In this synthesis of twentieth-century Argentine history, I have not sought—as is generally the case in this type of book—either to prove a thesis or to find that unique and revealing cause of a singular, in this case somewhat infelicitous, national destiny. I have merely attempted to reconstruct the history—complex, contradictory, and unique—of a society that unquestionably has experienced better moments and that finds itself currently at one of the lowest points in its history but whose future is not, I trust, definitively sealed. The questions around which this text is organized—questions born of Argentina’s anguished and tumultuous national experience—are only some of the many possible ones; and their explication reveals the individual selection that an undertaking of this kind entails.

The first question posed by the book is what place in the world today exists for Argentina—which so assuredly inserted itself into a very different world order more than one hundred years ago—and what is its feasible economic organization? What kind of economic structure can Argentines strive for that would guarantee some of the country’s basic goals, such as society’s general welfare, a reasonable degree of economic progress, and a certain rationality in public life? A similar question was asked by Juan Bautista Alberdi, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and those who a century and a half ago outlined the design of modern Argentina. But unlike the situation when our founding fathers posed the question, the answer today is neither obvious nor at hand. Today the same question is formulated from a more modest perspective and with fewer illusions than one hundred and fifty years ago because now an *aurea mediocritas* seems to us a more desirable destiny.

The second interrogative refers to the characteristics, functions, and instruments that the state must have to guarantee the common good, regulate
and rationalize the economy, ensure justice, and improve social equality. Once again, the interrogative poses, in a much less promising context, questions that Argentine society debated and to a certain degree resolved more than half a century ago, answers that today are outdated or have simply been discarded, but that have not yet been replaced.

The third question concerns the world of culture and intellectuals and the conditions that can foster creativity or ideas that can be simultaneously critical, rigorous, and politically engaged and that fulfill a task that can be useful to society, analyzing social reality and proposing alternatives. Thus it happened in the Argentina of the centennial in 1910, during the fleeting experience of the decade of the 1960s, or for an even briefer moment during the hopeful return to democracy in the 1980s. The latter two experiences are close enough to remind us that such conditions are generally neither common nor easy to obtain.

Looming over these interrogatives are more distressing questions, those that most reveal that Argentina is at a crossroads, questions that concern the intersection of society and democracy. What possibilities are there to preserve or rebuild a democratic society combined with social mobility, one not partitioned into isolated worlds but one that is relatively egalitarian and with opportunities for everyone, based on competition but also on solidarity and social justice? All this constitutes the legacy, today more valuable than ever, built over the course of a century and a half, one that endured until the not-too-distant past, until a mere quarter century ago, at which point the momentum began to break down and reverse course.

Above all, there is the question about what characteristics the political system should have to ensure democracy and make of it a practice with some social meaning. In this case, the past reveals itself rich in conflicts, but it is not easy to find in it very many accomplishments, not even in periods of democratic rule, when there can be perceived in nuce the practices that carried to destruction institutions that had never fully matured and whose reconstruction appears now a Herculean task. Perhaps for that reason the last question is today the first one: What is the future of our democracy and of the tradition that nourishes it? We must return to Sarmiento and Alberdi and a task that we a bit naively considered to have been finished and whose accomplishments today seem fragile and vulnerable.
A book informed by such concerns is at once the work of a professional historian and a personal reflection on the present. It could not be any other way. Any attempt at historical reconstruction derives from the necessities, doubts, and preoccupations of the present, seeking a balance between professional rigor and personal opinion, but knowing that the scales frequently tip toward the latter the closer the historian is to the period or the subject under analysis. Indeed, writing this book has led me, in good measure, to abandon a more customary style of work and submerge myself in my own personal story and in a past experience that is still alive.

This was first revealed to me on attempting to make use of the ideas employed twenty years ago when, working with Alejandro Rofman, I sketched an outline of Argentine history and discovered how little use the ideas were to me now. The questions we posed then were aimed at explaining the roots of dependency and their baleful effects on the economy and society. Questions relating to democracy and republican institutions did not seem relevant to us, and, in general, politics appeared as merely a reflection of structural conditions, or conversely as an unstructured place where, through sheer willpower, such conditions could be changed, because in the collective consciousness then the perception of dependency was complemented by the search for some kind of liberation.

This dilemma is, I believe, a good example of a platitude in our profession: Historical consciousness guides historical understanding, and though the latter can impose limits on the former and subject it to the rigors of evidence, it cannot ignore it altogether. In previous years, the central idea in a historical reconstruction of this type would perhaps have emphasized social justice and economic independence, while for an even earlier period it would have been progress, modernization, or even the building of the state and nation. These concerns certainly have not disappeared for the historian and are to be found in this text as they were in their own times as aspirations, ideologies, or mobilizing utopias. The problems that they addressed are also present in today’s concerns, but their ranking, connections, and accent are different, as the questions around which this text is organized bear witness. The world in which we live, whose outlines we can only barely see, is radically different not only from that one hundred or even fifty years ago but also from that a mere twenty years back.
It is generally believed that one who writes thinks either implicitly or explicitly of the reader. I began to write this book thinking of my colleagues, but I gradually came to realize that my implicit readers were my children and those of their younger generation, the ones who had almost no information about our recent past, not even of the horrors of just yesterday, because our society less and less preserves its collective memory, perhaps because it presently suffers from a great difficulty in envisioning its future. In various parts of the book, I simply wanted to leave a testimony, perhaps unnecessary for scholars familiar with this history but necessary as a civic act, because I remain convinced that only an awareness of the past permits constructing the future. At a time when the pessimism of reason struggles with the heart’s optimism, I want to continue believing in the ability of men and women to make their history, to confront the circumstances in which they are fated to live, and to build a better society.

I am grateful to Alejandro Katz for his confidence that I could write this book and to Juan Carlos Korol and Ricardo Sidicaro for their careful reading of this text and their criticisms. I regret only that I could not have followed their suggestions in all cases. When I began to write this book, I asked Leandro Gutiérrez to play the part of critic, and he promised, as was customary between us, a brutally frank and stimulating dialogue. I am sorry that his death made this impossible, but I am certain that much of his penetrating, even acerbic, but enormously warm critical spirit is present in these pages; from no one, except my father, have I learned so much about history.