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ENTREVISTA  
INTERVIEW

EN EL EXTREMO DEL OCCIDENTE

IN THE EDGE OF THE WEST

ADRIÁN GORELIK, MARCELO TRAMONTANO, MARIO VALLEJO

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**Adrian Gorelik** is an Architect and a Doctor in History. He is an independent researcher at Conicet, Argentina, and Professor at the National University of Quilmes, where he directs the Center for Intellectual History. Among several books, he has published *Glances over Buenos Aires* (2004), *From the vanguard to Brasília: Urban culture and architecture in Latin America* (2005), *Correspondences: Architecture, city, culture* (2011), and has compiled (together with Fernanda Arêas Peixoto) *South American cities as cultural arenas* (2016, our translation).  
adrian.gorelik@gmail.com

<http://www.unq.edu.ar/comunidad/32-adri%C3%A1n-gorelik.php>

**Marcelo Tramontano** is an Architect, holds a Master's degree, Doctor, and Livre-docente in Architecture and Urbanism, with a Post-doctorate in Architecture and Digital Media. He is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the Graduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism of the same institution. He directs *Nomads.usp* and is the Editor-in-Chief of *V!RUS* journal.  
tramont@sc.usp.br

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1999154589439118>

**Mario Vallejo** is an Architectural and Engineering Draftman, and holds a Master's degree in Architecture. He is a researcher at *Nomads.usp*, and Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism at the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. He studies digital design processes, collaboration, BIM, and methods and means of representation.  
mariovallejo@usp.br

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1094158283404582>

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**Marcelo Tramontano:** Thank you very much, Adrián, for accepting our invitation. I would like us to start with a historical perspective on the Latin American city. Perhaps we can try to sketch a parallel with the evolution of governments and democracy in the region throughout the 20th century, examining how the notion of public space and the ways of reading and producing the

city have evolved. In the early 2000s, you wrote about the Latin American city as a category. Perhaps we can think of up-to-date understandings of that concept from that brief historical survey.

**Adrián Gorelik:** Well, I am right now closing a cycle with my works from the early 2000s. A book of mine that is in press brings together that series of works in which I tried to think about how a specific notion of "Latin American city" has been shaped during a period of the continent's history. These works sought to understand it with a vision on what that city should be. My intention, at that time, was to warn that there is no Latin American city, that the idea of a "Latin American city" is a cultural and political product of a period. Why? Because, as the history books show, and at first, those of José Luis Romero, if we can speak of a Latin American city –or rather, an American city– at the time of colonization and conquest, the destiny of that city was differentiation and not staying within the same pattern. This idea brings us to say that it is hard to put Buenos Aires and Cali or Buenos Aires and a medium-sized Argentine city in the same sentence. But if it is not possible to speak of a Latin American city, it is not only because the cities are different from each other, but because the "Latin American city" is the product of different languages: the voices of ethnography, sociology, architecture, planning, and cultural history produce different Latin American cities, as do the languages of government institutions or research centers.

From such a language crossing results a collage, a patchwork, in the sense that, like any figure of the social imagination, when the historical work of the idea of the Latin American city is carried out, it is not a univocal figure. Rather, it is a mismatched mosaic, made of irregular pieces, which do not fit together perfectly. A puzzle of the "Latin American city" implies that you end up with a complete figure. In reality, the result is a series of pieces made up of social representations, scientific discourses, political programs, artistic imaginations, ideologies. All this is what makes up the patchwork that produced, in a given period, an active and operational notion of the "Latin American city".

Between the 1940s and 1980s, the idea of a "Latin American city" attracted political and technical discourses. It was operative for a series of representations that sought transformation. It is difficult to find that a similar moment has occurred again. I think that we are still in the 1990s, when it is not easy to find an operative notion of a "Latin American city". We have Latin American cities, in the plural, each with very different problems. Of course, as a region of the Global South, as a region of unequal and inequitable societies, our cities recognize similar problems, but not enough to constitute a typology of the city that we can speak of in the singular. So, regarding the question about the relationship with policies, it is interesting that, in the cycle in which it worked, the idea of a "Latin American city" could work with different governments and different political orientations. The central issue that we must discuss is the differential temporalities between the world of politics and the world of projects and urban ideas, which recognize a different duration.

