

## **Creation or gentrification? Downtown Marseille as a site of conflicting public reasons of space**

Downtown Marseille—namely the neighbourhoods of Belsunce and Noailles—is situated squarely between the poorer, post-migrant, and politically disenfranchised northern districts (les quartiers nord) in supposed perpetual crisis due to the drugs trade and gang warfare and the more wealthy and apparently stable southern districts of Marseille. It constitutes a deeply public spatial juncture point and contingent public sphere encapsulating the struggle between Marseille's militant postcolonial left, advocating for a diverse grassroots-led civil society model of urban coexistence, and the project to gentrify central Marseille since at least 2000 (see Jourdan 2008; Dorier et al 2012). In other words, downtown Marseille is the battleground for the soul of the city and in many ways resonant with the structural dynamics of Gramsci's southern Question a hundred years on. In particular, echoes of the Southern Question are present in the determination of the centralized powers in the French North tending over the past decade towards a fascistic populism to finally unpick the cohesion of a strongly anchored Southern revolutionary Left (Gramsci 1926 Congress theses) that has continued to develop in the context of Marseille's chronically underfunded postcolonial context. This context and the contingent racialized politics is a key change from the 1920s.

Situated between the two apparently opposing forces of creation and gentrification are the shifting yet still plural northern and eastern African, Jewish, and Armenian ethnocultural and ethnocommercial worlds of food, music and hospitality (see Comeroff and Comeroff on ethnocommerce in particular 2009). These urban contexts function across communal boundaries both operationally and in the surrounding built environment. Bringing the work of local ethnographers (and founders of *la Marseillologie*) Carreno, Hayot and Lesme (1974), Émile Temime (1985), Alain Tarrus (1995) and Michel Peraldi and Michel Samson (2006) up to date, we will focus on two key sites of these geographically bounded crossings specifically through an analysis of the built materiality of these dynamics and the traces that they leave in public space in terms of morphological urban transformations including within the histories of those monuments that mark the territory, colonial and not, formal and not (see Gallichio and Sintès 2020). To this end and in addition to close terrain participant observation and interviews, archival materials (local press, cartographies, urban and territorial policies) will be mined from the municipal and departmental archival records held, among other places, in the contingent City Museum. These sites which also intersect at the point of political militancy and gentrification are: 1. The renovation projects and the multiple failures for them to fully materialize of the commercial centre (mall) Bourse and the high-rise social housing units attendant to it which took a central place in the violent

demonstrations that followed the murder of the young French Arab Nahel Merzouk and 2. The chaabi (popular or vernacular) cabaret culture historically spanning record label stores, informal gigs in migrant hotels, and in a contemporary frame re-invented and re-invested in local DJ-nights, that across chronologies have always brought together a diverse assortment of anticolonial seafaring, sex-working and creative populations to tell the story of the pull and push of different publics and their divergent reasons for investing downtown Marseille.

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