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Immigration, Nationality, and Xenophobia in Late-19th Century Marseilles

Abstract: This paper investigates the “Vêpres Marseillaises,” a June 1881 anti-Italian riot in Marseilles, in order to discuss the intersection of working class nationalism, immigration, and French political and social discourses. The event is more than a simple manifestation of xenophobic nationalism; it is both a moment that illustrates the unique place of Marseilles as well as the inaugural expression of a discourse that sought to bring the working class under the French republican banner.

On June 17, 1881, a French army corps returned from recently occupied Tunisia and marched through the streets of Marseilles. A fervent and excitable crowd gathered as the troops made their way from the quay down la rue de la République, the main street of the port district. The crowd, consisting primarily of young French workers, quickly gathered outside the headquarters of an Italian national club after hearing sardonic whistles and impudent catcalls directed towards the marching soldiers. The workers began agitating, calling for the club's Italian flag to be taken down. A public official soon arrived on the scene and made efforts to calm down the agitators and the police arrived shortly after to protect the group of Italians inside the club. The crowd succeeded in

tearing down the flag, but there occurred no violent confrontations; the crowd left and the prefect shut down the club as a precautionary measure. The brief truce was an uneasy one, though; the next day, the 18th of June, a band of French adolescents viciously attacked a small crew of Italian day laborers on their way to work. Intermittent violence proceeded for the two days following, leaving three dead and dozens injured. Hundreds were arrested, Frenchmen and Italians alike. Some were put on trial and given short prison sentences.¹ This event became known as the “vêpres marseillaises,” and is a significant, if obscure, point in the histories of French and Italian worker relations and, more broadly, of manifestations of xenophobia in Marseilles.

The general subject of immigration, xenophobia, and their political relationships with nationalism has attracted renewed attention in France in light of recent trends. Racially charged and even racially motivated violence in the French *banlieues* and the nature of the contemporary French political right have brought out an interest in how France developed such a lukewarm (and often hostile) relationship with foreigners on its soil. Race riots erupted in 2005, which resulted in mob violence throughout much of Paris. Cars were set on fire and policemen and rioters clashed viciously. Civil unrest spread to such a degree that the government declared a state of emergency. In 2013, thousands of young Parisians demonstrated against the country's severe immigration policies following the forcible deportation of a young student from Kosovo. The questions of immigration, nationality, and ethnic hostility are quite explicitly shaping France's politics and social constitution today. How, then, were these problems framed at the end of the 19th century, when rapid industrialization and modernization led to

¹ "Bulletin du Jour," *Le Temps* [Paris] 23 June 1881: N pag, *Gallica*, Web, 15 Sept, 2013.

heightened immigration and magnified national tensions? The concept and practice of xenophobia and its intersection with nationalism has attracted considerable attention from sociologists. However, there is a fairly limited literature on the history of its origins and development in France. Much of the historical interest in the subject derives from the resurgence of publicly held xenophobic attitudes in the 1980s among neoconservative political figures.² Even today, nationalism and the cause of anti-immigration enjoy a public voice in the form of the Front National, a protectionist and socially conservative political party.

The aim of this paper is to critically examine the “*vêpres marseillaises*,” a violent riot in Marseilles that took place over the course of three days in the summer of 1881, and to explore the histories of immigration, violence, hostility, and nationalism for which this event serves as a prism. The “*vêpres marseillaises*” is, in the context of this study, a historical moment through which to talk about these involuted histories. The event itself is central, of course, but its centrality derives from its conceptual position as a reflective device that allows us to more clearly examine the histories that pass through it. In the particular case of late-19th century Marseilles, it is very difficult to hold a serious discussion about immigration without talking also about the accompanying strain of anti-foreigner feeling and its effects on conceptions of French national community. As a result, it is difficult to separate these histories. Where does one end and the next begin? It is precisely this problem that makes the “*vêpres marseillaises*” such a convenient focal point; the riot is a place of convergence for these coincident narratives.

² Noiriel, Gerard, Preface, *La France hostile*, By Laurent Dornel, 2004, 1st ed. Hachette, 2004, 7-11, Print, 8.

The literature that bears on the “vêpres marseillaises” is in itself quite small. Georges Liens tackles the subject in a 1967 article in the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*. Liens cobbles together a coherent narrative of the events of the “vêpres marseillaises” from local and national newspapers. The main lines of interpretation here relate to how the event had a major influence on Franco-Italian relations throughout the 1880s and even beyond. The event precipitated a diplomatic rift between the two countries. Conservative elements in both the French and Italian governments tried to maintain good relations, but Italians took to the streets in protest and Italy had to abandon the pretense.³ As Liens writes, “But these manifestations of sympathy remained isolated and, for eight days at least, a violent current of hostility against France emerged in the press and in the street.”⁴ This view of the event is quite unique; no other source assesses the “vêpres marseillaises” as an event as internationally significant as Liens would have it.

