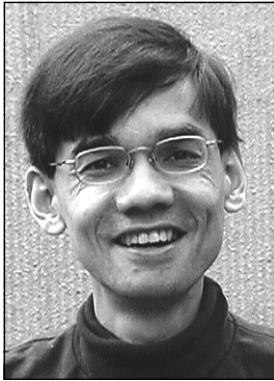


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Reconstruction



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“Die Ros’ ist ohne Warum, sie blühet, weil sie blühet,” wrote J. A. Silesius, or so one reads in J. L. Borges’s “Seven Nights”. How do a city – say Berlin –, a vocation – scholarship, for instance –, and life reconstruct themselves? How does one start anew after the storms that life neither frees us from nor warns us against? Without a discernable why, Wiko and Berlin open-handedly gave me the renewal of intellectual excitement and irony. For my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was meant to be devoted to the history of social science. Instead, it was an extended and fruitful rumination on the very idea of reconstruction; a pondering of lasting effects on my work and life.

Wiederaufbau – like everything in the German language – is a term of meticulous architectonic beauty: once again to build up, once again to dwell. In English too, to reconstruct is more than to rebuild, and not only structures; it is to be able to dwell once again, a city or oneself. *Reconstruirse*, in Spanish, is the antidote to the *maladie américaine* of diminishing returns on self-esteem. In effect, to reconstruct is to begin anew, to dwell again; it is oblivion and it is

both pardon and regained peace; also, it is to write history. *Reconstruir* is what I saw, learned, and did in Berlin and the Wiko.

I.

Berlin is truly in reconstruction, an urban cosmos emerging from the chaos of undesirable pasts, destroying monuments, constructing new ones, exorcising buildings and streets. I found consolation in living for a year in the city of reconstruction, and this feeling necessarily reached my work. I read and wrote, regaining a sense of excitement and ignorance, which had been lost somehow in the avatars of an academic career. For Wiko's marvelous library service and editorial help were complemented by the invaluable dialogue with some colleagues with whom my work will keep talking for a long while. I see my ideas trying to find how would they sound in the echoes of the voices I met at the Kolleg. But the sounds of Berlin's reconstruction echoed those of my mind's own, and the resonances were of substance, no time for anything else. The comradeship of books and minds made me more intolerant both of the widespread trendiness of scholarship and of the boredom of academic omnisapience expressed in academic English with the "I argue", "I claim", "I know", "I theorize", "I guess my question is ..."

And as was inevitable, I wrote about the city. *City Upon a Lake* is the history I almost finished at the Kolleg, and it is a history of Mexico City, my city, in the years between 1880 and 1940. "I speak of the immense city," wrote Octavio Paz, "that daily reality composed of two words: the others," and he added, "and in every one of them there is an I clipped from a we, an I adrift." I understand that the walks, joys, anguishes, and hopes I experienced in my city or in Berlin are not interesting stories to be either told or read, but over this year I have translated, unduly as it may be, my own urban "I adrift" into specific historical phenomena. *City Upon a Lake* reconstructs different strolls – to streets, buildings, and places of science, language, and hope. I deal in the same way with Mexico's 1910 centennial celebration of independence as with science and the city and some urban characters that have no apparent history (the three, the dog, the *borracho*, obscenity). It sounds like destiny that in Berlin I reconstructed the history of the great *City Upon a Lake*.

II.

Reconstruction, however, is also oblivion, and Berlin is oblivion mounted in cranes and scaffolds. To have lived in Berlin at this moment of European history, at this point of my career, at this moment of my life, was an extraordinary occurrence; one that taught me both the indispensability and the limits of oblivion.

Lethe, Harald Weinrich, a former Fellow of the Kolleg, showed, is not only the sinister river of death but also of freedom, of finding peace from remembrances. True pardon is never oblivion but also merely absolution – Berlin is the example. I feel that oblivion is in fact the device that allows us to be multiple in the instantaneity of every moment; instantaneously we forget what we have been or are and thanks to this oblivion we keep on. But the only thing that does not exist, said Borges, is oblivion. Berlin or our ideas and works are thus reconstructions over the fertile soil of, over a never truly possible, oblivion.

It might be that past times preferred memory over oblivion. Our times are oblivion's revenge. Of course, what we have lost with this overstimulation of oblivion is as much as what we have won. We acquire peace, we lose memory and justice. So Berlin shows. And over this year my own work reflected this trade-off: *Diario de un urbanista* was the text that came out of my reflections on cities, peace, and oblivion – a collection of joined stories and histories that go from the history of Mexico City's suburbanization in the 1950s to the life of two lovers, a Bengal radical, M. N. Roy, and an American activist, Evelyn Trent, both in Mexico City and Berlin in the 1920s; from Barcelona's urban development as succeeding Disneyland (1888, 1929, 1992) to Austin potential as the first officially-sanctioned bilingual capital of the US; from the abuses of urbane political correctness to the fruitfulness of urban vulgarity. I conceived this collection in my walks throughout Berlin. The marks of the cities are in the pages as much as my ideas are now attached to various corners of Berlin. The adventures of the Bengal Quixote who founded the Mexican Communist Party and the stories of the betrayal, love, and disappointment of Evelyn Trent blended in my mind with the history of Potsdamer Platz I saw, which in turn was seen by Roy and Trent from the windows of the Hotel Fürstenhof in 1922. And there is an immense linden tree in back of the Reichstag, at the edges of the Spree, over whose shadow I felt how history can pardon us without our having to forget it. As today, I don't know what *Diario de un urbanista* is – whether simple walking accounts urban or cultural

history or history at all; it is what my own reconstruction dictated. That I know.

III.

I report: This is what I did at Wiko. It is not as much as I would have liked, but it is more than I dreamt. Indebtedness is what Wiko did to me; profound gratitude for the wisdom and friendship of the editorial board of the *Chilaka Palukulu*, the only virtual and, like all essential things, ethereal periodical not to be found in the Internet. Thanks to all of them: Muzaffar Alam, Philippe Burrin, Partha Chatterjee, Navid Kermani, David Shulman, Velcheru Rao, Wang Hui, and, of course, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who fed us both with his remarkable cuisine and with his unmatched intelligence. I also feel deep gratitude for Fellows and friends whose camaraderie and intelligence tremendously benefited my work and life at the Kolleg: Francis Snyder, Leticia Avilés, Patricia Brand, Stephen Krasner, Katherine Verdery, Carol and Richard Bernstein, Suzanne Marchand, Andreas Wimmer, Pedro Muñoz-Gerdau, and Lorena Jaume-Palasi. The priceless companionship of Álvaro Morcillo, scholar in the making and Wiko's *Mitarbeiter*, was the greatest proof that Berlin did care about my own reconstruction.

To be sure, I could elaborate on the disadvantages of Berlin's cuisine, on unfriendliness and pretentiousness, so common in this kind of Olympus of egos, on the German cult of *Wissenschaft*, on scholars' inability to ask a simple question, and on the need to invite younger scholars, people from the tropics and so on and so forth ... But a report is just a report, and ... *mil gracias es más que mil pormenores*.