

R E P L Y

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This rejoinder will focus on what I regard as the fundamental question raised by Diego Abente and Janet Kelly de Escobar—that the issue I selected for challenging the conventional view of the power of FEDECAMARAS in the Venezuelan political process is not sufficiently relevant.¹ This claim essentially coincides with the old elitist view that the elite wins only if the issue is fundamental and loses otherwise.

The significance of an issue is conditioned by the time in which it takes place as well as the kinds of actors involved. If it happens to occur in “normal” times and participation is restricted to low-ranking bureaucrats (as in a safety issue like seatbelts in cars), then the issue certainly could be regarded as a minor one. But it would be inadequate to place an issue in the same category if it takes place during a critical economic and political period and involves the participation of top governmental officials and important foreign and national political actors, which is the kind of issue that I have chosen to discuss.²

Diego Abente points out that capitalist classes are dominant in the political system insofar as they have “a reasonable degree of control of the basic economic system.” Although he does not explain what he means by “reasonable,” it seems safe to assume that control of the basic economic resources of a social system by a specific sector or group increases its probability for political effectiveness. The actual case is, however, that national economic sectors in Venezuela do not exert any kind of control over the national economy, which is centered around oil production and in turn subject to state ownership.

This description fits the current situation. But let me turn to the past. Based upon the same premise, one may hypothesize that in the twentieth century at least, Venezuelan national economic sectors have been far from dominant in both the political and economic arenas. It is useful to consider some striking differences between Venezuela and a “comparable” country like Colombia. In examining the evolution of both societies during the nineteenth century, important similarities emerge. In the political sphere, oligarchical groups controlled the national agricultural economy and overwhelmingly dominated the masses. These groups were organized politically into oligarchical fac-

tions that called themselves liberal or conservative without having fundamental differences.³ But by the end of the century, the discovery of oil in Venezuela and its subsequent exploitation triggered a long-term evolution that did not occur in Colombia. This process affected Venezuela's political development in the twentieth century. Juan Vicente Gómez built a centralized political machinery on oil revenues. This structure allowed the now-powerful state to exercise authority previously exerted by nineteenth-century political factions.⁴ This process led to a high degree of "state autonomy" vis-à-vis national economic and social sectors. After Gómez's death, no return to the former state of affairs occurred, as modern mass parties such as AD and COPEI began to play important roles in the political processes of contemporary Venezuelan society.

I did not attempt in my report to measure how sensitive these parties have been to pressures from economic groups. I simply sought to raise an important issue by showing that the power of relevant economic pressure groups may have been exaggerated, but I nonetheless argued that more empirical studies are needed before taking a firmer position on the matter. Unfortunately, many suppositions tend to obscure, rather than to illuminate, understanding of the interactions between politicians and economic groups. For instance, Robert Bond, who seems to equate AD and COPEI practices with the Mexican PRI model, inaccurately asserts that no linkages exist between economic groups and these two major political parties. Janet Kelly de Escobar points out correctly that individuals like Luis Ugueto, Arturo Sosa, and Manuel Aspúrua who are associated with certain economic groups have occupied important economic posts in the government, but she incorrectly infers that FEDECAMARAS enjoys strong influence over governmental decisions.⁵

It would be unsound to argue that the economic sectors have no say in Venezuela's governmental process. What would be interesting to find out is how they influence the government on specific issues and policies, particularly in key areas that are more regulatory and redistributive in nature. Such areas are likely to remain important in the near future at least.⁶ Answers to these questions, I insist, will require many more case studies.

NOTES

1. I will not deal with Robert Bond's interesting viewpoints because they generally do not contradict my conclusions. But I am skeptical about his assertion that the motive of FEDECAMARAS leaders in campaigning for the PDR was purely "to breathe new life" into what he now regards as "a moribund organization."
2. I was not concerned about possible impacts of government policy on the profits and welfare of Venezuelan socioeconomic elites in general, or of FEDECAMARAS mem-

bers or enterprises in particular. For instance, it was not my purpose to measure whether or not FEDECAMARAS enterprises will experience less profits—or more losses—particularly after 17 July 1986, when President Lusinchi announced that his government would not grant the PDR for repaying the principal of private debts after all. Thus Abente's hypothesis that there were no negative outcomes for any unsuccessful petitioners is plausible. But gross figures on foreign currency flight from Venezuela to international banks alone do not prove the point he is trying to make.

3. Unlike events in Mexico, church and land issues typical of nineteenth-century Latin America did not generate deep cleavages between liberals and conservatives in either Colombia or Venezuela.
4. It is not by chance that no nineteenth-century political names recur in twentieth-century Venezuelan history. The Monagas, Urbanejas, and Guzmanes of Venezuela are past history, which cannot be said of the Ospinas and Restrepos in Colombia. For an interesting account of the impact of the Gómez dictatorship on Venezuela's political development at the end of the century, see R. J. Velásquez, *La caída del liberalismo amarillo* (Caracas: Editorial Bloque de Armas, 1986).
5. This argument would be like claiming that the working class possesses strong influence in a given society because a few key ministers have working-class backgrounds. Perhaps all that can be hypothesized from the fact mentioned by Kelly de Escobar is that specific economic groups have a higher probability of becoming more influential on specific issues at specific times. Yet to relate the firings of Díaz Bruzual and Luis Matos to the power of FEDECAMARAS is very speculative.
6. Despite the scandalous bankruptcies of the Banco Nacional de Descuento and the Banco de Comercio that negatively affected the wider public, key economic groups seem to have been relatively successful in preventing stronger regulations of banking activities during the last two years. As far as I know, however, no research has been conducted in this area.