Gerard Noiriel, in *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France: discours publics, humiliations privées*, analyzes the event from a strictly French perspective. That is, he concerns himself with the ways in which the “vêpres marseillaises” projected its significances to France as a united whole. For Noiriel, the questions that the riot raises are national, rather than regional, in scope. The primary questions he raises involve the effects that the event had on relations among the workers themselves and the social, economic, and political implications of them. Noiriel argues that the “vêpres

³ Liens, Georges, "Les "Vêpres Marseillaises" (juin 1881), Ou La Crise Franco-italienne Au Lendemain Du Traité Du Bardo," *Revue D'histoire Moderne Et Contemporaine* 14.1 (1967): 1-30, *JSTOR*, Web, 19 Sept. 2013, 19.

⁴ Liens, ““Les Vêpres Marseillaises,”” 19. Original quotation: “Mais ces manifestations de sympathie restent isolées et, pendant une huitaine de jours au moins, un courant très violent d'hostilité envers la France se déchaîne dans la presse comme dans la rue.”

marseillaises” was a founding moment (“moment fondateur”)⁵ in the history of xenophobia. For the first time, anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner feelings were being distilled in political discourses. Noiriel writes, “Here workers expressed their anger using national language and symbols, and the resulting violence was persecuted by the national government itself, where before the local elites would simply distribute reprimands.”⁶ To Noiriel, the event is a turning point for the social mobilization of the French working class against the presence of foreign communities.

Laurent Dornel gives much the same interpretation. However, he focuses more on the impact that the “vêpres marseillaises” had in the French press, both local and national. He sets more store by the discursive reverberations of the violent episode. For him the disturbance was an event that set off a very public discussion about the role of immigrants in the political, social, and economic landscape of the nation. Moreover, the violence itself, and the many other similarly motivated acts of violence, contributed heavily to the formation of a social movement whose defining feature was xenophobia. Noiriel and Dornel's approaches give a good sketch of the contours of the historiography on immigration and nationality in Marseilles.

The angle that I propose to take here will center rather more on Marseilles as a space of convergence where these social processes were played out. Under this framework, the “vêpres marseillaises” becomes a point at which the narrative of prosperous cohabitation among national groups begins to crumble. Moreover, Noiriel and Dornel's general framework that takes the concept of xenophobia as the central

⁵ Noiriel, Gerard, *Immigration, Antisemitisme Et Racisme En France*, N.p.: Fayard, 2007, Print, 149.

⁶ Noiriel, *Immigration*, 150. Original quotation: “Mais ici les ouvriers (tout du moins certains d'entre eux) disent leur colere en utilisant un langage et des symboles *nationaux*, et leurs recriminations sont repercutées jusqu'au sommet de l'etat republicain, alors qu'auparavant les élites se contentaient de réprimer les débordements locaux.”

explanatory variable needs to be expanded. The argument that a general buildup of xenophobic feeling was, at root, the cause of the “vêpres marseillaises” is deficient in that it minimizes the importance of contingency. It risks suggesting that the riot was inevitable. Why did anti-Italian feeling manifest itself in the way that it did when it did? To satisfactorily answer this question, it is necessary to explore Marseilles as a place of convergence in both the cultural and metaphorical senses. This single riot in the summer of 1881 was a watershed moment for French discourses on immigration, attitudes towards foreign populations, and the social mobilization of the city's French workers towards a more precise and egalitarian definition of what it meant to be French.

Historical Marseilles and the “Italian Invasion”

Investigating Marseilles as an evolving space of confluence that frequently served as a battleground for French struggles with violence, national identity, and immigration is crucial to understanding how each of these threads represent closely parallel histories.

Every account of the city of Marseilles discusses its historical “cosmopolitanism.” Emile Temime, in his book *Migrance: Histoire des migrations à Marseilles*, writes:

Marseilles remains by nature a crossroads, a place of meeting among civilizations in a Mediterranean world where isolation is too often the norm, a bridge between men, where they meet and different cultures unite. Therein lies its fortune; therein lies its future.⁷

Marseilles, France's second city, has a long history as a commercial port, a melting pot of

⁷ *Migrance: Histoire des migrations à Marseilles*, Ed. Emile Temime, Vol. 4, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 1989, 414. Original quotation: “Marseilles reste par nature une ville-carrefour, un lieu de rencontre entre civilisations dans un monde méditerranéen où les rejets et l'isolement deviennent trop souvent la norme, une passerelle entre les hommes, d'où qu'ils viennent et les différentes cultures qui s'y rejoignent. Là est sa chance; là est son avenir.”

the civilizations and cultures that have lined the Mediterranean as far back as the Roman Empire. People from far and wide passed through and sometimes settled in Marseilles. New migrations folded over the previous, forming cosmopolitan Marseilles just as sediment accretes over old soil. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Marseilles became the “port of the empire,” funneling goods and personnel to French centers of control in Africa. The docks of the city became a place of immense international and intercultural convergence. Such a convergence has important conceptual consequences. Above all, it means that Marseilles is not simply a representative slice of the French republic or the French nation. French nationality as manifested in Marseilles is firmly embedded in the context of cosmopolitanism. The historiography, following Temime's example, has largely interpreted Marseilles' cosmopolitanism in a positive light. As Stéphane Mourlane and Céline Regnard note in the introduction to their collection of essays, *Les batailles de Marseilles: immigration, violences, et conflits, XIX-XX siècles*, this tendency to understand cosmopolitanism as a reason for the historical greatness of Marseilles has contributed to a conspicuous absence of critical studies of the violence and aggravation that have occasionally vitiated relationships among the city's nationalities and that have served as an important, yet overlooked, force in the formation of a sense of French national unity among the working classes.⁸

