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**CRIMINAL REBELS?
A DISCUSSION OF WAR AND
CRIMINALITY FROM THE COLOMBIAN
EXPERIENCE**

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Criminal Rebels?

A discussion of civil war and criminality from the Colombian experience¹

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Abstract

The Colombian conflict seems to be a typical instance of a 'greedy war', and exhibits very strong links between criminal economic activities and rebel organisations. Against this, I suggest that not even in Colombia does the 'criminal rebels' thesis hold, with the Colombian case showing that criminality and war mix in ways that escape a strictly economic interpretation of war.

Are rebels criminals? Though the greed and grievance papers produced by Collier and collaborators² have elicited a steady thread of criticism, only seldom has the debate focused on the link between criminality proper and rebellion. From this point of view, the Colombian war seems to offer very nearly the ideal conditions for the evaluation of the thesis that "rebellion is a form of criminality". The main rebel groups – and indeed the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), an anti-subversive coalition that has been another major player in the conflict – are rentiers of primary products, mainly but not only illegal crops, linked with international markets. Only very few people with knowledge of the country would describe the guerrillas as altruistic, or as barers of genuine grievances. Colombian public opinion, for one, sees guerrillas more in terms of banditism than of politics, as opinion polls have systematically shown.

I will argue in what follows that the criminal rebels thesis fails even in the Colombian case, and that this highlights some of the more general shortcomings of the strictly economic interpretation of wars. I will criticize the thesis on three accounts. First, it whisks out of sight the problem of the microfoundations of war – which is rather surprising, given Collier's stated theoretical framework and his explicit creed. Second, it works under the hidden assumption that the sum of ideological and mundane motives amounts to a constant. The Colombian experience shows that this is not necessarily true. Greed might be in part simply a function of scale (big rebel organisations seem shadier, small ones cozier) but political relevance also is. Third, Collier fails to take into account the specific nature of the activity under scrutiny: war. Indeed, he doesn't once name the fact that death looms large over warriors³ – a very crucial factor, which Mary Kaldor and others have properly stressed.⁴ On the positive side, I will suggest that the Colombian war has become increasingly criminal

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues Ana Danies and Jonathan Curry-Machado for their valuable input, along with Colciencias and the Crisis States Programme whose funding made this work possible.

² See for example: Paul Collier & Anke Hoeffler, 'On economic causes of civil wars', *Oxford Economic Papers* no. 50, 1998, pp. 563-573; Paul Collier & Anke Hoeffler, 'Greed and grievance in civil war', World Bank Working Paper, 2001; Paul Collier, 'Rebellion as a quasi criminal activity', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol. 44 no. 6, 2000, pp. 839-854; Paul Collier, 'Doing well out of war', paper prepared for the conference on economic agendas in civil wars, London, April 26-27, 1999.

³ Collier (1999 & 2000).

⁴ Mary Kaldor, 'Las nuevas guerras. Violencia organizada en la era global', Barcelona: Tusquets, 2001.

and, at the same time, increasingly political. In a more general vein, I argue – or rather remind – that purely ‘greedy’ wars are doomed to failure, both from a liberal-individualist perspective⁵, and from a sociological one, be it statist⁶ or class-based. In fact, a part of the greed or grievance literature is vulnerable to both types of criticism. On the one hand, it is unable to provide credible explanations of why individuals engage in extremely hazardous and trying forms of collective action. On the other, it is blind to the different links that rebel armies have with major social groupings and divides. This suggests that contemporary civil wars simply don’t fit into the greed and grievance dichotomy. Some of the social historical thesis about the reasons⁷ and modalities⁸ of peasant rebellion might offer better clues for the interpretation of the statistical regularities observed by Collier and collaborators than a purely *homo economicus* story would.

This paper proceeds in the following order. In the first part, I offer a short description of the criminal rebels thesis in the context of the greed or grievance debate. This section is necessarily succinct and sketchy but, I hope, fair. Readers familiar with the literature can comfortably skip it. In the second part, I present some basic aspects of the evolution of the Colombian conflict. The third and fourth parts are devoted respectively to the link of the guerrillas with illegal markets, and to the internal organisational constraints that make up their member’s immediate system of incentives. The fifth part discusses this evidence, and exhibits some of the oversights of Collier’s proposed explanation. The sixth part sketches alternative interpretations. In the conclusion, I suggest we need a framework for the understanding of wars waged by non- (or not strictly) materialistic soldiers.

The criminal rebels thesis

Based on cross-national research about the causes of war, Collier and Hoeffler found, that “natural resource exports are strongly associated with an increased probability of civil conflict”:⁹

The relationship is nonmonotonic, but at the peak (around a quarter of gross domestic product [GDP] being generated by natural resource exports), the risk of conflict is around five times higher than in societies without such resources, controlling for other characteristics.¹⁰

This, plus the lack of significant association between economic inequality or political injustice with war, yields the conclusion that the latter is fueled by greed rather than by grievance. The protagonists of war are young men without opportunities in the legal economy, that find an alternative in the insurgency.

Drawing from these findings, Collier concludes that rebellion is a form of criminality.¹¹ To show this, he proceeds in several steps. First, he sets up his general framework:

Although the popular descriptive literature on the impetus for civil conflict has focused primarily on group grievance, real or imagined, the analytic economics literature, set in a rational choice framework, has focused on predation.¹²

⁵ As in the extraordinary Benjamin Constant, *Ecrits politiques*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

⁶ Niccoló Macchiavelli, *The Prince*, New York: Bantham Classics, 1984.

⁷ Barrington Moore, *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966.

⁸ Eric Hosbawm, *Bandits*, New York: Pantheon, 1981; Gonzalo Sánchez & Donny Meertens, *Bandoleros, gamonales y campesinos*, Bogotá: Áncora Editores, 1983.

⁹ Collier & Hoeffler (1998 & 2001).

¹⁰ Collier (1999), p.840.

¹¹ Collier (1999 & 2000).

The rules of the game are clear: agents are rational, and act by materialistic motivations. This is not only an assumption, it is also an empirical fact. If you observe rebel groups – instead of hearing them – you will see that they are intent on predation:

The approach I take, which is the conventional one in social science, is to infer motivation from patterns of observed behavior. If someone says “I don't like chocolates”, but keeps on eating them, we infer that she really likes them, and the question of why she says the opposite is usually relegated to being of secondary importance.¹³

The methodological dictum is to observe organisational behaviour and make inferences about the motivations.

