Political Cohesion/Political Culture in
Seventeenth-Century Aix

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Two cats are engaged in frightful, panicky
conversation. One of the cats, Robin, has heard that two
doctors have convinced the town council of Aix that the
health of the town's inhabitants depends on the slaughter of
cats. So opens the "Dialogue between two cats," penned by
an Aixois doctor by the name of Coissard in 1629 as Aix
was in the throes of the plague. In the dialogue, Robin and
his mate Matou exchange gossip, news of events, and
opinions overheard from their master (the very same
Coissard) during a time of great troubles in Aix.¹

The years 1629 and 1630 were indeed eventful years
for the Aixois. First plague struck, then the following year
saw political attacks against the privileges of Provence
elicit the Cascaveoux uprising, which itself was shaped by
division and rivalry that stemmed from the thirteen months
of plague. How did the Aixois react to these challenges? If
we look beyond the anxieties expressed by the fictional
felines Robin and Matou, what do the responses of the
Aixois tell us about local political culture in the face of
both a natural crisis and a centralizing monarchy?
Coherence and division, coordination and rivalry are

¹ Bibliothèque Méjanes [hereafter B. Méjanes], MS 781 (794),
159-63.
recurring dualities in the political behavior of the Aixois in the years 1629 and 1630.

With a population in 1629 of about 22,000 or 23,000, Aix was the administrative capital of Provence; unlike the neighboring province of Languedoc, the central institutions of provincial power, including the parlement, the court of accounts, one of two archbishoprics, and the executive committee of the province's estates (the procureurs du pays), were all concentrated in this one city.\(^2\) It was, indeed, very much an administrative city, with its economy geared toward the production of goods for local consumption; likewise commerce in Aix was small and localized, and there was little in the way of a strong, sizable merchant class. On the other hand, Aix was very much a noble city. Unlike their counterparts in northern France, nobles in Provence were urban first and foremost, and their longstanding presence in Aix meant that they dominated the municipal government along with the institutions of provincial power. The local political culture was in fact a noble political culture.\(^3\)

What, then, did the two cats, Robin and Matou, have to report about the Aixois response to plague? Level headed and less paranoid than his friend Robin, Matou decried the speedy decision made by the municipal leaders, who "with cowardice abandoned their town once they got wind that the plague was nearing." Passions were trumping reason, exclaimed Matou. A handful of doctors exaggerated the threat of the plague and caused the town to empty out – all


but the cats, that is – aided by the intendant who, in Matou’s words, held his charge "to get his hands on the public moneys." In fact, according to Matou, a single Parisian brothel was home to more sickness than all the town of Aix. Meanwhile, lesser towns throughout the province refused entry to Aixois, essentially "revolting" against the principal town of Provence.

Repeating what he had heard from his master, Robin agreed that the evacuation of Aix caused more suffering than the plague itself. The disruption of lives, the danger to the poor of having to leave their domicile and take to the road – Robin blamed all of this on "the law and the miserable conditions that it brought about."

The doctor Coissard, master of Robin and author of the "Dialogue between two cats," thought it a criminally bad idea to order the evacuation of the town. Through the mouth of Robin, he directed his strongest criticisms against a doctor from Puy who came under fire not only for raising the alarm against the plague and recommending evacuation, but also for passing through town with his retinue of guards, his parasol, and a false sense of importance. Robin further remarked that this doctor's self-importance was such that he seemed always to be headed to explain some apocryphal text to "those who were part of his nation; his grave demeanor being so Rabbinical and Talmudic." The precise relevance of his rival's Jewish heritage is unclear, and Coissard made no further references to it in the dialogue. What is clear, though, is that Coissard was engaging in a highly personal attack against a doctor whom he saw, for one reason or another, as a rival. Included in his condemnation were the civic officials whose ears the good doctor from Puy had.

Division and personal rivalry, along with a keen sense of just what town officials were doing in response to the
crisis, are themes echoed in other accounts of the plague as well. Jean Nicolas de Mimata, canon of the cathedral of Aix, chronicled the roughly thirteen months of plague from a vantage point within the town. Displaying a cleric's interest in rituals and in the spiritual health of the town's inhabitants, he recorded events that included prominent deaths (largely of other religious figures), actions of local political leaders, and attempts among the populace to adhere to the rhythms of public religious life. Mimata placed considerable emphasis on the ideal of continuing with business as usual. Eight months since the first outbreak of plague, at a time when deaths were diminishing in frequency, his entry of 25 March 1630 reports a commissioner from the parlement carrying orders to close the doors of the churches for fear that the disease would spread among the people gathering indoors for services. Mimata, according to his own reports, defied this order, responding:

that, unlike others in town, our church had never closed its doors; in fact that was the only consolation for the poor, who were trapped in this mess, and if it remained open during the entire pandemic, it should certainly remain open at this time now that people have a duty to confess and take communion.

