The Embedded Experience of Racialised Space. The Case of the Descendants of Algerians in Marseille Through the Sayad's Gaze

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Abstract

In this contribution, we will attempt, in line with the legacy left to us by Abdelmalek Sayad, to start from spatial conditions in order to analyse more broadly the national/not national representations made by the descendants of Algerians, born and raised in France. The investigation will be based on ethnographic research carried out in the Belsunce neighbourhood in Marseille, which began in September 2022 and ended in September 2023. The questions the research aims to answer are: what is the representation of spaces made by young descendants of Algerians? How does the neighbourhood participate in the production and reproduction of the national/non-national categorisation (Sayad, 1979a; 1979b) that affects the descendants of migrants? The article therefore questions the description of Belsunce made by some young descendants of Algerians women and men who live there or work there. Through their words, their reflections and the observation of the spatial practices they implement, it is possible to notice how Belsunce, and therefore Marseille as a whole, is the product of the persistent effects of the colonial organisation of space and also how the neighbourhood participates in the reproduction of processes of colonial categorisation and racialisation; French/non-French, national/non-national, civilised/uncivilised, integrated/barbarians. Confirming that space is not only structured but also structuring.

Keywords: urban coloniality, racialisation, space production, urban ethnography, French colonialism, Algeria.

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1. Introduction. *Les Enfants d'immigrés* in Abdelmalek Sayad

Abdelmalek Sayad approached the migration phenomenon both scientifically and personally, as he himself was "an emigrant" and "an immigrant," having left Algeria for France. Through his studies, he demonstrated that it is essential to analyse the processes that compose the migration to better understand the hierarchical structures of societies as a whole, given that we transcend unconscious reasons and the subordination of science to politics (Sayad, 1999a; 1999b). In *"Les enfants illégitimes"* (Sayad, 1979b), the Algerian sociologist dedicates a particular focus to the children of Algerian immigrants in France, examining the legal, political, symbolic, colonial, and familial aspects of their existence in the French context. Sayad writes that they are considered *"enfants d'immigrés"* and thus migrants themselves, inheriting the status and discrimination that come with it, *bien qu'il ne soit pas le leur* (Sayad, 1979b). The descendants of the colonised and the immigrants continue to be recognized as non-nationals and non-French but as a *"population à problèmes"* (Sayad, 1979b). The relationship that is established between the national group, those recognized as "French," and the non-national group, not only the non-white immigrants, mostly Africans, but also their descendants, is asymmetrical. The various notions used to describe it prove this: "insertion," "integration," or "assimilation" (Sayad, 1979b). Those considered non-nationals are always compelled to achieve integration without ever truly attaining it. Therefore, the mandate to which the descendants of Algerians should respond is that of naturalization, which for the Algerian sociologist represents phase of the same process, that is, colonialism (Sayad, 1999a, p. 412). Sayad asserts that integration is a fundamentally identity-related social fact, and like any conflict generated by individuals in the attempt to secure a position of greater prestige in the hierarchy of social classifications, it is an extremely powerful process because it involves the entire social being of the individual and groups (Sayad, 1994). It thus reveals itself to be a social construct capable of identifying who is the "us" and who is the "other," and especially of defining these classifications unequally because their positions of power are unequal. The obligation to integrate is a daily, "anonymous, underground, and almost invisible" work (Sayad, 1994), a form of secondary socialization that the individual, considered foreign, alien, and non-national, "must" undergo to earn the legitimacy to exist in a given space.

As can be seen, Sayad dealt with all the most relevant aspects of the social experience that accompanies the fact of migrating and being born in the former *métropole*, without ever forgetting the relationship with spaces. He first confronted the housing and spatial conditions of Algerians as colonised people, as in the case of the regroupement camps, and then of Algerian migrants in France, the analysis of the "bidonville" in Nanterre is an example (Sayad, 2019).

