CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH ON EARLY MODERN POLICE

Police can be claimed to have been one of the most important governmental and administrative themes in early modern states and societies in Continental Europe. In contrast to our time, in the early modern vocabulary the term ‘police’ (Swedish politie, Germ. Policey, Fr. police) did not primarily refer to the authorities responsible for the maintenance of public safety and order. Instead, the term had many different and ambivalent, although interrelated, conceptual meanings. However, two main meanings can be discerned. Firstly, the term police was used to describe a state of affairs that the authorities aspired and strove for, i.e., police as a material objective. In this meaning the term often appears in early modern sources in the form ‘good police’ (Swedish god politie, Germ. gute Policey, Fr. bonne police). Good police was also often used as a synonym for ‘good order’ (Swedish ordning, Germ. Ordnung, Fr. ordre); order being understood in the widest possible sense, i.e., societal order including the social, economic, moral and religious spheres. Police as a state of affairs thus signified good societal order. Secondly, the term police was frequently used to signify governmental action through which maintenance of this societal order was to be achieved. In this regard, police was often used synonymously with the word ‘regimen’ (Swedish regemente, regerning; Germ. Regiment, Regierung; Fr. regime).¹

In addition to these main uses, the term police was used in other contexts as well. In Germany the term *Policeyordnungen* came to denote imperial and territorial police codes which included a vast body of provisions concerning the maintenance of good police. For instance the first imperial police order that was issued in 1530 came to be known during the seventeenth century as the *Reichspolizeiordnung*.\(^2\) In addition to these more or less encompassing police codes, an endless volume of individual police ordinances were issued in the early modern period.\(^3\) Furthermore, the term police also occurred in the names of many authorities that were established in order to take care of the task that fell under the scope of good police. In France, for instance, a new authority, *lieutenant general de police*, was established for the city of Paris in 1667. Some thirty years later, in 1699, the same authority was to be established in every French city under royal jurisdiction.\(^4\)

Both in the German *Reich* and territories as well as in France the concept of police was derived from the Greek word *politeia*. With Aristotle the word *politeia* primarily stood for a ‘state form’.\(^5\) Ancient realms and city states had different state forms such as democracy, oligarchy, and autocracy. In early modern continental political parlance the term received new meanings as indicated above. However, in early modern England the term police never assumed such a manifold meaning as on the Continent. Although some sixteenth-century English political theorists such as Thomas Starkey (1495–1538) did in fact use the term ‘pollycy’ in much the same wide meaning as it was used in the Continent, this usage never broke through. Instead, the Aristotelian *politeia* developed.

---


\(^5\) See e.g. Maier, *Staats- und Verwaltungslehre*, 99.