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# Marseille in uproar: secularism, multiculturalism, and urban degradation in the city of immigrants

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## ABSTRACT

The French Mediterranean city of Marseille is typically imagined as a city of unparalleled multicultural diversity. Yet, this view overlooks how Marseillais residents of African, Arab, and Muslim origin are progressively driven out of their homes, since the 1990s, by urban renewal projects seeking to redevelop 'unsightly' working-class neighbourhoods downtown into upscale commercial zones. This article offers an account of a central paradox undergirding Marseille's redevelopment: As working-class minority residents are expelled from downtown spaces, city authorities continue to mine them, as emblematic figures of Marseille's multicultural diversity, for extractive cultural and economic capital to buttress the city's cosmopolitan image.

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## Introduction

Nestled in downtown Marseille bordering the glitzy Vieux-Port and its glamorous yachts, Noailles is a working-class neighbourhood (*quartier populaire*) with deep African and Mediterranean roots, settled predominantly by immigrants from north-western Africa since the late twentieth-century. Halal butcheries, Maghrebian mini-markets, Senegalese cafés, and stores selling jewellery, fabric, spices, and herbs find sanctuary packed along its narrowed alleys and open squares. Itinerant vendors peddle everything from cheap cigarettes to bootlegged DVDs. Travel guides gush over its cultural authenticity, with one describing Marché des Capucins, an open-air local market, as 'truly like a magic carpet ride' (Iberia n.d.). Noailles is celebrated, cliché as it may be, as an embodiment

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of synergic contrasts that typifies Marseille, the ancient city of immigrants: It is residential and commercial, traditional and modern, and a harmonious fusion of African, Arab, French, Islamic, and Mediterranean influences. Though touted as the heart of multicultural diversity in Marseille, Noailles has been subjected, since the 1990s, to aggressive urban renewal schemes aiming to redevelop Marseille's downtown into upscale commercial zones.

This article examines the paradoxical ways in which Marseille leverages its multicultural diversity to promote its image as a city of immigrants, distinct from the rest of France, while also framing its large immigrant downtown population as unruly subjects impeding urban revitalization. It offers an account of how Marseille's urban renewal projects are shaped by exclusionary logics that mark the downtown population as unproductive 'foreign immigrants' who must be removed to make way for the construction of profitable city spaces. I first discuss debates that scholars have presented on the tensions between multiculturalism and *laïcité* (French secularism) in France. I then introduce the concept of *secular-republican multiculturalism* to analyse how Marseille's multiculturalism is strategically depoliticized and commercialized to cultivate the image of Marseille as a diverse city in ways that do not challenge state-sanctioned secular-republicanism. I argue that multicultural diversity is reformulated as commodified objects of consumption, marking the *continuation*, rather than contradiction, of secular-republicanism's logics. Finally, I examine the urban degradation crisis in Marseille's downtown that is gradually driving out its ethnic minorities, the very groups hailed as markers of the city's multicultural diversity. Marseille's multiculturalism is appraised as a state-sanctioned project insofar as the city's diversity is neutralized as a matter of commercial enterprise, sidestepping problems of social inequality faced by minorities.

### **Laïcité and multiculturalism: debates**

Laïcité is a political principle robustly expressed through politics and discourse, from the governance of religious affairs to matters of citizenship. Scholars have argued that classical definitions of secularism as the neutral separation of religion and state poorly describe the historical and cultural distinctiveness of secularism in France (Baubérot 2000). The principle of *laïcité* first emerged in France after a 1905 law of separation formally enacted the division of church and state, ensuring that citizens had the right to freedom of conscience without interference from the Catholic Church or the state. Dense with its own historical genealogy and contradictions, *laïcité* gestures to how secularization has suffused the layers of French society through a shared adherence to secular-republicanism, a key feature of *laïcité*. Secular-republicanism is the social pact by which citizens must conform to the

Republic's values of secularism and abstract universalism to foster a unified national citizenry (Fernando 2014).

However, through its intermingling in the politics of citizenship and identity, *laïcité* has inevitably emerged as a site of cultural conflict and political contestation. Not confined to the separation of religion and state, *laïcité* and secular-republicanism have strongly shaped French politics and public life in ways that have nurtured conformity and resistance. Controversial policies like France's 2004 head-covering ban of the Islamic *hijab* marked the state's prerogative to shape laws, institutions, and public spaces according to *laïcité* principles. With rising postcolonial migrations from former French colonies over the twentieth-century, *laïcité* became pivotal in redefining the parameters of French citizenship in a globalizing world, emerging as the state model for immigrant integration (*intégration*) into French society. For individuals to become fully integrated citizens, they are expected to embrace the Republic's universalism, individualism, and secularism.