Second, he offers a sequence for the development of rebellion. In the first stage, rebels might address true grievances, but since they do not want to win (“victory over the government is not an objective, and so conflict is treated as an equilibrium phenomenon”¹⁴) they need a source of sustained rents to survive. Objectively, subversive forces act as criminal firms facing an entry problem:

Even in conditions under which a large rebel group is profitable, a small rebel group risks getting eliminated. Hence, rebellion faces the organisational problem of surmounting an entry threshold.¹⁵

Rebellions are a distinctive type of criminal activity in that the labor force engaged in the activity is both large and organized into a single enterprise.¹⁶

All this highlights the centrality of scale. Scale can be analyzed from two perspectives. On the one hand, it differentiates rebellion from other forms of criminality. Collier describes three distinct orders of magnitude, with their respective ideal behaviours and sizes: a) household theft, for which secrecy is vital for success, and thus tends to be very small; b) mafias, that engage in racketeering, and ideally are middle sized; and c) rebellion, which is big, because it predated on immobile wealth or rents (given its association with a particular type of economy: the exportation of primary products). On the other hand, successful groups are able to pass the threshold that enables them to become a self-sustaining and successful organisation:

First, rebel movements might initially finance themselves by criminal activities, evolving to natural resource predation only once they have passed the threshold. In effect, mafias might grow from protection rackets into more ambitious challenges to government military forces. It is perhaps possible to interpret the growth of the Medellin drugs cartel in Columbia and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda in this way, although it is hard to see the crime-to-rebellion story as a general phenomenon. Second, rebel movements might be pump-primed by foreign governments, whether hostile neighbors or ideological opponents, which see an advantage in generating rebellion. Third, rebel movements might initially be financed either by their own members or by charitable contributions from

¹² Collier (1999), p.839.

¹³ Collier (1999), p.3.

¹⁴ Collier (1999), p.840.

¹⁵ Collier (2000), p.9.

¹⁶ Collier (1999), p.841.

supporters. This is evidently facilitated if the rebel movement represents a ‘cause’ other than just the enrichment of its fighters from subsequent predation.¹⁷

Grievance discourse is thus accounted for as a rationalization. It is basically an eye wash, directed outwards to international audiences and constituencies (NGO’s, diasporas, etc.) and inwards to the rank and file:

Far from seeking to avenge grievance, rebel leaders need to incite grievance for their business to be profitable.¹⁸

But there remains a pretty obvious anomaly. If rebellion is typically big, its ability to solve social dilemmas has to be explained. Here we find two answers: a) greedy rebellions don’t face collective action problems because they can offer selective economic incentives; and b) ethnic or class solidarity promotes cohesion, as in other criminal settings:

The typical solution that rebel leaders adopt in response to these problems is to confine recruitment to those strata of the population that enable the rebel organisation to be cohesive. Recruits share a common ethnic, religious, or class background. Indeed, mafia organisations, which face similar problems but on a much smaller scale, appear to adopt a similar solution.¹⁹

As an afterthought, Collier finds that grievance has its place, after all, as a starter:

Rebel groups may need to harness a grievance to get started, but only those that can become profitable through predation are sustainable. The existence of entry thresholds for loot-motivated rebellions is somewhat analogous to the existence of the free-rider problem for grievance-motivated rebellions: each is a major barrier. This suggests that grievance and greed may have a symbiotic relationship in rebellion: to get started, rebellion needs grievance, whereas to be sustained, it needs greed.²⁰

This observation is extremely important (and partially correct), and I will return to it several times.

In sum, the criminal rebels thesis has three distinct interpretations. In the first one, rebel leaders get rich and use ideology and/or identity to recruit and organize soldiers. With this, huge moral hazard and collective action problems have to be accounted for. In the second one, all the members of the organisation – leaders and soldiers – are “doing well out of war”, like in the mafia only on a bigger scale, and selective economic incentives are used for recruitment and promotion (“enrichment of the fighters”). This might work well if it could be proved empirically that this is precisely what is happening: for example, if guerrilla cadres engage in racketeering, or in pillage and looting. In the third one, rebels operate like a kind of armed employment agency: poor people enter because they cannot find a legal job. For this it must be demonstrated that a position as a member of the rebel armed force is a substitute for a legal job (or at least for another illegal activity).

Taken as a whole, these clauses are rather inconsistent and do not always match the general assumptions of the model. If the guerrilla rank and file are rational, how can they be so easily

¹⁷ Collier (2000), p.850.

¹⁸ Collier (2000), p.842.

¹⁹ Collier (1999).

²⁰ Collier (1999), p.8.

convinced by the discourse of the leaders?²¹ Put differently, the first interpretation does not apply: “Greed motivated rebellion does not face any of the collective action problems of the grievance motivated rebellion.”²² And how are the moral hazard problems addressed? If rebels do not want to win, why in at least one crucial example offered by Collier (Russia, 1917) did they actually take power? Many more examples can be added to this list.

However, perhaps one or other of the clauses taken separately is useful. Collier applies the second variation to Colombia:

Greed motivated rebellion does not face any of the collective action problems of the grievance motivated rebellion... Hence, we may expect that those grievance motivated rebellions which actually take hold do so by combining some material pay off with the grievance. We see this in many rebellions. For example, in Colombia groups which began as grievance based organisations (of the political extreme left and extreme right) have evolved into drug baronies.²³

Is this vision correct? And if it fails, perhaps another of the two variations is viable?

The context

As said above, at first glance the Colombian war seems to fit Collier’s picture pretty well. Although the present day guerrillas have existed since 1964, and have their roots in an earlier protracted confrontation (*La Violencia*, 1948-1958)²⁴ between the two major political parties,²⁵ during more than a decade they were marginal, and only very rarely came to the centre stage of the country’s public life. Following the statistical definition (two or more organized actors, 1000 casualties per year, with no more than 95% of them belonging to any one side)²⁶ the war started in 1983, though if contextual criteria are included, it might be said to have begun earlier, but not before 1978.

The two major guerrilla forces in operation today in Colombia are the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). They are the survivors of a proliferation of small insurgent efforts, that – inspired strongly but not exclusively by the Cuban revolution – developed in the early 1960s under the conviction that a revolution was possible, even if protagonized by only a handful of rebels that opposed a repressive government backed by the United States. There is, however, a fundamental difference between them. While the ELN was ‘imported’ (i.e. it was more or less a direct result of cold war ideologies and practices), the FARC is heir to a long and endogenous process of accumulation of peasant armed resistance. In particular, the core of FARC’s leading cadres was already active in the 1948-1958 civil war, as the left wing of the liberal guerrillas. In the early 1960s it became a peasant self-defense organisation, encroaching into a couple of small towns, notably Marquetalia, which was bombed by the government in 1964. After a process of radicalization it became close to the pro-Soviet Communist Party, and so it remained until the fall of the Berlin Wall. This fact is of fundamental importance, and

²¹ And, for that, why are international actors so naive as to believe in the sermons of the leaders? Aren’t they rational?

²² Collier (2000), p.8.

²³ Collier (1999), p.8.

²⁴ The beginning and end dates of *La Violencia* are hotly contested by historians, but I will not address this issue here. The dates offered here are those conventionally adopted.

²⁵ See, for example, James Henderson, *Cuando Colombia se desangro*, Bogotá: El Áncora Editores, 1985.

