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July 15, 2002
Micro-Foundations of Civil War Violence
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Political Violence during El Salvador's Civil War

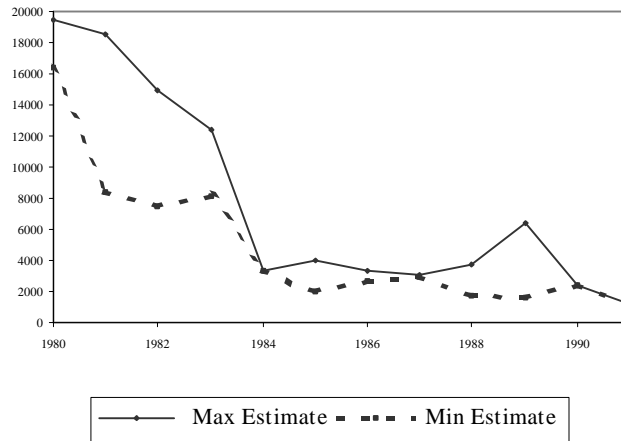
About one in 56 Salvadorans died as a result of the El Salvador's civil war (1979-1992), a figure comparable to that of the US during the Civil War (1:55) and of Britain in World War I (1:57), and somewhat less than the figures for the Guatemalan and Nicaragua civil wars (both about 1:40; Seligson and McElhinny 1996: Table 3).¹ About two thirds of those killed were civilians. Some were supporters or supposed supporters of one side, killed by forces or supporters of the other side. A few were killed in the cross-fire of battle, but the great majority were killed intentionally. The war occasioned major population movements, reversing the pre-war urban/rural ratio of 40:60. Most violence took place in areas controlled or contested by insurgent forces. The war did not have an ethnic dimension; the approximately 5 percent of the population that identify themselves as indigenous did not strongly support either side and neither party attempted to mobilize around ethnic appeals. Rather, the war was fought by leftist insurgents against an authoritarian regime opposed to economic or political reform. After years of military stalemate, the war ended by a negotiated settlement in 1992; the first inclusive democratic elections were held in 1994.

The vast majority (more than 85 percent) of the serious acts of violence analyzed by the commission were carried out by state agents or those acting under the direction of state agents against alleged supporters of opposition organizations. This was the finding of the Truth Commission (1993), the UN-sponsored organization authorized by the peace agreement to document human rights violations during the civil war (but see below). In contrast to much of the violence in Argentina and Brazil, the violence often occurred in public or the results were displayed in public places.² The Truth Commission found that "any organization in a position to promote opposing ideas that questioned official policy was automatically labeled as working for the insurgents; to belong to such an organization meant being branded a subversive" (Truth Commission 1993: 311). In the early years of the war, government spokespersons attributed violence against civilians to the insurgents and when that charge was not creditable, to death squads not under governmental control (a strategy currently recurring in the Miami trials of two former generals). However, the so-called "death squads" were largely military intelligence units funded by rightist civilians (many based in Miami or Guatemala City) acting under the orders of a combination of active and formally retired military officers (Truth Commission 1993; Joint Group 1994; Stanley 1996). Much of the violence took place in the countryside. Peasants were frequent victims of the violence: the human rights agency of the Archdiocese of San Salvador recorded 12,501 political murders in 1981; of the 6,718 whose profession was known, 76 percent were *campesinos* (roughly, peasants) (Americas Watch 1982: 278-9). (Of the rest, *campesinos*

likely comprised at least as high a fraction as they are more likely to have not been identified.) Areas controlled or contested by insurgent forces were locations of particular violence against civilians, including aerial bombing and widespread sweeps to clear civilian population. Women suffered rape and sexual abuse at the hands of government forces, both in the course of military operations in the countryside and while in detention.

