

**Olivia LANGLOIS, “A Contribution to the history of postal public service from the Revolution to the liberal trend of the Second Empire”, (“Contribution à l’histoire du service public postal de la Révolution au tournant libéral du second Empire”), Ph. D Thesis in the history of law directed by Jean-Michel Poughon, Strasbourg 3, 2003, 544 p.**

The goal of this thesis is to trace the notion of public service from the Revolution to the liberal turning point of the Second Empire through the agency of the letter mail, using the set of indicators that constitute the definition of public service as it appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: its structure, the goals of the service, and relevant jurisdiction. In other words, we seek an understanding of how the postal administration evolved toward public service as well as how the issue of public service was presented and materialized in the postal domain.

In this context we have studied the evolution of the postal structure according to the problematic enunciated above (its administration and management style), the postal monopoly (legislation, jurisprudence), the postal administration’s responsibility (legislation, jurisprudence), and the ultimate purpose of service. It is always difficult to apprehend the ultimate purpose of a service that is so diversified by nature. Nonetheless, a study that takes into account postal rates, the organization of the transportation of State correspondence (legal authorization and counter-signature), as well as the political use of the transportation of letters would seem to constitute a valid approach to understanding the ultimate purpose of the postal service.

There were two main periods in the evolution of public postal service.

From the Revolution to the First Empire, the postal administration succeeded in resisting the economic and political upheavals of the period. The changes made in most areas of postal activity with the advent of each new political administration demonstrated that the new government always tried to put its imprimatur on the postal field. The Napoleonic era put an end to this instability by grounding the postal administration on a more sound foundation. At the same time, the notion of public service appeared regularly in public and political discourse, assuming various forms but never as the object of any concrete measure. It was essentially mentioned whenever topics related to the interests of the State arose, such as the issue of how the service should be managed, or the transportation of official correspondence. Without exception, the notion of public service did not imply any social purpose, while the postal monopoly remained legitimized above all by fiscal, security, and even police-related imperatives. As a laboratory for administration experimentation, this period honored the role of the State in managing a service that fundamentally evolved from the perspective of the State’s prerogative. This orientation did not vanish with subsequent governments, but it was attenuated by the social and economic functions of postal service that became stronger throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From the Restoration to the liberal turning point of the Second Empire, the notion of public service flourished within the postal administration, playing an active role in the emergence of a new concept of service. The ideological and technological revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, together with the new wants they gave rise to, forced the postal service to evolve in the context of the developing corpus of administrative law that was seeking legitimacy and standards. The improvements made to the service increased individuals’ geographic and economic accessibility

to the mail as references to public service multiplied with increasingly social connotations. The socio-political discourse that accompanied the evolution of the postal service progressively associated the State monopoly with the geographic and economic access to service, social purpose, and public service. Although the State's interests were not neglected, its role evolved – after relying on the principle of governmental domination in the service of politics for a long time – now implied the State's responsibility to the people it administrated who felt that access to public service was their legitimate right. Furthermore, the importance that public service had acquired was complemented by an increasing amount of dysfunctions and accidents caused by the same service. Faced with the demands and contentions that arose from this situation, the issue of State's responsibility was reconsidered, whereas earlier this had been of little concern to government.

Postal history is a field that is ripe for the study of emerging theories of public service. Moving beyond the scope of postal history, the period we have studied is of fundamental importance for the history of public service. Our study demonstrates that the notion of public service progressively absorbed new forms of social discourse that sought to legitimize themselves before becoming a driving force in political, economic, judicial, and social life in 20<sup>th</sup>-century France.