²⁶ Melvin Small & David Singer, *Resort to arms: international and civil wars*, London: Sage, 1982. Collier and Hoeffler make explicit use of this definition.

accounts for the differences in style, efficiency and strength, that clearly favour FARC over ELN.

However, FARC and ELN also have many things in common. How can these shared aspects be grasped? There are many works about the evolution of Colombian guerrillas, with a more or less sophisticated periodization.²⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I will present a simple sketch of two moments: guerrillas without war (before around 1978), and guerrillas with war (after this date).

In the first period, the guerrillas basically developed what Broderick has called an “imaginary war”.²⁸ It is true that sporadically they came to the front stage of political debate, as FARC in 1964, but this was very rare. They only seldom faced the army, and their activity consisted mainly of long walks through the jungle, interspersed, in the case of the ELN, with outbursts of internal conflict, that frequently ended in bloody purges.²⁹ When there was confrontation, the result generally didn’t favour the guerrillas. Both of them (the FARC in 1967, and the ELN in 1973) suffered crushing defeats (once again, ELN’s was much more severe). The portrait that we have of the everyday life of the guerrilla members is certainly bleak, and this includes that of the leaders³⁰. Due to its peculiar trajectory, FARC had somewhat more rooted in the peasant population, and was able to appear from time to time in the press, after long intervals of silence³¹. But both were very small groups. By 1978, FARC had between 400 and 600 people; in the mid 1970s, ELN, after a major military defeat and a severe organisational crisis, was a cut above a hundred members.³²

There appear to be four important, though not necessarily competitive, candidates for an explanation of the organisational take-off of the guerrillas, and for the transition from the first to the second period. First, the multiplication of income due to illicit activities. On the one hand, the implantation of the FARC in illicit crop regions, started in 1978.³³ On the other, kidnapping and bank raiding abruptly increased. Second, and related to this, a change in the production structure of the country. Colombia’s political system was built on the long coffee cycle,³⁴ which was gradually fading out. Colombia was becoming a mining-illicit crops producer, which gave the guerrillas both political (coca growers are a relatively big constituency in a status of permanent illegality) and military opportunities to grow. Third, political factors. A process of ‘heating’ – which should be typical of pre-war situations – took place in the Colombian polity in the 1970s. A general disappointment with democracy

²⁷ See for example: Eduardo Pizarro, *De la autodefensa a la combinacion de todas las formas de lucha*, Bogota: IEPRI-Tercer Mundo, 1991; Juan Guillermo Ferro & Graciela Uribe, *El orden de la guerra. Las Farc-Ep: entre la organización y la política*, Bogotá: CEJA, 2002.

²⁸ Walter Broderick, *El guerrillero invisible*, Bogota: Intermedio, 2000.

²⁹ Jaime Arenas, *La guerrilla por dentro*, Bogota: Tercer Mundo, 1971; Broderick (2000); Carlos Medina Gallego, *ELN: Una historia contada a dos voces*, Bogotá: Rodríguez Quito Editores, 1996; and Carlos Medina Gallego, ‘ELN: La historia de los primeros comienzos’ (<http://www.conflicto.galeon.com>), 2002.

³⁰ Privileges were vigorously condemned, and the denunciation of budding inequalities within the ELN, for example, included not participating in the night guard, failing to take part in the quotidian chores, or preying on women (Arenas, 1971), but not the exploitation of economic resources. The general landscape is of extreme austerity.

³¹ In 1970, Tirofijo, FARC’s historical leader, wrote a heated letter to the daily *El Tiempo*, stating clearly and loudly that he was well, alive, and in Colombia. The letter was motivated by a previous series of news clips published in *El Tiempo*, that argued that he had died, or that he was in Russia and the Soviet government had ordered the end of the guerrilla activity.

³² Medina Gallego (2002).

³³ Ferro & Uribe (2002).

³⁴ Charles Berquist, *Café y conflicto en Colombia 1889-1910*, Medellín: FAES, 1981.

seems to have emerged in some quarters, and several factors (an alleged fraud in the 1970 presidential election, repression, corruption) might have transformed this feeling into concrete benefits for the armed opposition. Unfortunately, opinion polls started only in the late seventies, and though they indicate benevolence toward certain guerrilla activities, there is as yet no quantitative evidence about the evolution of the guerrillas' support in the transition between the two periods.³⁵ Fourth, learning. In the 1970s still another guerrilla organisation, M-19, thrived. M-19 emerged as a criticism to the 'classical' rural guerrillas, to their doctrinarism and political marginality. M-19 proposed national imagery instead of cold war icons, boldness and openness instead of leftist quasi-religious prudery, spectacular urban actions instead of remote armed jogging, a more centrist political programme, and a 'faster' way of waging war.³⁶ It tried to address the urban middle class, and apparently had a fair degree of success in doing so. Although at the military level it failed miserably – causing a lot of gloating from the FARC, which had correctly predicted the result – politically the M-19 showed that it was possible to make war the central issue of Colombian politics. In the 1980s FARC and ELN were using – rather successfully— – many of the political motives and techniques that the M-19 had discovered.

How did the guerrillas evolve in the second period? Above all, they experienced a giddy growth. Currently, FARC has between 18 and 20 thousand members, nearly 30% of which are women,³⁷ with a high combat capacity. It has suffered defeats – by the army and the AUC (paramilitaries) – but it has also inflicted them. ELN's development was stunted by the AUC, and after 1995 it suffered major military setbacks. Nevertheless, it still boasts an army of nearly 6,000 people. Hundreds of young manual workers, mainly peasants, enlisted both organisations. As an apparent paradox, at the same time the level of public approval for the guerrillas has dropped, today lying very near zero. This is because of the nature of the increased guerrilla activity. In a very obvious sense, this is a "war against society",³⁸ as can be seen in Table 1, that exhibits the evolution of massacres committed by FARC from 1993 to 2002 .

Even admitting a certain overestimation, the steep positive slope of FARC's murderous activity in the war period is telling³⁹. In two other fundamental dimensions, the guerrilla movement has shown an almost monotonous growth: direct confrontations with the army (Table 2), and what can be called economic warfare (Table 3). Involvement in illegal markets has increased enormously, as well.

³⁵By the way, if quantitative data can be finally collected this would give a fine vantage point to evaluate the weight of political and economic factors in the transition from period 1 to period 2. If armed activity grew significantly before 1978 then the political aspects of the war are definitely not negligible. This may seem to contradict my assertion that both FARC and ELN were small by 1978, but it has to be taken into account that in the decade of the 1970s other guerrillas were active. Of course, a full narrative of the ups and downs of the several denominations of the early guerrilla movement goes way beyond the purposes of this paper.

³⁶In turn, the M-19 was inspired by other Latin American guerrillas. The M-19 entered into a peace agreement with the government in 1990, and had a short, if spectacular, success as a legal political party. As a guerrilla, its activity was highly controversial, with several catastrophic and rather shady events in its record.

³⁷Ferro & Uribe 2002.