By contrast, multiculturalism (*multiculturalisme*) has long been a target of critique by *laïcité* proponents. Multiculturalism is generally conceived as the political principle whereby all unique groups in a pluralistic society are afforded some recognition to preserve group-specific rights (Taylor 1994). A classical liberal formulation to a modern political dilemma (how distinct groups and interests are managed fairly in a liberal polity), it strikes a balance between maintaining state authority and respecting individual and group rights. In France, multiculturalism is often pejoratively critiqued as a foreign ideology imported from Anglo-Saxon and American contexts. During his presidential campaign, Emmanuel Macron proclaimed that 'France was never and will never be a multicultural nation' and parroted the secular-republican model of integration as the sole basis for conceiving national belonging (Causeur 2017). In this view, multiculturalism, invoked interchangeably with separatism (*séparatisme*), would encourage individuals to reject integration in favour of cultural insularity.

A growing chorus of counter-proposals, however, calls for an inclusive secular-republicanism through notions of cultural rights, though they remain couched in universalist language. Michel Wieviorka argues that group rights do not oppose universalism and proposes the framework of 'cultural difference' (Wieviorka 1997, 53). Sociologist Dominique Schnapper favours a 'tolerant republicanism' (*républicanisme tolérant*) that accepts limited recognition of identity-based rights, but sees universalism as the master frame for French identity. By arguing that 'we need to recognise the full humanity of the Other' through tolerant republicanism, Schnapper rehashes the particular (the immigrant) and universal (the Republic) dichotomy: Immigrants, particularly those from the Global South, are racialized as the perpetually foreign Other who cannot be recognized as fully human until they integrate via secular-republicanism's social pact (Schnapper 1997, 10).

While Wieviorka and Schnapper appear to offer inclusivist notions, their alternative proposals of cultural rights and tolerant republicanism remain tied to principles of secular-republicanism, whereby citizens must conform to the Republic's universalism. As Mayanthi Fernando argues, secular-republicanism marks 'a set of particular, embodied identities – usually white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual, and secular or Christian – that have proclaimed themselves universal' (2014, 86). The recognition of group-based identities is conducted as an apolitical question of cultural difference, not an inalienable political right, through privatized rights conditionally granted by the state. Mirroring Macron's proclamation, there can be no such thing as 'multiculturalism' as a political project, only a universal community of abstract citizens. This does not mean an outright denial of France's cultural multiplicity, but underlines secular-republican efforts to neutralize the question of identity politics that multiculturalism poses into a state-regulated project, in which group special interests, if recognized, remain subservient to *laïcité* principles. Such narratives entrench the dichotomies of particular-versus-universal, immigrant-versus-citizen, politics-versus-culture, and multiculturalism-versus-*laïcité*.

Yet there has never been a clean separation of religion and state in France. Religious buildings like churches and synagogues built before 1905 remained state property in continuance of the Napoleonic Concordat system, which recognized Catholicism as the religion of the majority of French citizens and extended state protections to Calvinism, Judaism, and Lutheranism. The state continues paying for the buildings' upkeep, asserting that those interventions do not contravene *laïcité* but preserve France's cultural heritage. In the north-eastern region of Alsace-Moselle, annexed by France in 1919 after the Treaty of Versailles, the region's three *départements* still operate under the Concordat. The state pays the salaries of rabbis and Calvinist, Catholic, and Lutheran ministers from Alsace-Moselle, recognizing them as civil servants (*personnels civils*). *Laïcité* is also differently applied in Mayotte, the only Muslim-majority *département* where banning headscarves in schools appears lax to accommodate the region's unique demographic.

Such historically uneven applications belie how *laïcité* is far from a complete or uniform state project. In fact, earlier incarnations had publicly recognized and tolerated religious difference. The influx of Algerian labourers and migrants in the early-twentieth century, with smaller numbers from Morocco and Tunisia, compelled France to devise an accommodationist integration policy, starting with the 1926 construction of the Grand Mosque of Paris and state-funded cultural programs and food-distribution schemes for Parisian Muslims (Davidson 2012). As French officials tended to associate northern Africa with Islam, they instituted an *Islam français* (French Islam), an administrative framework to monitor Maghrebian migrants in France, grant social welfare, and

provide healthcare in a Muslim-only government hospital in Paris. Though it created an insular socio-legal regime whereby, as Naomi Davidson argues, Maghrebian migrants were 'kept in a parallel social universe, separated not only from the French but also from other immigrants' (2012, 85), *Islam français* indicated the state's willingness to publicly accommodate Muslim difference, albeit on a limited scale, in response to France's labour needs.

Murat Akan notes that following France's 2004 law banning religious symbols in public schools, the government helped establish the advisory French Muslim Council (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*) and France's first Muslim private high school, in what he calls 'key gestures of multiculturalism' that appeared to contravene the state's supposed non-intervention in religious affairs (Akan 2009, 237). Akan argues that such inclusionary manoeuvres did not imply a sudden embrace of multiculturalism but marked the state's efforts to address problems of social exclusion that secular law might enact, using accommodationist solutions typically ascribed to multicultural policies (239). The state's support of new Islamic institutions, however, was not to confer full autonomy to France's Muslims but to establish a state-controlled Islam within *laïcité's* framework. But as Akan observes, though features of *laïcité* and 'multiculturalism' were co-opted by the state to develop ostensibly inclusionary approaches to govern Islam, the result was an 'exclusionary *laïcité*' that fractured public schools and failed to address social stigmatization faced by *hijab*-wearing schoolgirls (253). While those modes of organising religion in public spheres can hardly be called multicultural, such state recognition of Muslim 'difference' was historically crucial to secular-republican politics in its response to the metropole's shifting migrant and labour concerns.