The concept of cosmopolitanism in Marseilles cannot be understood uniformly as a force for tolerance and coexistence. Indeed, Mourlane, Regnard, and Dornel show beyond doubt that it led to serious disputes over economic rights. Between 1880 and 1890, incidents of violence between French and Italian workers became more frequent

⁸ Mourlane, Stéphane and Céline Regnard, “Introduction,” *Les batailles de Marseilles: immigration, violences et conflits*, Ed. Mourlane, Stéphane and Céline Regnard, Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2013, 5-11, Print, 7.

and more intense.⁹ These violent disputes took many forms: street fights, physical assaults, and even petitions and public demonstrations.¹⁰ Anti-Italian violence was, according to Dornel, somewhat ritualized. It very frequently involved premeditation and followed on the heels of such collective expressions of hostility and nationalism as the chanting of derogatory slogans and the publishing of mordant editorials in the local newspapers.¹¹ This set of circumstances was brought about by a minor economic crisis. When French workers lost their jobs en masse, there arose resentment at employed Italians. Thus the violence that troubled Marseilles during the 1880s was a direct consequence of cosmopolitan economic processes.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, France received a surge of immigrants, many of whom left their home countries to look for work in the increasingly industrialized French landscape. Many immigrants went to work in factories or took on other manual jobs in the industrially developed parts of the country such as Paris, Marseilles, Lyon, and Lorraine. These fairly sudden demographic changes had serious effects on the country's social and economic character. Italians (mostly from parts of northern Italy such as Piedmont) and Poles comprised the most significant immigrant populations. Incidences of violence among workers of different nationalities erupted throughout France. Tensions were especially high during periods of economic distress, as the French working class resented the incoming foreigners, who would sometimes take lower wages (which led to the depression of wage standards) and would frequently be

⁹ Dornel, Laurent, "Paradoxes de la xénophobie ouvrière," *Les batailles de Marseilles: immigration, violences et conflits*, Ed. Mourlane, Stéphane and Céline Regnard, Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2013, 137-147, Print, 138.

¹⁰ Dornel, "Paradoxes de la xénophobie ouvrière," 138.

¹¹ Dornel, "Paradoxes de la xénophobie ouvrière," 142.

employed as strike breakers.¹² These were the sources of a xenophobic tendency among the French working poor, which to an extent cohered into a sense of French nationalism, particularly among urban workers.

By the 1870s, only a decade before the “vêpres marseillaises,” Marseilles' cosmopolitanism educed a series of new economic circumstances, which altered the ways in which people did business and which bore tremendous consequences for the city. In the previous decades, the port had earned a renewed importance as the center of a colonial network after France had begun to exert its power in North Africa.¹³ Moreover, in 1869, the Suez Canal opened, leaving Marseilles as a prime route of transit for traders, travelers, and cargo ships going to and from as far afield as East Asia.¹⁴ However, the period saw a proliferation of port cities throughout Europe, and Marseilles lost its place as the Mediterranean's sole port of passage. The commercial economy was modernizing, and Marseilles' docks were no longer bustling. Thus Marseilles slowly became a more industrial city, relying not on local resources but on imported materials to forge goods.¹⁵ The city became famous for its “oleagineaux,” mainly olives and olive oil, and for its soap.¹⁶

The critical consequence of the new Marseillais economy was an upsurge in demand for labor, both skilled and unskilled. This shift was accompanied by numerous other significant changes. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Marseilles' political leaders, backed by the city's influential assembly of merchants, successfully challenged a

¹² “Bulletin de l'Étranger,” *Le Temps* [Paris] 22 Mar. 1882: N. pag, *Gallica*, Web, 03 Sept. 2013.

¹³ Pierrein, L, “Du negoce aux industries 'classiques' (1870-1940),” *Histoire de Marseilles*, Ed. Edouard Baratier, Toulouse: Privat, 1973, 359-384, Print, 360.

¹⁴ Pierrein, “Du negoce aux industries 'classiques' (1870-1940),” 360.

¹⁵ Pierrein, “Du negoce aux industries 'classiques' (1870-1940),” 362.

¹⁶ Pierrein, “Du negoce aux industries 'classiques' (1870-1940),” 370.

move towards economic protectionism, which would have spelled doom for the region's commercial activity.¹⁷ More important still were the social and demographic patterns that emerged from this period. First, the city's population exploded, rising from around 300,000 residents in 1872 to more than half a million by the turn of the century.¹⁸ Here, immigration was largely to thank; by 1886, only 43% of Marseillais had been born there.¹⁹ The Italian community in Marseilles was the largest and most economically vital immigrant group; according to census data, there were more than 165,000 Italians (mostly workers and their families) in France in 1876, many of whom lived and worked in the Bouches-du-rhône region along the south eastern coast in cities such as Marseilles and Nice.²⁰ Additionally, in the 1870s, organized labor began to gain serious ground in Marseilles, and in Provence generally. Workers gathered in a “congress” in 1879, pledging to use strikes and other tactics to win concessions from the business owners. In 1883, for example, almost 10,000 dock workers ceased all operations, paralyzing the port for a full three weeks.²¹ On the eve of the “vêpres marseillaises,” Marseilles was a city of immigrants and workers, with an industrial economy, a decisively leftist politics, and a very diverse social scene.