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In this article, the analysis of the relationship between space and social groups highlighted by Sayad will be revisited to investigate the representation of the national/non-national category of the descendants of Algerians.

2.   Methodological notes

This article is based on urban ethnographic work that began in September 2022 and ended in September 2023. The ethnographic and spatial method is justified by the fact that observation is considered essential for urban research (Duneier et al., 2014), helping to describe the different social groups that inhabit the city and the ways in which inequalities and discrimination are spatialised. Access to the field was made possible by my move to the neighbourhood, which allowed me to assist by participating in daily activities, shopping, meal distribution activities in the *hôtels meublés* [1] and the relations and dynamics involved in my building. The language between me and the research participants was French, but not being my mother tongue and having a strong Italian accent this created a kind of vulnerability in the eyes of the interviewees that reinforced a bond of understanding. Moreover, the French language represents one of the vehicles through which domination is regenerated and the fact that I did not speak it well, presumably made my position less hostile in their eyes. Indeed, my individual and social position as a young white woman from southern Italy, as well as my precarious employment status, played an important role in my access to these relationships. Italians were well liked in their eyes and the fact that I was originally from Salerno, near Naples, gave rise to a series of stereotypes about Neapolitans, "you are all thieves", which, recalling the racist prejudices about "Arabs", created further proximity. In this article we present some part of the field notes and some contributions from the interviews conducted with young people aged 23 to 30, born in France to Algerian parents who have a strong relationship with the neighbourhood either because they live there or because they work there. In this paper we choose to use the word "Arab" and "Muslim" with a capital letter and in inverted commas since we recognise it as a category with a colonial and discriminating matrix and it is only used in reference to the words of the interviewees. In this text, therefore, the words "Arab" and "Muslim" are mobilised not as a category that essentialises and reduces a

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[1] They are furnished hotels that do not cater to a tourist clientele but to a poor population (such as migrants and retired migrants). Some rooms are rented through public services, like the 115 service.

person's entire identity to race or religion but as a sociological category to ana-lyse how it produces racist discrimination and reproduce colonial representa-tions.

3. Belsunce: a context of precariousness

Marseille, is a city in south-eastern France, located in the Paca region and the *Bouches du Rhône* department, is the second largest city in France in terms of population (870 721 inhabitants, Insee 2020). It is two and a half times the size of Paris and it is a city with considerable disparity in socio-territorial terms as shown in Tables 1 and Table 2 in which we can observe the social and spatial inequality in terms of unemployment and poverty rates between the central and northern districts with those to the south of the city.

Table 1. Percentage of poverty rate per neighbourhood.
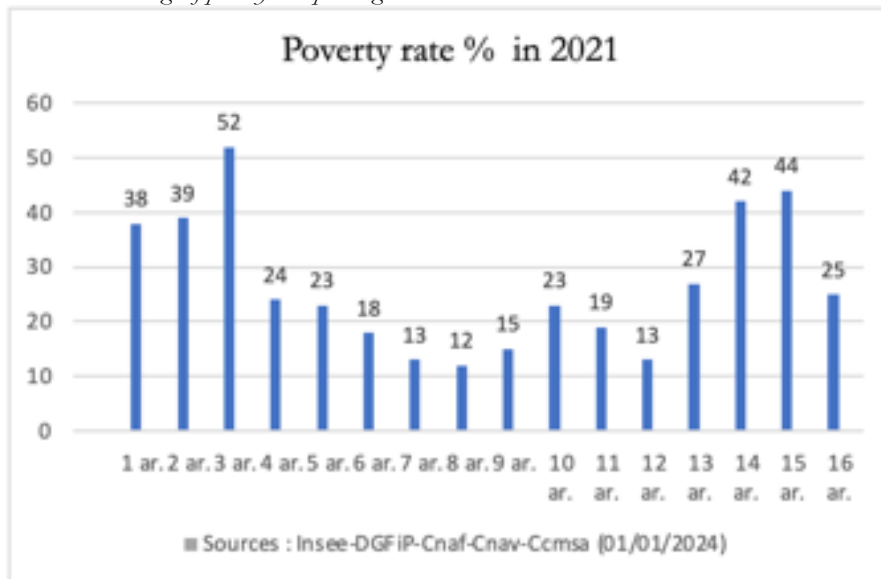
The poorest areas of the city not only in the so-called northern quartiers (arrondissements 13, 14, 15, 16) but also in the city centre, the 1er, 2er and 3er register alarming figures as more then 37% of poverty rate (52% in the 3er arrondissement) and more than 20% of unemployment. These neighbourhoods show a majority of migrants and descendants of migrants. The neighbourhood addressed in this article, Belsunce, is located in the first *arrondissement*, where the