³⁸Pécaut 2001.

³⁹However, by far the principal mass killer of the Colombian war is the paramilitary alliance.

Table 1 – Massacres by FARC

(Source: Departamento Nacional de Planeación)

	No. of massacres	No. of victims
1993	37	172
1994	63	310
1995	135	720
1996	141	731
1997	110	554
1998	144	769
1999	163	939
2000	198	1203
2001⁴⁰	152	519
2002	152	903

Table 2 - War events

(Source: Departamento de Planeación Nacional)

	Ambush to the military	Confrontations with the army
1990	9	94
1991	31	196
1992	37	321
1993	7	354
1994	29	385
1995	27	323
1996	25	371
1997	17	376
1998	14	201
1999	30	244
2000	59	352
2001	43	478
2002	38	697

⁴⁰ In this year a peace agreement – without truce – between the government and FARC came into effect.

Table 3 – Pillaging

(Source: Departamento de Planeación Nacional)

	Bank raiding	Hijacking in roads	Illegal tolls and <i>pescas milagrosas</i>
1990	6	7	1
1991	21	24	20
1992	22	29	23
1993	14	16	2
1994	10	22	1
1995	5	13	1
1996	10	5	1
1997	3	9	17
1998	13	24	17
1999	12	84	30
2000	10	101	67
2001	6	125	72
2002	6	152	113

Rebellion and illegal markets

The transition from ‘guerrillas without war’ to ‘war’ occurred somewhere around 1978. In the same period, the country was witnessing the coca boom. As early as 1978, FARC regional leaders were sorting out how to deal with the peasants involved in illegal crops. After a short period of hesitation, they decided to accept the activity, within certain bounds.⁴¹ Some time after, the FARC entered the poppy markets, albeit with fewer qualms. Colombia didn’t become a big-scale coca grower until the second half of the 1980s, and it seems that the organisational take off of the FARC preceded its becoming a full fledged warlord in the coca territories. On the other hand, without this factor the organisation may not have been in a position to continue waging war, at least on the scale it has done in recent years.

Though the coca and poppy businesses are spectacularly important, they should not be allowed to cause other areas to pass unnoticed. The FARC is doubtless a very successful money maker. It amasses huge resources through kidnapping, racketeering and extortion. Livestock was an early target, and in the 1980s the guerrillas already held a tight racket (the ‘vacuna’, a quota that theoretically prevented kidnapping) over several regions. Gold and other mining companies, as well as some subnational governments, probably have paid it a regular quota.⁴² More than half of the world’s yearly kidnappings take place in Colombia, and of these half are attributable to the guerrillas,⁴³ even without taking into account that

⁴¹ Ferro & Uribe (2002).

⁴² Andres Peñate, ‘Arauca: politics and oil in a Colombian province’, Master Thesis, Oxford University, 1991.

⁴³ Of the 19,570 kidnappings that took place between 1992 and 2002, 9,748 (49.8%) were attributable to them; of these, 4,670 were committed by FARC, 4,378 by ELN, and the rest by other entities. Calculations based on figures of the *Departamento Nacional de Planeación*.

there has been an outsourcing of the kidnapping business, and that some victims are abducted by common delinquents and then sold (and eventually resold) to the FARC and other groups. In 1991 a governmental committee, *Comité Interinstitucional para las finanzas de la subversión* (Inter-institutional Committee on Subversive Finances) concluded that the guerrillas' income was bigger than that of all the Colombian legal industries taken together.⁴⁴ This may be a gross overestimation (balanced figures rarely make the headlines) but it hints at the magnitude of the guerrillas' financial muscle.

How does this economic war machine work? I will concentrate on the FARC, because it is objectively more important and there is better evidence about it. FARC's top management (*Secretariado*) establishes mandatory financial goals to be fulfilled by the regional entities (*Frentes*). All the money is centralized, and then it is redistributed according to normative (trying to maintain a balance between rich and poor *Frentes*) and military criteria. This system – plus the fact that promotion might be associated with the fulfillment of the financial quotas of the *Secretariado* – has proven stringent and effective, and has forced the leadership of the *Frentes* to develop their economic imagination. Thus, financial practices exhibit a fair amount of regional variance. However, several common patterns appear. I highlight two which are directly relevant.

First and foremost, the system produces a strong contradiction between the politics and the economics of war. To understand why, it is important to know that FARC rarely promotes class wars in the regions in which it is strong. Its expansion strategy is more territorial than class-based. In several zones, landowners, and political and economic elites in general originally admitted FARC's presence,⁴⁵ because: a) it was able to control cattle stealing, and b) played a 'civilizing' role vis-à-vis the peasants, as it instilled self-control and austere mores, compatible both with a revolutionary logic and with work productivity. In this sense, the relation between rebels and landowners obviously had a strong economic content: the latter are ready to pay the former a rent for imposition of security and discipline. However, as the pressure for more resources from the *Secretariado* mounts, the rent becomes so big that cooperation ceases to make good business. Thoroughly documented cases show that the price imposed on the well-off may become prohibitive: the *vacunas* can be collected arbitrarily, and not over a fixed period; people have been kidnapped two or three times; some families have had all their members seized. If the financial pressure from the *Secretariado* is high enough – and the idiosyncratic composition of the leadership of the *Frente* is the wrong one – the victims of kidnapping and racketeering can be systematically cheated, and ransoms collected without releasing the victim: a particularly hideous practice. Moreover, as the narrow demographic base of the well-off is depleted,⁴⁶ the organisation targets the middle and popular sectors. Taxes, tolls, random kidnappings in the roads (the so called *pescas milagrosas*), and rackets over 'small' economic agents (e.g., owners of taxis), are deployed. The outcome can even be armed opposition against the organisation,⁴⁷ as happened for example in Puerto Boyacá where the FARC eventually had to abandon the region.⁴⁸ But elsewhere the contradiction is also evident, and the complaints against the growing weight of FARC's impositions has become widespread.

⁴⁴ 'La guerrilla millonaria', *Cambio* 16 no. 110, 1991, pp. 38-48.

⁴⁵ Carlos Medina Gallego, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico. Origen, desarrollo y consolidación. El caso 'Puerto Boyacá'*, Bogotá: Documentos Periodísticos, 1990.

⁴⁶ They will flee, or get killed, or fight back, or a combination of all three.

⁴⁷ Fostered by members of the Colombian Army, but they were able to do it only because they had an available social base.

⁴⁸ Medina Gallego (1990).

Second, the *Secretariado* maintains a tight control over the *Frentes* and over individual members who are in charge of financial affairs. The rationale behind this is evident: the only relatively serious splits that the FARC has suffered in its long history come from people who have abandoned the organisation with a handful of dollars. Typically, their following has been from tiny to negligible.⁴⁹ FARC leaders are highly aware that a luxurious life style and the enjoyment of pantagruelic rents can not only undermine the organisation's cherished unity, but also slacken its combativeness. Thus, strong bureaucratic and normative constraints are imposed over the militants, specially those who are more exposed to temptation. But this brings us to the general frame of the institutions developed by the organisation, that constitute the immediate set of incentives and constraints for its members.

