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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 tele-vision 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 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