The pivot, however, to a contemporary *laïcité* rooted in a rigidly universalist cultural politics is relatively recent. Several national and transnational developments, from France's changing post-war demographics and post-colonial migrations to the post-9/11 'War on Terror', transformed *laïcité's* political meanings and functions in relation to France's sense of culture and national security. With the so-called 'War on Terror', in tandem with France's growing Muslim population and alarmist rhetoric on Muslims as a racialized and sexual threat to French culture, *laïcité* became substantially linked to existential questions of cultural and national defence. Amidst rising anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiments in France, such developments 'officialize an authoritarian and securitized conception of *laïcité*' whereby 'the argument in defense of *laïcité* increasingly responds to a cultural securitization imperative that spares no segment of French society', as Vincent Geisser argues (Geisser 2021). Through repeated invocations of cultural preservation and populational threat, *laïcité* and Islam become oppositional fault lines drawn in the Republic's war against global terror, with Muslims constituting

the primary referent to enact debates and policies ranging from France's secularity and national defence to women's rights and sexual progressivity, as various scholars have noted (Fernando 2014; Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995; Guénif-Souilamas 2006; Mabilon-Bonfils and Zoïa 2014).

### **Secular-republican multiculturalism: cosmopolitanism, vivre-ensemble, social mixing**

Marseille's multiculturalism has long been a subject of debate and praise, with its setting by the Mediterranean inspiring countless artwork, novels, and music. Touted as the oldest city in France, Marseille's claim to fame ranges from its windswept beaches and historic port to being the namesake of *La Marseillaise*, the national anthem. A rich literature on the city's immigration history has shown how Marseille's population is deeply shaped by its historical importance as a port-city and migrations from north and western Africa since the 1970s (Cesari 1988; Peraldi and Samson 2005; Temime and Échinard 1989). While no state data on Marseille's ethnic make-up exists, Marseillais passionately brand their city as unrivalled in its diversity, comprising notable migrations from Algeria, Armenia, the Comoros, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and, more recently, Syria, Turkey, and Vietnam (Temime 1999).

While it is debatable if Marseille's ethnic diversity sets it apart from other European cities with similar demographic patterns, Marseille is nonetheless constructed in the cultural imaginary as an exotic Mediterranean destination, with Marseillais known to express immense pride in their city. Marseille's large Muslim population is a provocative subject of debate and speculation, although scholars caution against reading demographic plurality as translating to political power (Cesari 1988). Marseillais Muslims are ethnically and culturally diversified, with communities of Algerian, Comorian, Mahoran, Moroccan, and Tunisian origin said to be of sizable importance. Estimates range from 250,000 Muslims comprising a quarter of the population to as high as 30–40%, with higher concentrations of Muslims downtown and in peripheral banlieues (Lorcerie and Geisser 2011). Popular representations of Marseille tend to portray it by its unparalleled diversity and violent crime, though whether such claims represent a unique historical reality is part of inventing Marseille's mystique. Laurent Mucchielli contends, however, that Marseille's crime rates are not historically higher than other major cities like Lyon, Nice, and Paris, where infractions like burglary and organized crime occur more frequently (Mucchielli 2013, 38–43).

Marseille has undergone major redevelopment to improve its image since the 1990s. The Euroméditerranée (Euromediterranean) project, launched in 1995 as one of Europe's largest urban renewal projects at the time, redeveloped 310 ha of Marseille's strategic but commercially under-developed waterfront by the Vieux-Port. The state-sponsored project aimed to refurbish





**Figure 1.** The redeveloped Vieux-Port near Quai des Belges, with Norman Foster's *L'ombrière* (the shaded house), a canopy of reflective mirror surfaces, as symbol of the port's renewal. © Amir Aziz. June 2021.

the run-down port, with its seaport access and untapped commercial potential, into a vibrant commercial zone. By 2021, the Euroméditerranée zone has been remarkably redeveloped: Along with its busy waterfront with yachts and cruise liners, the revitalized Vieux-Port (Figure 1) boasts new cafés, hotels, and promenades. Euroméditerranée brands Marseille as the region's business and cultural hub, a clever marketing stratagem that plays upon the aesthetic allure of an idyllic Mediterranean lifestyle purchasable for a price tag. As one travel writer enthused, Marseille's rebirth was a study in striking contrasts: It restyled itself as a 'cultural Mecca ... determined to shed its gritty reputation. With dozens of sleek new museums and artistic venues, the rough-edged Mediterranean port city exudes urban renewal' (Banas 2013).