Political violence declined significantly in the latter years of the war as is evident in Figure 1, which traces maximum and minimum estimates of war-related deaths (both civilian and military, including disappearances) each year. The decline reflected the conditioning of U.S. economic assistance to the government on improved respect for the human rights of civilians. The coming to power of younger officers trained in “winning the hearts and minds” of civilians may also have contributed. According to U.S. military advisers (Bacevich et al. 1988), the Salvadoran military failed to win popular support because of their record of violence against

Figure 1.3: War-Related Deaths, 1980-1991



Source: Seligson and McElhinny 1996: Table 1

people judged by their neighbors not to have been insurgents. Efforts to recast the image of government forces through civic action campaigns and psychological operations failed to convince rural residents to participate in civil defense patrols, in light of the significant ongoing violence (though at a much lower level). An exception to the trend of lesser violence is the smaller peak in the figure, which marks the FMLN’s November 1989 offensive. The regime reacted with egregious violence against civilians. The government’s Atlacatl Battalion, on the order of the High Command, executed six Jesuit scholars, their housekeeper, and her daughter and the Air Force bombed civilian neighborhoods of San Salvador (Gibb 2000).

Political violence by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) focused on supposed government informers (and of course soldiers). Civilians thought to be informers were

sometimes warned from insurgent-contested areas; if they remained, they were executed, occasionally after some sort of hearing. This pattern of violence intensified after the discovery that a high-level member of one guerrilla faction (the RN) was a government informer whose reports had led to the decimation of FMLN networks in western El Salvador and parts of San Salvador (Gibb 2000). It took an extreme form on the slopes of the San Vicente where FPL commander Mayo Sibrian executed hundreds of guerrilla combatants and insurgent *campesinos* (roughly, peasants) in the mid-1980s on suspicion of being informers (Gibb 2000: 291-308). The FMLN also forced mayors from the contested areas. After threats, 45 percent of the mayors resigned. One guerrilla faction executed several mayors in eastern El Salvador who refused to leave and kidnapped others in a unsuccessful attempt to negotiate the release of two captured commanders (Truth Commission 1993: 312).

To be more precise about patterns of political violence is difficult due to the limits and biases of the available data sources. There are few police or judicial records; military records are not yet available.³ The most authoritative source is the Truth Commission report, which includes annexes that characterize the violence in terms of the characteristics of human rights violations it documents (rural versus urban). Other studies did not find as large a discrepancy between the violence of the left and right. Based on a post-war national survey of 1,400 people, Seligson and McElhinny (1996: 238) found that respondents who supported the FMLN were almost twice as likely to report the death of at least one family member during the war than respondents affiliated with the center and right (55.2 percent compared to 29.9 percent). Moreover, the reporting of war casualties and human rights violations to the Commission appears to have been extremely uneven across geographical regions. The reasons are not clear, but probably include differences in the effort regional organizations affiliated to the FMLN made to mobilize residents to report violations, as well as the different accessibility of regions during the war itself. The report draws on various sources, including directly reported violations but principally the data compiled by human rights organizations during the war. Rural violations were not adequately represented in this data as their reporting depended on the presence in the area of likely reporters of violations were present, such as Catholic clergy.⁴ The data of some (covertly FMLN-affiliated) organizations was probably biased against the government.

So there is a lot we do not know about political violence in El Salvador. Given the absence of detailed government or other records concerning civilian support of the insurgents and their reasons for participating, my research method in studying patterns of collective action and political violence during the Salvadoran civil war is primarily ethnographic.⁵ To explore the local processes of participation and non-participation in the insurgency, my case-study areas had to meet the following four criteria. First, the areas had to be accessible to the researcher, a far from trivial requirement during and just after civil war. Second, the case-study areas had to be contested regions where both participants and non-participants were present. This meant that areas where one side or the other generally maintained control would not serve as in the Salvadoran context that meant that only supporters of the controlling party would be visible to the researcher (whatever their private preferences). Third, the case-study areas should comprise a variety of agrarian economies before the war. Finally, the set of case-study areas had to be

manageable politically. Maintaining a research profile acceptable to the principal political actors in a civil war is a difficult and complicated enterprise, particularly when the researcher moves between the contending parties interviewing both participants and nonparticipants, the rural landless and their erstwhile landlords, and FMLN commanders and government military officers.

The case-study areas analyzed in my forthcoming book (Wood 2003), the municipality of Tenancingo in the department of Cuscatlán and selected municipalities in the department of Usulután, together met these criteria. On various occasions between 1987 and 1996, I conducted field research in two areas of El Salvador, spending a total of 25 months there in all.

