

## INVESTMENT IN HUMAN INTELLIGENCE IS TOMORROW'S OPPORTUNITY: interview with the philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky

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MIRELLA DE MENEZES MIGLIARI

E-mail: mirella.migliari@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0003-3444-8965

LUCIA SANTA CRUZ

E-mail: lucia.santacruz@espm.br  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5362-9967

SANDRA SANCHES

E-mail: sandra.sanches@espm.br  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1007-2473

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## Abstract

This interview with the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, held shortly after his participation in an international meeting in Rio de Janeiro on education, addresses the importance of the educational process in the formation of sociability, reflects on the pedagogical role of the city as a space for generating knowledge, while at the same time pointing out the impacts of excess consumption on the development of human intelligence. Lipovetsky also deals with the creative city, a concept that reinforces the educational character of urban contexts.

### Keywords

Gilles Lipovetsky; education; creative economy; educative city; consumerism.

## Introduction

“We must civilize consumerism. We must decentralize it. It should no longer be the center of life, people should not live just to consume. We are a humanist society and we must develop man in his entirety (...) Education should not be thought of as something secondary. It is at the center of tomorrow's opportunities. And tomorrow's powers will be developed by researchers, by universities, by well-trained men”. The vision is by the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky<sup>1</sup>, author of books such as *The Empire of the Ephemeral - Fashion and its destiny in modern societies*, *The era of emptiness - Essays on contemporary individualism and The twilight of duty - The painless ethics of the new democratic times*. Lipovetsky highlights the importance of education as a process of forming sociability, while emphasizing that, in contemporary times, education is not restricted to classrooms, but expands to the entire urban and social context. In this sense, he approaches the city as a space of knowledge and is concerned with the role attributed to consumption as a value in itself. Although he considers that it is not possible (nor desirable) to abolish consumption, the philosopher is more concerned with the excesses that may come to block the development of human intelligence. In his words, it is necessary to question consumerist practices, transforming them and bringing education and knowledge to the center of the discussion. Its most recent release in Brazil, *Da leveza - Towards a weightless civilization*, addresses the contemporary cult of happiness as opposed to the fast-paced routine of today. In this interview<sup>2</sup>, Lipovetsky addressed the relationship between the educational city and the creative city, the ecology of the spirit, the place of women, fashion, appearance, happiness, the paradoxes of the postmodern era and the changes surrounding consumerism.

**Contracampo** - *During your last conference in Rio de Janeiro, in September 2017, you addressed the concepts of educational city and creative city. Could you clarify what is the relationship between these two concepts and what impact do they have on development in life?*

Yes, in fact, I dealt with this issue, which seems very important to me, because, in the age of hypermodernity, education cannot be reserved simply for school. Today, you learn at any age, and the school is, of course, central. However, there are new issues that can make the city play an important role, especially at a higher level, evidently favoring the link between universities, favoring laboratories. It is not

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky. Philosopher-sociologist. Lecturer. Member of the Analysis Council (Prime Minister). Titles and activities: Associate Professor of Philosophy. Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of Sherbrooke (Canada). Doctor Honoris Causa from the New Bulgarian University (Sofia). Knight of the Legion of Honor. Member of the National Program Council (Educação Nacional) until 2005. Member of the Analysis Council to the Prime Minister. Specialist consultant in APM (Association Progress Management). Research field: the transformations of regulations, values and behaviors in developed western societies. interventions: Conferences and interventions in the main industrial and banking groups. Seminars and conferences on Business Ethics in large industrial and banking groups in France, Spain, Canada, Argentina, Mexico. Research seminars on individualism, luxury, consumerism and contemporary lifestyles in Madrid, Barcelona, New York University, Montreal, Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Singapore. Published works: *L'Ère du Vide* (1983) – Gallimard - *L'Empire de l'Ephémère* (1987) - Gallimard. English translation: *The Empire of fashion* (Princeton Press) - *Le Crépuscule du Devoir* (1992) – Gallimard - *La Troisième Femme* (1997) – Gallimard - *Métamorphoses de la culture libérale* (2002) - Liber(Canada) - *Le Luxe éternel* (2003) - Gallimard - *Les Temps hypermodernes* (2004) - Grasset. English translation: *Hypermodern times* (Polity Press) - *Le bonheur paradoxal. Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation* (2006) - Gallimard - *La société de déception* (2006) – Textuel - *L'écran global* (2007) – Seuil -- *La Culture-monde. Réponse à une société désorientée* (2008) - Odile Jacob - *L'Occident mondialisé* (2010) - Grasset - - *L'Esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste* (2013) - Gallimard. These books are translated or in translation process for 18 countries. (information collected in the interviewee's LinkedIn profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/gilles-lipovetsky-50715012/> on 04/26/2018).

