

that it will likely be as interesting to scholars of urban history or politics, the New Deal, sixties radicalism, transnational intellectual history, liberalism, race and ethnicity, or immigration.

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**L'aventure des mots de la ville**, edited by Christian Topalov, Laurent Coudroy de Lille, Jean-Charles Depaule and Brigitte Marin, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2010, 1568 pp., €39 (paperback), ISBN 9-7822-2111204-5

Those who know how difficult it may be to carry out transnational, long-term research projects on the city will find it encouraging to see an undertaking as ambitious as *Les mots de la ville* published in its final form, after a decade-long effort and a few side publications that had given urban scholars a first glimpse of what it was about.

The 1500-page dictionary, written by 160 authors from different nationalities, collects 264 entries that trace a history of the words used to talk about the city in eight different languages. The languages chosen are mostly European: English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, with some of their regional (especially American) variations and with the addition of Arabic. The historical study of each word is based upon a corpus of written sources, integrally listed at the end of the respective entry: these are remarkable for their diversity and include dictionaries, encyclopaedias, city descriptions and guides, administrative documents, literary sources, and monographic studies from a variety of academic fields. A multi-disciplinary approach to the subject is partly implicit in the diverse backgrounds of the four editors – a sociologist, a geographer, an urban anthropologist, and a historian. The book focuses on everyday language and does not take into account specialized terms related to the city, except when these have come into widespread use. The latter case being not so unusual, *L'aventure des mots de la ville* may be useful to planning historians as a tool for studying the contaminations between common language and the technical jargons of planning and housing.

Christian Topalov, who signs the general preface to the *oeuvre*, claims that the research is inspired by a 'constructivist' approach to the study of the urban vocabulary: its aim is to observe how language, rather than merely reflecting the social and spatial peculiarities of a city, contributes to shaping them. It is, however, inevitable for the results of such a collective effort to open many perspectives, not all of which are necessarily consistent with the original premises. The book recognizes this potential by encouraging readers to assume an explorative attitude towards its material: the thematic links at the end of each entry and the indexes at the end of the volume are invaluable for anyone willing to follow specific research paths. There are many ways to read this dictionary, and the less systematic ones may prove to be the most interesting.

Although they are presented in alphabetical order, the words have been selected according to a thematic grid that places a special emphasis on four categories: words used to designate the city as a whole (the English *city* and *town*, the Russian *gorod*), words used to designate specific parts of the city (the Italian *quartiere*, the Spanish *barrio*, the Arabic *medina*), words that indicate different types of dwellings (the French *HLM*, the American-English *project*, the German

*Hof*), words that indicate streets and open spaces (*boulevard, viale, alley, rambla*). This underlying structure is meant to favour cross-linguistic comparisons on a few fundamental issues, although it leaves other potentially promising topics – urban infrastructure and transport, for example – partly unexplored.

The words discussed in *L'aventure des mots de la ville* evoke the history of European cities and their exchanges with the urban networks of North and South America and the Mediterranean. Somehow the book, with its interest in transatlantic and transcolonial connections, bears the mark of the time when it was conceived. In the 15 years since this research took its first steps, the geographies of urban studies have shifted dramatically, and it probably would be more difficult today to justify the exclusion of such widely spoken Asian languages as Mandarin, Japanese, Hindi/Urdu. Does this dictionary, with all its subtleties and nuances, speak to us of the sophistication of a bygone urban world? Possibly, but one of the strengths of the research lies precisely in the way it covers apparently familiar ground while posing unfamiliar questions. Rigorous in its methods and challenging in its results, *L'aventure des mots de la ville* is likely to become a fundamental reference for anyone interested in the cultural translation and the linguistic articulation of urban concepts. Hopefully the findings presented in its pages will be further discussed and its comparative approach extended to other geographical, historical, and linguistic settings. As with any good adventure book, one closes this one longing for some *nouvelles aventures*.

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