Briefly, my findings are these. Approximately a third of the residents of the case-study areas, a minority but a substantial one, voluntarily supported the insurgents with food, water, and military intelligence, some for more than a decade, despite their keen awareness of the high risks they thereby ran. Participation took various forms on the part of different people and at different periods of time. Some of them at some point during the war served as couriers, militia members, and leaders of insurgent organizations. A very few had also at some time served as full-time members of the guerrilla forces. Most residents did not support the insurgents. While members of elite families almost all supported the government, support for the insurgents among poor rural residents was only weakly related to pre-war land tenure status. Even some beneficiaries of the counter-insurgency agrarian reform carried out in 1980 supported the insurgents. The form of insurgent collective action varied over time, ranging from individual covert support to the public founding of insurgent organizations to occupy land.

Those who did not participate in the insurgency had access to the material benefits of the insurgency whenever their insurgent neighbors did. The FMLN did not attempt to protect particular households or communities. In Usulután during the military stalemate, *all* households had access to land for subsistence cultivation as a result of the FMLN's forcing of government forces and landlords from the area. Yet many were willing to found insurgent cooperative to formally claim land they were already farming. It was the armed presence of the FMLN, not the existence of cooperatives, that assured access to land from year to year. It was not credible (until the end of the war) that membership in an insurgent cooperative would yield legal title to land farmed in highly conflicted areas during the civil war.

An important factor in whether a *campesino* supported the FMLN or not was the history of violence against family members and neighbors. According to my fieldwork, in neighborhoods or among families where government forces and their allies had carried out significant violence support for the FMLN was more likely (*if* the area was not entirely dominated by government forces). Where the FMLN had carried out significant initial violence support for the FMLN was much less likely (and some there covertly supported government forces). So patterns of government and insurgent violence should help explain patterns of insurgency.

Additional evidence to resolve the puzzle of high-risk collective action comes from

insurgent *campesinos*' accounts of their participation, non-participants' accounts of their experiences, and the emergence of an insurgent political culture among insurgent supporters by the end of the civil war. When asked why they supported the FMLN, insurgent *campesinos* reiterated several themes: the injustice of pre-war land distribution and labor relations, their desire for land, the contempt with which they were treated by landlords, the arbitrary brutality with which government forces responded to non-violent strikes and demonstrations, the fear with which they lived during the war, and the suffering of their families. Significantly, they also repeatedly asserted their pride in their war-time activities and consistently claimed *authorship* of the changes that they identified as their work, a claim to authorship difficult to account for in most explanations of collective action. In contrast, those who did not support the insurgency emphasized the exercise of violence by both armies (and a significant subset particularly emphasized that of the FMLN).

Based on these pattern of participation and on the interviews, I believe that moral commitments and emotional engagement were principal reasons for insurgent collective action by *campesinos* in the Salvadoran civil war. But whether and when people acted on those commitments was shaped by the course of the war.

First, many participants appear to have taken part because they had come to value *participation in itself* as a result of new religious teachings under liberation theology because to struggle for the realization of the reign of God was to live a life valuable to oneself and in the eyes of God despite its poverty, humiliations, and suffering. The result was a new sense of hope and new belief in the possibility of effective political participation which together sustained participation by many despite the movement's few victories.

Second, some *campesinos* not only felt moral outrage at state terror but acted in *defiance* of those authorities, supporting the insurgency despite the violence of the government, a refusal to acquiesce. Participation *per se* expressed defiance; its value was not contingent on success or even on one's contributing to the likelihood of success. Some *campesinos* apparently valued defiance more than they feared the possible costs and joined the insurgency regardless of whether others also joined, that is, independently of the likelihood of success. These participants, who tended to have lost family members at the hands of government forces and to have joined the insurgency early in the war, were the *unconditionally defiant*. Others also valued defiance but participated or not depending on the likelihood of success; for these *conditionally defiant* participants, their participation depended on the belief that sufficiently numerous others would join in.

