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# Culture in/and Crisis

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## **MARSEILLE: CITY AND EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE IN/AND CRISIS**

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### *Introduction*

"The themes of culture and European capitals of culture in/and crisis" reflect certain realities concerning Marseille, the French city that, along with a number of neighbouring towns, was selected as Marseille-Provence, European Capital of Culture for 2013.

This paper opens with a description of the background to the crisis in Marseille since this determines the general context and social conditions for the elaboration of the "Marseille-Provence 2013" cultural project. Following this the governance of the ECOC by the implementing body is examined. Marseille's application is built upon the idea of crisis taken as an asset or at least as a means of revival which could give culture a decisive role in the region's economic development. Marseille-Provence 2013 maps out a new territory for cultural action by restructuring relationships between various actors and local authorities which should lead to increased coherence or integration, although it also involves a certain amount of dissent.

Finally, the paper focuses on the different kinds of crisis - the structural economic crisis in itself and the conflicting interests and positions of the different actors involved in the implementation of the ECoC.

### *1. Marseille in crisis*

"Marseille a city in permanent crisis" is a phrase which has several dimensions: economic, demographic, social and urban. The present paper examines some of the most significant features or recurring statements from the late 1970s onwards. These characteristics build

up a kind of "common knowledge" about Marseille as a port city in crisis, and to a certain extent, nourish the initiatives for its renewal.

Economically, the crisis theme revolves mainly around the collapse of industry and focuses on port activity. The crisis can be dated to the post-war period and worsened after decolonisation in the sixties; it gave rise to the implementation of new initiatives for economic development that demonstrate a way of addressing the crisis in terms of mutation. The economy is then seen through the prism of a zoning process across an urban area. For the first time ever, the question of the place of Marseille in an urban area extending beyond the limits of the city is being treated on an institutional and political level.

The correspondence between economic functions and geographical areas is clearly illustrated by two major projects directly reflecting this idea i.e. the construction of the industrial port area of Fos-sur-Mer and the planning of the "Marseille Metropole" head office designed between 1964 and the late 70's. These projects organised the new economic, social and urban structure of what is now called a metropolitan area. Marseille was thus promoted as the headquarters of the industrial site specialising in the steel industry, and this mutation played a part in the building up of a new urban order.

This operation, aimed at building Marseille as a regional capital, impacted on two other characteristics of the city: the spatial distribution of its inhabitants and the place occupied by the immigrant population.

By the late 60's, an analysis of the city's urban pattern clearly showed the separation of position or place held by the social space along a north/south axis. To the north, the harbour area and the popular districts of old Marseille, with additional housing projects known as "the northern districts". To the south, luxury shops and banks and the presence of upper-middle-class districts whose vocation and social composition were strengthened in the following decades by a number of adjustments. It is mainly on the north side of the old town that the project of a new urban centre necessary for the expansion of the service sector - supposedly attractive for the middle classes - will be launched.

The history of migratory movements shows that many foreigners have found near the old harbour a place of accommodation and transit that gave the historical centre of Marseille an important role in the process of their acculturation.

For local officials, this area has long been a problem, in that they associate urban dereliction with the presence of an immigrant population. With these economic and urban restructuring projects, local officials have therefore found an opportunity to intervene in the social and ethnic composition of the city centre. The public discourse on the immigrant element in Marseille, especially North Africans, then became prominent in the rhetoric concerning the "reconquest of the centre." Arguments in favour of the transformation of an economic pattern based on small grocery shops and local artisans are based on the obvious lack of public hygiene in this area. This apparently legitimate discourse on urban rehabilitation is associated with a more controversial one on immigration and its visibility. In the context of the '70s, even if immigration did appear at the time as a critical element likely to hamper the project of a new central area, it was also taken up as a major argument to revive the "fiction of a coherent space pattern, the myth of a possible central area or the legitimacy of public initiative"<sup>1</sup>. The "re-conquest-of-the-centre" theme was reformulated in the course of the following decades as the quest of an urban pattern specific to Marseille. The cosmopolitan identity of the city then began to be looked upon as an idiosyncratic feature, as a constitutive element of Marseille's urban pattern, as a significant contribution to the construction of the city's identity.

This restructuring scheme has not been implemented, mainly due to the global economic crisis of 1973, which had a major effect on the city. The mutation failed, which led Marseille to an economic, social and demographic decline: the city lost 100,000 residents between 1975 and 1995. The semantics of the crisis in Marseille has been built upon this failure. It also conjures up images of imbalance, paralysis, impotence, lack of discipline, local and regional feuds representing a counterpoint to the economic crisis. These major structuring projects of the metropolitan area have remained "horizons for the future" and constitute a mobilising factor regularly evoked when speaking about changing the course of the city's history. Sometimes this is done with a sense of urgency, because of the threat of social disintegration. Eventually, since the late '70s, the recurrence of the crisis as an assessment or an explanatory principle, makes this crisis a permanent state which seems to characterise the city best.

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<sup>1</sup> Peraldi (1987) : 138-139

## 2. *Marseille-Provence 2013 as a crisis control device (Building up a cultural project using crisis material)*

Marseille's recent adoption of the reference grid relating to the institutional and political environment of the ECoC has helped to bring the "crisis" to the fore. The re-emergence of the discourse about the crisis reveals the changing context in which it is developed. In this sense, we consider the ECoC as a new situation of enunciation of the crisis, a prism through which Marseille has been analysed and presented for decades by various actors who, in the present circumstances, find themselves on common ground, beyond their differences over the origin and constitutional elements of the crisis. In 1994 experts issued a report<sup>2</sup>; their conclusion was that the city's spatial planning was 30 years out of date compared to its French counterparts, due to the presence of three separate entities: Marseille /Etang de Berre/Aix en Provence and their incapacity to talk to each other which characterises relations between these local authorities.