What Temime calls “Italian Invasion” is of particular importance here, and its narrative allows for a more precise understanding of the social and political relationships between the Italians and French during this period of profound economic innovation, demographic rearrangement, and social transformation. During the second half of the

¹⁷ Pierrein, “Du negoce aux industries 'classiques' (1870-1940),” 378.

¹⁸ Olivesi, A, “Contrastes sociaux et luttes politiques sous la troisieme republique,” *Histoire de Marseilles*, Ed. Edouard Baratier, Toulouse: Privat, 1973, 385-424, Print, 386.

¹⁹ Olivesi, “Contrastes sociaux et luttes politiques sous la troisieme republique,” 386.

²⁰ Leroy-Beaulieu, Anatole, “Les Troubles De Marseilles,” *Le Revue Politique Et Litteraire: Revue Des Cours Litteraires* (1881): n. pag. *Gallica*, Web, 25 Aug. 2013, 66.

²¹ Olivesi, “Contrastes sociaux et luttes politiques sous la troisieme republique,” 406.

19th century, immigration from all over Europe to the United States was in full swing. Marseilles was frequently a way station for Italians, Greeks, and Turks on their way to Ellis Island.²² The city served also as a permanent destination for many thousands of Italians, the most significant national minority in the area, who were attracted by the work opportunities in the industrializing economy. The composition of the city, both social and economic, was shaped to a very large degree by this flow of workers. Insalubrious tenements were erected in shabby neighborhoods, where Italian workers (mostly men) slept.²³ Communities rose around these neighborhoods. Importantly, many of these communities were culturally separate from French Marseilles, which had neither the infrastructure nor the experience to integrate the Italians into an idealized republican city in which everyone, irrespective of race or nationality, was an equal citizen. This meant that Italians could maintain their culture and lifestyle without great difficulty. Naturally, however, serious problems arose out of this absence of social integration. Occasionally, resentments flared up; French workers accused Italians of stealing their jobs and of undermining union efforts by accepting low wages. The “vêpres marseillaises” marks a moment in which this maelstrom of class and national tensions boiled over into the political discourses of the French Third Republic.

The Press and its Coverage of the “Vêpres Marseillaises”

The “vêpres marseillaises” is worth careful consideration precisely because it lies at the intersection of all of these narratives. National identity, worries over immigration,

²² *Migrance: Histoire des migrations à Marseilles*, Ed. Emile Temime, Vol. 2, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 1989, 22.

²³ Temime, *Migrance: Histoire des migrations à Marseilles*, Vol. 2, 27.

and violent incidents – all of these stories converge in this single event in the summer of 1881. The violence was relatively isolated, but the event nonetheless acquired a certain heft in both the local and national presses. Examining the perspectives and language from which and with which these presses described the “vêpres marseillaises” will bring us further towards an understanding of the incident as a moment in the evolution of France's relationship with immigration and national identity.

By the 1880s, the French republic had established a print tradition that would prove key to the way that the French public, and especially the working classes, consumed the news. By 1881, ten years after the reestablishment of republicanism after the fall of the Second Empire, a public discursive space reappeared, giving rise to private, competing newspapers.²⁴ Crucially, the press succeeded in attracting the widespread attention of the working classes. Newspapers often achieved this by presenting the news in short bulletins and portraying conflicts in black and white language, with clear “victims and aggressors.”²⁵ We will see this tendency reflected in the language and ideas of the press with respect to the Italian community in Marseilles.

The local Marseillais press is especially useful in providing detailed accounts of the “vêpres marseillaises,” and bears more directly on the question of working class nationalism. While the national press illustrates publicly held beliefs about Italians in France, the local newspapers permit a more thorough investigation of the actual tensions in the streets of Marseilles. Besides the rough sketch of the “vêpres marseillaises” given above, there are several specific points that deserve a closer reading.

²⁴ Noiriél, *Immigration*, 154.

²⁵ Noiriél, *Immigration*, 154.

The ways in which the Marseilles papers portray Italian workers are telling. The Italians are, according to *Le Petit Provençal*, disposed to violence. After all, they always carry “long knives”²⁶ on their persons. In addition, several pieces concerning the incommensurable hygiene of the Italians were published in the ensuing months.²⁷

The contextual significance of the day of June 17, 1881 is crucial. On that day, an expeditionary corps of the French army under a certain General Vincendon debarked in Marseilles on its return from Tunisia and was welcomed with a “climate of celebration.”²⁸ The feeling in the city was one of national pride and triumph. The gathered crowd of French workers (dockers, industrial workers, itinerant laborers) was energetic, verging on unruly.²⁹ *Le Petit Provençal* printed that the Marseillais were “enthusiastic, even chauvinistic, and we here will not reproach them for it.”³⁰ The soldiers turned down the Rue de la République, which was lined with foreign consulates, many of which raised their countries' flags.³¹ The catcalls and verbal provocations that allegedly came from the “club italien” thus pierced an already tense, highly charged atmosphere in which not only the French crowd, but also the foreign diplomatic representatives in Marseilles, actively expressed their national loyalties. The symbolism is immediately clear. One of the primary ways in which these French workers related to their Italian counterparts was through a carefully defined national allegiance demonstrated by identification with the republic and the flag. The press, as illustrated by *Le Petit Provençal*, fueled the fire of national pride and righteousness. The conjuncture

²⁶ “Informations,” *Le Petit Provençal* [Marseilles] 26 June 1881: N. pag, Print.