The notion of "expansive period" has been convenient to my work, which I take from the Italian urban planner Bernardo Secchi. The idea that there is an expansive moment in the western city serves me a lot. Secchi speaks for the European city, but Latin American cities fit that idea very well. Because it is an expansive period that is related to the formation of the welfare state itself. Such a period lasted approximately from the middle of the 19th century (1870), when our cities began to develop, until the end of the welfare state, in 1970. According to the studies I conducted on the expansive process and some other urban processes, mainly in Buenos Aires, we can add that this expansive cycle produced a triple tension: i. a tension towards the outside, in the territory, which are the urban expansions themselves; ii. a tension towards the inside, in society, because there were institutions that acted in conjunction with urban expansion, and that had a representation, but also a need for a more or less unified society (because welfare capitalism supposes a citizen who is, in addition, a consumer, and that means a more or less integrated society); and iii. a tension forward in time, which is the idea of the project. This is the crucial role that urban thinking, planning thinking, and political thinking of cities played in all the decades of the expansionary cycle.

This ended in the 1970s. It is interesting to notice how important and necessary it is to describe in different ways the Brazilian dictatorship of 1964 and the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships of 1973 and 1976, for example. Being so few years of difference and since, in political terms, they are so similar and respond to certain situations of the international scene, the Cold War, the Cuban revolution, and so on. From an urban point of view, the Brazilian military coup occurred within the expansive cycle, and this is why it kepted being inhabited by planning ideas. Of course, with its particular ideology, with its differences from previous democratic governments. But regarding urban processes, it did not mean such a big cut as it would mean, in the second half of the 1970s, all new neoliberal worldview and, in the 1990s, the policies to face the problem of the post-expansive city. In this new vision also the democratic governments of the region, in all its variants, are quite united in relation to urban policies. They are part of this post-expansionary moment, in which the instruments of intervention and the intervention state itself have been greatly weakened.

We can recognize that even within this new moment, there were tremendous achievements. In Brazil, the Statute of the City, projects such as Favela-Bairro, in Rio de Janeiro, and the Medellín projects, in Colombia.

But at the same time, it is easy to recognize other projects that have tried to follow these models but with fewer intervention instruments than those they had in the expansive period, and that this has been decisive in their limited effectiveness. That is why, from the general point of view of urban transformations, it seems more important to identify the more general cycles in which territorial processes are installed and deal with politics from there than to identify the political differences of each of the governments. It is more important to identify the long cycles in which the general economic situation, the state of capitalism, the conditions of our fragile economies mark the limits of what is possible for urban interventions, than the conjunctural relations with varied populist and conservative governments, and dictatorships. Within these limits of what is possible, we must begin to analyze and judge more precisely what each one is doing, what each one can do, and what each one is failing to do.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** Indeed, the differences between governments are not what matters most. But something happened, something specific, when, at the beginning of the 21st century, progressive governments were elected in various countries in the region. In Brazil, during the administrations of Presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, but also in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, there was great euphoria and a real interest in occupying public space. Perhaps from that exercise of citizenship, new understandings of public space emerged.

**Adrián Gorelik:** Yes, but we need to make a distinction with the Brazilian case. As in many other topics in Latin American history, we recognize in Brazil a continuity where in the other countries there was rather a rupture. What continuity? For me, it is that the ideas of planning, from the 1960s and 1970s, were updated and acknowledged continuity in the movement for urban reform, for the Statute of the City, in everything they set in the years 1980-90 and emerged once the Lula government arrived. In that sense, in the rest of Hispanic America, urban studies suffered a major crisis in the mid-1970s and have not recovered. In the occupation of public space in Brazil, we have to recognize that the very struggles for urban reform were central. In the case of Argentina, on the other hand, although there is a tradition of mobilization of society, for which, once the dictatorship left, the public space was a very active sphere, the issues of the city did not take the foreground.

The role that the human rights movements played in the last years of the dictatorship in Argentina made the public space an area of great political intensity. In the 1980s and 1990s, such movements were articulated with an ideology of public space, with the idea that public space gave vitality to civil society that states that were too omnipotent or authoritarian had canceled. By the end of the century, it was quite evident that this public space ideology was working in the same direction as certain neoliberal proposals in which while the one spoke of civil society, the other was speaking of the market. In the facts of urban policies, it was not too different. This process coexisted with the progressive weakening of public intervention instruments until this moment of varied and more progressive governments. Some were more populist than others, and it would be very reductionist to unify, for example, Bachelet, Lula, and Chavez. This reality coexisted with the progressive weakening of public intervention instruments. In political terms, it is a fairly complex map, but even so, a common factor can be found in all that complexity: the discourse of greater state intervention in opposition to pro-market discourses.