Mimata, of course, was conveying a clerical view of the importance of the sacraments, but we can read in his reaction as well a further commentary on the range of reactions to the plague. In contrast to the parlement, which had evacuated Aix, the clergy remained behind and looked after the spiritual well-being of the Aixois while also providing leadership. There was, as Mimata implied, virtue in having remained behind in town and gone about business

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4 B. Méjanes, MS 776 (RA 8), 208r-16v.
as usual. Mimata went so far as to describe the town of Aix as having been "abandoned" by the parlement and by "nearly all persons of quality." Indeed, this is an opinion that Coissard expressed rather strongly through the mouth of Robin in his "Dialogue between two cats."

Try as they might, though, the Aixois simply could not adhere strictly to business as usual. In November 1629, Mimata reported that abbots, aware of the danger they faced from "conditions having worsened throughout town, and having come across both the sick and the dead," resolved to have matins sung not at the usual two o'clock in the morning, but at 4 a.m. By the following May, some normalcy was returning to Aix, and rituals took on their pre-plague rhythms and tones; Mimata reported that Pentecost was officiated "with the ordinary ceremonies and solemnities." Yet even that late spring, as deaths from the plague diminished to two or three per day at most, there arose a tension between claims of having maintained business as usual and recognition that something extraordinary was coming to an end. The singing of the Te Deum in late spring and summer and especially the return of the parlement on 1 September signaled the end of extraordinary times, just as the original evacuation of the parlement the previous October had marked the beginning of a period of crisis for the Aixois.

Mimata makes no mention of the division and rivalry that had splintered the parlement during its evacuation. When the magistrates had fled Aix on 25 October 1629, municipal officials, officers from the bureau of finances, and magistrates from the court of accounts joined them. Indeed, nearly all the "people of condition" left Aix, leaving behind only the prévot du chapitre (a low-ranking judicial officer), the canon Mimata, three abbots and two
officers of the municipal government, the assessor and one consul: François Borilli.  

Those who had evacuated dispersed in various directions. The court of accounts took refuge in Toulon, while magistrates from the parlement divided their ranks between two chambers, one in Salon under the first president baron d'Oppède and the other in Pertuis under the president Coriolis. While presiding over the chamber in Pertuis, Coriolis expressed some very public pretensions; by dressing himself in a red robe when in session, he suggested that his leadership was on par with that of first president Oppède. Oppède objected, and the competition for public honor and standing between the two men evolved into a rivalry between the two chambers that was only partially resolved when the king ordered the Pertuis chamber under Coriolis to rejoin the Salon chamber. Coriolis held out, though, until it was time for both chambers to return to Aix, and thus tension and rivalry marked the occasion Mimata reported as putting an end to the crisis of the plague. The Coriolis faction in particular seethed with the sense of having lost face.  

With an urban nobility dominating the town council and the law courts of Aix and from there exercising power across the province, factionalism had long characterized Provençal politics. The factional rift that divided the parlement was in this sense an expression of the noble political culture that dominated the province. On a more contingent level, however, the political divisions in Aix in 1629 and 1630 took on a geographic dimension as groups of the ruling elite dispersed and then regrouped in towns

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6 Ibid., 4:453.
7 Bohanan, 79-82.
throughout Provence. Resentment among those who stayed in Aix toward the majority of town leaders who had fled framed and shaped the conflicts. Rivalries and jealousy between groups spread among different localities exacerbated the tension.

How, then, did the Aixois react to royal attacks on their privileges in the fall and winter of 1630? Did their divisions provide an opening for Richelieu and Marillac to weaken provincial liberties, or were Aixois able to cohere politically and resist the crown's attacks? The noble factionalism that had come to dominate Aixois politics did indeed provide an entry by which Richelieu managed to strengthen his political grip in this crucial frontier province. As early as 1625 he set out to wrest power in the region from the governor, the Duke of Guise, by creating "his own Provençal administrative network." He peeled two important clients, one of whom was first president Oppède, from Guise and made them his own men (créatures) in the province. From there he constructed an ever-larger clientele. While factions opposing Richelieu remained in force, Richelieu nonetheless had remarkable success placing his clients in key positions, and they included "the provincial lieutenant general, archbishop of Aix, first presidents of the sovereign courts of Aix, city boss and bishop of Marseille, general and lieutenant general of the royal galleys, and he sent a stream of provincial, naval, and army intendants to Provence." Richelieu was grafting his own powerful clientele network into the factionalism of Provençal politics with such effect that hopes for provincial solidarity in opposition to royal initiatives were severely diminished.

