Nearly 100 prefectures and 300 sous-prefectures, were constructed during the Second Empire with such internal features as staircases and reception rooms designed to impress. They provided the setting for prefectural dinners and socially exclusive balls, and evidence of the participants' aptitude to mix in society. Carefully prepared lists of invitations, choice menus, and the most fashionable dances from Paris enlivened the season in provincial towns. Eagerly anticipated invitations offered a means of winning the confidence of local elites, as well as of rewarding members of the administrative hierarchy and reconciling political opponents. A private income obviously helped to meet the costs of representation. The prefect, a symbol of the state, needed to appear *agréable*. Public opinion was constantly interested in his activities. The prefect was expected to be impartial and conciliatory in his judgements and to behave respectably in his private life. Letters of complaint were especially concerned with *abus d'autorité* and immoral behaviour. A faux pas, particularly one attracting the attention of the press, might well ruin a career. The ritual accompanying official visits by the prefect and his wife provided especially important opportunities for electioneering, or at least for impressing local councillors, parish priests, and local worthies. Prefects resplendent in dress uniform, displaying good manners, and delivering florid speeches with often theatrical gestures in a benevolent tone, pledged to represent local interests and relayed guarantees of order, peace, and prosperity, together with promises of subsidies for the construction of roads, schools and churches on behalf of the government.

NOTES

[1] Bernard Le Clère and Vincent Wright, *Les préfets du Second Empire* (Paris: Presse de la Fondation National de Sciences Politiques, 1973).

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