
BOOKS IN REVIEW

DETAIL AND THE GRAND DESIGN IN HISTORY

POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND SOCIETY IN ARGENTINA IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD. By TULIO HALPERÍN-DONGHI. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975. Pp. 425. \$42.50.)

This is by any measure an extraordinary work of historical analysis. It fulfills an almost classic prescription for a historian's history: it focuses on a major period of the past, considers the broad trends, deals with individuals and events, manipulates abstractions, and demonstrates overwhelming scholarly competence. Given a work of such stature, a reviewer hardly need comment on the usual matters of scholarship, materials, sources, or quality. And, indeed, the work has been justly praised by others more qualified in Argentine history than I.

Yet in case there are those to whom the name Tulio Halperín-Donghi and the above title are unfamiliar, a short comment may be in order. This massively detailed study analyzes in great depth the dynamics of Argentina's independence epoch from the colonial background to the republican aftermath. While the themes of this work are hardly new—focused as they are on the issues of economic regionalism, political factionalism, the militarization of politics, personal rivalries, the changing nature of Argentine society, and the development of Buenos Aires—the approach is more comprehensive and at the same time more detailed than previous efforts. Although the organizational plan of the book follows a roughly chronological track from the late colonial years through to the events of the early republican regimes, the text itself proceeds along a much less direct path from colony to independence with frequent side trips, switchbacks, detours, and way stations. By the end, this book has provided a complex panoramic perspective on the turbulent formative years of modern Argentina.

Lest anyone be misled by the praise universally accorded the book, this is not an easily read monograph and not through any fault of the translator. By

scaling the study so large and by demanding the inclusion of such detail, the author guaranteed the impossibility of a quick reading. This book must be read in small sections over a considerable time, otherwise the complexity of the narrative outstrips the ability to absorb detail.

Having certified, then, my agreement with the generally enthusiastic reception accorded this work, let me take another view of Halperin-Donghi's analysis. Implicit in the style, content, and structure of this work are an interesting series of methodological notions about the study and writing of history. One of these is the apparent conviction that history must be constructed from the minutia of the past, that the grand designs of our ancestors can never be traced without the verification of a detailed examination of behavior, interest, motive, and belief. Another is the preference for written history that reflects in its style and content the complexities and ambiguities of the past it attempts to portray. A third notion, clearly present in the book, is that the past is best understood by immersing both scholar and reader into the stream of history, in order to experience the crosscurrents of opinion and interest, the buffeting of events, and the drowned feeling of despair. While these three predilections of our author hardly encompass all of his historical methodology, they provide a convenient agenda for discussing the methodology of doing history.

Part of this book's impact, aside from its exemplary scholarship, comes from a tension between its antique, nineteenth-century fascination with detail and its thoroughly modern emphasis on interest groups, economic causes, and social conflicts. The author fails to give us the expected clues in his introduction, for example, where he forthrightly claims that the book is a political history. Well, perhaps. But more is made of the economic, social, and geographical causes and consequences of political behavior than of that behavior itself. Perhaps most interesting in this regard, is Halperin-Donghi's immersion technique. The trend among our modern historians is towards a detached, quasi-scientific approach to the past. This posture presumes that what counts in the study of history are the big trends, the fundamental patterns, and the comparability of these to similar phenomena in other places and times. The details exist and must be occasionally reported, but only insofar as they validate the big trends. These details not only have little importance of their own, they are also more or less interchangeable. One detail used as an illustration of a grand design could easily be replaced by a number of similar details, equally suited for illustrative purposes. As a corollary of this intellectual proposition, the modern historian must keep aloof from the lives and times being studied. Convinced that all of us have biases and preconceptions that must be articulated and controlled, the thoroughly modern historian often believes that detachment and distance protect best against the insidious influences of his own intellectual upbringing. Where Halperin-Donghi displays a journalistic enthusiasm for the study of politics, the truly modern historian cultivates the cool competence of the laboratory technician when analyzing political forces.

In a similar vein, our most modern practitioners of the historical science reflect in their prose styles this belief in the efficacy of history at a distance. If we had to invent a paradigm to represent the structure and form of modern histori-

cal writing it would surely be the computer-programmer's flowchart, a diagram that tells how a computing task is to be accomplished in sequential order. The test of the efficient program is often the simplicity of the flowchart describing it. Our modernist historian's works can almost always be represented by relatively simple, elegant flowcharts. Unlike the life they discuss, these books have clear-cut objectives, carefully specified limits, precisely defined analytical steps, evenly balanced explanations, and neat, satisfying conclusions. Not Halperin-Donghi. A flowchart for his work would be almost impossible to construct; it would begin in the middle, move to the end before the beginning, branch in a variety of inelegant directions, and, upon completion, fail the test of efficiency. Halperin-Donghi's book has only the most general of objectives—to understand Argentina's revolutionary period: it sets no limits at all on what should be included or what is deemed relevant; the analysis proceeds in fits and starts utilizing insights from economics, social behavior, power politics, international economic theory, and psychological understanding; and the work concludes with no major theoretical pronouncements but a host of tentative propositions whose universal applicability is hardly discussed.

These basic differences between the modernist and Halperin-Donghi keep coming back to the notion of detail, for it is the overwhelming volume of detail and the author's mastery of it that impresses most. Throughout my reading of this book, as a modernist sympathizer I kept impatiently looking for the quick summary statement, the elegant synthesizing paragraph that would lift me out of the mind-boggling welter of minutia. About halfway through the book it finally came to me that I had been misreading the volume: these details so irritating to my impatient modernist sense were not merely illustrations preparing the way for the coming synthesis; the complex track through Argentine history that Halperin-Donghi forced me to travel was the main event itself. Naturally, this method places extraordinary burdens on both the reader and writer of history: the reader has to pay attention to the detail or miss the point of the book, and the author must control the detail or lose track of the story.

Even though this book has many characteristics of a life-and-times story telling history, it differs in at least two major ways. The first is that the author takes a holistic view of his subject, refusing to be limited to any specific aspect. The second is that his use of material is informed by an understanding of modern research on economic, political, and social forces. This is no old-fashioned book relying on simple explanations but a complex book with analyses drawing strength from the accomplishments of the recent social science literature. And it is the peculiar amalgam of the old style and methodology with the new understanding of social processes that sets the book apart.

Worst of all, the book poses an uncomfortable challenge to the modernist. How could the book have been done better and at the same time been as effective? We could propose systematic and methodologically sound treatments of prices, wages, population, elite formation, and migration, all topics Halperin-Donghi treated impressionistically or on the basis of voluminous fragmentary data. We could plead for a reduction of detail and a reorganization of content. We could ask for explicit statements of hypotheses, for a sharp set of limits, and

for an unambiguous recasting of the conclusions. But were we to do all these things we would surely end up with a series of books that, while giving more rigorously defined results, failed to provide the reflection of life made available by Halperín-Donghi.

Throughout this comment, I have artificially opposed Halperín-Donghi and those I rather flippantly call the modernists, but of course there is no necessary opposition between the two methodological perspectives. Putting one against the other sets up an improper equation. These methodological approaches are, in fact, designed to do different things, even though they uneasily share the label of history. Halperín-Donghi speaks to those who see in history the possibility of vicarious participation in the past, in part for its own sake and in part for what that experience teaches about the human condition. The modernist looks to history for examples with which to test general propositions about the structure, form, and function of human affairs. Both methodologies, as Halperín-Donghi so eloquently proves, if done well by good historians produce excellent work. But the value and utility of such histories depend, of course, more on the needs of the reader than on any virtues inherent in the methodology.

JOHN V. LOMBARDI
Indiana University