Now, it seems to me that the conditions of the time did not allow this state intervention to be more sophisticated and translate into a more complex public space. In other words, state intervention, in most cases, was translated into aid and subsidies to a society that had been heavily damaged. The intervention failed to restore the ties of citizenship that allowed the emergence and existence of a more active public space. A public space that was designed not only as a place of celebration and protest but also a place to build citizenship and collective construction of intervention instruments, from the citizenry, in conjunction or against the state. What we have experienced in the first two decades of the twenty-first century was more discursive than effective. At least in Argentina –again, the social-economic conditions in Latin America are quite different, and we should not generalize– we have to realize that the last forty years that saw the consolidation of democracy were enormously productive in the achievement of civil rights, but with a regrettable result in the social-economic dimension. For example, divorce in Argentina was achieved with the first democratic government of 1984, and equal marriage was approved in the 2000s, in addition to an enormous amount of progress in terms of civic freedoms. At the same time, we have suffered a continuous and pronounced social decline, which has produced a fracture that this society had not known in the entire 20th century. At this moment, Argentina is close to 50% poverty, something that has been growing in the last forty years from levels of less than 10%.

So, as democrats, and precisely because we are democrats, we have to make sure that democracy, in some cases –here I speak of Argentina specifically– manages to put economic and productive proposals capable of reversing this unacceptable situation at the level of progress in expanding civil rights. This contradiction can not have a long life since it has profound effects on society. Our society proceeds, for the third generation, in what in Argentina we call the NiNi society (neither works nor studies). This situation produces deep corrosion in the social soil. Poverty and inequality are elements that not only have we not been able to combat, but they

have also grown exponentially throughout these forty years of democracy, in an even line that does not recognize differences of government. These are immense obstacles to discuss public space because once our cities have 50% poverty, what public space can we talk about? It is hard to apply such categories considering these aspects.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** Although with many deficiencies and losses over several decades, social achievements have been essential for shaping a more inclusive public space capable of bridging differences and stimulating sociability. The pandemic was an explosion in this process, making us return to the conflicts that we were struggling to overcome, the fear of each other, and health reasons that justify social distance.

**Adrián Gorelik:** It is necessary to consider the shortcomings you mention about public space, especially when the COVID-19 pandemic put everything related to it in parentheses. The main focus of this disease has to do with collective life, with not being with other people, even with aspects of urban life for which we have fought so hard, such as, for example, the improvement of public transport in our cities, which now turns out to be dangerous. By putting all this in parentheses, the pandemic allows us to think about the situation that we had reached previously. I agree with you: it is not a problem of the last two decades, but a problem of the past four or five decades in which, outside of the romanticization of the idea of public space, we have not managed to build efficient public spaces to constitute citizenship. This lack relates to the dramatic number of people who cannot consider being part of authentic citizenship due to economic constraints. There can be no citizenship without sewers because citizenship is part of a conception of society, in which urban infrastructure is as relevant as political participation. Sewers sustain democratic political practices over time and do not turn activity in public space into simple outbursts of social protest.

We have to realize that our enthusiasm for public space has lacked, until now, the construction of more equitable infrastructures and urban policies that think about what to do with this uncontrolled growth of metropolises. The pandemic has put these shortcomings in the spotlight. Cities like Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Mexico continue to grow without limits since we no longer have a planning state that had the utopia of deconcentration and the creation of alternative growth poles. So, how can we build, at this moment, new ideas regarding what can be done with the growth of our cities, with migratory flows, and the different problems that continue to multiply poverty instead of reducing it? These continue to be some of our main challenges.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** Perhaps we can divert our gaze a bit from the urban to focus on the references we use to examine it. Generally, they are references from the North of the planet, often based on concepts formulated about the realities of the North and the northern cities. Even in our institutions, we are used to working on issues that interest the North more than our region specifically. But after so many years of existence of graduate programs, so many scientific journals that cover so much intellectual production from Latin America, it must be possible to build references that are born from our knowledge of the continent, that help to bring together cities and their cultures with local values.