poverty rate is 38% and unemployment 21.1%. In Belsunce, the activity rate is very low, less than in the other *quartiers* that make up the first arrondissement (Le Chapitre, Noailles, Opera, Saint Charles, Thiers). From 15 to 64 years old, the activity rate is 45%, which means that 55% are inactive: unemployed and not looking for a job (Insee, 2020).

Table 2. Unemployment rate of individuals aged 15 to 64.

Unemployment rate % 15-64 years old in 2020

Sources : Insee, RP2014 et RP2020

These social and economic conditions are part of a longer history of discrimination and marginalisation. Because of its location, between the station and the old port, it has for centuries been a district whose economy has revolved around mobility and migration, as evidenced by the historical studies of Eleonora Canepari (2022), who in fact reported that the *Hotel des Deux Mondes* was already present on Cours Belsunce in modern times between the 17th and 18th centuries. In Belsunce there are nowadays many *hôtel meublés* which have a long history in the immigration system in France (Sayad, 2019) and in which many people in mobility, migration and economic difficulties live like elderly immigrants from North Africa, called *chibanis*. Canepari's thesis is particularly relevant because it contradicts the narrative that Belsunce was a wealthy, middle-class neighbourhood that was ruined by the arrival of migrants from North Africa. During the 20th century, the district was inhabited by Italian migrants, then by Armenians, Corsicans and Spanish, and during the 1960s and 1970s by migrants from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco (Temime, 1995). While the Italians, Armenians, Corsicans and Spanish left the neighbourhood and the

other poor areas of the city, this was not the case for most North Africans and descendants of North Africans. Today many Algerians live and work in Belsunce. It is a neighbourhood with singular characteristics, in which the same dynamics seem to have been reproduced for a long time: the presence of numerous *hôtels meublés*, the insalubriousness of the buildings, in a paradoxical continuous transience and precariousness. It seems that time has never transformed the structure of the neighbourhood, its function and which groups live there, which could mean that the racist and colonial relations that produced it have not been overturned and are still at work.

4. The symbolic production of the neighbourhood and the national/non-national categories

In the upcoming paragraphs, we will analyse how young women and men born in France to Algerian parents and, as well as young migrants from Algeria, describe the Belsunce neighbourhood. A relevant aspect to underline is that the discourse carried out by the sons and daughters of Algerian migrants, on the fact that the space is ugly and repugnant because it is inhabited by "uncivilised", "animalistic", and "too Arab" people, is not so different from the reflections made by young migrants from Algeria. We will start with the experiences of Leila, Nadia, and Noureddine. Leila is a 30 year old accountant with whom I interacted daily starting from November 2022, forming a significant and friendly relationship for me. She was born and raised in France, and her parents moved from Algeria to Paris and then to Marseille when she was a child. We met in a dramatic way when a pipe burst in the building where we both lived—I was on the fifth floor, and she was on the first—and for several days, we had no access to water. The building was in a deteriorated condition, with many of us facing problems with bed bug and cockroach infestations, water leaks, dampness, and mould. From those initial interactions about pipes and plumbers, our relationship grew very intense. We shared our stories with each other, and since Leila was about to get married, I had the chance to participate in some of the preparations. One afternoon, while we were talking about wedding dresses at her house, where we usually met, I suggested that we could take a look at *Marché du Soleil,* a market not far from our home. She responded, "Marianna, *tu me soûle*," meaning "you are annoying me." However, a few weeks later, she suggested we go there to bring lunch to her future husband, who worked at the market as a shop assistant. This was my opportunity to ask her why she had answered that way when I had initially asked her to go to *Marché du soleil.* She replied that in the market, there are "too many Arabs," and "it's fine if you're in Algeria, but if you're in France, no, it's not okay." I realised then