Despite renewal efforts, Marseille remains France's most economically divided city with high rates of income inequality and unemployment. With 874,619 inhabitants in January 2021, Marseille is France's second-largest city after Paris. At least 210,000 inhabitants, a quarter of its population, live

below the poverty line. In the third arrondissement, France's poorest neighbourhood whose borders overlap Euroméditerranée, one of two residents subsist below the poverty line or are unemployed, despite the affluent port nearby. Neighbourhoods in the second and third arrondissements saw its working-class population fall sharply throughout the 2000s, followed by increases in affluent residents who worked in white-collar or senior executive jobs. While banlieues are typically far-removed from city centres, Marseille is presently the only city in continental France with a sizable working-class population residing downtown, but that is rapidly changing. As the city ramps up renewal efforts, Marseille's southern half, comprising the Vieux-Port and southern arrondissements, is becoming more affluent and driving out poorer residents. It becomes clear, then, that Marseille's resurgent wealth has not trickled past socio-economic boundaries.

Paradoxically, Marseille's diversity is played up by media and political leaders to cast off its decaying port image, with the city commonly called 'a capital of diversity' (Peraldi, Duport, and Samson 2015, 3). At first glance, Marseille's embrace of its multicultural diversity appears at odds with laïcité's precept that promoting group-based identities undermines secular-republican harmony. But such characterizations are aimed at promoting a commercialized multiculturalism to bolster the lucrative image of Marseille as a tourist-friendly Mediterranean destination for visitors to enjoy without the messiness of politics or baggage of social inequality. In this context, I formulate the notion of *secular-republican multiculturalism* to indicate discourses and policies that promote cultural diversity and appear to cohere to, rather than undermine, secular-republicanism. I am responding to growing scholarship urging for alternative approaches to interrogate Marseille's diversity that challenge dominant narratives of its cultural exceptionalism (Gastaut 2003; Peraldi, Duport, and Samson 2015) and reject the notion that Marseille is immune to logics of secular-republicanism due to its regional uniqueness (Biass and Fabiani 2011).

Contrary to rhetoric that Marseille is culturally distinct from the rest of France, the reality is more complex. The secular-republican framework strongly dominates local politics and discourse in ways that shape the city's socio-economic fabric: Local officials praise Marseille's diverse immigration history, while drawing from secular-republican discourse to reject assertions that its chronic social disparities are ethnic- and class-based and could form the basis for political mobilization. While Marseille is surely culturally diverse, with its trans-Mediterranean ties to Africa and the *laissez-faire* Marseillais way of life encouraging an easy intermixing between people, problems of racism and socio-economic discrimination, particularly against Black and Maghrebian residents, are fairly common. In the 1980s, Marseille gained infamy following a string of murders targeting Maghrebian immigrants.

Yvan Gastaut remarks that a multicultural Marseille ‘relays the image of a welcoming city as much as that of a city of racism’ (2003, 9). Such contradictions point to how Marseille is not distinctively set apart from the rest of France, but a city torn apart by the same competing interests and divisions that render it representative of France’s struggles with managing diversity amidst secular-republican uniformity. To illustrate this, I discuss how logics of secular-republican multiculturalism emerges in three instances via notions of *cosmopolitisme* (cosmopolitanism), *vivre-ensemble* (living together), and *mixité sociale* (social mixing).

First, the term *cosmopolitisme* is generally used to state the fact of cultural diversity in Marseille, eschewing politically contentious terms like multiculturalism. As part of its successful bid for the European Capital of Culture in 2013, Marseille was called ‘a melting pot of civilisations’ and ‘the most cosmopolitan’ Mediterranean city (Marseille-Provence 2013, 8). Key to this framing was how Marseille’s multiculturalism was described as apolitical expressions of culture: The bid report endorsed notions of ‘exchange, hybridity, cross-fertilisation, contamination’ mobilized through the idea of ‘interculturalism’ (*interculturalité*), while critiquing how multiculturalism as politics ‘rarely encourages communication, sharing, dialogue, and interactions’ (Ibid, 12). Robert Vigouroux, a progressive Socialist mayor of Marseille in the 1980s, had supported a cosmopolitan policy framework, though he saw Marseille’s *cosmopolitisme* as a precursor to Euroméditerranée, which he called ‘a key concept to the next century’ (Vigouroux 1991, 12). The language of *cosmopolitisme* enabled leaders to reframe multicultural diversity as a universalist cultural aspiration, positioning Marseille as a successful model of secular-republican harmony and profitable source of capital.

The idea of a cosmopolitan Marseille is lucrative. In Operation Grand City Center, launched in 2009 to redevelop 1,000 ha downtown, *cosmopolitisme* is used to frame urban renewal as a revitalization of Marseille’s wearied cultural diversity. For instance, the Mercure Canebière Vieux-Port is a luxury four-star hotel that opened in Noailles in June 2019. Proponents argued it symbolized efforts to protect Noailles’ architectural and cultural legacy, offering workspaces, bars, and tourist amenities, exemplifying how *cosmopolitisme* aligned with Marseille’s privatized urbanism strategy. Renovations proceeded despite local opposition, with its architects framing the hotel as reanimating Noailles’ cosmopolitan feel.

