

Obituaries

Tulio Halperin Donghi (1926–2014)

Tulio Halperin Donghi, a towering figure in the fields of Argentine and Latin American history, died on November 14, 2014, in Berkeley, California. Incisive and prolific, Halperin was a twentieth-century intellectual with the range and passion of a nineteenth-century humanist. While he made use of nearly all the theoretical “turns” that swept history after 1960, he never allowed any one approach to dominate his astute and often-caustic interpretations of the past. He was the author of 24 books, including pioneering monographs, major works of synthesis, essay collections, and a powerful memoir of his formative years. His first book was published in 1951, and his last a month before he passed away.

Halperin was born into a socially plebeian but intellectually elite family in Buenos Aires: his father was a teacher of Latin, his mother a professor of literature, both well integrated into the dynamic world of the *porteño* intelligentsia. After briefly studying chemistry at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Halperin decided that his real interests lay in history. On the advice of a family friend, historian José Luis Romero, he earned a degree in law, just to be sure that he could make a living, and then a second in history. Along the way, he spent nearly a year in Turin, taking courses and discovering the writings of Antonio Gramsci. He completed both degrees in record time, although he never would practice law, as a steady stream of book reviews for newspapers and articles for encyclopedias soon brought in a modest income. His warm commentary on Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) led the French historian to invite Halperin to pursue doctoral studies under his supervision. Braudel would later comment that “only a young Argentine historian of Jewish origin had understood what I was trying to do,” while Halperin, for his part, would recognize the “overwhelming influence” of Braudel on his work, starting with his doctoral dissertation on medieval Spain, published in 1955.

With the fall of Peronism, Halperin came into his own as a writer and teacher intensely engaged in remaking the university. Admired and feared,

he became a professor and dean at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral (1955–1960) and then a professor at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (1959–1966). Along with its intellectual challenges, this period offered a practical training in the rough-and-tumble of politics that would indirectly inform his historical work: he later remarked on some similarities in size and dynamics between revolutionary Buenos Aires circa 1810 and its university around 1960. Yet politics, whether in the past or in his own life, remained more a spectacle to reflect on than a sphere of committed action. Time and again, he made clear that “retrospective militancy” was not his task as a historian.

Immediately after a 1966 military coup overthrew the elected government and sent soldiers into the university, Halperin resigned his post in protest, along with many colleagues. After a brief stint teaching at the Universidad de la República in Uruguay (1966–1967), and somewhat disappointing experiences at Harvard University (1967–1970) and the University of Oxford (1970–1971), he accepted a position at the University of California, Berkeley, where he would remain until 1997.

From the beginning, Halperin found himself at ease in the political ferment and intellectual seriousness of Berkeley. But after his deep involvement in academic politics in Rosario and Buenos Aires, he took a different tack, becoming a respected but distant presence in the history department, with his interventions in internal academic politics as significant as they were rare. Outside the department, on campus and in the US academy, he was more of a senior figure than an institution builder, never fully in step with the social-scientific direction of Latin American studies or the European and North American dominance of history as a discipline. His lectures were biting, ironic, demanding, and full of perfectly apt and wonderfully recalled topical anecdotes. Though entrancing to colleagues and fascinating for graduate students, they were sometimes baffling to the California undergraduates who found their way into his lecture hall.

Halperin continued to live an Argentine intellectual life outside Argentina. He briefly considered returning in 1973, but neither private think tanks nor those directing the Universidad de Buenos Aires welcomed his initiative, and he remained in California. Still, he continued to discreetly visit even in the darkest years of military rule. For many years, long before the Internet, he read with devotion the international editions of Argentine papers that reached him once every week. This was how he kept alive, with much effort, the “portable country” of memory that he inhabited from afar and with notable intensity. With the return of democracy and the rebirth of universities, he truly came into his own on the Argentine intellectual scene. Over the next three decades,