Whatever their feeling of moral outrage and willingness to act on defiance, *campesinos* with no proximity to insurgent forces did not of course act; even the unconditionally defiant were not suicidal in the Salvadoran contest. Thus there were two contingent factors that shaped who acted for this reason: *the path of violence* and *proximity to insurgent forces*.

In interviews, insurgent *campesinos* claimed the changes wrought in the case-study areas

as their achievement as well as that of the FMLN, which suggests that in so doing, participants experienced a pleasure in agency: they had redrawn the contours of their world. Given the absence of material selective benefits, I suggest that pleasure in agency itself forms the third reason that some *campesinos* joined the insurgency. By *pleasure in agency*, I refer the positive affect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that come from the successful assertion of intention. But I mean something more specific. By using the abstract term agency rather than the plainer “effectiveness” or the more common “efficacy”, I mean to stress that this increased self-esteem and pride in self-determination and efficacy occur not just in *any* intentional activity but in the course of making history -- a history perceived as more *just*. Pleasure in agency is distinct from participation-in-itself as a motive in that it depends on expectations that an action will be successful.

The affective benefits of participation reinforced an emergent insurgent political culture in a reiterative process. The pride and pleasure in the effective collective action of forcing landlords and authorities from the area reinforced insurgent values, beliefs, and identity as well as perceptions that the benefits of collective action -- including affective benefits -- were higher and the costs less than believed (if still significant as attested to by the low but non-zero number of cooperativist casualties). These changes in values and beliefs constituted an emerging insurgent political culture, which included a new identity as a member of a new community that together carried out challenging deeds and took pride in their success. The process was recursive: when a new set of insurgent actions, such as the founding of the first insurgent cooperatives, was successful, nearby groups of non-participants once again re-evaluated the costs and benefits of participation and some decided to join – and insurgency spread across the case-study areas. The increased expectation of success was essential in drawing in new members, but the pleasure of agency was undiminished by the fact that one’s own contribution to the likelihood of victory was vanishingly small.

These reasons for participating in insurgency have a particular common form: they are *process-regarding*, *other-regarding*, and *endogenous* to the course of the war. In contrast to the material benefits of the insurgency that participants and non-participants alike could share, these reasons were contingent on participation (that is, on the process) and thus have the formal structure of selective (or in-process) benefits. The reasons are other-regarding in that the experience has meaning (and is thus a motive) only in reference to a wider community, those whose suffering are given meaning through continued activism or those with whom one acts to make history. These reasons for action emerged endogenously in the course of the war in response to changing patterns of violence and rebellion. For example, participation in insurgent networks enabled both the imagining of different futures as the result of one’s own action, and the positive judgement that change was possible. The evolution of insurgent political culture was the product of ideological work carried out within insurgent networks.

Finally, that their reasons were moral and emotional does not imply that participants were irrational: like conventional explanations for collective action, this interpretation emphasizes intentional action taken with the purpose of realizing one’s interests or values as the key element

of the micro-foundations of collective action. Despite the risks involved, *campesinos* had cogent and enduring reasons for participating, which they articulated to me at length. They acted intentionally in the pursuit of their ends, often carefully weighing the benefits and costs. Acting for such reasons is not irrational either in the substantive sense of unreasonable or crazy or in the formal sense of inconsistent or incomplete. My interpretation of insurgent collective action thus does not differ from canonical rational choice accounts in its presumption of intention but in suggesting the importance of reasons for acting absent from that account. Some reasons for acting are non-consequentialist, which does pose a challenge to rational choice accounts (unless one believes that, say, a commitment to keep a promise to my dead mother can be well understood as a taste for promise-keeping or a reluctance to be the kind of person who does not keep such promises, or some other formal interpretation of a non-consequentialist commitment.)

Thus an understanding of political violence depends on scholarship that is attuned to emotional as well as material reasons for action, other-regarding as well as self-interested motives, and the possibility that culture, not just political opportunity, resources, or forms of organization, evolves during the course of conflict. Yet local causal processes were also shaped in important ways by national and international actors. Political mobilization expanded in the countryside before the war in large part as a result of the new pastoral practices of liberation theology; U.S. conditionality restrained state terror; and international allies provided important logistical support to the FMLN. How violence “worked” during the Salvadoran civil war changed over time, as did the political opportunities that shaped collective action, the political culture of insurgent supporters, and (not explored here), and the country’s political economy, which made possible a settlement (Wood 2000).