The hotel’s location is symbolically striking: It faces La Canebière, Marseille’s famed 1 km-long high-end shopping street, while looming over the rest of working-class Noailles, as if marking a bridge between divergent worlds. Such a juxtaposition punctuates dualistic images of Noailles as ‘dirty, abandoned, poor, and dangerous’ but filled with mineable cultural potential as ‘a lively, commercial, well-located, and cosmopolitan place’ (Barthelemy et al. 2003, 28). It contrasts how millions of public dollars were lavished to turn

a block of apartments into a private luxury hotel, while many buildings in Noailles were left in disrepair. Tourism guides advertised the hotel's perks as offering sweeping city views and easy access to the Vieux-Port and Noailles' local markets. Visitors could experience Marseille's cosmopolitanism and cultural offerings in modest doses, while remaining safely distanced from the area's impoverishment and urban degradation.

Part of Marseille's renewed *cosmopolitisme* involves controlling the commerce downtown, shutting down dime stores like call shops and cracking down on informal economies of trade like open-air vendors, in favour of businesses approved by officials. Yves Moraine, an elected official, declared the aim was to 'maintain a dignified and pleasant city center, with small, independent, and attractive shops' (Made in Marseille 2017). By also cracking down on unlicensed commerce like nomadic street vendors, officials sought to create a carefully curated *cosmopolitisme* closely regulated by authorities. Françoise Lorcerie and Vincent Geisser note how Marseille's *cosmopolitisme* produces 'paradoxical effects in the sphere of representations [...] at once a source of pride, in the framework of a local identity promoted as that of a welcoming, tolerant host city, and a subject of shame (perceptions of invasion and insecurity)' (2011, 45–46).

Second, *vivre-ensemble* (living-together) refers to the spirit of social cohesion as basis for communities co-existing peacefully. It has also been invoked as part of secular-republican values, ever since the 2003 Stasi Commission stressed that state-enforced *laïcité* was central to *vivre-ensemble*. Though lacking a legal premise, *vivre-ensemble* is invoked informally to argue that the public absence of visible religious or identity-based symbols fosters a united citizenry.

Marseille's *vivre-ensemble*, like its *cosmopolitisme*, is attributed to its unique Mediterranean admixture, with its 2,600-year-old Phoenician roots cited as proof of distinct communities having co-existed harmoniously for millennia. Between Euroméditerranée and being crowned the 2013 European Capital of Culture, Marseille seemed poised to play up its claim as an international capital of *vivre-ensemble*, hosting cultural festivals, sports tournaments, and diplomatic events that accrued its cultural and economic capital.

But such notions remain tied to universalist ideals of secular-republicanism. Minority groups of Maghrebian and Muslim background are especially stigmatized as threats to *vivre-ensemble*; in this view, despair over their socio-economic impoverishment leads to the much-feared *repli sur soi* (withdrawal into oneself), stoking secular-republican fears of social insularity. As Christine Delphy notes, *vivre-ensemble* conforms to secular-republican orthodoxy by emphasizing diversity as private culture, as it 'implies a defence of the status quo, in other words living together without changing anyone's situation or status in society – you in your place, me in mine' (Delphy 2015, xi).

Though *vivre-ensemble* appears to suggest universal equal treatment of all groups, it belies the exclusions it enacts, particularly in governing Islamic life. Plans for a Grand Mosque, similar to the one in Paris, were made in the 1990s to accommodate Marseille's growing Muslim population. Muslim Marseillais leaders described a potential Grand Mosque as embodying *vivre-ensemble's* spirit of inclusivity, given how large churches and synagogues were prominently visible in Marseille. While politicians initially supported the project, enthusiasm wavered under mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin's administration. An official later stated they no longer wanted 'a cathedral-esque mosque' and suggested a smaller 'neighbourhood mosque' or 'Muslim cultural centers' to supplement plans for a museum of the history of immigration (Monde 2004). This reveals not only how Muslims remain tied to the figure of the racialized immigrant, but that Islamic religious life and architecture become generic forms of culture that blend unobtrusively into Marseille's landscape. The project had raised enough private funds for construction by 2013 but was beset by legal challenges from the far-right *Front National*, then finally abandoned in 2016. Though lack of funding was cited as reason, contrasted with millions of public dollars poured into Euroméditerranée, the affair reveals how *vivre-ensemble* remains largely calibrated by secular-republican sensibilities. Mosques and Islamic prayer must remain a hidden cultural spectacle within the cityscape, admired afar by tourists, rather than essential sites of worship for Marseille's significant Muslim community.

Lastly, *mixité sociale* (social mixing) denotes vibrant social interactions between communities. It is also an ambiguous term as it could refer to gender, ethnicity, class, or other social categories, though it remains largely coded for ethnic origin. Since the 1990 Besson law enshrining housing as a legal right, *mixité sociale* became tied to housing policies on the premise that a better mix of public housing between different communities would integrate isolated groups. But scholars argue that discrimination pervades housing allocation, as officials used the rationale of *mixité sociale* to reallocate minority groups into state-approved housing in neglected or far-flung neighbourhoods (Kirszbaum and Simon 2001). As non-profit Fondation Abbé Pierre argues, '*mixité sociale* often turns into, without legal basis, a one-way ethnic mix that penalizes immigrant or foreign households' (2016, 16).