**Adrián Gorelik:** Latin American countries have been part of the processes of knowledge, debate, and intellectual and scientific production in Europe since the very origin of the continent, as we understand it here. This fact differentiates the fate of Latin America, in cultural and artistic terms, from much of the rest of the Global South. Frequently and mistakenly, they get unified under notions like postcolonialism. The participation of Latin America in the international dialogue is marked by its integration into the West. I like the definitions of "far West" and "extreme West" formulated many decades ago because, obviously, living in countries like ours is not the same as living in the center of that universe that we call the West. The assumption of that belonging should not be taken as a de-problematizing statement. On the contrary, it makes our cultural processes more dramatic once we understand what it means to be formed so far from the originals on which our culture depends. No matter how much a person is part of the intellectual field –which means being a member of cultural elites–, decades and sometimes his whole life may pass until he knows, in their sources, some artistic, architectural, urban objects that are in the matrix of what we can think.

This awareness creates the basis of the critical relationship that we should keep with those centers in the West, in the sense that the more conscious we are of what it means to be at its extremes, the more we can critically approach Western thought, appropriate it, use it, use it, distort it, criticize it, etc. But we can not imagine that we can start from completely different coordinates. That said, in general terms, I believe that there is much to do between our diverse Latin American cultures, also in the sense of deepening that critical relationship. It is essential to narrow the intellectual, cultural, and artistic fabric between Latin American countries for a simple reason: this gives enormous wealth, variety, and productivity to what each of our national cultures –sometimes not even national, but urban– has managed to create a direct unilinear link with central countries. My feeling is that the local, regional, and continental plots that we can put together are

crucial to making knowledge available and to know more about ourselves. The absurdity is that currently it is easier to get a book published in Madrid or Barcelona in Buenos Aires than one published in Montevideo, which is half an hour across the river.

We must work hard in the cultural and intellectual fields, which is what we can do to change that situation. At the same time, we have to build political programs that promote economic and communication infrastructures that can do so. Mercosur is a project that has so many flaws that it is difficult to be proud of it. But at the same time, one believes that such initiatives, linking different countries, different markets, and different university fields, is the only way. I think our intellectual constructions will become more sophisticated when we manage to have a better dialogue between all of us. It does not imply that we will succeed in banishing the weight of the European *maîtres à penser*, with whom we continue to think, even when we think of breaking with them. Although a good part of critical thinking, even the most radical in Latin America, has come either from Marx, Foucault, or Deleuze, I would never claim those thoughts as long-term prisons. Yes, I would think of the entire universe of Western and non-Western knowledge as a possibility available to us, as peripheral or extreme western residents, appealing to Jorge Luis Borges, to arrange it in a way that Europeans or North Americans themselves could not. We have the possibility of being less provincial than those centers that have such a strong culture. It is much easier to see a plurality of languages and nationalities in the bibliography of a Latin American author than in that of a French author who, in some cases, everything he has read has been written only in French and edited in his country.

We cannot deny that we are a kind of extreme or far West. Yes, we can do a lot, and much has been done. What I am saying is not new, since there is a claim that has lasted for at least the entire 20th century, about the need for a strong link between the cultures, cultural markets, and academic markets of our countries. That is fundamental, and a lot has been done about it. Today we have a link, in my specific case, with Brazil. We have publishers in Argentina that translate a lot of new Brazilian literature. Before, it was impossible to find a current Brazilian author in Argentine bookstores. Today many publishers translate and choose authors well. So there is progress in that direction, and it must be deepened.

**Mario Vallejo:** You mentioned the term "deprovincialization" which made me think of those inverse processes of change of direction of the Latin American gaze, which has been moving towards the continent itself. In the processes of the 20th century, the gaze was fixed on Europe, always trying to achieve similarities with European cities, the inverse processes of looking at ourselves externally. There seemed to be a certain aversion to the provincial, to the local. We could say that, in the last two decades, an inverse process has been growing, of appreciation of that province that, more than omitting it, was devaluing. Could you comment a little on these processes?