<sup>2</sup> This interview was carried out remotely, via Skype, done by interviewers in Rio de Janeiro, and the interviewee in Paris, in October 22, 2017. The interviewee had received the questions via email, with sufficient notice to prepare for the interview in person. The content of the questions referred to the magna lecture *Por Uma Educação Global* (For a Global Education), which Gilles Lipovetsky presented at the Education 360 event that took place in Rio de Janeiro in September 21, 2017. The interview was carried out in a live voice in the French language. Subsequently, the interview was transcribed and translated into Portuguese by the translator Ana Paula Vaz Corrêa Maia.

a matter of stating that the city becomes an educational center, but there can be investments in the area of knowledge, making universities, research laboratories available... a set of devices. This is the first point. The second point, I think, is that we have, increasingly, difficulties in relation to children with what we call 'school failure'. And the city can also, in this case, help the education system by financing, for example, help services for children in difficulty.

The city can also play a very important role for the immigrant populations that arrive, who are not literate, who cannot read, who cannot write, and who are mainly adults. The city can play a very important role in socialization, as this cannot be done by the school. And finally, the third point, which interested me in the conference, was about art, because in this case, in the traditional school, artistic creation is considered as a secondary task. And I believe this is a mistake. In today's society, aspirations, creation, are very important. People want to express themselves, they want to do things that they love, and I think that at school one should start giving children tools at an early age, so they can have an artistic practice. Developing artistic taste, of course, with teachers, but here too the city can play an active role, especially by making children meet artists from the region, organizing exhibitions for the creation of young people. Artistic creation is an important point because it allows people to have self-esteem. When you participate in an exhibition, when you sing in a choir, when you play an instrument, you do what you like. And that is one of the ways to reduce the weight of consumerism. I believe it is important to develop this. The school can play an active role, families can play an active role, but I believe that the cities, especially through organizing and making exhibition places available to associations for young creators, [the cities] also have an important role. It is a way of allowing people to dignity again. I will give the example of Medellín. Medellín did an important job in Colombia facilitating artistic creation in urban areas under difficulties. I believe that we should not see education only as education for work when we are adults, but also towards having a richer life, in the sense of personal development. Education is also the education of the individual in order that he can have a life that is not just a consumer life. It is not just by changing the television programs that we will be able to avoid a life of simple and only consumerism. For that, we need to offer people new tools, other tools, and especially tools for artistic creation. So, for me, this is a very important point. I wrote a previous book titled "The aestheticization of the world", in which I show that, more and more, there is a will, an artistic ambition in people. Photographing, making videos, playing music, dancing, all of this is, more and more, spread around. So, the school and the cities must take care of that.

**Contracampo** - *In your speech, you mentioned that we are in a cultural transition towards an ecology of the spirit. Do you notice a trend as opposed to the culture of consumption in contemporary society?*

I didn't say that we were in a transition period. I said that this period would be desirable for an ecology of the spirit. Is not the same thing. But yes, I think we should go in that direction. I think it is a way of opposing the consumer culture, which is not bad, which is not the devil, but which is too strong, and does not allow, I believe, the satisfaction for mankind. This is seen more and more. If consumerism were enough for life, well, we wouldn't see all this explosion of people who photograph, make videos, sing on corals, who search for many things. And I believe that, with the increase in people's cultural level, there is a desire to distance themselves from consumerism. In any case, it is necessary to work in this direction, and in this sense, I speak about ecology of the spirit, that is something more balanced. Consumerism is not bad, but it is excessive. So we must counterbalance the forces of consumerism, move towards an ecology of the spirit. And so, to achieve such ecology of the spirit, I believe it is necessary to invest in school, culture, general culture, the humanities and art. I think this is what can balance consumer culture. I never considered that consumerism should be abolished. In fact, this is stupid, because it will not disappear. But we must civilize consumerism. We must decentralize it. It should no longer be the center of life, people should not live just to consume. We are a humanist society and we must develop man in mankind entirely.

And consumerism does not fully develop mankind. It develops only the consumer side of it. But, people are more than consumers. They are living ones who think, who create, who act, who fight for justice. We must develop all of these features. This is what I call an ecology of the spirit.