Promoting rebellion⁵⁰

The guerrilla organisations obtain huge rents from their armed activity. There is reasonable evidence that in Colombia there might not have been war (perhaps a guerrilla movement, but not war) were it not for illegal markets. But what about the individuals that wage war? How do the guerrillas build up an adequate system of incentives to make them fight? This is certainly a principal-agent (leaders-soldiers). How is it dealt with? How are collective action problems solved?⁵¹ What are the expectations of the guerrilla members? There are ten necessary pieces of information to try to solve this puzzle:

1. FARC does not pay its soldiers, nor its cadres. Apparently there have been some exceptions, especially in those zones in which several organisations are competing for supporters, but even then payment is only transitory; there is no salary on a regular basis. Intermediate level cadres manage huge amounts of money and this, again, can generate demoralization and, in a few cases, desertion.⁵² The organisational response to this danger is to increase the mechanisms of control over people in charge. The ELN appears to have somewhat different organisational principles. It is more federalized, and pays a portion of its 'professional revolutionaries', though it has started to reduce the salaries of routinized people and fire those who are obviously redundant (which constitutes a typically liberal strategy to obtain organisational efficiency!). On the other hand, normative constraints seem stronger, and grass roots fighters are not paid either.
2. FARC members can seldom, if ever, see their family, women have to fight hard for a permission to have a child (and then they have to give it away to a relative), couples can be torn apart if the military rationale, or simply the whim of the immediate

⁴⁹Only one such split was able to start its own warfare entity, the *Frente Ricardo Franco* in the late 1980s. The majority of the members of the *Frente Ricardo Franco* were murdered (near 100) by their own chief, Pedro Delgado, who suspected they belonged to the intelligence services of the Colombian Army. The massacre was organized practically in the face of the Colombian media. Some of the victims admitted publicly their 'guilt', which is a tragic indicator of the Stalinist mentality, found also in the early ELN (Medina Gallego, 2002; *El Tiempo*, 21 December 1985).

⁵⁰This section leans heavily on the extraordinary Ferro & Uribe (2002).

⁵¹Will Moore, 'Rational rebels: overcoming the free-rider problem', *Political Research Quarterly*, jun vol. 42 no. 1, 1996, pp. 417-454.

⁵²Recently the US ambassador in Bogota stated that the FARC leaders had enormous accounts in dollars, but provided no evidence. The thread was not followed and the issue remains open. Even if admitting this version, the accounts may be used for military-organisational purposes. There is no evidence of extremely high levels of consumption or spending by the guerrilla leaders.

superior, demands it. Arbitrariness can easily acquire a dramatic turn.⁵³

3. The two rebel armies prohibit the taking of booty following a successful attack. Although there are mountains of documented cases of flagrant abuses against the civil population by both FARC and ELN, they generally come in the guise of collecting rents, bullying people into certain behaviours, or enforcing critical restrictions that favour the organisation, not the soldiers individually considered. The paramilitary alliance, AUC, is more lax, and so its soldiers can be more rapacious. There is evidence that a more or less planned result of its anti-insurgent war is to snatch away land from small tenants and pass it to new owners, many of them AUC members. Even then, this expropriation apparently does not necessarily favour AUC's soldiers: it also goes to new residents, 'invited' by the AUC, or to old big landholders who are one of AUC's main financial backers. But in the guerrilla movements the dominance of bureaucratic over individual interests is overwhelming.
4. The mechanisms that enforce such a dominance, in the FARC case, are twofold. First, organisational. Strict vigilance is kept on members to prevent them from keeping goods that 'belong' to the organisation. Political and administrative sanctions have been used to block the temptation of ostentatious consumption, one of the immediate results of cohabitation with illegal markets.⁵⁴ Second, normative, based on the organisation's history. A crucial moment in the formation of FARC's identity as a distinct organisation was its decision, in the midst of the 1948-1958 conflict, to disavow individual appropriation of goods. The rule in those remote times was looting and individual allotment, more or less according to a pecking order, which created continuous internal conflict and breakdown of the chain of command.⁵⁵ Thus, even admitting the possibility that a handful of individuals actually gets rich with the war, which until now has not been proved, the vast majority of the organisation has no possibility whatsoever of doing so, and knows it.
5. Both FARC⁵⁶ and ELN⁵⁷ demand life-long militancy. It is a one-way path: you can go in, but getting out might prove impossible, or in any case extremely traumatic. In the ELN, these conditions seem to have been somewhat relaxed, and this appears to be clearly associated with its lower combativity. FARC's recruitment camps insist on the hardships that the recruit will face: from elementary but potentially very hurting (long and tedious walks, no drinking, severe limitations on smoking), through extremely serious (practically breaking off family links), to irreparable (loss of one's life).
6. Additionally, FARC and ELN promote strong moral rules among their militants. Once again, the standards have been relaxed in relation to the orthodox beginnings. The ELN, for example, apparently closed the bloody chapter of internal purges for good. Physical elimination for 'wrong' behavior or poor morality is used economically, if at all. Restrictions remain severe, though. Agrarian egalitarianism is still ubiquitous in the every day life of both organisations. The vertical control is rigorous, and at least up to very near the top people lead a similar life style; differentiation is incipient. Subjectively, the members of both organisations seem to have strong consciousness of a shared destiny although, of course, there is no

⁵³ Alfredo Molano, *Trochas y fusiles*, Bogotá: El Áncora Editores, 2001.

⁵⁴ Ferro & Uribe (2002).

⁵⁵ Arturo Alape, *Tirofijo*, Bogotá: Planeta, 1989.

⁵⁶ See Ferro & Uribe (2002), p.76.

⁵⁷ See Medina Gallego (2002).

evidence based on large numbers.