To accelerate renewal efforts, *mixité sociale* is invoked to justify evicting minority residents from targeted neighbourhoods to 'diversify' the area. Soléam, the public body in charge of urban renewal in Aix-Marseille, outlined how commercial diversification of housing downtown, like introducing private homes and rentals, promoted mixing and preserved Noailles' cosmopolitan liveliness (2015, 67). But such notions are concerned with maintaining a normative demographic balance, wary that the excessive presence of Black and North African Marseillais would tip the proverbial scales of *mixité sociale* and render downtown undesirable for businesses and tourists.

Gérard Chenoz, then-president of Soléam, declared that ‘in order for people to mix, some have to leave first’, hinting at the removal of ‘immigrants’ from the city centre (quoted in Berneau 2000). Another individual lamented ‘there are a lot of people who come from the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa. The French are a minority, there should be more mixing’ (Soléam 2015, 19). Despite how most Noailles locals are French citizens or legal residents, the comment reveals how *French* is reduced into a specific ethnic embodiment as quintessentially French, with Whiteness as the unmarked plurality dominant in realizations of *mixité sociale*. In another instance, Chenoz quipped that Noailles ‘will become a trendy neighbourhood’ and added that ‘the tourists do not want us to remove the Arabs, they just want us to sweep things up a little more often’ (quoted in Le Dantec 2019, 73). Under Marseille’s revitalization, *mixité sociale* entails cultivating a mixing of the ‘right’ kinds of populations conducive to a redeveloped downtown.

*Cosmopolitisme*, *vivre-ensemble*, and *mixité sociale*, among other ideals, form part of a secular-republican multiculturalism that place Marseille’s diversity within the schema of a universalist cultural politics. As Marseille accelerates redevelopment efforts, its cultural and religious diversity is devolved into commercialized products or tolerated as privatized cultural practices, denying minority groups from wielding those identities as basis for meaningful political mobilization.

The argument that multiculturalism can function in service of capitalist extraction is not new. Scholars in fields like anthropology and cultural studies have studied how multiculturalism policies in different contexts are rarely about embracing alterity. Writing on the United Kingdom, Stuart Hall shows how multiculturalism policies are key to attract migrants and produce a racialized underclass of workers whose labours in low-wage jobs are essential to local economies, yet British discourse and policies stigmatize them as burdensome wards of the state (Hall 2011). Others argue that despite opprobrium levied against multiculturalism policies in various national contexts, multiculturalism’s elastic meanings and associations have been recuperated to bolster capitalist development projects, commodifying human difference to extract capital and profit (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Lentin and Titley 2011; Peraldi and Samson 2005). As Fatima El-Tayeb contends on similar developments in cities like Amsterdam and Berlin, ‘marginalized groups are not completely expelled, but excluded from rights through their failure to achieve consumer-citizen status, making their primary value that of products to be consumed’ (El-Tayeb 2011, 123). In this sense, Marseille and France’s context may not be unique. Yet, a notable difference grounded in the French context is the emergence of a rigidly universalist cultural politics invested in a singular interpretation of *laïcité*, amidst internal schisms over France’s changing demographics, border anxieties, and rising inequalities. When minority groups protest how redevelopment policies do not permit the



**Figure 2.** 63–65 Rue d'Aubagne: vacant site of the collapsed buildings, cordoned from public access. © Amir Aziz. June 2021.

flourishing of religious, ethnic, and classed diversities, such dissent is too easily decried as antithetical to secular-republican harmony – addressed in the next section.

### **Rue d'Aubagne collapse and the urban degradation crisis**

When two buildings at 63 and 65 Rue d'Aubagne collapsed in Noailles on 5 November 2018 (Figure 2), locals denounced how the tragedy was a culmination of decades of municipal neglect. As rescuers spent days digging through rubble to find victims' bodies, authorities evacuated at least 1,054 residents from over 100 nearby apartments. Despite mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin announcing plans to temporarily house 176 families in hotels at the city's expense, critics charged that authorities were using the tragedy as pretext to resettle poorer residents from Noailles. Residents and housing rights activists held protests calling for Gaudin's resignation, declaring unsafe housing a citywide emergency.

The crumbling infrastructure of Marseille's older buildings, some standing since the eighteenth-century, was no secret. Noailles residents navigated daily hazards, like decaying staircases and exposed electrical wiring, with little recourse to improve conditions or seek assistance against slum landlords (*marchands de sommeil*). A 2015 inspection report had alerted the Minister of Housing of at least 40,400 out of 377,000 apartments in Marseille posing grave safety risks to over 100,000 occupants, with thrice the number of unsafe homes downtown. Such revelations failed to spur Gaudin's officials into action (Nicol et al. 2015, 9).