²⁷ Noiriel, *Immigration*, 154.

²⁸ Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 7. Original quotation: “La foule participait dans un climat de fête.”

²⁹ Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 7.

³⁰ “Outrage en Marseilles,” *Le Petit Provençal* [Marseilles] 18 June 1881: N. pag, Print.

³¹ Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 7.

between class and nationality arises once again; *Le Petit Provençal* was a publication with socialist inclinations.³² A picture begins to emerge in which Marseilles' leftist elements, rather than its conservatives, have appropriated nationalism as a means of self-expression. This stands in stark opposition to traditional socialist dogma, which emphasizes the importance of international cooperation among fellow workers. Thus the “vêpres marseillaises” represents a demonstration of the unique blend of socialist politics and nationalist symbology that characterizes the development of working class nationalism in Marseilles.

As another daily newspaper, *Le Petit Marseillais*, notes, on the evening of June 19 a group of fifteen or twenty Italian workers, armed with knives and revolvers, began attacking pedestrians on the street.³³ Chaos followed; a large and angry group of Frenchmen chased the offenders, who barricaded themselves inside a house. The Italians then ascended to the building's roof, where they began to throw stones and tiles at their murderous besiegers.³⁴ When the dust cleared, several lay dead and the authorities promptly arrested over a hundred people. However, the reverberations of the violence were considerable. Word of the violence spread through the city, and the streets were soon packed with protestors calling for blood.³⁵ The Italian community at large, most of which was of course entirely ignorant of the day's bloodshed, locked their doors and armed themselves out of fear and confusion. The city was effectively locked down on the order of the prefect – cafes and businesses were shuttered and the military locked down

³² Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 8.

³³ “Informations,” *Le Petit Marseillais* [Marseilles] 20 June 1881: N. pag, Print.

³⁴ Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 11.

³⁵ Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 12.

major intersections.³⁶ This account delivered by *Le Petit Marseillais* indicates the gravity of the violence and the depth of the anger and hostility on both sides of the national divide.

The coverage of the “vêpres marseillaises” by the French news sector operates on two distinct levels: the diplomatic and the local. Most of the news reports concerning the “vêpres marseillaises” give basic testimonies of the course of events and then establish the response of the authorities. The former illustrates how the French workers used symbols of the nation in the immediate struggle against their Italian counterparts. The latter is important in understanding how the republican government in Paris viewed the riots. As mentioned above, the Marseilles police arrested French workers as well as Italians on the direct order from the prefect, suggesting that the government wished to avoid the appearance of prejudice in its handling of the affair. The riots were therefore understood as having potential effects on the diplomatic relationship between France and Italy. The French authorities had to make sure their response was even-handed. However, the event did set off a minor diplomatic crisis between the two countries, caused, according to Noiriél, by Italy's resentment of France's success in subduing Tunisia. The workers of Marseilles were thus “conscripted into the diplomatic battles that were not theirs.”³⁷

The local newspapers that covered the bloody events of June 1881 demonstrate the ways in which both the French public and the Marseilles workers used both violence and the language and symbols of the *patrie* in the service of French nationhood.

³⁶ Liens, “Les Vêpres Marseillaises,” 12.

³⁷ Noiriél, *Immigration*, 152. Original quotation: “Les ouvriers ont été ainsi enrôlés dans les querelles de diplomates qui n'étaient pas les leurs.”

Le XIXe siècle, a Paris-based quotidian journal, proffers a slightly more international perspective and places the “vêpres marseillaises” in the context of the political relationships among the rising and falling powers of Europe. The June 29, 1881 issue of the paper shows an awareness of how the press in neighboring countries reacted to the riots: “While the German newspapers, whether from Berlin or Vienna, rejoice at seeing the French and the Italians fighting each other, we see, in contrast, gradual appeasement in the cities of Italy, and, more unexpected still, in their newspapers.”³⁸ Enduring tensions between France and Prussia gave the Germans cause to celebrate the troubles in Marseilles. More importantly, *Le XIXe Siècle* suggests that the Italian press began to take a more conciliatory tone in its discussions of the “vêpres marseillaises” in an effort to minimize the political damage. It becomes ever more apparent that the riots took on an international significance beyond their apparent scope, and the range and depth of press coverage of the sort we have seen here is to thank for it.

“Les troubles de Marseilles” is a piece in the *Revue politique et littéraire*, a moderate republican journal based in Paris from 1871 to 1939, by Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, an academic and the son of a republican politician. The piece was published in July 1881, just a month after the events of the “vêpres marseillaises.” His article looks at the events partly in the context of European colonialism, which shaped the relationship between France and Italy during the period. More important, however, are the prejudices, conscious or otherwise, that Leroy-Beaulieu's piece evokes.