**Contracampo** - *You said you do not believe beauty will save the world, as proposed by Dostoevsky, but intelligence. How can this happen in a world so full of paradoxes?*

I wanted to use that expression to show everything that could separate us from the age of Enlightenment, when someone like von Schiller could think that artistic education would allow democracy and the spirit of freedom bold. I believe a lot in art education, but it is not enough. It can give deep satisfactions in life. That's a lot, but it doesn't solve all the problems. I said at my conference that we will soon have ten billion individuals on the planet. Ten billion. Ten billion to be fed. How to do it? How to fight pollution and fight global warming? These issues will not be answered by art and beauty. What I call intelligence, which is the reason, is the scientific reason, of course, will play a major role in discovering new modes of production and consumption that are less devastating to the planet. It will be necessary to discover cleaner technologies, to develop renewable energies, to change, without a doubt, our type of agriculture. For that, it is the human spirit, intelligence, scientific rationality that will allow this to happen. I do not believe, of course, that this will solve all problems. I have already made clear all the importance that I dedicate to artistic education. But the problems of tomorrow's humanity, the problems of overpopulation, the problems of pollution, all these issues demand we consider university intellectual training, scientific research in the private world, but also in universities, as priorities, as opportunities for the future. Investment in human intelligence is tomorrow's opportunity. It is not as put by certain intellectuals, who propose non-consumption to save the planet. I believe this is a utopia that sounds effective in intellectual circles, but it lacks strength on a planetary scale. On the planetary scale, with entire continents still poor, we need to invest in science and technology. Once again, I am not advocating scientism, I am not saying that it will solve all problems, but it is with innovation that we have some opportunities to solve the crucial problems of the future. I believe, then, that countries should prepare for the future by favoring innovation, research, and universities. We cannot believe that we will solve the problems only through the natural wealth of soils, mines, oil and all that. Fifty years from now, this will still have an important function perhaps, but the future lies in the development of everything that favours mankind creations. Do you understand? There are small countries, like South Korea, like Scandinavian countries, that have excellent results and yet they have no natural wealth. See the extraordinary success they have. But they all have very ambitious educational systems. It is mankind who creates wealth. So, it is mankind that we must train.

**Contracampo** - *But who should promote these changes? The government? Or educational institutions and private companies?*

Anyway... I am not a complete liberal, I am not an ultraliberal. I think the State has an important role, mainly, in financing education systems. I don't think it's good for the school to be driven by the force of money alone. I am not against private schools or private universities, and again, in this case, I believe in a balance. It is good to have private centers, but I think that a public pole should also exist, because if there is no public pole, financed by the State, then education will become a privilege for the rich ones. Only children from wealthy families will be able to study. So, this is the opposite of the democratic spirit. The State must invest a sum of its budget in education. Otherwise, only money will allow for the training of men, and this is not desirable.

I think that, precisely, to regenerate the political class, it will be necessary that political parties take this issue seriously and make ambitious proposals for the State to invest in schools, in the education system, in teachers' incomes. In Latin America teachers are very poorly paid. You cannot have a good

education system if teachers are not respected and not paid well. If there are no good teachers, there will be a lot of waste of human wealth. It is necessary to have teaching staff such as those in Norway, such as those in Singapore, where teachers are respected, are well paid, take training courses. It is an important system today. Education should not be thought of as secondary. It is at the center of the opportunities of tomorrow's societies. It is not because Brazil has the Amazon and oil, that the country will develop correctly. The country must move towards the future by investing in the powers of tomorrow. And tomorrow's powers will be developed by researchers, by universities, by well-educated people.

***Contracampo** - The Creative Economy is very important for the life of Rio de Janeiro. We believe that the Creative Economy can transform the city, the life, the culture, the wealth of the city. How can emerging economies, like Brazil, apply the concepts of the new economy to find solutions for their development challenges? The practices of coworking, sharing, collaboration networks are different from the traditional models of capitalist organization. Can they really bring about radical changes or will they be absorbed by the dominant neoliberal models?*