Marseille's housing crisis is exacerbated by a notorious system of clientelism, a regime of cronyism whereby those in power distribute goods and services via patron–client relations in exchange for political support. Clientelism occurs in degrees: At the municipal level, officials

may allocate resources like subsidies and welfare to preferred recipients based on personal or political relationships, while clientelist diversity policies distribute funds to certain minority groups to garner political favour. Clientelism promotes the mobility of a select few from underprivileged classes, extracting their political and economic capital, while preserving existing socio-economic relations (Mattina 2016). Local officials monopolize the allocation of public housing, rendering it difficult for residents in hazardous housing to incentivize officials into action if such concerns do not serve immediate clientelist and political interests.

For privately owned buildings, residents petition officials to sign peril decrees (*arrêtés de péril*) or insalubrity procedures (*procédures d'insalubrité*) to flag buildings as unsafe, but those are rarely issued. Two months after the collapse, officials hastily signed 147 peril decrees and evacuated 2,000 tenants, but only after being publicly criticized for inaction. In the 2 years since then, officials signed peril decrees at an alarming rate, casting a wider evacuation net downtown and displacing more residents and shopowners from zones marked for redevelopment.

Marseille's urban degradation emerged in a historical context marked by postcolonial immigration and spatial segmentation. In the 1970s, migrant workers, majority from northern Africa, settled in Noailles and its vicinity; some opened restaurants and markets, transforming the area's ethnic and commercial orientation (Temime 1999). Still embittered by the loss of colonial Algeria, right-wing and conservative figures in Marseille framed Algerians as thieves, killers, and invaders, while a wave of murders targeting Maghrebian immigrants unfolded in the 1970s. After bomb attacks in Marseille and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the focus shifted to Muslims, with mayor Gaston Defferre calling mosques breeding grounds for radicalism.

When Jean-Marie Le Pen's far-right *Front National* won popular electoral support in Marseille in the 1980s and 1990s, his campaign to stigmatize Muslims and non-European immigrants held powerful sway over public opinion and politics. Spaces settled by minorities were vilified and segmented from the rest of the city, producing the social division of urban space that coalesced into policies of wilful neglect by authorities, deepening social deprivation and degradation downtown over the decades.

Marseille's urban policy drastically changed in the 1990s under right-wing mayor Gaudin, with projects like *Euroméditerranée* aiming to transform Marseille into a prosperous Mediterranean city like Barcelona or Naples. Gaudin framed urban renewal as a triumphant reconquest of Marseille from immigrant invaders, proclaiming 'the Marseille of the masses, it's not a Maghrebian or Comorian Marseille. The centre was invaded by foreigners, the *real* Marseillais are gone!' (quoted in Le Dantec 2019, 74). Downtown neighbourhoods like Noailles, Belsunce, and Le Panier, settled by Maghrebian migrant dockworkers and low-income groups who remained after the port's



post-war decline, became desirable real-estate for commercial redevelopment, dovetailing with Gaudin's promises to rid the downtown of destitute elements. Claude Valette, an urbanism deputy, declared: 'We need people who create wealth. We have to rid ourselves of half of the city's inhabitants. The city's heart deserves something *more*' (quoted in Ruffin 2007).

When former mayor Gaston Defferre was told of the idea of making the local Al-Taqwa mosque more visible, he insisted on moving it elsewhere, adding, 'I don't want the tourists who come to Marseille to see the Arabs leaving the mosque', aware that the mosque was steps away from Porte d'Aix, a popular tourist attraction (quoted in Maussen 2009, 119). Central to Defferre's remark was not just the familiar secular-republican disdain for mosques as symbolic excesses of Islamic religious life that must be concealed, but that visible signs of Muslim embodiment, which he reductively ethnicised as Arab, were unsightly elements tarnishing Marseille's economic potential. Marseille's clientelist system and Gaudin's policies together created a deregulated system of competing practices that left downtown areas like Noailles stranded in perpetual destitution.

Officials marked certain downtown areas for mandatory restoration, forcing private owners to renovate under penalty of expropriation or risk having their properties seized. Activists noted that evacuated tenants were rarely relocated in the same area, while owners offered compensation for expropriation were unable to purchase property of equitable value elsewhere. Many buildings in Noailles were auctioned off to buyers only intent at reselling at higher prices or had no desire to renovate, forcing evicted residents to leave the neighbourhood eventually. As buildings became abandoned for decades or re-sold without repairs, the cycle of displacement and insalubrity continued, with the 'endless construction zone' (*chantier interminable*) becoming the most recognizable feature of Marseille's landscape (Peraldi and Samson 2005, 177).

Following the Rue d'Aubagne tragedy, over 300 Noailles residents founded the 5 November Collective, an activist group to aid those affected by the collapse. The group's slogan, *Noailles en Colère!* (Noailles Enraged!), signalled a collective uprising and rebuke against decades of deadly neglect and political apathy. On 9 November 2018, they held a silent march in memory of Chérif, Fabien, Julien, Marie, Niassé, Ouloume, Simona, and Taher, the eight lives lost at Rue d'Aubagne. The group organized a March of Anger of over 8,000 people and marched to the mayor's office at the Vieux-Port, only to be greeted by riot police and tear gas. Mayor Gaudin deflected criticism by stating that millions had been invested to repair unsafe structures but failed to note that most were sunk into costly commercial ventures; for instance, '3 million euros for substandard housing' but 'more than 50 million for an ice rink'.<sup>1</sup> The skewed distribution of resources

revealed a deliberate protocol of letting degraded buildings in Noailles stand vacant and unrehabilitated, reducing the availability of affordable housing and conceding to clientelist and market logics. Residents were gradually forced to leave by political and market forces beyond their control.

