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During the 1980s, civil war plagued much of Central America. From 1979 until 1992, over 75,000 people died as a result of the conflict in El Salvador alone. In *Forging Democracy from Below: Insurgent Transitions in South Africa and El Salvador*, Elisabeth Jean Wood (2000) introduced us to a distinct type of democratic transition that emerged as a result of years of sustained popular mobilization by Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). This mobilization succeeded in transforming the political and economic interests of the country's ruling oligarchy. After decades of political exclusion and repression against the left, many elites became convinced that the only way to end the war and rebuild the country's infrastructure to support an export economy would be to allow the left to participate in the formal political process. In return, the armed left had to surrender its vision of creating a revolutionary state in El Salvador. The FMLN agreed to disarm, demobilize, and accept electoral politics as the only legitimate means to attain state power. These simultaneous transformations on the left and the right combined with a number of favorable domestic and international conditions led to the historic signing of the Peace Accords between the FMLN and the government of El Salvador in January 1992.

Prior to the Peace Accords, El Salvador was historically ruled through a mixture of state repression and electoral fraud. In the 1970s, many Salvadorans mobilized to demand justice. After two fraudulent presidential elections in 1972 and 1977, many turned to the belief that revolution was the only means by which to bring about a more socially, economically and politically just society. In 1980, five guerilla groups united to form the Marxist-Leninist insurgent group, the FMLN. For the next twelve years, the insurgents battled the US-backed

military of El Salvador to a stalemate, forcing the country's economic and political elite into accepting a negotiated settlement.

In Wood's new book, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, Wood explores the reasons why individuals participated in this rural insurgency. Several scholars, military analysts, and insurgent leaders credit the success of the FMLN (and similar armed insurgent groups) to the high level of support it received from *campesinos* - "a person who engages in agricultural activities" (5). These *campesinos* provided the foundation of the rural insurgency at great risk to their lives, as well as the lives of family and friends. Given the extreme levels of violence in El Salvador and the disproportionate amount suffered by *campesinos*, "What accounts for the emergence of a powerful insurgent movement in an area where acquiescence had long been the response of the rural poor to social injustice? Why did so many poor people run extraordinarily high risks to support the insurgency? Why did others decline to do so?" (2) Wood argues that traditional explanations of revolutionary mobilization - class struggle, political opportunity structures, solidarity peasant communities, the existence of social networks, relative deprivation and purely, rational self-interest - fail to adequately account for the extent and timing of collective action on the part of the insurgents and their supporters. Instead, she develops an alternative explanation whereby the majority of the civilian supporters chose to contribute to the insurgency largely out of *moral* and *affective* benefits received through participation.

How does Wood reach this conclusion? Wood bases her explanation of insurgent collective action primarily on evidence collected from well over 200 interviews conducted between 1987 and 1996. Wood purposefully oversamples *campesinos* that chose to support the insurgency. Typically, these *insurgent campesinos* did not participate in the war as combatants,

but instead provided active guerrilla forces with food, water, shelter, and more importantly, logistical support (the moving of ordnance, providing intelligence, reporting on government troop movements, etc.). Wood also conducted a modest number of interviews with *campesinos* that did not support the insurgents, local landlords, mid-level commanders of the FMLN, military officers, members of the government, members of the United Nations mission in El Salvador and workers with various governmental and non-governmental agencies.

One can hardly conceive how difficult it is to conduct investigative research in the midst of a civil war, particularly when your research involves exploring individuals' reasons for supporting and/or joining an insurgent movement. In order to overcome some of the inherent dangers of conducting research in such an hostile environment, Wood lays out four requirements of her case-study areas: accessibility, FMLN/military contested areas, economic diversity, and "manageable politically." These requirements would permit Wood to draw meaningful conclusions from her interviews and to ensure the safety of those cooperating in her research project. Wood had to be concerned not only for her own security, but also for the security of those interviewed, as those cooperating faced an increased likelihood of being harassed by the military, unofficial security forces or members of one of the five competing insurgent groups that comprised the FMLN. In the end, Wood conducts her research in five areas of El Salvador that meet her requirements: Tenancingo in the department of Cuscatlán and Western Jiquilisco, San Francisco Javier, Santiago de María and Las Marías in the department of Usulután.

All of the interviews occur during the latter years of the war (after its most violent phases) or in the first few years following the negotiated settlement. This raises concerns about how interviewees formulated their memories of intense events after several years had elapsed. It is not hard to imagine supporters of the FMLN demonizing the military whenever possible and

attributing abuses to them for which factually they were not responsible. Many of the concerns of drawing inferences from these distant memories are dealt with in Chapters 2, 7 and 8. Wood draws upon research on social science experimentation involving memory formation and crosschecks individual accounts to make sure that memories are corroborated to satisfy the readers concerns.

Based upon these interviews, as well as analyses of secondary sources (data on agrarian property rights and election statistics) and participant observation, Wood identifies five patterns of insurgent collective action. First, campesino participation was largely “voluntary.” Rarely were individuals forced to join the insurgency. In the case study areas, both selective and collective incentives were noticeably absent. Wood explains how successful operations by the insurgents liberated several areas of the country from the presence of the Salvadoran military and landlords. As a result, those *campesinos* choosing to remain in the area were able to take advantage of this benefit – access to abandoned land. Access to land was readily available and equally distributed to *campesinos* regardless of whether they supported the insurgency. The only requirements for those remaining in the area were to provide food and water to the insurgents (a service typically provided to both insurgents and military regardless of one’s allegiance) and to refrain from providing the military with intelligence on the insurgents. Wood argues that the majority of *campesinos* did “freeride” on the benefits of the insurgency, but an unusually high number of *campesinos* provided material support to the insurgents above and beyond the minimum at much greater risk without receiving any obvious greater compensation.