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that I had hurt her because she felt associated with a space that has a negative connotation due to the, in her words, "excessive" presence of "Arabs". She thought I identified her as one of those "too many Arabs," diminishing her recognition as "French" in my eyes. Her relationship with the neighbourhood often surfaced in our conversations, underscoring the importance of spaces in the psychological and social lives of individuals. Below are some examples collected in my field notes.

> We go to a clothes shop between Belsunce and the marché du soleil, and Leila is incensed, she wants to get out and leave. Too many people, too much shouting. So much so that I don't finish trying on the things I wanted to buy, I prefer going? out and go away, far away. Meanwhile, we get hungry, she tells me she wants to stop for a burger and fries. We go to the fast food restaurant (Leila and I) located to the left of the Porte d'Aix. We sit down, I eat my 5.90 euro menu, when I see her getting angry again, this time more intensely and with less anger than when we were in the clothes shop. I ask her what is going on and she tells me that sitting there in that space makes her feel bad. She says: 'it makes me nervous, I don't like it, too many people, nothing nice'. She speaks little, she answers me in monosyllables, I can tell that a discomfort is running through her. I ask her if it is related to some bad memory, and she says no. That it's just the neighbourhood. She doesn't like it. There's nothing nice about it. A discomfort that stems from her relationship with space. Being there, eating, seeing those people in that neighbourhood makes her feel bad. (Ethnographic note 01/04/2023)

It is important to consider the intense and repeated discomfort that Leila experiences in her relationship with the neighbourhood, or rather, from the relationship between the neighbourhood and the representation of the group to which she might feel attached. "There is nothing good about it", she exclaims, adding that "it's okay if you're in Algeria, but if you're in France, no". The market is not inherently an unpleasant place, but it becomes so when the social meanings and behaviours associated with Algeria encounter all that it means *etre français*. For these complex reasons, Leila and many of the participants in the research would avoid these spaces as much as possible as they undergo a process of negative identification in their relationship with these places. The following is a part of the interview with Leila.

> "I don't like the Marché du Soleil, as I told you. There are markets all over the world, but the Marché du Soleil is the only market where you can't go because, well, people push you, they don't respect you (...) so in the end, you don't want to go there (...) I didn't like going there before, and I still don't like going there, but less than before. (...) Despite the fact that I am Muslim. But the North African population, I don't care about them (...) When you see