Noailles' collective anger was not just directed at the problem of urban neglect. Protests against racism and police violence have long taken place in the city as material acts of resistance. Activists argued it was no coincidence that Marseille's downtown neighbourhoods settled by immigrants and minorities are relentlessly subjected to social stigmatization and heightened policing. While other French cities are also gentrifying across class and ethnic lines, the extent and deadliness of Marseille's urban decay is especially notable in its callous premeditation, part of the calculated political strategy to regain the downtown from Gaudin's 'foreigners' through the temporal and racialized violences of capitalist economic restructuring. Activist protests in Marseille's downtown are further marked by challenges in articulating their grievances when faced with accusations of *communautarisme*, a largely untranslatable concept that emerged through secular-republicanism.<sup>2</sup> *Communautarisme* emerged in French discourse, notably after the 1989 veil controversy, to discredit claims of ethnic and religious discrimination and rally laïcité hardliners against the social divisions they believed emanated from Muslims. *Communautarisme* is disparagingly used to 'describe and denounce the threat posed to French society by communities of any kind (religious, linguistic, ethnic, racial, gendered) demanding special consideration' (Dufoix 2018, 21). The term is used to especially 'evoke Islam, the banlieues, or integration' and single out Muslims and immigrants of non-European origin as undermining France's universalism (Dufoix 2016, 15).

Marseille's activist mobilizations are burdened by the difficulties in articulating group grievances under a secular-republicanism that renders such claims politically unintelligible, especially when emphasizing racial and class disparities as sources of discrimination. It marks the politics of contention and disavowal at the heart of redevelopment's devastating effects in Marseille: As Noailles and downtown areas are targeted by renewal projects as the next strategic phase for revitalization, officials deny this is precisely because its residents are disenfranchised groups who, apart from being persistently called 'invaders' and 'foreigners', tend to wield little political and economic power to resist larger political and market forces. Dissent against redevelopment's destructive effects is dismissed as divisive through the optics of *communautarisme*. As Nacira Guénif-Souilamas remarks: 'In France the fear of an alleged *communautarisme* is used to justify Islamophobia and to undermine claims for equal rights for Muslims, new immigrants, as well as gay and lesbian movements, and hence perpetually marginalised in an ambiguous otherness' (2006, 30).

## Conclusion

This article challenges claims of Marseille's exceptionalism by drawing attention to how emphasis on its diversity obscures socio-economic marginalities plaguing the famed Phoenician city of immigrants. I consider how secular-republicanism, a key feature of *laïcité* that has more recently espoused a universalist cultural politics, shapes how Marseille brands its diversity. As Marseille aspires to remake itself as a modern tourist destination, there emerges a need to promote its supposedly unparalleled diversity on the global stage but only insofar as it remains couched in universalist language, neutrally denoting the fact of different communities co-existing in the spirit of secular-republican harmony. This draws out the seemingly contradictory tensions between secular-republicanism and multiculturalism, suggesting that secular-republicanism may not, in fact, be entirely incompatible with the recognition of multicultural diversity, especially when that diversity is repackaged into forms of depoliticized, commodified difference conducive to capitalist extraction.

Such universalist articulations of diversity further obscure the contradictory ways in which Marseille's marginalized communities, particularly those of Black and Maghrebian background, are treated; they are symbolically celebrated in rhetoric, yet stigmatized as invaders and foreigners. Neighbourhoods like Noailles, historically populated by migrants from north and western Africa, are praised as symbols of Marseille's famed multicultural diversity, yet residents are progressively expelled to make way for redevelopment projects. The disastrous collapse of two Rue d'Aubagne buildings in Noailles highlighted how officials had persistently failed to address the degradation crisis, yet millions of dollars were spent to build new hotels. Noailles residents find it challenging to articulate their grievances, as officials deny that ethnic- and class-based discrimination exists in a universalist Republic blind to difference. Such contestations highlight a contradiction that secular-republican multiculturalism facilitates: As residents are increasingly expelled from downtown, the city continues to mine them, as symbols of Marseille's multicultural diversity, for extractive cultural and economic capital to buttress its image as an attractive tourist destination.

## Notes

1. The words of Carole Lenoble of *A Downtown For All*, quoted in Isnard-Dupuy (2019).
2. Laurent Lévy (2005) argues that *communautarisme* is a French adaptation of the English term 'communalism' that connotes community-based interests as the basis of belonging. But 'communalism' may not convey how secular-republicanism is central to French identity distinct from the Anglo-Saxon and northern American contexts. The term has been erroneously translated into

English as 'communitarianism', a different philosophical concept whereby the common good supersedes individual interests. Due to contestations on semantic origin, I retain *communautarisme* in French to refer to notions that upholding group-based interests threatens France's universalism.

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