

Donatella Calabi. *Marcel Poete et le Paris des Annees vingt: aux Origines de l'histoire des villes*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998. 140 pp. 90 FF (paper), ISBN 978-2-7384-6320-3.

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## Marcel Poete (1866-1950): A Man, a

What could be the interest of biography in Urban History? From her introduction, Donatella Calabi wonders whether this kind of study is able to contribute to the discipline, to shed light on the construction of cities. The teacher of the Instituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia convinces us that biography is not out-of-date. *Marcel Poete et le Paris des annees vingt* showed us that there are some very lively ways to analyze the life and the work of a “great man.” Marcel Poete and the 1920’s Paris lend themselves to this sort of narration: Calabi’s biography displays the networks, the large “nebula” of numerous reformers, and also the personal and not necessarily institutionalized links uniting men who participated in the great urban modernization during the Progressive Era.

### WHO WAS MARCEL POETE?

Marcel Poete was born in 1866 in Doubs. He died in 1950. Calabi presents him to the readers as a mere municipal employee. The first chapter of the book looks like a “traditional” biography, i.e. a biography focused on the different events of the character’s life from his youth to his death. After studying at the Ecole des Chartres,[1] he began his career in Bourges’ library, then was appointed in Paris (Bibliotheque Sainte Genevieve) before running, as its Conservator, Besancon’s library. In 1903, at the young age of 36, he managed to be in charge of the Bibliotheque Historique de la Ville de Paris. At the head of this great library, he immediately decided to make knowledge accessible to a very large public.

He wanted to popularize the access to a library usu-

ally reserved to a minority of highly educated people. He organized some exhibitions and some conferences, and he gave his first lessons on the history of Paris. Thanks to Donatella Calabi, we know that his fondness for didacticism was a characteristic feature of his life. During the war, in 1916, he decided to transform the historical library of Paris to an Urban History, Geography, and Economy Institute (Institut d’Histoire, de Geographie et d’Economie Urbaine de la Ville de Paris). The institute enabled Marcel Poete, Henri Sellier [2] and also Louis Bonnier,[3] thanks to the subsidies from the “Department” (the intermediary administrative scale between city and national government in France) of the Seine, to create the first French Institute of Urbanism: L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines. His passion for urban history and also for urban reform led him to meet and to work with town planning militants. And he participated in the 1910s and 1920s in the elaboration of a new discipline Patrick Geddes called “civics” and Marcel Poete “science de la ville.”

Concretely, how is it possible to study the life and the thought of Marcel Poete? First, of course there are the books and the numerous articles. Donatella Calabi devotes the very interesting second chapter to the published work of the Historical Library conservator. Secondly, we have had the great luck to preserve a lot of his letters in the Bibliotheque Historique de la Ville de Paris. Those very numerous papers are quite surprising; they are great testimony of the intellectual activity Marcel Poete had until his death. But Donatella Calabi didn’t content herself with those sources. She also used

the archives of the Library of Besancon (where Marcel Poete worked before going to Paris), and, above all, she studied the deliberation of associations that Poete was member of, such as La Commission du Vieux Paris, etc. This last kind of source is representative of her work: making Marcel Poete's thought clearer by considering the context of his written work and the social networks he belonged to. We have the feeling that the first chapter, which is factual, exists as if she wanted to put away this "traditional" approach very rapidly. This descriptive chapter out of the way, Calabi can then take an original interpretation of Marcel Poete. Thus, we discover among a nebula of town planning militants the role of Marcel Poete in the production of the modern Paris, his participation in the elaboration of a new knowledge and also in the movement of urban reform.

#### A REFORMER AND SCIENTIFIC NEBULA

What is a nebula? This expression could have been used by the author for the title of the Chapter Four. In this chapter, she presents the different associations leading social reform that appeared at the turn of the century. She emphasizes the Musee Social[4], an institute in which Marcel Poete was really interested. He became one of its members and participated in one of its sections, Section d'hygiene urbaine et rurale. But Calabi also evokes the Institute of Urbanism, the SFU (the French Association of Town Planners), the AGHTM (the Municipal Technicians and Hygienists Association) and the Union des Villes et Communes de France (French Union of Local Authorities). She stresses the similarities in the debates of those different associations. A lot of them wanted to reform the city, to institute a new principle of sociability in the big towns. This chapter makes us understand one of the difficulties of Urban History: even if we have the sense that those numerous associations were the real laboratories of a new discipline and of a new conception of cities, it is quite difficult to clarify the links between them and, of course, to evaluate the unity of this town planning movement. A sort of looseness seems to surround those associations and their ties. Calabi explains: "the links were neither institutional, nor programmatic but practical."