In fact, there is a new economy, there is the sharing economy, the collaborative economy, as they say, the sharing economy. This is a very important point. I believe that it will continue to develop, and this economy goes around the traditional networks of the capitalist economy. But I do not share the same point of view with, for example, Rifkin [Jeremy Rifkin, an American economist and social theorist, whose most recent book, *The Society at Zero Marginal Cost*, maintains that the era of capitalism is being replaced by a new economic system, based on collaborative common goods, from the emergence of the Internet of Things. Rifkin considers that the Internet of communications, energy and transport converges towards the establishment of a neural network that accelerates productivity and reduces the marginal cost of producing and distributing additional units of goods and services to practically zero], as he sees in this new economy an important breakthrough that, eventually would end capitalism and even consumerism. He says that, finally, with the sharing economy, ownership is less important - as people just want to enjoy things, experiences, ownership becomes secondary - and that, perhaps, we will leave the model of capitalism behind. I don't have that same understanding. Firstly, in the global context, I see that this new economy has enabled the emergence of real giants that are giants of capitalism. Airbnb, for the rental of real estate, or Uber, for automobiles, are gigantic companies, worldwide. Everything works differently, but they are economies, in short, firms, companies of the capitalist system. In that context, I don't see any change. Second, does the new economy transform consumers? In fact, it transforms practices. If you rent an apartment directly from the owner, it is not the same as paying for a hotel room. If you share a car to go to São Paulo, instead of going by train or plane, this is another consumption practice. This is undeniable. So, there is a change. The problem is: does this harm consumer culture? I don't think so, no way. In addition, research shows that the main motivation for people, consumers, who use these new services, thanks to the internet, is to save money. So, do they want to save and why do they want to save? So that they can buy other things and not because they reject consumerism. On the contrary. It is to continue with consuming that these consumers use this new circuit. So, I think it is an illusion to believe that we are witnessing a rupture with what I have called hyperconsumption. I simply think that the consumer has new aspirations. There is another aspect: a new economy is also a clean economy, a sustainable economy. Well, I think that many consumers are demanding to consume better. And consuming better does not necessarily mean less. They want to consume respecting the planet, through healthier products for health. This changes, without a doubt. But at the same time, they want to continue with their consumering passions. People want to listen to music on Spotify with an unlimited choice, they want to travel, they walk, they fly. Even with low-cost airlines, they travel by plane. So, they consume. Even if you use your bicycle instead of your car, this is still an act of consumption. It is a less polluting consumption, this is very good, but still, it is a consumer culture. There is no exception. It is necessary to act in order to have a cleaner, more responsible,

more ecological consumerism. But, I don't think this necessarily implies a decline in consumerist passions. I am convinced that in the future, people will continue to long for consuming new things, to have new experiences constantly. Because this is inherent in contemporary individualism.

**Contracampo** - *You are a philosopher who is renewed and evolving as few today. However, in your books there is an immutable point: the coexistence of the positive and the negative as complementary dimensions. For you, what would be the paradoxes of the postmodern era? How long will consumerism continue to guarantee pleasures? And what is the downside of these pleasures?*

The question is too long! Well, the paradoxical aspect, which I had developed, is the idea of a paradoxical happiness, which means a society that promises, permanently, happiness, well-being, etc. The end result is that life has become very difficult. While consumption, in principle, should make our lives easier, I think we are moving towards an increasingly heavier life. That's why I wrote a book about lightness. People want to be lighter, but at the same time, they always have more objects, they always want more things and life gets more complex. I think it is more complicated because we no longer have a strong tradition. We are forced to reflect for anything, to make decisions for anything. So, the paradox is that there are more and more invitations to pleasure and, at the same time, there are more and more concerns, issues, the need for reflection by people. We don't live in an easy society. Everything is complicated. People are afraid in their private lives, they get divorced, relationships with their children, health... There is a lot of information available and then people are concerned with what they eat, what they breathe, what they drink. All of these problems have become emblematic. Even if the consumer society turns out to be a party, as a permanent distraction, this is a great paradox in the world in which we live. Will consumption continue to guarantee pleasure? It does not guarantee it. It continues to offer it. So, I believe that the consumer supply will continue. I am convinced of that. Consumerism is not going to back off. I think what I called hyperconsumption is certainly not upon decline. He continues, but in a new outfit. For example, with the sharing economy, with ecology. These are new clothes. But it carries on. In this regard, you asked about the negative point of consumption. I think the downside is excess, not consumption. Because consumption brings many positive things: it brings information, it brings travel, it brings distraction. Not everything is negative. But, it is negative when it becomes the center of life. This is what, in the end, is negative, and what makes some people live to consume. As if consuming represented everything. And that is not a good thing. It's negative. That is not the way to go.