Halperin would be a crucial external ally in rebuilding history as a discipline, serving as interlocutor, evaluator, and reference point for a generation of new scholarship. He was a regular presence at conferences and taught graduate courses at universities across the country, particularly after he formally retired from Berkeley. Yet even as he became the leading figure of the newly professionalized historical “establishment,” Halperin remained sharp and reflexive, and he was particularly attentive to younger scholars, overlooking the emerging hierarchies of the renewed discipline to follow their work and take their findings seriously, whether to challenge or champion them. Traditional institutions like the Academia Nacional de la Historia de la República Argentina proved more resistant to his work; only after repeated efforts by a handful of its members was he nominated “académico correspondiente en los Estados Unidos,” in 1996. Even so, few would dispute that Halperin was the most influential Argentine historian of the last third of the century, as reflected in the arguments of many monographs, the anecdotes of dozens of published personal recollections, and even a polemical essay collection titled *Discutir Halperin* (1997). His influence was also reflected in the frequent interviews that he gave to newspapers across the political spectrum; even at the most polarized moments, he spoke with everyone, using often-unexpected historical insights to dispassionately analyze the present.

Entering the profession at the moment when historians were beginning to seriously employ the methods of social science, Halperin made deft use throughout his career of the latest approaches, from social history to price history to dependency theory, while making often-prescient remarks on the limitations of each. He attended closely to larger questions of structure but also to the immediacy of politics, to events as well as to ideas, to the state and to civil society. He wrote persuasively about such varied themes as the shifting composition of the early nineteenth-century Buenos Aires upper class or the social dynamics of cereal cultivation on the frontier or the years before the emergence of Peronism. But regardless of the problem that he was tackling or the tools employed, his central concerns throughout remained political and intellectual history.

Halperin's work ranged across centuries, from medieval Spain, through the Bourbon reforms and Latin American independence, and down to the late twentieth century. Attentive as he was to the *longue durée*, it was rarely the center of his inquiries. Instead, the core of his method, the focus of his attention, was the conjuncture; he was a master of the historical moment considered as part of larger processes. These historical moments were always densely populated, by

elites of various stripes, middling groups, and popular sectors, none ever treated in essentialist terms.

His prose was famously baroque, even slightly antique, a heritage of years of Latin and a not-so-hidden homage to the nineteenth-century statesmen-thinkers with whom he struggled so eloquently. But the purposes to which he put that prose were strikingly contemporary, even cinematic, exploring individual moments of political decision or social change in all their multiplicity. Halperin was a singular prose stylist, crafting sentences of masterful complexity whose intricacy conveyed the subtleties, feints, and reversals key to his mode of historical thought. More than a flourish, these sentences were the heart of his craft, unsettling implicit assumptions, switching perspectives, highlighting unresolved ambiguities, proposing lines of interpretation only to partly undercut them, and mirroring the ambivalence and untidiness of historical processes. They made challenging rather than pleasurable reading, but the pleasures of their challenge have animated generations of scholarship since.

In all his work, Halperin resisted the temptation to narrate an inevitable national “progress” or to directly map present-day political commitments onto past experiences. Many of the questions that he posed to the past were informed by a present that fascinated him, to be sure, but this link was the spark rather than the conclusion for his work. This sensibility was perhaps best captured in the title and theme of his essay “Canción de otoño en primavera,” reprinted in *El espejo de la historia* (1986).

While Argentina was his central passion, Halperin was deeply engaged with broader debates about Latin America. His *Historia contemporánea de América latina* (the first Spanish edition of which appeared in 1969) became an instant classic, with 13 editions in Spanish and translations to Italian, French, Portuguese, Swedish, German, and, finally, English (in 1993). In many countries, this book was the backbone of Latin American history courses from the 1970s forward, with a framework inflected by dependency theory but never subordinated to it. Crucially, his rigorous exploration of shared legacies and family resemblances across national histories is never reductive; the specificities of each experience are never dissolved in a regional generalization. His analytical range across the continent was also evident in his masterful works on the era of independence: *Hispanoamérica después de la independencia* (1972) and *Reforma y disolución de los imperios ibéricos, 1750–1850* (1985).

