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# COMMUNICATIONS

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## LITERATURE ON INTER-AMERICAN RELATIONS: Comment

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I should like to congratulate LARR and Jorge Domínguez on the publication of his comprehensive, penetrating, and sophisticated review of the inter-American relations literature (LARR 13, no. 1 [1978]:87–126). A review at this level would have been impossible fifteen years ago, and its appearance now is encouraging evidence of the development of the field both here and in Latin America in the past decade and a half. The review covers a broad range, and I should like to suggest an additional point for discrimination among types of analysis, with special reference to what seems to me a blurring of approaches by diplomatic historians, as distinct from political scientists.

Domínguez is appropriately modest about the utility of paradigms in social science (p. 100) and he well says that “There are several clusters of ideas seeking to be born as paradigms; they coexist, and they compete.” Among these ideas are those of the primacy of politics or of economics, especially in U.S. foreign policy toward Latin American countries. Here I shall refer to my own work, but only to illustrate my concern about larger issues of interpretation. Referring to some scholars who “insist on the primacy of politics,” my book on the good neighbor policy is listed along with other volumes. Then the statement is made that “Other scholars would not choose to emphasize the primacy of politics. On the contrary, they would emphasize the primacy of economics” (p. 102).

This raises the question, in my view, of a fundamental and deceptively simple distinction between historians and political scientists—the relative importance assigned to the time factor. Despite the author’s formal bow to the

absence of paradigms, political scientists continue to employ language, such as “primacy of politics,” as though the phrase had universal validity in time and space.

The expression “primacy of politics” is not one that I used, but it would be correct to say that I concluded in my study that political considerations overrode economic considerations in U.S. policy toward certain Latin American governments. However, the essential point, a *caveat* to the generalization, is that this conclusion applied only to the peculiar circumstances of a specific period of time, from 1933 to 1942. I would go so far as to say that for this period, I was able to demonstrate that, in contrast to previous U.S. practice, the interests of private corporations with foreign holdings were largely subordinated to U.S. national political interests as perceived by Roosevelt, Hull, and Welles. The time frame of my study, and the validity of the demonstration were limited, and this is indicated by my use of the phrase “in its time” in referring to the good neighbor policy (*The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1961], p. 361).

Dominguez’ excellent review, with greater attention to the time factor, might have modified its handling of the paradigm problem so that more emphasis would have been given to the circumstances of cases of varied primacy; and also, of course, to that great antiparadigmatic factor for political scientists—differing personalities and perceptions of political leaders. Comparative studies of cases, in depth, might bring out distinctive characteristics of the conditions for emergence of different types of primacy. Arguing *in vacuo* about economic and political primacy leads down the path to the theologians’ traditional head of a pin. This may be as close as social scientists can come to paradigms, but then, they might derive some satisfaction by noting that meteorologists have to contend with long-term warming trends.