³⁸ “Informations,” *Le XIXe Siècle* [Paris] 29 June 1881: N. pag, *Gallica*, Web, 29 Sept. 2013. Original quotation: “Tandis que les journaux allemands, soit de Vienne, soit de Berlin, se réjouissent de voir les Italiens et les Français se distribuer les coups de poing et les coups de couteau, nous voyons, au contraire, l'apaisement se faire dans les villes d'Italie, et, chose plus inattendue, dans leurs journaux.”

Leroy-Beaulieu's analysis illustrates several conceits that helped shape French opinion towards Italian immigrants. The first is a variety of cultural centrism that places France, and Paris in particular, at the heart of European civilization. He writes that many other Europeans were drawn to France by the “magnetic”³⁹ power of the riches and cultural sophistication of Paris. It is plain that his vision of France as united and uniform clashes with the social realities in Marseilles, a place that operates along global lines. Additionally, he voices the concern of many French people that continued immigration and integration would lead to the dilution of the French nation: “Les esprits prévoyants se sont souvent, depuis vingt ou trente ans, inquiétés pour notre avenir national de la diminution progressive de la fécondité de nos familles, de l'affaiblissement de la nationalité française.”⁴⁰ The language he uses also betrays mild hostility towards foreigners on French soil; he writes of Italian immigration to France as a “silent invasion” (*silencieux envahissement*). Yet, the piece is doubtful that restrictions on immigration would be a good idea. Leroy-Beaulieu concludes that economic forces were the primary motivation for immigrant workers and he chalks up the “vêpres marseillaises” to the inevitability of violence between non-integrated, prideful nationalities living in close proximity to one another.⁴¹ A further point of interest is the amount of information that Leroy-Beaulieu assumes that his readers already know. He never actually describes the “vêpres marseillaises” in any detail. He simply alludes to them as the “troubles of Marseilles.” The piece presupposes a certain degree of knowledge, and this underscores the idea that it was covered fairly widely by the French press.

³⁹ Leroy-Beaulieu, Anatole, "Les Troubles De Marseilles," *Le Revue Politique Et Litteraire: Revue Des Cours Litteraires* (1881): n. pag, *Gallica*, Web, 25 Aug. 2013, 66.

⁴⁰ Leroy-Beaulieu, “Les Troubles,” 67.

⁴¹ Leroy-Beaulieu, “Les Troubles,” 68.

For Leroy-Beaulieu's contemporaries, the article was an application of age-old French concerns about foreigners in France to an explosive new situation in Marseilles. Importantly, it was an instance of a major republican publication in Paris taking note of a relatively isolated event in the south of France and ascribing to it major political significance. This was a relatively new thing; there had for the past century been numerous small, localized instances of violence among national groups in France, but they had never been given such attention by the national press.

The piece reveals some of the mainstream French attitudes towards immigration and the presence of communities of foreign workers in France. The journal in which the article was published, the *Revue politique et litteraire*, was a very widely read periodical among the urban middle classes whose politics favored republicanism. It is not therefore too great an interpretive leap to suggest that the piece represents a mainstream current of thought about issues of immigration. The primary features of this current, as evinced in Leroy-Beaulieu's writing, are a serious preoccupation with the French nation, a sense of cultural superiority strongly linked to French success in imperial endeavors, and a moderate, protectionist brand of hostility towards foreigners. Once again, these views take Marseilles as part of the French core, gravely misunderstanding that the city, and the social conditions therein, are a product of much more than a Franco-centric history. These attitudes serve as the context in which it becomes possible for French workers to begin to adopt symbols of the French nation and for the established republic to begin to include the workers in the *patrie*.

The regnant republican newspaper in Paris, *Le Temps*, also demonstrated a

watchful concern over the Italian presence in Marseilles. In the July 7, 1881 issue, the paper published a statement on the number of Italians leaving the city after the “events” of the previous month: “1,374 Italians left Marseilles during the month of June, and 1,667 in the first days of the current month, which gives a total of 3,041... This figure does not represent a substantial change from the rate of Italian repatriation [during the year 1880], even though it first appeared so in light of the events that we have just endured.”⁴² The mildly euphemistic reference at the end is surely a nod to the “vêpres marseillaises.” That France's most influential and most widely read daily newspaper bothered to track and publish the number of Italians leaving Marseilles to return home to Italy illustrates the degree to which the community was distinct from other populations in France. The Italian presence was a genuine “colony”⁴³ on French soil. There is also an important bit of implicit analysis that *Le Temps* engages in. The piece alludes to the “vêpres marseillaises” as the reason for hundreds of Italians leaving Marseilles. *Le Temps* tacitly understands the violence of the previous month to be quite a serious moment indeed. One is left with the impression that the newspaper is keeping a close on the Italians because they do not trust them to be peaceable.