We have the feeling that a lot of characters bathed in a kind of (international) atmosphere. For example, the comparison the author frequently makes between Patrick Geddes and Marcel Poete is very interesting. She shows the parallels between the two men, their taste (and also their interest in some great projects such as the 1900s Globe of Elisee Reclus) and their written work, overcom-

ing many obstacles to show any recognized influence. She explores the different contacts they had and their readings (though she says that Marcel Poete didn't write very long notes about Geddes' books). We are facing a vast not really institutionalized network which can be called a "nebula."

The common point of all the members of this nebula may be a taste for didacticism. A lot of those men wanted to give an educational role back to the city. Calabi insists on Poete's attachment to popularization. When he arrived in Paris at the head of the Historical Library in 1903, he decided at once to organize some annual exhibitions about the history of the capital. When the Historical Library was transformed to the Urban History, Geography and Economy Institute, the Hotel Le Peletier de Saint Fargeau, 29 rue Sevigne, became the head office of many educational institutions: L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines (the first French Urbanism Institute), where Marcel Poete taught the evolution of cities; l'Union des Villes et Communes de France, which presented itself as a municipal documentation center and wanted to educate the city officials; and l'Association d'Etude pour l'Amenagement et l'Extension des Villes, which was the French section of the International Federation of City Garden and Town Planning created by Ebenezer Howard. Marcel Poete occupied a central place in this process of popularizing this new science of cities. He participated in a lot of those associations, he attended numerous congresses, and of course he contributed to many reviews: in 1919, he was the founder with Louis Bonier of the review called *La Vie Urbaine*. When the book ends, Marcel Poete appears to us, above all, as a professor. The relations he had with some of his students and the lasting nature of his thought are treated in the last chapter, offering yet another way to show that Marcel Poete gave an impulsion to a new knowledge, to a new way to study cities.

This summary may have treated only a few aspects of this dense book. It would be difficult to conclude without talking about the real work of history of ideas that Calabi makes. She analyzes Marcel Poete's thought and she clarifies the weight of the evolutionary ideas in the elaboration of the discipline called urbanism. Chapter Six, dealing with the role of Bergson's writings, could be a perfect example of what should be done to read past texts, and make a history of ideas. It can recall the recommendations of Quentin Skinner.[4] That American Professor of Political Science called for a kind of "social" history of ideas. He claimed that a text couldn't be analyzed only by its context. He also warned against the temptation of

basing the analysis on a would-be autonomy of the text. Skinner wrote: “any statement [and therefore any text], as I have thought to show, is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend.”[5] The eleven chapters of Donatella Calabi’s book show the intentions of Marcel Poete, the problems he wanted to answer, the conditions of enunciation and also the ways his message was transmitted and received in part. Thus Donatella Calabi shows one of the ways of understanding and appreciating the genesis of Urban History as a discipline.

#### Notes

[1]. The Ecole des Chartes was created in the nineteenth century for specialists in very old documents and in order to give to the French libraries trained conservators.

[2]. Henri Sellier was a left wing official who became mayor of Suresnes in 1919.

[3]. Louis Bonnier was architect of the City of Paris, and was in charge of the “Greater Paris department,” Directeur de l’Extension in the Seine Prefecture.

[4]. The Musee Social was founded in 1894 thanks to the subsidies from Count Aldebert de Chambrun. A lot of its members wanted to prolong the work of the French sociologist Frederic Le Play and to make social peace possible. In 1908, a section devoted to the study of urban problems was created. Janet Horne has published several texts in English about the Musee.

[5]. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, 1969. This text was re-published in James Tully, *Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, 1988).

[6]. Skinner in James Tully, 65.

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