7. The two rebel armies have an unfavourable score in their confrontation with the army: the ratio of casualties vis-à-vis the army is consistently slightly worse than 1:1.⁵⁸ Joining them is more dangerous than becoming an 'official' soldier. The risks are increasing, as the intensity of confrontation has grown higher (see Table 2). Death comes easy.
8. The combat morale of all parties is relatively high. This is not an attribute of organisations fixed on looting or on obtaining immediate economic rewards, which typically confront very serious problems of collective action. If one contrasts the behaviour and the combat morale of, say, the warlords in China in the 1930s and Colombia's war lords in 2002, it turns out that the latter's morale is much higher. By the way, the same can be said about the respective State's army.
9. There is individual desertion, specially from ELN and FARC to the paramilitaries. To my knowledge, there are only ELN documented cases of group desertion toward the paramilitaries. Neither FARC nor ELN are endangered by the phenomenon; it occurs on the margins. Changing sides several times is rare, though in the 1980s there was a flow of militants between the guerrilla groups, that ended favouring the FARC. Desertion is difficult to quantify, but it is several orders of magnitude smaller than the spectacular aggregate growth of FARC. Why does it happen? It is associated with FARC's organisational arrangements – paramilitaries pay salaries, allow a margin for looting, and do not enforce strong restrictions – and also with the fear of a military defeat, in the case of ELN. Organisations compete for support, especially of technically endowed warriors, and the paramilitaries have advanced a conscious strategy of promoting the defection of skilled adversaries with the purpose of incorporating them on a paid basis. Given this factor, the desertion rate seems surprisingly small.⁵⁹ The other side of the coin is that when the paramilitaries take over a territory previously dominated by the guerrillas, the civilian support for the latter – in particular the network of specialists mobilized and in mass organizations – frequently switch sides, sometimes with astonishing suppleness.
10. There are no deep religious or ethnic cleavages behind the Colombian war. The members of each group are not attached to a fixed denomination or social group that would super-determine, so to say, their loyalty. There is an amount of forced recruitment, but in the main it is voluntary. FARC leaders state that forced recruits fight poorly and are dangerous: they can switch sides and shoot their comrades in their backs.⁶⁰

This gives us a general picture of the organisation-individual gap in the Colombian war. Take the FARC, with its strong links to criminal activity. Its non-paid members (18 to

⁵⁸ Nazih Richani, *Systems of violence. The political economy of war and peace in Colombia*, New York: University of New York Press, 2002.

⁵⁹ I am not aware of empirical calculations of the desertion rate. Using press information, my guess is that less than 1% of FARC fighters change sides each year. During the new president's administration (since August 2002) a vigorous and attractive programme to promote guerilla desertion was implemented. In the first 4 months of 2003, according to official figures, 147 FARC members abandoned the organization. This amounts to 0.8% of FARC membership, which means that overall desertions this year could be of the order of 2 to 5%. The desertion rate is still small, though pressures and incentives have mounted, which reinforces the general argument of this paper.

⁶⁰ Ferro & Uribe (2002), p.75.

20,000) are participating in a conflict in which they have a fair probability of getting killed. They do not benefit from looting, becoming rich is not a realist perspective, and this is common knowledge. The organisation severely intervenes in all the domains of their life. FARC's time horizons are long, because, very wisely, it has refused to offer a more or less precise notion of when victory, or the termination of war, will arrive – its patience is proverbial, and a powerful tool in peace bargaining. This is 'metaindividualistic' patience indeed, a life time might not be sufficient to attain the collective goals (however we describe them). No extraordinary income (or ordinary, for that), thus, no family life, and no credible expectation of escaping war. No ethnic or religious glue, either, nor a big doctrinarian build up. Despite this, FARC's members generally fight with great verve. There are exceptions, but as a rule their behavior in combat exhibits both skill and motivation against opponents endowed with better technical means. When on the defensive, they do not fall apart, and only on the margins does the group suffer defections.

Does the criminal rebels thesis fit the evidence?

All this is uncomfortable, to say the least, for any *homo economicus* story. Regarding the FARC, we have four crucial dimensions. First, individuals have very poor economic incentives to join the organisation, let alone to gamble their life for it. The basic expectation ("we may expect that those grievance motivated rebellions which actually take hold do so by combining some material pay off with the grievance") barely appears in this conflict that is an ideal candidate for the title of greedy war. Second, joining the FARC is not like taking any other job. A position in the FARC is not a substitute for a legal employment (life engagement, organisational intervention in the private life, etc.); nor is it a good substitute for less risky, and/or economically more rewarding, forms of illegal activity. Third, the war gives origin to an organisational competition. Rival groups try to co-opt the better cadres and sell their trade names. In this competition the FARC offers the least, and demands the most; however, in terms of growth it is the winner. The reason seems transparent: people who are going to join a guerrilla group enter the most attractive, successful and biggest, but this is not the utility function of a strict materialist. Collective action and moral hazard problems should proliferate. On the contrary, they seem to be pretty well solved, without recurring to economic incentives or ethnic/religious discourse. And this, in an organisation that engages massively in racketeering and exploitation of illegal markets. Fourth, contrary to what should be expected of greedy soldiers, FARC members fight well.

All this points towards several flaws in the criminal rebels thesis. It is inconsistent in its own terms. Any tenable economic (and more generally, rationalistic) explanation of rebellion has to offer solid micro-foundations. The problem has two levels, because in transforming the greedy wars hypothesis into the criminal rebels one, a hidden but fundamental change has been introduced. In the former, it sufficed to show that soldiers were entering into the guerrilla movement to cope with the lack of opportunities in the legal economy. The guerrilla group would be something like an armed employment agency, and the terminology ('rebel labour force') strongly suggests this notion. As seen, a position in the FARC or ELN is not a substitute for another job (legal or illegal). But in the second case (criminal rebels), the situation is much worse, because it must be shown that the guerrilla cadres get rich as individuals, that they (and not only the organisation) are "doing well out of war",⁶¹ like people engaged in household theft or in the mafia do. Here, the hypothesis fails completely. There is no looting – not even a regular salary is paid.

⁶¹ Collier (1999).

The fundamental problem that precedes the observation of what the organisation does, both logically and empirically, is why do individuals enter the guerrilla movement voluntarily, and why do they risk their lives knowing at the same time that they might get no material reward and have no expectation of a short or medium-term victory. The notion that rebels harbour a strictly materialist calculation when joining collapses entirely in the Colombian case and, I suspect, in many others. People enlist in guerrilla groups following a mélange of motivations – vengeance, prestige, fear, hate, even excitement – where strictly materialist ones do not always appear, because these organisations have explicit bureaucratic methods of internal distribution that disallow practices like looting, and may even prevent the payment of salaries. This is common knowledge for both recruiters and recruited.

The criminal rebels thesis reveals a blissful lack of awareness of the nature of war. It is an analysis of war built on the ground of a deliberate ignorance of what war is about (killing and being killed). As Kaldor has very adequately put it, no strictly economic calculation is possible when you are risking your life every day.⁶² The value of your life for you (not for society or for your family, as when taking out an insurance policy) is immeasurable. To “convince people to risk their lives”⁶³ organisations that wage war have, thus, to promote strong forms of byalty and norms of cooperation that imply the relaxation of individualistic behavior and norms – a feature common to all stable armies. This raises severe collective action problems, and questions about the utility function of the warriors (individually considered). Practical warriors understand very well that if the minimum of normative cement is lacking, they can get shot in their backs, an event that they try to avoid with all their might – a pretty rational concern, but not a strictly economic one.⁶⁴ To preserve my fundamental individual interests I would be better off if somebody prevented me and my comrades from being too individualistic – a typical solution of an extended prisoner’s dilemma, only that in this case cooperation is guaranteed by existing organisational structures and not by spontaneous evolution. These structures, however, may themselves be an evolutionary product – in the FARC, a result of learning from both the successes and shortcomings of the old Liberal Party and later guerrilla groups.

