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# L'abécédaire de Marcel Roncayolo. Entretiens

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This book is a collection of interviews given by the French historical geographer Marcel Roncayolo and discusses his contribution to urban research in France over the past few decades. Roncayolo is an interesting example of an urban thinker whose work has been extremely influential in some European countries, but whose most important books have never been translated into English. His writings place him at the crossroad between the consolidation of urban history as a field of historical research in France (until recently he was directeur d'études at the EHESS in Paris) and the evolution of the debates on French urban planning (he was the director of the Institut d'urbanisme de Paris in the early 1990s). His familiarity with geography, economic and social history, as well as planning and architecture, gives his research a cross-disciplinary character that is quite uncommon in the current compartmentalization of French urban studies.

The title of the book makes an explicit reference to L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze, a television programme produced in 1988 – 1989 which consisted of 8 hours of interviews between the French philosopher and Claire Parnet. The French word abécédaire indicates a spelling book for children: like a dictionary, an abécédaire is arranged in alphabetical order but – unlike a dictionary – it provides no strict definitions of the words it presents. The use of an abécédaire implies a patient and continuous investigation into language that involves people who belong to different generations, which is exactly what happens here between Roncayolo and his interviewer Isabelle Chesneau.

The volume is made up of 24 long interviews focused on specific words and arranged in thematic chapters (from 'A: anticipation' to 'X, Y, Z: three dimensions + time'), each followed by a specific bibliography. Words include cornerstones of Roncayolo's vocabulary, such as 'city', 'territory', 'function', 'grammar', 'representation' and 'social division'. They also include notions that do not appear frequently in his writings such as 'beauty', 'je-ne-sais-quoi' or 'week-end'. The intention, as Chesneau states in her preface, was to occasionally force the interviewee to move out of his habitual field and view the body of his work from a different perspective. Some choices must have been difficult to make: what about the letter H, for example, knowing that Roncayolo owes part of his fame to his studies on Georges-Eugène Haussmann and the haussmanization of Paris and Marseille, two examples that are frequently evoked in these dialogues? The chapter beginning with H is instead dedicated to a discussion of the work of Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist whose writings had a major influence on Roncayolo's approach to urban research.

It is quite unusual to see Roncayolo engaged in abstract conversations such as the ones collected here. Although his work has always been rich in generalizations, these have been firmly grounded in the empirical aspects of his research, as if only the close observation of a specific place in a specific timeframe could provide the basis for wider assumptions. Such a continuous tension between generalization and singularity could indeed be considered one of the fundamental aspects of his writings. At times, the book may therefore elicit a certain sense of displacement. Chesneau's interest for a purely conceptual discussion of Roncayolo's writings tends to leave little ground for analysing the oscillations of his research interests over time and even less ground for autobiographical details. It would have been interesting, for example, to know more about the curious editorial history of some of the French geographer's major works, such as *La ville et ses territoires* (published in Italian and Spanish before being published in the original language) or *Les grammaires d'une ville* (a thesis discussed in 1981 but published only fifteen years later).<sup>1</sup>

The volume could have taken advantage from some additional editing: repetitions abound between the interviews and 600 pages are probably too many, especially for a scholar who is widely recognized for his virtue of concision. In the end, no collection of interviews can fully capture the reason why generations of scholars have been fascinated by Roncayolo's research, namely, his writing style and his ability to capture the multiple nuances of urban phenomena. But the conversations are often very interesting and Isabelle Chesneau must be credited for giving us a book that – far from being just a summing up or a commentary of previously published material – has the potential to push the interpretation of Roncayolo's research towards unexpected directions. Chesneau's book, for most of its part, is almost as challenging and enigmatic as the original work from which it evolved.

## Note

1. Marcel Roncayolo, *Citta'*, in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. III (Turin: Einaudi, 1978): 3 – 84; Marcel Roncayolo, *La ciudad* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1988); Marcel Roncayolo, *La ville et ses territoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); Marcel Roncayolo, *Les grammaires d'une ville. Essai sur la genèse des structures urbaines à Marseille* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1996).