A second pattern of insurgent collective action discerned from the interviews was that participation was “widespread.” Wood estimates that between one-quarter and one-third of all *campesinos* in the case-study areas supported the insurgency. This number is slightly higher

than other successful instances of insurgent collective action. Although Wood provides no statistical evidence for her estimate (and actually says one-third might be too high), the fact that the FMLN garnered roughly thirty-percent of the national vote in the 1994 “elections of the century” provides some tentative support for this estimate.

The third pattern of insurgent collective action reflects the evolving nature of the insurgency. In the 1970s opposition activity in El Salvador was largely confined to contesting elections and organizing strikes, protests and demonstrations. When the government responded by stepping up its repression of all forms of opposition activity, Salvadorans increasingly opted to support the revolutionary alternative espoused by the rural insurgents. While I agree with Wood that the repertoire of opposition activity generally evolved from less to more confrontational activities, it would be a mistake to lump together all opposition. During the 1960s and 1970s, opposition existed primarily in the form of Bible-study groups, student organizations, labor unions, political parties, and nongovernmental organizations. The armed left became a viable opposition beginning around 1980, but it did not entirely replace existing opposition. While the FMLN became overtly or covertly tied to some opposition organizations, much of the opposition remained autonomous from the guerrillas and rejected their decision to carry out armed revolution. So while many individuals and organizations opposed the Salvadoran government, this did not always translate into support for the armed insurgency and should not be counted as such.

Fourth, the level and degree of participation on the part of the *campesinos* varied over time. *Campesinos* contributed to the insurgency in a variety of ways: providing information, food and shelter to the insurgents, moving ordnance, participating in the local militia, and sometimes serving as insurgent combatants. The roles that the *campesinos* performed during the

insurgency reflected personal (pregnancy, tending to the harvest, etc.) and political (disagreement over the changing tactics or goals of the revolutionaries) concerns as well as the needs of the insurgents. A final pattern of insurgent collective action reflects the creation of a “new political identity and culture among insurgent supporters, reflecting the fact that once-quiet *campesinos* had for over a decade contested the authoritarian practices of landlords and the state and asserted unprecedented claims to citizenship” (18). The development of a new political culture is nicely explored in chapters 3, 6, and 7 through *campesinos*’ own accounts of personal and communal involvement. In addressing the creation of a new political identity and culture, Wood details how Salvadorans, by participating in the insurgency, were able to redraw “more just boundaries of class and citizenship” through a “collective enterprise” (235). The *campesinos*’ personal accounts are most vividly illustrated through a series of map-making workshops in which they expressed their new political identity and culture (Chapter 3 and website).

As mentioned previously, Wood claims that traditional explanations of revolutionary mobilization do not adequately explain these five patterns of insurgent collective action. Instead, Wood develops an alternative individual level explanation of revolutionary mobilization based upon affective and moral reasons. In the case study departments of Usulután and Cuscatlán, *campesinos* contributed to the insurgency at great risk to their own lives out of three principal reasons. First, *campesinos* enjoyed an *inherent value* in participating in a movement that would bring about social justice. This value was not diminished by the fact that total victory by the insurgents was unlikely. Second, *campesinos* acted out of *defiance*. Supporting the insurgency meant that they would no longer have to accept the indignity under which they suffered by the country’s political and economic elites. Finally, *campesinos* participated because they took

*pleasure in agency* – “the positive effect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that come from the successful assertion of intention” (235).

Though many *campesinos* appear to have contributed to the insurgency even with the knowledge that victory over the Salvadoran armed forces was unlikely, they were not irrational. Two path-dependent processes were also in motion. These processes affected the values that individuals assigned to these emotive and affective reasons: *local past patterns of violence* and *proximity to insurgent forces*. One of the most reliable predictors of an individual’s support for the FMLN insurgency related to whether that individual had a family member or close relative killed by the military. The Salvadoran armed forces committed several massacres and extrajudicial killings of unarmed civilians both prior to and during the conflict. While Wood conducted the majority of her interviews years later, most *insurgent campesinos* mentioned the murder of a family member as a primary reason for joining or supporting the insurgents. The moral and affective reasoning behind participation was much stronger among these *campesinos*.

The second path dependent process involves one’s proximity to insurgent forces. During the war, one was much more likely to participate if one’s community was located close to an insurgent success. Successes could range from a successful military campaign by the insurgents to the establishment of schools, hospitals or land cooperatives. For example, a successful land cooperative in one community was key to convincing new members from neighboring communities that the benefits of the insurgency outweighed the costs. One of the many interesting findings from this discussion is the tendency for *campesinos* to evaluate the success of the insurgency in local terms. *Campesinos’* interviews did not refer to the likelihood of success at the national level – the overthrow of the regime by the FMLN. Instead, their support for the insurgency was much more a reflection of their personal and communal experience.

Overall, Wood does a laudable job in drawing together much of the general theoretical literatures on peasant rebellion, revolution, social movements, and collective action. She also makes use of several research methodologies including open-ended interviews, participant observation, archival research, formal modeling and social science experimentation. The book will be of interest to not only scholars of El Salvador and Central America, but to those interested in the study of collective action processes and political violence more generally.

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