In this perspective, although one could define as a "tour de force"<sup>3</sup> the territorial scale chosen by those involved in the ECoC application of Marseille-Provence 2013, and insofar as it comprises no less than one hundred town councils, it also points out the limits of a course of action which consists of "betting on culture to cement the construction of a metropolis." We can also analyse the effects of the reorganisation of territories characterised by their diversity as a potential asset, in spite of the divisions and antagonisms existing between institutions and their respective policies. Against the old oppositions, it is diversity considered as an asset that is promoted in the Marseille-Provence 2013 bid. Indeed, it includes 130 towns, 5 urban communities (Marseille, Aix, Arles, Salon, Istres and Gardanne), 2 regional parks (Luberon - Camargue). In this sense the application of the project achieves a significant result and delimits a place for culture (the territory for which the project is designed).

However, this site is itself encompassed in a wider area of diversity, which is that of the Mediterranean. This is mentioned in the broad guidelines of the application document. The prologue, named "Marseille, Europe and the Mediterranean"<sup>4</sup>, gives the Marseille-Provence

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<sup>2</sup> Club d'échanges et de réflexions sur l'AMM (1994).

<sup>3</sup> Grésillon (2011) : 36

<sup>4</sup> Latarjet (2008) : 17-19

area a dimension extending beyond its local boundaries. If the Mediterranean is characterised as the birthplace of both Europe and Marseille, it is also asserted to be the future asset of local development: a "Mediterranean future for Marseille and Provence."

With this Mediterranean perspective, Marseille-Provence, Marseille-Provence is presented as a territory which contributed to the avoidance of conflict and a "26-century-old crossroads of civilisation". As quoted in the application document, today the Mediterranean is the focal point of "all the disorders of the planet", and for this critical area, Marseille-Provence can play a part and also find ways out of its own crisis. This role is defined by cultural action, which is necessary both to re-launch the Barcelona process (initiated by the EU perspective of a European policy in the Mediterranean) and as a specific experience for Marseille-Provence that could hereby find an opportunity to revive its economy.

### *3. MP2013 CEC, as a crisis operator device*

The crisis theme has been identified in the application of Marseille-Provence 2013 as a contribution to the treatment of the relational crisis existing between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, and as a means for Marseille to escape from its slump through culture. However, another type of crisis may finally be seen now concerning the governance of the project. It casts a shadow on the cohesion of a territory as promoted by the application document and which, for some time, seemed to have been achieved.

The atmosphere of crisis around Marseille-Provence 2013 arises from the rivalries between territories and local authorities but also from the distrust that the EcoC implementing body has given rise to in the local cultural environment. The national press regularly reports these problems and disagreements which are treated as emblematic illustrations of Marseille's idiosyncrasies... This is reinforced by a series of special cases and disorders which exacerbate the poor image Marseille suffers from, even though the organization of the European Capital of Culture project was supposed to be a way of fixing such disorders<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Douay (2009)

The idea of making local authorities work together and thereby overcome traditional divisions, which has been promoted through the ECoC, has suffered a serious setback with the withdrawal of Toulon, one of the main cities of the area. This has implications for the CEC budget which has been cut. Similarly, Aix-en-Provence, another major city of the territory, has delayed its signature as a member of Marseille-Provence 2013 by bartering its financial contribution for compensations such as the location of the head office of a research and higher education centre in Aix instead of Marseille<sup>6</sup>.

In another field, the public debt crisis has had an impact on government subsidies to local authorities, which has reduced the funding of cultural organisations. In Marseille, the cuts in subsidies have caused misunderstanding insofar as culture is supposed to occupy a privileged place in the preparations of the EcoC project. The cultural sector put the blame on the management of the 2013 project for their reduced subsidies<sup>7</sup>. This leads to a feeling of mistrust towards the "MP 2013" implementing body; seen from the outside, this reveals the local discomfort of the cultural sector<sup>8</sup>. This discomfort is not only that of cultural organisations but also of council services<sup>9</sup> who denounce a multi-dimensional crisis affecting the financial and administrative governance of public cultural institutions.

### *Conclusion*

These are the first elements of a study which is being presented currently. They are part of a broader research project initiated by the Centre Norbert Elias which has made Marseille-Provence2013 an observatory of cultural and political dynamics. We consider the nomination and designation of Marseille-Provence 2013 as ECOc as an event that opens a new dynamic leading to a whole set of social, political, urban and cultural reconfigurations. From a pragmatic approach, this constitutes what we call a public experience.

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<sup>6</sup> "Marseille Provence 2013 : Aix gagne son bras de fer". Marsactu, 26 janvier 2011. <http://www.marsactu.fr/2011/01/26/marseille-provence-2013-aix-en-provence-gagne-son-bras-de-fer>

<sup>7</sup> "Marseille 2013 : des intellectuels s'enchaînent devant la Bastille à Paris". Le Parisien, 9 mars 2011.

<sup>8</sup> "Marseille 2013, révélateur du malaise culturel local". Le Monde, 18 mars 2011.

<sup>9</sup> « La Culture dans la rue à deux ans de Marseille 2013 ». Libération, 27 mai 2011.



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