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9 Ibid.
The crown's attacks in 1630 came in two separate edicts that struck against the privileges of Provence, the nobility, and the town of Aix. First, the edict of *élections* of 1630 created the fiscal circumscriptions (*élections*, staffed by *élus*) that would have allowed the crown to circumvent the province's estates and unilaterally tax the Provençaux. Instead of being a province where royal authority worked through the estates (*pays d'état*), Provence would become a region over which the king could extend his taxing authority directly (*pays d'élection*). Second, and nearly simultaneously, the crown issued an edict permanently relocating the court of accounts from Aix to Toulon.

With this threat leveled against the estates, the province's privileged status was clearly at stake. Indeed, Provence was not alone in this treatment. Seeking greater institutional uniformity across the kingdom, the chancellor Michel de Marillac convinced the king to create *élections* in Burgundy, Languedoc, and Dauphiné as well, all with the intention of bringing these provinces with estates under direct royal fiscal authority. The threat was real, indeed, as the experience of Guyenne, until recently a province enjoying the right of holding estates and negotiating its tax levels, made clear.\(^{10}\)

Beyond the threat in general to provincial privileges, noble and Aixois interests, which often coincided since the Provençal nobility was essentially urban, had the most to lose should the estates disappear. Together the overlapping categories of nobles and Aixois dominated two of the three chambers of the estates as well as the executive committee that managed provincial affairs while the estates were out

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\(^{10}\) J. Russell Major, *From Renaissance Monarchy to Absolute Monarchy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 253-60.
of session (the *procureurs du pays*).\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, planned relocation of the court of accounts to Toulon threatened the overlapping noble/Aixois interests. As the eighteenth-century Provençal historian Papon wrote, "this meant a direct attack on the privileges of Aix that would do great harm to this capital." Then commenting on the overlapping of noble and Aixois interests, Papon added, "The people of Aix registered their opposition by making a show of force; the nobility staked a position that was nearly the same."\textsuperscript{12}

Despite the groundwork having been laid, in large part by the monarchy's actions, for a coalition between the Provençal nobility and the inhabitants of Aix to resist the crown's measures, factionalism shaped the popular insurrection that came to be called the Cascaveoux uprising. Continuing his rivalry with the baron d'Oppède, Coriolis accused the first president of having supported the edict of *élections*.\textsuperscript{13} As crowds burned royal officials in effigy and took over the streets of Aix, Oppède and one of his parliamentary colleagues, the president Séguiran, were forced to flee Aix. Nonetheless, the subject of the *élus* who would administer the new *élections* was raised more to rally popular support and to define the factional rivalries than as the object of the popular disturbance. The Cascaveoux – so-called for the bells that they wore to identify one-another – under the leadership of Coriolis and of Paul de Joannis, seigneur de Chateauneuf, had as their rallying call "*fouero Elus*," "down with *élus*" in Provençal. A faction of municipal leaders and aristocrats under the leadership of baron de Bras, a consul of Aix and a member

\textsuperscript{11} The *procureurs du pays* were the archbishop of Aix, the three consuls of Aix, who in practice were almost always nobles, and the assessor of Aix (likewise typically noble): Bohanan, 100.

\textsuperscript{12} Papon, 4:452.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 4:454.
of the city's executive committee (*premier procureur du pays*) who sought to reestablish order, likewise had as its rallying call "*fouero Elus,*" though in this case the rallying call was preceded by the respectable cry of "*long live the king.*** All of the factions involved in the disturbances of the fall and winter of 1630 opposed the edict of *élections,* which is why Sharon Kettering considers the Cascaveoux uprising to be only secondarily about the edict of *élections.* First and foremost, it was a factional conflict.\(^{15}\)

It appears, therefore, that the same division and factionalism that had characterized the Aixois' reaction to plague carried over in the fall and winter of 1630 to shape reactions to the crown's attacks on the province's privileges. Yet on closer examination, we do see some significant political movement in the opposite direction toward cohesion that was contingent on both local institutional particularities and on pressures from the outside.