**Contracampo** - *Professor, you have evidenced fashion's libertarian character in your books, as if the force of transformation generated by fashion acted as a door to freedom, the opportunity for human beings to be whatever they want through it. Does fashion still maintain such magic in a hypermodern, hyper-consumerist, hypereredonist society in which people build up on the profiles of social networks?*

More precisely, I tried to show there are paradoxical faces in fashion. In fact, this paradoxical face of fashion has already been shown by Simmel, a German sociologist. On one hand, fashion is conformist, so there's no freedom. But, on the other hand, fashion might change habits. It opens up a range of choices. There are these two aspects in fashion. On one hand you can see fashion watching over people, and those who renounce their freedom. Young people, for example teenagers, are totally addicted to brands. This is not a sign of freedom. This is, on the contrary, a form of conformity that is very strong in adolescents. They all want, for example, Nike shoes. This is not a sign of freedom. But on the other hand, fashion, since centuries ago, but mainly in the last thirty or forty years, has left space for freedom of choice. Why? Because it multiplies the models. Currently for example, it is very difficult to know what fashion is, because there are so many different models... Everything is possible. So today, fashion allows people to choose what they like, without following a very regulated standard as had happened in the past, in the upper layers of society. When studying fashion, it is necessary to study these two aspects, this tension, which is even a

somehow opposed. There are these two aspects. On one hand, I wanted to show fashion, these days, is everywhere including consumption, objects, travel, and also on television programs. Fashion contributed to freedom, as it contributed to undermining the great collective ideologies. The problem is this retreat from the great political ideologies, which have done so much harm to the whole world, does not allow it to form free spirits on its own. It favours free spirits, but it is not enough. And so, back to the previous question, school is necessary. If there are only people who are obsessed with fashion, I do not believe that one can go in the direction of freedom. There is a poor side. If freedom is just buying brands and choosing brands... it may be some kind of freedom, but it is a poor kind of freedom. It is not a satisfactory freedom. In this context, the fashion world goes in these two directions these days. On one hand it imprisons people in a consumerist universe that only partially releases mankind. On the other hand, it suffocates them. The other issue that you address, the magic of fashion, is a broader one. Fashion, as you know, was born in the West in the late Middle Ages. And fashion had, in the aristocratic, and then bourgeois, an enormous prestige. There was real magic in fashion. And I believe this magical aura of fashion is retreating in the context of dress. I think women are less obsessed with fashion. They are still interested in fashion, but not as they used to be. Because in the past appearance used to be of enormous importance. Women's lives were basically children, home and the looks. Not today. Nowadays, women can work, they create their companies, they enter politics, they read, they create, they are artists... In short, women's lives have become richer. As life is richer, fashion is less important. Women dream less about fashion. They like fashion, but it doesn't have the same importance as it used to have because women have the ambition to do something with their own lives these days. And not just being mothers, or just raising children. They have professional, creative, political ambitions. So, I think this is important to understand what has changed in the relationship with fashion. Individualization in fashion translates, of course, on one hand, into more choices. You can wear trendy clothes, you can wear sexy clothes, you can wear sportswear, you can wear streetwear, you can wear short or long clothes, you can wear vintage clothes. There are many possibilities and the style of appearance is free to choose. People are less condemned than in the past. But there is another individualization of fashion. I see, for example, that even adults, today, wear T-shirts, for example, with fun inscriptions, puns, with drawings that make them laugh. Before, it was seen as childish, but I am not convinced of it. I think it is the other way around. This means that fashion is secondary, fun. And since it is nothing serious, you can go out with Mickey or Donald on the T-shirt. It doesn't matter, because what is important is not the appearance, it is not the fashion. What is important is what you do with your life. Not in the past. In the past, the bourgeois had to dress seriously. You couldn't play with fashion. So, this is individualization today. There is more freedom, more distance, more irony. And at the same time, there is less magic. One dreams less about fashion.

***Contracampo** - Appearance has Always had relevance in Brazil. Even if we don't think fashion is important, Brazilians care a lot about appearance ...*

You are right. Fashion magic, simply magic, is less important, but the appearance of the face and body is much more important than in the past. That is why plastic surgery was strongly developed. Body care, fitness, exercise, bodybuilding, all that stuff. It is the body, as an element of appearance, that is central. That's what I meant, when I mentioned the retreat of the magic in fashion, I talked about clothing fashion. Appearance is undoubtedly more important than in the past.