Broadly speaking, Halperin’s work on Argentina falls into three strands. The first relates to the creation of a new nation in the nineteenth century. The crowning achievement within this area is *Revolución y guerra* (1972). The English translation, published as *Politics, Economics, and Society in Argentina in the*

Revolutionary Period (1975), won the 1976 Clarence H. Haring Prize of the American Historical Association, for the best work by a Latin American historian. Embracing geography, economics, and sociology, the book describes the destruction of old elites and the creation of new ones in the crucible of the war for independence. It recast the history of a much-studied period in an entirely new way, and even decades later the scholarship on the period continues to be structured by the questions that Halperin posed. Another crucial work is his brilliant *Una nación para el desierto argentino* (1982), originally published as the book-length introduction to the anthology *Proyecto y construcción de una nación* (1980). Likely the most influential work on the founding fathers of liberal Argentina, Halperin's study continues to set the standard for integrating political, intellectual, and social history.

The second strand has focused on mass politics, and especially Peronism. In two book-length polemical essays, *Argentina en el callejón* (1964) and *La larga agonía de la Argentina peronista* (1994), Halperin explored the broad impact of the "Peronist revolution" that transformed the country at midcentury and the unstable and finally explosive political stalemate that it left in its wake. While neither essay was rooted in archival research, both offered compelling accounts of the country's crisis that proved broadly influential in public debate and future scholarship. Even as the Peronist movement has proven more resilient than he perhaps imagined, his analysis of the long demise of "Peronist Argentina" as a set of social arrangements and its final implosion after hyperinflation in 1989 remains the touchstone for debate. Toward the end of his career, Halperin returned to the tumultuous years of mass politics before Peronism, producing three essential works of political history: *Vida y muerte de la República verdadera (1910–1930)* (1999), *La Argentina y la tormenta del mundo* (2003), and *La República imposible (1930–1945)* (2004).

A third strand consists of intellectual history, or better stated, the history of intellectuals, especially in the nineteenth century. His first book was a pioneering interrogation of "el pensamiento de Echeverría" (1951); his penultimate book, *Letrados y pensadores* (2013), a tour de force on the autobiographies of Latin American intellectuals. Especially outstanding here is his 1986 study of José Hernández, the author of *Martín Fierro*. The book focuses less on the poem itself than on how this middling newspaperman and minor political figure came to write the national classic. Examining Hernández's intellectual formation through his long career as a political journalist, Halperin transformed the study of this convoluted era and recast literary studies of a landmark work. Fittingly, Halperin's final book, *El enigma Belgrano* (2014), returned to the ambiguous legacies of a founding father, prompting glowing reviews in print media and

fierce denunciations from would-be defenders of a static vision of the past. Down to the end, he remained committed to history as an act of critique.

It was in the later years of his career when Tulio Halperin began to receive extensive recognition for his intellectual trajectory, including honorary degrees from universities in Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay. The Fundación Konex in Argentina awarded him the Premio Konex de Platino and the Diploma al Mérito in 1994 and 2004, and a Mención Especial por Trayectoria in 2014. He was given the Distinguished Service Award from the Conference on Latin American History (1994) and the Award for Scholarly Distinction from the American Historical Association (1998). He was named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2006, and received the Kalman Silvert Award from the Latin American Studies Association in 2014, the year of his death.

Tulio Halperin Donghi thought, celebrated, and suffered Argentina. Deeply informed on many specialized topics, he remained skeptical of the narrowness of the specialist. With passion, sophistication, and a measured dose of pessimism, he reflected tirelessly on the past as an open problem and the future as an uncertain challenge. With his departure, we have lost an extraordinary and multifaceted intellectual, and a crucial voice.

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DOI 10.1215/00182168-3088608

Silvio Zavala (1909–2014)

Silvio Arturo Zavala Vallado nació en Mérida, Yucatán, el 7 de febrero de 1909 y falleció en México, D. F., el 4 de diciembre de 2014, poco antes de cumplir 106 años. Segundo de seis hermanos, hijos de una ilustre familia yucateca, hizo los estudios primarios y secundarios en su ciudad natal, donde inició la carrera de derecho (1927–1928), que continuó en la Universidad Nacional de México (1929–1931) y terminó en 1933 en la Universidad Central de Madrid, a la que llegó como becario del gobierno español en 1931 cuando se proclamó la República. De estos años datan sus primeras publicaciones, en las que muestra interés por el derecho constitucional y una clara percepción del momento político. En 1932 obtuvo la licenciatura con la memoria “El Tercero en el Derecho Mejicano” y, en 1933, el doctorado en derecho con la tesis *Los intereses*