how people from the Maghreb behave now, well, most of them have no respect. It's the same for the French and everyone else, but in Marseille, most of the people you would want to insult are Arabs, Maghrebians. (...) I'm not going to say that all Arabs/Maghrebians are bad (...) I know there are good people and bad people, people who behave in ways that make you want to kill them. We try to change this image, some people behave better, but some just don't get it and do stupid things. (…) Because if we want, the fact that there are people with negative views about North Africans and so on impacts us, but we have to show that it's not true, that we shouldn't generalize. (...) A few days ago, there were killings (...) at La Joliette (about a ten-minute walk from the building where Leila and I lived) (...), you know who did it? (referring to the murder of a 16-year-old in a drug trafficking context) well, only Maghrebians kill each other, and you want to stay quiet after that? (...) And then you ask me why I don't like Arabs. Even as a Maghrebian, they disgust me (...). In my daily life, yes, in relation to people, for example, at work, there are people who don't like me because I am Maghrebian or because I wear the veil and they say, there, it's another Arab, it's always the same thing. They have a negative image while we have nothing to do with everything that happens. (...) When people ask me where I live, I won't say: I live at *Rue Colbert (*a street in Belsunce*)*, I'll say I live on *Rue de la République*. I won't say I live in Belsunce, even though I am between the two, but I'll say I live on *Rue de la République*. Why? Because the République is beautiful, it's pleasant, it's clean. (...) When I tell you, I live in Belsunce, you visualise Belsunce, you know it's catastrophic there. If I say *Rue de la République*, it's beautiful, it looks like *La Joliette* (a neighbourhood considered more beautiful following some urban transformations). So yes, on the one hand, it has an impact, sure, but it has an impact, yes, in relation to what it reflects. (...) I don't say I live in Belsunce because I don't want to be identified with the inhabitants of *Colbert*. (...) They are poorly regarded, it's the Maghrebian part, it's dirty, it's not clean. (...) I prefer to say I live on *Rue de la République*."

Leila does not want to be associated with the market, Belsunce, and therefore the "Arab part" of Marseille. In long conversations and the interview she participated in, she also introduced the theme of zoological language (Fanon, 2010), which would later be frequently repeated by other young participants in the research.

(Talking about the Belsunce neighbourhood) It's a people of animals; they are animals, they don't respect, it's always dirty. You can have a place where there are many people, and it is very, very clean, respected, very, very quiet, whereas there, it's not. It's always noisy; it's not for parties; it's for fights. There's always the police. Most of the restaurants aren't even restaurants; they're just bars (mostly frequented by men), that's all. (Interview with Leila, 30 years old)

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In line with this view, the words of another young man who worked in a *hôtel meublés* (that his Algerian father bought) are central. Noureddine is 23 years old and grew up in Mulhouse in Alsace before moving to Marseille in 2022.

> Let's say they are much more integrated. (...) Yes, in Mulhouse. So, it's much quieter. And here (Belsunce) is a bit like a zoo. Well, you see, the Senegalese uncle here will shout as if he were at home. In Mulhouse, you wouldn't see him shouting. In Mulhouse, you would see him shouting at home. (Noureddine)

> In fact, it's strange what I'm about to say, but here it feels like he is at home, you know?

For Noureddine, integrating means not behaving as if one were "at home"; it means following the French rules, not raising your voice in public, containing behaviours and the body that otherwise reveal themselves as animalistic ("like a zoo"). Zoological language joins a discourse on "civilization", as described by a 24-year-old economics graduate, daughter of an Algerian and a Tunisian.

> It's clear that people are not civilised (in Belsunce); there are people who don't know how to behave, who are not civil, and this creates an amalgamation for people who have the same origins but don't behave the same way. There are people who, because of the stigmatisation and amalgamation, feel they belong to this category when it's not necessarily true. (...) So yes, obviously, they try to leave if they have the opportunity and if they can, rather than staying (in Belsunce) (...) Let's admit it, you won't find a well-off person in a neighbourhood like that. (Nadia, 24 years old)

4.1. The representation of Belsunce by young migrants from Kabylia

References will now be made to interviews with Mohamed and Yassin, both of whom moved from Kabylia to Marseille. Mohamed, 26 years old, whom I met during the observation and distribution of meals in the *hôtel meublés* where I volunteered. He is a student pursuing a complementary master's degree in marketing and moved from Algeria to Marseille in 2018. I had invited him to talk about his migratory experience in relation to space and his work in the *hôtel meublés*, and I proposed meeting for the interview in Belsunce in a tea salon, but he told me he "just doesn't like it" there, that there are too many "Arabs". So, we met in a "cooler" bar in Réformes (an area that is gradually becoming more bourgeois).