Le Temps also provides a way to understand the intersection of this conflict of nationalities with the conflict of class that arose out of the newly energized socialist movement in Marseilles. *Le Temps* runs this passage on July 26 about a major conference of the city's socialist elements: “The socialists and the Italian anarchists sent

⁴² “Bulletin de l'Etranger,” *Le Temps* [Paris] 7 July 1881: N. pag, *Gallica*, Web, 02 Sept. 2013. Original quotation: “Pour la même période de 1881: 1,374 italiens sont partis pendant le mois de juin, et 1,667 dans les premiers jours du présent mois, ce qui constitue un total de 3,041. La différence, au profit de 1881, n'est que 130. Ce chiffre ne constitue pas, on le voit, une modification sensible dans le roulement ordinaire du rapatriement des italiens qui habitent Marseilles, ainsi qu'on aurait pu le croire à première vue, après les événements que nous venons de traverser.”

⁴³ “Bulletin de l'Etranger,” *Le Temps* [Paris] 7 July 1881.

delegates, all of whom felt the same way. They deplore the hatred that came from the violent collisions between workers from Marseilles and Italian workers. Workers should not fall for the bourgeois game. They should have neither country nor nationality; the world is divided in two and those who suffer are brothers, and those who exploit them are enemies.”⁴⁴ Here, *Le Temps* runs a piece detailing the some of the major ideas coming out of the socialists of Marseilles, whose primary message is that the “vêpres marseillaises” has caused a regrettable split between French and Italian workers, who should instead unite to battle the bourgeoisie. Class operates in this context as a line of conflict that runs perpendicular to the lines of national conflict. That is, class and nationality are two overlapping, convergent categories whose interests often contradict one another. One speaker at the conference laments that if the socialist agenda was achieved, there would be no need for “national quarrels.”⁴⁵ We will see later how nationalism among the French working classes interacts with this clash of interests and changes its dynamics.

How is one to characterize the general position of the mainstream French press towards the “vêpres marseillaises”? The reports in *Le Temps* provide an indication of the (unsurprising) tendency of the French press to view the “vêpres marseillaises” in terms of an unwelcome foreign community stirring up trouble on French turf. The paper's actual description of the riot is relatively conciliatory, emphasizing that the whole affair was

⁴⁴ “Bulletin de l'Etranger,” *Le Temps* [Paris] 26 July 1881: N. pag. *Gallica*, Web, 13 Sept. 2013. Original quotation: “Les socialistes et les anarchistes italiens en ont envoyé un certain nombre qui ont toutes le meme sens. Elles déplorent les haines qui ont amene des collisions entre les ouvriers de Marseilles et les ouvriers italiens. Les ouvriers ne doivent pas faire le jeu de la bourgeoisie ventrue. Il ne doit y avoir ni patrie ni nationalite; le monde se divise en deux parties ceux qui souffrent sont des freres et ceux qui les exploitent sont les ennemis.”

⁴⁵ “Bulletin de l'Etranger,” *Le Temps* [Paris] 26 July 1881.

“regrettable” and “unfortunate,”⁴⁶ but Italian responsibility for the violence is nonetheless implicitly assumed. There seems to be no self-consciousness on the part of the writers and editors, no concession that the Italians may have settled in Marseilles out of economic necessity, no understanding that Marseilles as a city was something other than perfectly French. Rather, an unsubtle jingoism towards Italians reigns in France's preeminent newspaper.

The “Vêpres Marseillaises” and Natural Imagery

The press coverage of the riot also repeatedly evoked bodily imagery. Articles often refer to France itself as a human body, a metaphor that helps explain the nationalism in the press. France, like the human body, was supposed to be a single and whole organism with mechanisms to keep harmful foreign particles out.

This kind of language evolved as a way to express concerns about the nation. Over the course of the “Belle Epoque,” the French began to appropriate natural symbols and imagery to talk about civilization and culture. One of the most frequently employed examples is the metaphor of the society as a living organism. Society can thus be in good health or poor health, in a state of prosperity or degeneration. As Robert A. Nye explains in “Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis in the French *Belle Epoque*,” these twin notions of degeneration and degeneracy pervaded late-19th century culture in the west. “As the opposite ego of the morally correct gentleman, the degenerate provided

⁴⁶ “Bulletin du Jour,” *Le Temps* [Paris] 23 June 1881.

an astonishingly corporeal vision of the fatal consequences of drink, sloth, and vice.”⁴⁷

In France specifically, the concepts were connected to the psychiatric practice, and had serious intellectual and scientific underpinnings, many of which also formed the bases of social and racial theories. French popular culture also helped to disseminate the concept of degeneracy. For instance, the twenty “Rougon-Macquart” novels by acclaimed writer Emile Zola, which propose to capture the nature of life under France's Second Empire, contain countless scenes of drunkenness, debauchery, lechery, murderous violence, and mental illness. Nye underlines the degree to which this sort of thinking penetrated political discourse. He notes that Emile Durkheim, the renowned French sociologist, once compared the role of the statesman to that of the physician; statesmen must above all be on watch for maladies and pathologies that threaten society. In addition, the discourse showed a deep concern for biological equilibrium. Just as the body regulates itself to maintain homeostasis, the French national organism had to find proper balances in order to remain healthy and maintain its vitality and virility. Furthermore, “medical judgments were capable of expressing the consensual norms, prejudices, and salient anxieties of French society.”⁴⁸ For instance, the concept of degeneration was frequently used in the context of growing fears about the French birth rate, which, in the last few decades of the 19th century, had stagnated.⁴⁹ France's European rivals, the newly unified Germany chief among them, were surpassing her in both population and industrial production, leading to questions about the social health of the French people. Was French society more pathological than others? Were there more alcoholics, more

⁴⁷ Nye, Robert A, “Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis in the French *Belle Epoque*,” *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, Ed. Seymour Drescher, David Sabeau, Allan Sharlin, N. p: Transaction Publishers, 1982, Print, 19.