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Notes

¹ Seligson and McElhinny compared more than twenty sources of statistics on war-related deaths in El Salvador and concluded argue that the best estimate of total civilian and military related deaths in the Salvadoran civil war is between 80,000 and 94,000, of which 50,000 to 60,000 were civilians (ibid: 224). So the standard estimate of 75,000 deaths is a conservative one.

² It was not always the case that deaths were publically displayed: clandestine cemeteries were occasionally discovered.

³ U.S. records are slowly being declassified. While useful for documenting ties between the officer corps and the death squads and the extent of U.S. knowledge of those ties (Arnson 2000), they are not yet useful for analysis of local patterns of violence.

⁴ The annexes were simply not useful for research on one of my case-study areas, Usulután, as the under-reporting there was severe. Nor are the annexes yet available in electronic form, which further complicates their scholarly use. One searchable data base exists, a compilation of various news sources and press releases by human rights organizations (El Rescate Human Rights Chronology), but suffers from the same biases.

⁵ Nearly all scholars of the civil war either study events at the national level with little sustained local or regional focus, or study repatriated refugee communities, or study regions controlled by the FMLN. Jenny Pearce's book (1986) on Chalatenango, the work of Vincent McElhinny (2000a) on San Vicente, a little studied FPL area, and Leigh Binford's book (1996) on Morazán, are three exceptions to the pattern of national-level analysis, in addition to my work.

The civil war in El Salvador ended over a quarter century ago, but the total mortality due to violence is still unknown. Reasonable educated guesses about the total magnitude of violent death hover around 75,000 (see, e.g., Betancur, Figueredo Planchart, and Buerghenthal 1993; Stanley 1996; Wood 2003; Viterna 2013). This fact, combined with the inaccessibility of many parts of the country during the conflict, means that El Rescate data focus on "investigatable" acts of violence, particularly those that occurred in areas of the country accessible to staffers. The diocesan legal aid office changed institutional forms during the conflict. The Salvadoran Civil War was a civil war in El Salvador which was fought between the military-led junta government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) (a coalition or "umbrella organization" of left-wing groups) from 15 October 1979 to 16 January 1992. A coup on October 15, 1979, was followed by killings of anti-coup protesters by the government and of anti-disorder protesters by the guerrillas, and is widely seen as the start of civil war. El Salvador's estimated 70,000 gang members speak as a power because they do not act alone. Like the FMLN in its day as a guerrilla army, the maras operating in city shantytowns and, increasingly, poor rural areas have a social base, people whom they live among and receive support from. But unlike the all-volunteer FMLN during the war, which was one of the Western Hemisphere's most formidable revolutionary organizations, gang members are the primary or sole source of income for their family members, an estimated 500,000 people—about 8 percent of El Salvador's population. Violence involving street gangs in El Salvador left 907 people dead last month, a level of bloodshed unseen since the civil war of the 1980s, police say. They say the high numbers are due to an increase in clashes between street gangs and the security forces and rival gangs fighting each other. El Salvador is believed to have more than 70,000 gang members. The government has been tackling them head on. President Salvador Sanchez Ceren has brought in 7,000 army troops to help the police carry out patrols but he has been criticised for failing to reduce the violence. image copyrightReuters. image captionThrough to the end of August, there were 4,232 murders compared with 2,533 in the same period last year. Migration from El Salvador is shaped by a history of civil unrest, external interventions, and deeply rooted social inequalities. Home to roughly 6.4 million people, the country is the smallest by territory in Central America yet the most densely populated. El Salvador's status today as a major origin country of migrants and asylum seekers can be traced back to decades of deep political and socioeconomic inequities, which have long made life difficult for most Salvadorans. After El Salvador gained independence from Spain in 1821, its new leaders sought to develop the country economically, viewing international markets as the key to success. However, just 2 percent of asylum applications filed by Salvadorans during the war were approved.