



Challenging the 'Criminal Rebel' thesis

Based on Working Paper no.27: Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Criminal Rebels? A discussion of war and criminality from the Colombian Experience.' This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

The Colombian conflict seems to be a typical instance of a 'greedy war', and exhibits very strong links between criminal activities and rebel organisations. Against this, Gutiérrez suggests that not even in Colombia does Collier's 'criminal rebels' thesis hold, with the Colombian case showing that criminality and war mix in ways that escape a strictly economic interpretation of war. Analysing the experience of the two leading Colombian guerrilla armies (FARC and ELN), he demonstrates the need for a different framework for the understanding of wars waged by non- (or not strictly) materialistic soldiers.

- **Poor economic incentives to join a rebel army**

Guerrillas are generally unpaid. Plundering following a successful attack is also prohibited, and while abuses against the civil population do occur, these are on behalf of the organisation and not individuals. Thus a position in a guerrilla organisation is not a substitute for a legal employment, nor is it a good substitute for less risky and more economically-rewarding forms of illegal activity. Not only does this lack of economic incentive make it very hard for guerrillas to establish any kind of family life, but this is anyway strongly discouraged. Strict vigilance is kept on members to prevent them from keeping goods that 'belong' to the organisation; and political and administrative sanctions block the temptation of ostentatious consumption by those involved in illegal markets. Individual appropriation of goods is ideologically disavowed. Thus the vast majority of the organisation not only has no possibility of getting rich through war, but also know this.

- **High morale despite risks and apparent lack of incentive**

A guerrilla is more likely to be injured or killed than an 'official' soldier – a risk that is increasing, as the intensity of confrontations between the rebels and the army has become greater. Rebel armies also demand life-long militancy, with death often being the only way out. Yet there has been very little forced recruitment, it generally being recognised that forced recruits make poor fighters and are far more likely to switch sides. Morale has also continued to be higher than would be expected of organisations fixed on looting or on obtaining immediate economic rewards; and desertion has been of marginal importance, greatly outweighed by continued recruitment into the guerrilla organisations. In fact, in the competition between rival groups to recruit the best cadres, the FARC (which offers the least, and demands the most) has been a clear winner. Also, contrary to what should be expected of greedy soldiers, FARC members fight well.

- **Collective action problems have not been solved through ethnic or class solidarity.**

Ethnic or class solidarity is generally not a sufficient explanation for the solution of problems of collective action. The members of guerrilla groups are not attached to a fixed denomination or social group that would 'super-determine' their loyalty. Solidarity often appears despite a lack in ethnic motives, because leaders consciously address collective action problems, and try to solve them through ideas, organisational routines, and socialization in common norms.

- **Rebel armies promote strong moral rules among their militants**

No strictly economic calculation is possible when you are risking your life every day. To remain stable, an army has to promote strong forms of loyalty and norms of cooperation that override individualistic norms of behaviour. While internal purges now occur sparingly, restrictions remain severe. Vertical control is rigorous, asserted through organisational and normative mechanisms, and at least up to very near the top people lead a similar life style.

- **Rebel armies combine an ideology of self-defence and rootedness in peasant economies**

A better explanation than the Criminal Rebels thesis for the strength of rebel armies and how they operate (at least in the Colombian case) is to see them as emerging from a context of anger, grievance and hardship, in which vengeance plays an important role. While the State kept the guerrillas at arms length, there was no war as such. However, armed colonization and the boom in illicit drug production put the guerrillas and State into a different relationship. Illegal global markets provided the guerrillas with the resources to challenge the status quo (with their involvement increasing their political relevance amongst the peasantry), and also forced the State to intervene militarily. The latter increased the credibility of the discourse of self-defence.

- **Greed-grievance dichotomy too restrictive to explain contemporary armed contention**

A major source of rebellion and revolution in modern times has been the perception by the poor and powerless that they have no prospects in the incumbent state of affairs. Hardship would be a better term to use than greed in such a context. When rebel groups grow, they become much less ideological and much more focused on organisational success, because the new entrants (coming from popular sectors and with a lower educational level) are reacting to hardship and not doctrine. Hardship is a common motivation for both crime and rebellion. However, in the former individuals only engage in collective action to obtain large individual benefits. Although both use force against defectors, the selective incentives utilized by crime leaders are economic, while rebel leaders focus on norms and ideology.

- **Need to understand how guerrilla leaders address the challenges they face**

Guerrilla leaders face three types of challenge: collective action dilemmas, principal-agent structures, and competition with other potential entrepreneurs of rebellion or by anti-subversive coalitions. No good explanation of contemporary war is possible without understanding how they address these. Promoting wars using economic incentives has always been a poor strategy, since mercenaries are disloyal and greedy soldiers make bad fighters. In Colombia, although the rebel armies have engaged in the gathering of rents and involvement in illegal markets, it did so in order to have the means for waging the political war; war was not waged for the purposes of profit. The criminal rebels thesis is lacking because it cannot explain why guerrillas have remained united, fight well and hold tightly together in difficult situations.