**Adrián Gorelik:** I think that in Latin America we have cycles in which we oscillate between these two poles. Much of the critical thinking of the 1960s can be translated into the formula of "internal colonialism". It was a way of approaching the need to value the province, the interior, related to the metropolises, which are often seen as those which introduce what comes from outside, with no filters. We can think –from "super regionalism" and not from provincialism– of the interest in regional literature, by names such as Ángel Rama and Antonio Cândido (I mean his analysis of Guimarães Rosa, José María Arguedas, Juan Rulfo). They were looking for literature that had, for them, a greater expressive capacity of something typical of their countries or Latin America. It is a part of cycles in which, on the other hand, the significant metropolitan productions, the great writers of cosmopolitan cities, can not be left out of photography. Latin American culture oscillates between these two things.

Latin American cultural elites have strong cosmopolitan and internationalist traditions, and I guess that whatever we do can not renounce it. When I speak of deprovincialization, I am also speaking in Latin American terms, in the sense that the relationship between Argentina and Brazil deprovincializes Argentinians and Brazilians. Because, for decades of nationalist historiographic traditions, we are used to thinking that the history of our regions recognizes the very limits of nations, without seeking the more complex and plural interaction that we actually find as soon as we ignore those limits and organize our themes according to the regions they involve. How long it took for complex histories to appear, in Brazil or Argentina, about the war in Paraguay, for example. These events should make it possible to question the construction of national historiographies and see the region in a more articulated way. The appearance of sophisticated and articulating versions of the war in Paraguay is very recent.

Deprovincializing ourselves is also fighting against nationalist historiographic traditions within Latin America. They put the national in direct relationship with some international centers, but not in dialogue with the other countries. Fortunately, in recent decades there has been a much more articulated and collectively constructed Latin American political history. It is a Latin American intellectual history that is being conformed and dialoguing with the production of the different countries. When I speak of deprovincializing ourselves, I also

mean it in relation to the internal relations of Latin American countries, which have much to gain from the expansion, pluralization and the complexity of these internal relations.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** A Latin America with more complex internal relations among its peoples is our great desire. However, there is an idiomatic fissure in the continent that is little discussed and, after all, it is of great importance to think about how information circulates among the countries of the region. On the infinity of languages throughout the continent, Portuguese and Spanish predominate as marks of the historical constitution of the peoples, of two neighboring Americas that still have difficulties to dialogue. I think it is also important to remember the role of the Internet, which since the mid-1990s has been, in theory, a possible and effective means of stimulating communication.

**Adrián Gorelik:** I see the linguistic difference, first of all, as a great wealth of our countries. What the Portuguese language has allowed implies a recognition of the important steps that have been taken towards cultural, intellectual, and academic exchanges. However, we still have to discuss institutional and editorial policies. The growth of English in the literature of everything related to Humanities and social sciences is abysmal, and the Internet has contributed to this. Instead of giving greater autonomy to the world's dialects, the Internet promotes a dynamic towards English monolingualism. Today, in academia, anyone claiming some global resonance needs to be edited in English. I see this social process as inevitable, but at the same time, very harmful. Especially for those who work in the Humanities, in the social sciences, where language is part of our possibilities of understanding the world we study. Also, for those who do not attach the same importance to the fact that, for example, a work of mine on Argentina or Latin America is read by authors from all over the world in an English journal, and that it is part of a debate on those issues. It is hard to fight against this homogenizing dynamic but, at the same time, it is essential to keep doing so.

It means, for example, producing scientific journals that do not surrender to the globalizing homogenizing regulations indexers impose today. I work in a collective that produces a journal of intellectual history, and for us, it is a constant struggle to preserve sections that are nevertheless frowned upon by indexers, such as the "Reviews" section. Historically, book reviews in history or social science journals were the way the knowledge field communicated and interacted. Thus, the more educated authors showed that they were aware of the new productions, and their comments generated debates. The policy of the indexers of scientific journals does not consider reviews as original articles. If a journal publishes ten original articles, it cannot have a high number of reviews because the percentage of "original articles" drops a lot, and therefore, its rating decreases. The response of many journals is not to publish more reviews, which is a contradiction in terms of an academic policy concerned with enriching the field of knowledge.

