



## IN MEMORIAM

Tulio Halperín Donghi  
Muriel McKeitt Sonne Professor of History, Emeritus  
UC Berkeley  
1934-2013

Tulio Halperín Donghi, one of Latin America's most revered, prolific, and influential historians and a renowned public intellectual in his native Argentina and in Latin America, died November 14, 2014, at his home in Berkeley. He was 88. Halperín joined the University of California in 1971, retiring in 1994 as the Muriel McKeitt Sonne Professor of History.

Born on October 27, 1926, in Buenos Aires, Halperín was the son, on his father's side, of Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants, and on his mother's side, of Italian Catholic immigrants. He received his doctorate in History from the National University of Buenos Aires in 1955. Halperín had originally enrolled in the university to study Chemistry, but after two years realized that he was not cut out for science and switched to law and (without telling his parents) History. History was impractical because in Peronist Argentina you could not teach unless you belonged to the Peronist Party; law would allow him to make a living. But History was his calling. Casting about for a dissertation topic, he was given the masterwork of the great French historian Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II*. Braudel was then the head of the Annales school that was reshaping the writing of history in Europe. Reading his book was Halperín's road to Damascus. He set off to Paris, determined to study with Braudel, who recognized the potential of this new disciple, found him support, and assigned him a research topic in sixteenth-century Spain, the Moriscos of Valencia, the converted Muslims who formed the rural labor force. After fierce and dedicated research in Spanish archives Halperín returned to Argentina with materials for a massive study that made him worthy of the Annales school, *Un conflicto nacional: moriscos y cristianos viejos en Valencia* (1955).

Until 1966 Halperín taught History at his alma mater in Buenos Aires and at the National University of the Littoral in Rosario, unwittingly terrifying the students with his prodigious intellect, according to his wife Dora Halperín, who was one of those students. When the Onganía dictatorship clamped down violently on academic freedom in the national universities in 1966, Halperín, along with 300 other professors, emigrated. He landed at Harvard for three years but then moved to Oxford when he was offered the prestigious Chair in Latin American History. Oxford, however, proved to be a trying place for the family to live, and Berkeley swooped in. He arrived in 1971, joining the distinguished historian of Mexico, Woodrow Borah, in anchoring the field of Latin American History and making it one of the strongest in the History department.

It is likely that he intimidated the Berkeley undergraduates, as he had in Argentina, with his vast knowledge and his manner of teaching history by telling stories about people and events in the past — rather than pontificating or providing a tidy outline — but he was at the same time a kind and forgiving teacher of the young. And his graduate students here and in Argentina (which he visited yearly, spending 3-4 months in

Buenos Aires soaking up the gossip, teaching formal seminars at private universities and later at many public national universities, and meeting with students informally in cafes and restaurants) adored him.

Halperín's teaching style reflected his writing and analytical styles. His massive oeuvre, authored over a period from 1951 to 2014 (*El enigma Belgrano* was published just a month before his death, and the 600-page *Letrados y pensadores* came out just a year earlier), varies widely in terms of its subject matter, from intellectual, to political, to economic, to social history. This is a mark of Halperín's versatility as a historian, but it also reveals his absolute commitment to seeing the complexity and interconnectedness of things.

The best English-language title that Cambridge University Press could come up with for his magnificent *Revolución y guerra* was *Politics, Economics, and Society in Argentina in the Revolutionary Period*. Not very catchy, but accurate in the way it captured the multiple strands of causation that Halperín saw as forming the ruling elite in Argentina's nineteenth century. This book, written when he was forty-five, is considered the finest study on Argentine history produced in the twentieth century. Like his teaching, his scholarship insists on the importance of the telling detail, the small anecdote, from which emerge insights that do not just illustrate but rather illuminate larger processes and events and even transform our perception of them. His last book on the independence-era leader Manuel Belgrano, to choose just one example, punctures the worshipful consensus around this national hero by telling stories that highlight Belgrano's incompetence and his egotism: his proposal to solve Argentina's fuel problem by requiring households to build chimneys out of materials that were nowhere to be had, or his order that soldiers of his regiment cut off their long braids, provoking a riot. Typically, in a Halperín book, hard-won, submerged archival material (and Halperín's archival practices were legendarily impressive) is woven together in a dense and difficult narrative through which the reader moves slowly but steadily, sustained always by Halperín's subtlety, wit, irony and sense of humor about the human condition, and richly rewarded when the analytical brilliance of the big picture that he is creating comes into view.

Halperín wrote or co-edited over fifty books and countless articles. Most of his work centers on Argentina's history, from the late colony through the Peronist years and the periods of military dictatorship. Of this scholarship the historian Klaus Gallo writes: "His legacy in Argentine historiography is as powerful as that of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentine literature." But he also had a major influence in shaping the field of Latin American history, especially through his masterful and influential *Contemporary History of Latin America* (1967). In that interpretive history, as in all his work, Halperín is fundamentally concerned with how immensely difficult it was, and is, to create new nations and maintain them as free, liberal, democratic. Sometimes he sees these problems as structural, but he never sees them as straightforward matters of oppression or dependency. In fact, Halperín was one of the first and most perceptive critics of the more simplistic dependency theorists. As one award put it, "while *Contemporary History* offers a powerful indictment of international and domestic structures holding back the full development of the Latin American nation-states and their multifarious social and ethnic groups, it celebrates the rich variety of political and cultural movements that have tried to push forward distinct agendas... Nor can the failures of one era — for example, those of Argentina from Perón to the murderous military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 — be described as the inevitable outcome of what has gone before."

Halperín's legacy is not only his scholarship, but also his persona. He was the model of a scholar who is fully connected to the "real" world; he was interested in everything and seemed to know about everything, from Argentine soap operas to waste-disposal science to the latest chatter about Argentine politicians. He loved Argentina, but he despaired of it; as he wrote on the last page of his last book, today "the nation finds itself more than ever locked in a merciless war against itself." He was also the model of a scholar who sustains academic freedom and the open spirit of inquiry, an uncompromising ethical force. The historian Hilda Sabato wrote that "during the last dictatorship, he supported, in a thousand ways, the efforts of those who under these extremely difficult circumstances sustained the intellectual life of the nation, and his periodic visits were a vital inspiration to keep pushing through the darkness."

Halperín was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (one of only eight Latin American historians to be so honored) and was the recipient of the prestigious Kalman Silvert Award from the Latin American Studies Association in 2014, the Argentine Konex Prize for Lifetime Achievement, and the Award for Scholarly Distinction from the American Historical Association in 1998, as well as many honorary degrees. Within the History department he was an excellent citizen even as he feigned a degree of puzzlement at the ways of American academics. He was in constant dialogue with the faculty and students of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, where he brought his intertwined commitment to history and culture to shine on countless occasions and in his role as reader of many dissertations with a Latin American focus.

In the University he served on the Editorial Committee of the Academic Senate and on the editorial board of the University of California Press, and he was a longtime member of the Humanities Club, at which two and a half years before his death he offered a brilliant, witty, wicked talk, with no notes, on two personal encounters with Borges in the 1960s. The Center for Latin American Studies honored him in spring 2014 with a celebration of his lifetime achievements.

Halperín is survived by his wife Dora; daughter Alicia Halperín Yang; and grandsons Carlos Martin Yang and Andrés Sebastian Yang.

Margaret Chowning  
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