> (Talking about where he wants to move) In the neighbourhood where there are more French people, there is more of a French mentality, towards the eighth arrondissement. Those who have integrated have the same mentality as me, because I am integrated, so it's as if I were French, you can count me among the French, I will apply for French nationality, but there are areas where you don't feel this, it's as if you were still in Africa. (...) Personally, I don't feel comfortable in these places. (...) Because I feel embarrassed (...) It disturbs me morally.

> I don't feel in France, very briefly, I don't feel in France. (Mohamed, 26 years old, Algerian)

Mohamed divides the city's spaces into two groups: those with a French mentality and those without. The "French" places are described as orderly, calm, where you can ride a bike and enjoy the smell of the sea. The places without the French mentality are described as dirty, disorderly, dangerous, with people "going back and forth". A similar concept is expressed by another young Algerian: Yassin, 28 years old, a longtime friend of Mohamed, who works in a restaurant in Belsunce that is part of a *hôtel meublés* on the main street of the neighbourhood and is also a doctoral student at Aix-Marseille University.

> The immigrants here are friendly and nice; some people are intelligent but underdeveloped. For example, they are not clean, they don't integrate into French society, for example, they always speak Arabic among themselves (…) They don't respect the environment. They are not… They are not educated. Truly, these people are not French.

> (talking about the French) More orderly, people are more squared, respectful, generally developed.

> For me, integration is not a racist thing because when someone comes to me, they must behave like me, okay? Because they don't come as tourists. You come to live near me because, in my opinion, if you behave as you do in Algeria and live here, behaving like an Algerian, maybe you influence the French negatively, really, in my opinion, you influence them in the sense that you bother them, or you influence them in the sense that you change their way of behaving. (Yassin, 28 years old, Algerian)

Yassin, in attempting to talk about the neighbourhood where he works, gives voice to a contrast: the developed and the underdeveloped.

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> First my dream… To live in France because it is developed, etc., etc.
> But now… Sorry. I discovered France, and I said, oh, my goodness, it
> resembles Algeria, so I must get my degree and return to live in Algeria with
> my family, my environment. (Yassin, 28 years old, Algerian)

Yassin associates France and the French with "developed" people. His
journey could highlight that there is a search for "liberation" underlying the
desire to migrate, which also reveals a desire to free oneself from the condition
of being "underdeveloped" in an attempt to fulfil a mandate of liberation that
was, in part, unfulfilled by Algeria's independence, which was not enough to
achieve freedom from the coloniality system (Lazali, 2018). The words and
reflections of Mohamed and Yassin prove that the colonial substrate is more
widely shared in Algeria as in France and crosses different generations, even
those born in France. It is not the stay in France or the fact of being born there
that significantly overturns the discourse and changes the perception of
"Arabs" and the French.

5.   Belsunce as the custodian of racial and colonial categories

Although they have different family backgrounds, professions, and
educational levels (except for Leila and Noureddine, who did not continue their
university studies, the rest of the interviewees completed their master's degrees,
and one is pursuing a PhD program), the descendants of migrants and young
migrants agree in recognizing Belsunce as a place to avoid as much as possible
because there are "too many Arabs", who are described as "uncivilised,
undeveloped, animals, unintegrated", and therefore not French. Since being
associated with "Arabs" and Belsunce represents a source of negative
stereotyping and prejudice, with subsequences in terms of discrimination (and,
as in Leila's case, of distress), the interviewees try to identify others, not
themselves, as those excluded from "civilization" to consolidate the idea of not
belonging to that group and space. The words used to describe the "Arabs" by
the interviewees reveal an unbroken connection with colonial vocabulary that
continues to be reproduced through space, in line with Sayad's observation that
there is a continuous reproduction of the colonial system within the
immigration system: "*émigration n'est pas sans rappeler le précédent de la colonisation, et
la situation des émigrés celle des colonisés: à travers l'émigration qui la prolonge, c'est d'une
certaine manière la colonisation qui survit*" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 96). The language used
by the interviewees seems influenced, therefore, by this persistence; when the
colonist speaks of the colonised, they use a language of domination that feeds
on zoological terminology (Fanon, 2010) and an inferiorising vocabulary