***Contracampo** - In your book "The Third Woman", published in the 90s, you present a kind of version 3.0 of what you understand this woman is like. You spoke of a woman who works and who finds harmony between work and life. The question is: do we already have a 4.0 version, the fourth woman? Is she ready yet?*

Well, I don't know if she is the fourth woman, because the third woman, in short, what I called the



third woman, is a woman who claims freedom in her private life, work, studies, and at the same time she does not renounce the role of tradition, which concerns her appearance, but also her children, family etc. So, this is what I call the third woman. It is this mix. I am not talking about balance but about the mix. The mixing of the new roles that give her autonomy, individual autonomy and, at the same time, persistence in the context of a division of the functions of each sex. I don't think this is outdated. I take into account two types of research. First, research on women at the top of the political and, above all, economic hierarchy within companies. Well, we see that the inequality between men and women still continues. In large international groups, there is still class sailing, meaning the preventing of women at the top of the hierarchy. So, talking about a fourth woman, the woman 4.0, is fast forwarding because inequalities are still extremely strong between men and women, especially in the decision-making spheres. Second, there is still an unequal distribution of the work of men and women in the domestic space, at home. Well, one can only look at research, but all over the world one can see there is not much progress about it. It is always women who continue, massively, to invest much more time in the organization of home and in the interest of their children. The situation is progressing, but not much. It is only a few minutes every five years. It is very, very little. The third woman, whose model I presented in my book, is the indefinite woman. She must build up her own life, but it is still built upon very unequal sociological bases. And I don't see a big change today. Regarding the moment when I wrote my book "The Third Woman", there has been no real evolution, it has only been seen, perhaps, in the political sphere where there may be a little more women in the leadership roles. In fact, I said at the end of the book, I believed that the democratization of higher spaces in the political world would advance faster than in the economic world. I think this is what we may see. So, I think it's not yet the fourth woman we're witnessing. I think the third woman, as described in my book, is still present, and this can be shown by the sociological surveys that point out that women want to have a professional life, they have the freedom to use their bodies, they want to choose motherhood, they get divorced... They have this freedom, but at the same time, they are still putting up more into the house than men are, as well as in appearance, they are still very separated from the higher spheres of society, from leadership positions. So, in that context, I don't see a real difference or evolution. And it is not because, currently, the web is there that this situation has changed. It does not fundamentally modify that framework.

**Contracampo** - *I am going to go over Rio de Janeiro because we are in this city and it has a certain uniqueness. I would like to know if, in your opinion, Rio should make better use of its attributes, its value. It is a playful place, there are beaches, and many other pleasures, there is a kind of ode to pleasure in the streets, people are happy. And nowadays, having lived a happy and exciting period, with great events happening in the city and attracting thousands of tourists from all over the world, Rio is now going through a down phase, a very difficult moment. Do you think that Rio should make better use of all its cultural characteristics that, at the moment, are forgotten to become a creative city, a city that can monetize upon its culture? What is your vision on that?*

I fully agree with your point of view. I think that the city of Rio is, without any doubt, one of the most beautiful cities in the world with its natural panorama. It is an exceptional geographical landscape, a fascinating beauty, but I think that alone is not enough. Having beautiful beaches is not enough. Rio must use this to propose other things besides the beach. The beach is not the only source of pleasure. It is the pleasure of beauty in every way. There is not only the dental floss (bikinis) of the girls in Copacabana, it is not only the beauty of Pão de Açúcar. These are natural beauties, but there are others. I believe, mainly, in an important investment in the creation made by its population as seen on the streets, in the cultural manifestations. Rio needs to become a creative city itself. Creativity in the sense of attracting research of course, but also attracting artists to make it more beautiful, more exuberant. You said that Rio is a happy city. I am not sure. There are millions of people living in the slums. During the Olympics, the people of

Rio made huge demonstrations, and they were right to bring out the scandal that it was spending, I think, 12 billion in the Olympics while there is no decent public transport. It is necessary that the city takes into account people's daily lives and not just marketing the beach. That was what the cities of the 60s did. At that time, the beauty of women and beaches was enough. It's 50 years behind schedule. It is necessary to anticipate the future. And the future is to make Rio an attractive city, not just for the beach or for Carnival. That's not enough. There are millions of people living in Rio. These people aspire to quality of life. And that, I think, is not just going to the beach. Because when you live in such an urban environment that is not good, that is dangerous, etc., you cannot enjoy life. I think Medellín is an excellent example for many cities in Latin America. It was the most dangerous city in the world and became the most creative city in the world. This is a beautiful example. This is a beautiful ideal. All of these cities have extraordinary potential. Investment in culture seems to me crucial for Rio to become something else, in addition to being a tourist place. But tourism is also necessary and should not be criticized. However, there are people who live in Rio. It is necessary to attract the best to the city, to attract the creative classes. It is necessary to call the artists, all the people who bring novelty, and not just consumers. I would say that the city should attract creative people, not just consumers.