Therefore, a policy of a certain search for autonomy would imply continuing to maintain sections that seem to us intellectually or academically productive. Even whether they go against that homogenizing vision that does not contemplate our specific needs, nor our specific searches, to which we should not give up so easily. What I am proposing is a minimal detail, I do not want to grant it the stature of a great political struggle. But I think that with each of those little things, at the same time that it is possible to think about the construction of fields of dialogue that do not always triangulate with English or with some North American or European focus, it also allows us to shape collective projects among ourselves. That is very important, but not to cancel the theoretical and intellectual relationship with the European centers. Even less now, that globalization is producing enormous changes also in North American and European academic centers. It is essential, in the midst of all these changes, to keep and build the best possible ties between us, to discuss, among other topics, how to face them.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** The topic of journals is very dear to us. Because if indexing criteria are met, journals will eventually be dismantled. The true interest of the indexers is that journals become repositories of articles.

**Adrián Gorelik:** Let's agree that the Internet system itself and the OJS are excellent journal dismantlers. We no longer open the journals themselves, but the articles that we look for either by topic or by author, without minimally perceiving which discursive universe, within each journal, those articles are part of. Those of us who produce journals know that a journal is a unit conceived as an artifact in which the issues are related and discuss among themselves. The Internet has completely dismantled this notion of unity. So, the first problem is that of the technology itself, to which we add what you comment on the indexers, that put criteria that can not be defended in any rational discussion.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** You said that this reflection is a detail that should not have the stature of a political struggle, and I understand that. But we know that the hugest indexers on the planet are also responsible for the world rankings of universities and journals and that one of

the main criteria for classifying a university is to have publications in journals controlled by these same indexers. The invention of the offering of articles "ahead of print" in itself is ambiguous since it also contributes to the dismantling of journals, reducing them to repositories. That is why I believe, in this context of hegemony of the large indexers, that defending journals that propose guidelines to the academic community through the works they publish is an act of political resistance.

**Adrián Gorelik:** I agree. We, in particular, at the same time that we take these discussions and struggles to all the spheres we can, we cannot remain outside. Because staying out of the indexers means leaving the field of vision of new authors who want to publish and are looking for where to publish. It is quite a delicate balance but very necessary.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** As a teacher, educator, and trainer of new professors and researchers, new students of the city, how do you see the current academic systems in the continent?

**Adrián Gorelik:** It is, actually, very complicated. I have the impression that, in Latin America, we are prisoners of a kind of negative dialectic, which relates to the following idea: the university systems that push the most to renew, internationalize, and professionalize are much more subject to the pressures of the international academic system. It is the case of the Brazilian or Chilean academic systems, which have made a lot of effort to expand. When we see hundreds of people attending the Seminar on the History of the City and Urbanism in Brazil, we can say that postgraduate programs in different regions of the country are working to generate graduates, research, and knowledge. It is a gigantic effort carried on by an entire society and is very rewarding.

At the same time, I see that, by their own ambition to update themselves, those systems become victims of the worst traps the international academic system is entering. For example, the "publish or die" issue. In Brazil, the way a young researcher lives his day-to-day life is truly tremendous. This form of publication makes it very difficult to carry out long-term projects, or what it meant to structure important books over 8 to 10 years. Today a research work disintegrates into several articles, because it is more important, according to the criteria of academic evaluation, to publish many articles than to have a good book (the word "good" is out of place when faced with evaluations that only record the quantitative aspects). The way Brazilian institutions have self-assumed a series of rigorous requirements works against that very productivity and growth.

I see something similar in Chile, although it is a much smaller scientific field. These two countries are the ones that have assumed, with great rigor and the least criticism, many of the new conditions of the international academic market. On the other hand, countries like Argentina, precisely because they do not have such an efficient academic system, because they continuously suffer interruptions, blows, and changes of direction in policies, because they cannot progress in professionalization, in the nationalization and federalization of knowledge production, individually, they offer wider margins of freedom to the researcher. They do not have the resources to impose all this new paraphernalia of requirements. It is a dramatic dialectic, and I would like to be able to work on the growth and strengthening of our academic system, to keep in it the critical capacity to filter those things that are productive and those that are not for that same progress. We are not finding a model that allows us to see it.

**Marcelo Tramontano:** Adrián, one last question: does the future look promising for you?

**Adrián Gorelik:** I have an enormously negative view of the present and the immediate future, and I have great optimism for the long term. I believe that the best things of humanity will end up prevailing even against the most destructive reflections that humanity itself undoubtedly shows at every step. But it is a faith, just as some have a religion. The pessimism of reason and optimism of the will continue to be important forces for me to think at a distance, but trusting that one may be collaborating with the construction of a better future. Without that, I find it very hard to carry on from day to day.