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legitimised by an imagined and socially constructed barbarism, uncivilization, and the supposed underdevelopment of the colonised. It could thus be deduced that in Belsunce, hierarchical tendencies that guide North/South world relations, undoubtedly accentuated during the colonial era, are reproduced on a micro-spatial scale: the old fracture between a "developed" and opulent world, hence "civilised" and "civil", and a world seeking "development", marked by "uncivilization" and "barbarians". Discourses on civilization, in particular, were fundamental in justifying the colonial fact. Karima Lazali highlights in her book *Le trauma colonial* (Lazali, 2018) that the expulsion of colonised groups in Algeria from human civilization (socially constructed) prevents the individual from feeling alive, "one" among others, causing a painful self-construction that seems to perpetuate and reproduce the dualism of French/non-French, national/non-national, civilised/uncivilised, integrated/barbarians. To the interviewees, it seems that the only way out of these violent representations is to "integrate". Therefore, it is not surprising that starting from space, the interviewees reflect on this so much that it becomes difficult to separate the neighbourhood from the integration process, or rather, the state of integration: tell me where you are, and I will tell you how integrated you are. For these reasons, in the attempt to be recognized as "French", these people make spatial choices that involve selecting spaces to frequent and those to avoid: which bar to frequent, where to live, where to shop and make purchases. In their reflections, the national/non-national order of thought (Raimondi, 2016) is thus reproduced. It could therefore be hypothesised that colonial social meanings have remained inscribed in spaces and are daily regenerated with the collaboration of both the dominated and the dominators groups and that the negative or positive representation of groups influences space, which not only ends up being materially produced by economic and political processes but also reproduces them, having a significant representative impact on the lives of Algerian descendants, demonstrating that space is not only structured but also structuring.

6. Conclusion

Based on interviews with young residents or workers in the neighbourhood (descendants of Algerians and young migrants from Algeria) of Belsunce and notes collected during a year of field research, an attempt was made to reconstruct the symbolic and urban landscape in which the descendants of Algerians place their image of themselves and space, in line with the literature produced by Sayad. From the experiences of these people, it emerges that Marseille is made up of a fracture: the "developed" city with the "French mentality" of the

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southern districts of Marseille contrasts with the "uncivilised" and "underdeveloped" city of the central and northern districts. It seems that the compartmentalisation introduced by Fanon in 1961, who, analysing the colonial organisation of the city, described Algiers as a city divided into two parts, "the European city" and "the city of the natives", each opposed to the other, is present in Marseille (Fanon, 2010). This representational split of the city and spaces has an important impact on the mechanisms of self and group representation: the social meaning that is constructed around Belsunce, which is described as a dirty and run-down neighbourhood, is that the "Arabs" are dirty, uncivilised and underdeveloped. Space therefore reproduces the process that categorises groups into racist hierarchies and national/not national. These considerations do not remain symbolic but have a strong material connotation, considering the data in tables 1 and 2 and the marked urban and social inequalities, the fracture of the city in two is certainly not just a representative abstraction. These shared imaginaries not only have daily and discriminatory effects in the lives of these young descendants but also operate economically in the organisation of the society and the city of Marseille, creating a structural racist and spatial discrimination.

Migration processes should be read in the light of continuity with the colonial experience which is one of Abdelmalek Sayad's most important lessons. Currently, it would seem that some currents of sociology tend to describe a social subject, the migrant and his descendants, as neutralised and to be naturalised, without history and above all without a colonial past (Bouamama, 2006). This reflects a successful political attempt to deflect the historical responsibilities of the "arrival" state and society. The considerations drawn in the previous section should guide both urban and migration studies, as the effects of the colonial organisation of space are little studied (Ha & Picker, 2022) leaving an incomplete understanding of the spatial and life trajectories of migrants.

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