

Silvert Award Speech  
Tulio Halperín Donghi

I would like to open my autobiographical statement with the same words chosen by the last recipient of this distinction, my old and dear friend Peter H. Smith: my academic career, as his, “has followed a serendipitous path... marked by abundant opportunity, generous encouragement, unstinting intellectual support — and exceedingly good luck.”

Mine hasn't lacked in moments lived in anguish, but these have been essential in creating opportunities to indulge my omnivorous curiosity for the ways of the world, that I have found as enjoyable as the ones a less agitated career has granted Peter. To say it in Rudyard Kipling's verse, thanks to them I have learned that *there are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays and every single one of them is right.*<sup>1</sup> This is why I can retain fond memories of my brief career at Oxford, a not particularly happy time in my life, but one in which I witnessed and passively participated in the construction of tribal lays as bizarre as those that have fascinated several generations of anthropologist who played the role of participant observers in Melanesia. I was then lucky enough to continue my exploration of the world in Berkeley, where the spectacle of (and participation in) ritual combats as fascinating as those witnessed by Clifford Geertz in Bali is as available today as it was in 1971, when I joined the faculty of its Department of History.

To this long exploration of the world I owe fond memories of the many people who have helped on my way, beginning with Kal Silvert, whose house in Hanover, New Hampshire, was the first in this country in which, on his invitation, I spent a night followed by a sumptuous breakfast “straight from the *shtetl*” (Frieda dixit) when he took it upon himself to help his former colleagues in Argentinian universities who were forced to continue abroad careers cut short by the military takeover of 1966. They are too numerous to mention all of them here, but I cannot pass in silence the names of Woodrow Borah at Berkeley, Richard Morse at Yale and then Stanford, Albert Hirschman at Harvard and then Princeton.

But it was in Argentina and Uruguay, where — while I found so much to enjoy in the vast world, too many of my former colleagues found it increasingly difficult to continue doing work on the lines defined before 1966 — I was reminded of how privileged my fate was, and of the responsibilities that such privilege entails. For the moment there was little that I could do in favor of their increasingly heroic efforts, but after 1983, in a country in ruins, I was given the opportunity to play a part in the emergence of a vigorous historiographic community that is one of the depressingly few success stories of the period opened by the return of democracy to Argentina.

As you see, it is only fit that, in looking back at my career, I close these few words of thanks for this too generous award quoting again Peter Smith: it has indeed “followed a serendipitous

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell*, II, London, Penguin, 1970, p. 225.

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