The idea that collective action problems are, or can be, solved through ethnic or class solidarity, like in the mafia, is untenable. Practically all the literature about the mafia overwhelmingly shows that *mafiosi* have failed when facing collective action problems. Mafias are terribly unstable, succession is frequently decided by violence, trust is scarce, internal feuds frequent.⁶⁵ Any guerrilla with such problems would be rapidly crushed by the State – *mafiosi* can intimidate unarmed civilians but do not make great soldiers, and Colombian *mafiosi* have been no exception to this general rule. Collier’s ethnic (or class) clause is in fact not rationalist, but simply a functionalist dressing. As Elster has noted, it happens frequently that in the fact-fitting process the rationalist programme is hastily

⁶² Kaldor (2001), p.36.

⁶³ Kaldor (2001), p.43. Please note that the principal-agent problem becomes extremely serious when the respective army can’t recur massively to conscription.

⁶⁴ Allowing for a bit of rationalistic slang, it reflects a leximin utility function (try to conserve your life above all, and then maximize other things). But then why enter war, in the first place? It seems that norms and ideologies cannot be avoided.

⁶⁵ Pino Arlacchi, *Mafia business. The mafia ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, London: Verso, 1983; Raimondo Catanzaro, *El delito como empresa. Historia social de la mafia*, Madrid: Taurus, 1988; Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia. The business of private protection*, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1993; amongst others.

abandoned in favour of some version of functionalist explanation.⁶⁶ In this case there is a distinct Lamarckian ring: since solidarity was needed, it appeared via ethnic or class motives. It lacks the specific mechanism of solidarity building that can be spelled out only through the study of concrete organisations. As seen throughout this paper, solidarity can appear when ethnic motives are lacking, because leaders consciously address collective action problems, and try to solve them through ideas, organisational routines, and socialization in common norms.

Another way of seeing the limitations of the mafia analogy is through the lenses of scale that are so fundamental to the criminal rebels thesis. Collier's argument is that a type of criminal activity entails a particular scale of organisation. Is there a criminal metric: small = burglary, medium = mafia, big = guerrilla? How, then, could groups like FARC, ELN, and AUC (big armies that live off illegal market rents) have developed? Once again, the main answer is: through greed or ethnic and class solidarity, as in the mafia. This is not a good solution. As Paoli has forcefully argued, illegal markets give origin to firms that have a natural upper bound; they can hardly be called organisations.⁶⁷ Illegal markets are not similar to legal ones: the absence of State regulation and trust generate familism, lack of vertical integration, organisational simplicity, and segmental structures. In plain language, neither very, very big amounts of money nor a common constituency solve the problem of scale; other resources (that *mafiosi* do not possess) are needed.. What allows a guerrilla like the FARC to overcome this problem and grow? Once again, norms, ideas, and historical experience seem indispensable to answer this question.

The chocolate eater metaphor (apart from its narrow behaviouralism) misses the fact that organisations may have several objectives. The principle of revealed preferences cannot be applied without discrimination. Hirschman's dictum, in his criticism of narrowly economic models of politics, remains as simple and powerful as ever: in politics, you should observe and hear.⁶⁸ People express themselves through voice, and in a rational model voice cannot be dismissed as lip service because if you want to be consistent you have to suppose that audiences are also rational. Furthermore, in politics an agent can have several objectives at the same time, or produce systematically unintended consequences. A distant example will show more concretely what I mean. The Ecuadorian political leader, José María Velasco Ibarra, served five times as president, and only successfully reached the end of a single period, and then only just. This does not entitle anybody to state that his objective when being elected was to be toppled. Unintended consequences can give origin to very stable patterns, and objectives may not always be consistent, nor easily coordinated. FARC's core (its historical leaders) started its violent activity long before big-scale rent seeking was possible. When the opportunities appeared, FARC became an egregious money maker, expanding into ever more areas. But building the economic machine has affected in several critical ways and junctures the political and military performance of the organisation. To

⁶⁶ Jon Elster, 'Rational choice history: a case of excessive ambition', *American Political Science Review* vol. 94 no. 3, 2000, pp. 685-695.

⁶⁷ Letizia Paoli, 'The paradoxes of organized crime', *Crime, Law, and Social Change* no. 37, 2002, pp. 51-97. See also Arlacchi (1983) and Paul Reuter, *Disorganized crime. The economic of the visible hand*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985. There is certainly a very old and ongoing debate in Italy about the mafia: is it an organisation or a more or less decentralized phenomenon? Authors like Salvatore Luppò (*Histoire de la mafia – des origines à nos jours*, Paris: Flammarion, 1996) have tried the best to prove the former, but many others still bet for the latter.

⁶⁸ Albert Hirschman, *Exit, voice, and loyalty*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970, p.25.

survive, FARC needs a flow of militants and a minimum of sympathy from the civil population. But to wage war successfully it also requires capital, and thus engages in illegal activities and racketeering in the territories where it seeks support.

Summing up, the criminal rebels thesis faces a dilemma. If it adheres to its strong and, I suppose, original version – rebels are like *mafiosi* writ large, version 2 of section 1 – then it makes sense but is empirically falsified. It may be true for some wars, but not even in the very criminal-laden Colombian conflict can it be applied. If it uses some other version it becomes less vulnerable to falsification, but it tends to loose meaning. This assertion may seem rather strong, but it results from the previous discussion. Trying to make the case for greed, the possible evidence for grievance has been narrowed to an empty set. When Collier takes as an evidence of greed the act of addressing a class constituency (“the typical solution that rebel leaders adopt in response to these problems is to confine recruitment to those strata of the population that enable the rebel organisation to be cohesive. Recruits share a common ethnic, religious, or class background” like in the mafia) the limits of the mechanical division between greed and grievance are made clear. Something of the sort happens when the lack of opportunities in the legal system is identified with greed. The operationalization is simply wrong, and the overall result is more a product of the misunderstanding of what a rebellion or a revolution might mean than of something else. Even then, a lot of auxiliary clauses are needed, but they introduce through the window the problems that were taken out by the door. For example, if it is the case that the leaders want to become rich, but do not share their benefits with the rank and file, collective action and moral hazard problems reappear immediately and strongly (for the leaders and for the analysts).

An alternative interpretation is possible. Rebellion and revolution are activities fraught with difficulties, where success only comes rarely. Thus, when the State hasn't the power (and/or the will) to maintain the monopoly on violence, prolonged conflict is likely. For prolonged conflict to exist, there must be two conditions: motivations and opportunities. If motivations and opportunities are not collapsed into a single category, things become clearer. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, opportunities were provided by supportive governments. Today, they are provided basically by markets and networks. Motivations might be associated with a type of economy (primary product exports). What can be made of this in the Colombian case?