While factionalism has absorbed much of the attention in Provençal political histories, a strong tradition of assemblies and inter-assembly coordination also existed in Provence. Regular meetings of the estates, *procureurs du pays,* and distinct general assemblies of each of the three orders, provided an institutional framework by which local leaders could respond to the crown, often coordinating with robe officials from the law courts. This is precisely what occurred alongside the popular disturbances of the Cascaveoux. For example, the general assembly of the nobility met on 15 September 1630, not with the permission of the king, but instead with the permission of *parlement,* representing royal authority in the absence of the governor. Upon gathering, the assembled nobility heard from the king in a dispatch read by the intendant Dreux

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 4:460

\(^{15}\) Kettering, *Judicial Politics,* 175.
d'Aubray. His Majesty was angry, though not so much at the nobility for gathering but rather at the parlement for granting the permission to do so against the express wishes conveyed by the governor.\textsuperscript{16}

The assembly selected a sub-committee of six deputies to pursue a solution to both the edict of élections and the relocation of the court of accounts, either by presenting remonstrances to the king or by pursuing judicial remedies. On the following day, the sub-committee judged, based on the king's reported mood, that it would be best to pursue their case in the local courts. On 29 September, the sub-committee of the assembly of the nobility decided to go before the court of accounts once it was in session. There they would present a request for the court to oppose verification of the edict creating the élections and "all other edicts, letters patent, or orders introducing novelties contrary to the liberties of the province."\textsuperscript{17}

A second effort toward coordination opened on 9 October, when the procureurs du pays attempted to get the assemblies from all three orders to convene in Aix to discuss "the transfer [of the court of accounts] as well as other novelties with which the province was threatened."\textsuperscript{18} Shortly after, the procureurs reconsidered their strategy and sent word to the nobility to delay their meeting, since nothing had come of their previous meeting in Pertuis. Instead they should wait and see if anything would come from the general assemblies of the communities and of the clergy. The sub-committee of the nobility planned to meet on 25 October to receive news from the other general assemblies.

\textsuperscript{16} B. Méjanes, MS 736 (832), "Assemblées du corps de la noblesse de Provence," 730-77.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 738.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 739.
The meetings of general assemblies of all three orders and sub-committees of those assemblies continued through late winter 1631, as they coordinated with the procureurs du pays and the law courts to present a concerted appeal to the governor and the king to withdraw the two damaging edicts. A meeting of the estates at Tarascon in 1631 was finally convened after the insurrectionary movements had been suppressed by the prince of Condé who brought only mild repercussions to the municipality in the name of the king. At this assembly the monarchy and the province struck an agreement to withdraw both the edict of élections and the edict to transfer the court of accounts in exchange for a payment of 1.5 million livres. The Provençaux succeeded, therefore, in rallying to the defense of their estates and preserving them. This was by no means a foregone conclusion, since the province of Dauphiné lost its estates precisely at this moment, unable to rally the political cohesion to mount an effective defense.  

What can we make, then, of all of this activity between the general assemblies of the nobility and of the communities, the procureurs du pays, the parlement, and the court of accounts? Despite the rivalries, factions, and divisions that characterized the noble-dominated politics of Provence, a coalition formed among nobles, municipal leaders of Aix who were also the procureurs du pays, and robe officials of Aix. This coalition developed in part from the crown's actions; issuing simultaneously the edict of

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19 Major (253-60) argues that in contrast to earlier initiatives when "the principal reason for creating élections was to raise money from the sale of offices," the monarchy had a fundamental interest in seeing through this initiative of 1629-30 to bring about institutional change, at least until the fall of Marillac following the Day of Dupes on 11 Nov. 1630, after which time Richelieu was left a free hand to deal with the provinces.
élections and the edict to relocate the court of accounts essentially begged for such a coalition as a response. Further, the local institutional contours of Provençal politics, particularly the tradition of assemblies and cross-assembly coordination, helped to give rise to this coalition. While the extraordinary circumstances of the plague and the conflict over élections brought to the surface the factionalism that was an ordinary part of Provençal politics, less visible but perhaps more consequential trends toward political cohesion also surfaced with the effect of preserving, at least for the time being, the local provincial liberties.

Political cohesion, of course, is nothing unique within seventeenth-century politics. Mostly, however, we hear of two categories of cohesion, vertical patron-client ties and horizontal categories of class.\(^{20}\) The experiences of the Aixois during the years 1629 and 1630 suggest the relevance as well of more contingent forms of political cohesion. In this case, it was a coalition of leaders that arose as the local institutional contours intersected with the particular shape of attacks by the monarchy.\(^{21}\) Contingent and ephemeral as it was, this instance of political cohesion had the last word, at least for the time being, as it

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\(^{21}\) The estates of Provence met for the last time in 1639, after which point the monarchy negotiated with the general assembly of the communities. The demise of the estates came about as the monarchy was able to divide the local coalition that had defended the estates in 1631, particularly by emasculating the general assembly of the nobility. This epilogue, so to speak, underscores both the importance of this coalition of leaders while it remained intact and the contingent nature of its existence.
successfully pressed for the survival of the provincial estates.