⁴⁸ Nye, “Degeneration,” 21.

⁴⁹ Nye, “Degeneration,” 26.

degenerates, more diseased or unstable people in France than elsewhere? Was the aging population an indication of a slow social degeneration? This sort of concern, expressed in a very particular sort of language, is present in discourses surrounding the “*vêpres marseillaises*” and the Italian “colony” in Provence.

In the outrage over the street violence, a weekly business journal, *Le Semaphore*, explicitly calls the Italian presence in Marseilles “cancerous.”⁵⁰ The metaphor is quite apparent: the Italian community in the city is a malignant presence that ruins the health of the organism that is French society. The sentiment is equally apparent in the number of articles disparaging the hygiene of foreign workers – not just Italians in this case, but Poles and Spaniards too. This supposed lack of proper hygiene was considered a pathology. That is, it was assumed that this fault was simply a part of a larger “degeneration syndrome.”⁵¹ It was not really their fault – they just could not help it or did not know better. Out of these lines of reasoning there emerged “hygiene groups,” “ad hoc in nature, addressing themselves to a single problem. There were antidepopulationist groups, antialcoholics, and others that dealt with pornography or diseases of the popular urban classes.”⁵² In any case, the metaphors of degeneration had extreme political utility. Discourses such as the tirade in *Le Semaphore* were quite common, and appealed to the latent nationalism in the republican base. The “medical model for cultural crisis” was therefore a powerful rhetorical and symbolic device that the press used to vilify foreigners and unite Frenchmen of all classes under a nationalist banner.

Even apart from the “medical” metaphors about social and national decline, natural imagery was enlisted in the nationalist cause of the working class. Leroy-

⁵⁰ “Troubles en Marseilles,” *Le Semaphore* [Marseilles] 24 June 1881: N. pag, Print.

⁵¹ Nye, “Degeneration,” 31.

⁵² Nye, “Degeneration,” 31.

Beaulieu's piece is suggestive in this regard. He writes:

Some in this country have been worried for the past twenty or thirty years about the progressive diminution of the fecundity of our families, about the weakening of the French nationality. This is obviously a cause of inferiority militarily, politically and industrially vis-a-vis competitors. This change in balance is a detriment to our almost stationary French population: another alarming consequence for the future is the occupation by foreigners of the seats left empty by our children. If these foreigners came in small numbers, isolation, and redispersed regularly on the surface of the territory, they would be without penalty absorbed by the national body.⁵³

Leroy-Beaulieu's words themselves suggest a preoccupation with the comparisons of the French nation to the biological, the organic, the natural. For him, the future of France appears bleak; foreign populations are invading the French "body," taking advantage of the national organism's failure to populate as quickly as its competitors. Once again, this sort of rhetoric is used in the service of discrediting segments of the population such as the Italians in Marseilles.

A thoughtful and provocative piece in *Le Petit Provence* on June 26, 1881 provides perhaps the best example of the political adoption of natural imagery. The piece states that the "vêpres marseillaises" may in fact have brought the Marseilles workers closer to the "bosom" of the French nation.⁵⁴ This follows a long tradition in France of representing the nation using feminine language and symbols, such as Eugene Delacroix's famous painting "*Liberty Leading the People*," in which a woman, bearing the flag of the Revolution, leads a group of men through a bloody scene. The longstanding French notion of liberty even has its own symbolic embodiment in the parabolic character Marianne. The result of this language is the sense that the French workers of Marseilles,

⁵³ Leroy-Beaulieu, "Les Troubles," 68. Original quotation: "Les esprit prévoyants se sont souvent, depuis vingt ou trente ans, inquiétés pour notre avenir national de la diminution progressive de la fécondité de nos familles, de l'affaiblissement de la nationalité française."

⁵⁴ "Informations," *Le Petit Provençal* [Marseilles] 26 June 1881.

embittered and disenfranchised as they were, had their interests expressed in national terms. As Noiriél puts it, “Local incidents were from then on regularly described as national conflicts.”⁵⁵

As France progressed through industrialization and the social and cultural milieu of the late-19th century, tensions between immigrants and French citizens escalated, often culminating in violence of the sort that the city of Marseilles witnessed in June of 1881. At the heart of these conflicts lay fears over immigration, latent nationalism and its accompanying prejudices, and a social and political discourse that emphasized natural, even medical imagery to describe the pervasive sentiment of degeneration. The “*vêpres marseillaises*” itself was a critical moment at which the press began to describe local incidents among the working classes as concerns of the French nation at large. It was a nexus linking the narratives of immigration, class conflict, and nationalism in Marseilles, and to a greater or lesser extent, in France. Most of all, it was a distinct moment that illuminates the development of nationalist tendencies among the city's working classes.

⁵⁵ Noiriél, *Immigration*, 152. Original quotation: “Les incidents locaux sont désormais systématiquement décrit comme des conflits nationaux.”

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