Big opportunities and small motivations

That armed peasant rebellion is associated with export crops in low developed countries is a rather old conclusion of Moore.⁶⁹ He explained it basically in terms of the use of extra-economic coercion in that type of productive system. Something of the sort can be found in Hobsbawm's theory of social banditism, as a result of the crises of peasant economies in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁷⁰ Bandits would be primitive rebels, that typically exhibit a primordial peasant anger. A notion that has received its dose of criticism,⁷¹ but that has in common with Moore the depiction of agrarian wars as two-level boards characterized by small motives and big opportunities. You hate a foreman, or a policeman, or perhaps you want to avenge a relative, and you join a rebel group, but the group can only exist if the previous and 'correct' global markets and networks are there.

⁶⁹ Moore (1966).

⁷⁰ Hobsbawm (1970).

⁷¹ Joseph Gilbert, 'On the trial of Latin American bandits. A reexamination of peasant resistance', *Latin American Research Review* vol. 25 no. 3, 1990, pp. 7-53.

Such a vision, fitting Collier's basic correlation, seems to have a much better explanatory power than the criminal rebels hypothesis. The Colombian is in many senses a war of proximity, where sheer vengeance plays an important role.⁷² Recruits indeed speak of a lack of opportunities, but also about killed and maimed relatives, and below that, about family conflicts, collisions with their neighbours, petty aggressions from State officials, and so on. This panoply of small grievances and hardships flows into the big stream of self-defense, which is the foundational and main ideology of the FARC. It is easy to understand where the ideology of self defense has come. The ancestor of the FARC was created in the midst of a civil war in which, credibly enough, liberal peasants and shopkeepers claimed to be attacked and massacred by the conservative government. Then, in 1964, there was the Marquetalia bombing, that gave origin to the organisation. Today, its main seat being in the South of the country, epicentre of the illegal crops, the aggression comes in the form of fumigation of the crop by the government, one of the few concrete manifestations of the Colombian State in those territories. The self-defense ideology is powerful within FARC because it operates in the intersection area of biography and history, giving the FARC members the tools to interpret articulately their personal experience in a bigger explanatory frame of collective destiny. I suggest that such ideologies are particularly powerful, and can help to effectively cope with organisational problems. Only the FARC, as a non-implanted group, had this resource, and this helps to explain its triumph in the organisational competition between different rebel organisations.

This in turn highlights the key role of the State in mediating between small motives and big opportunities. Colombia has a quite stable democratic institutionality vis-à-vis its level of development, and a State that cannot be reasonably described as being in the process of breakdown; on the contrary, in several key domains it has visibly modernized and strengthened. Intensification of the war and State modernization have gone in parallel. Once again what has happened is more or less straightforward. In the 1950s and 1960s there was an intense expansion of the Colombian agrarian frontier, part of which was directly related to the 1948-1958 civil war. This "armed colonization" was the natural niche of the cold war insurgency;⁷³ there is solid quantitative evidence that in their early period both FARC and ELN prowled in the less developed and poorer regions of the country.⁷⁴ Armed contact with the State was scarce. The Colombian State did not have the reach to tackle the illegal groups, but had the force to limit their action and maintain them at arms length from the centres of economic and political activity. If we think in terms of territory, the Colombian State behaved towards guerrillas not like the classical Weberian monopolist, but like an oligopolist leader. The guerrillas, on the other hand, behaved as a Stackelberg follower, observing the signals sent by the leader and gathering the leftovers. This relative equilibrium (guerrillas without war) was broken by the coca boom, that on the one hand provided the guerrillas with the resources to challenge the *status quo*, and on the other forced the State, with a time lag and due to international constraints (the war on drugs), to try to extend its sovereignty and enforce the law in territories that were previously not crucial for it. But given the conditions of this extension, the State appeared there as a *de facto* occupation force.

Armed colonization plus the coca boom put the guerrillas into a real, and not only an imagined war, but also changed them. They got intertwined with illegal global markets.

⁷² Peter Waldman, 'Revenge without rules: on the renaissance of an archaic motif of violence', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* no. 24, 2001, pp. 435-450.

⁷³ William Ramírez, 'Violencia y democracia en Colombia', *Análisis Político* no. 3 ene/abr 1988, pp. 80-98.

⁷⁴ María Alejandra Vélez, 'FARC-ELN. Evolución y expansión territorial', Tesis de grado, Facultad de Economía de la Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, 1999.

Additionally, they started to play a regulatory role, acting as the institutional interface for the coca and poppy markets, developing conflict resolution mechanisms for the settlers, and promoting civic behaviour and self restraint.⁷⁵ Indeed, an important part of their initial support in several areas was their capacity to act as an ‘uncontaminated’ external regulator able to enforce proper behaviour, trust and morality, a role that the settlers themselves found indispensable.⁷⁶ This dynamic stresses that the inception of the coca economy offered not only economic but also political opportunities: the organisation’s rootedness in certain peasant niches, and thus its political relevance, has grown.

Please note that the combination of an ideology of self-defence and rootedness in peasant economies through armed colonization is particularly powerful. The State acted on the border of the agrarian frontier as an occupation force, giving credibility to the discourse of self-defence.⁷⁷ On the other hand, people who feel that even in the case of passive behaviour they are exposed to big dangers are natural risk takers,⁷⁸ and those who have observed the potential benefits in terms of collective action of severe rule enforcement may accept harsh treatment and may want to be bound by an external regulator if lacking faith in their capacity of self restraint. In short, they make good recruits.

Indeed FARC, and to a lesser degree ELN, is not an army of peasants, in the sense of having a broad constituency among them, but it is a peasant army: the composition of both its leadership and its rank and file is overwhelmingly rural.⁷⁹ Here there is an obvious class dimension that somehow tends to escape the ‘grievance’ motives, because it is more organisational than programmatic.

Conclusion

Obviously no case study can refute a statistical correlation. There are many ways of interpreting a set of facts, and besides the case might simply be an outlier, the proverbial exception that confirms the rule. However, when there are good reasons to believe a hypothesis is flawed, cases can highlight explanatory problems and provide suggestions about possible reinterpretations. Regarding the criminal rebels thesis, Colombia is extremely interesting. On the one hand, in a world where suicide bombing has become a standard staple in the repertoire of violent contention, one had better think twice before embracing with abandon any crude form of economism. On the other hand, some wars do appear to be typically greedy, of which Colombia seems to be an emblematic example. But, as seen, this very case shows that the mechanisms that translate motivation into action in the realms of rebellion and organized crime are very different.

The greed-grievance dichotomy is simply too restrictive to explain adequately contemporary armed contention; the difficulties start with the operationalization. That political violence in general can have politically mediated links with socio-economic inequality is a thesis

⁷⁵ Medina Gallego (1990); Jaime Eduardo Jaramillo, Leonidas Mora & Fernando Cubides, *Colonización, coca y guerrilla*, Bogotá: Alianza Editorial Colombiana, 1986.

⁷⁶ Jaramillo, Mora & Cubides (1986); Ferro & Uribe (2002).

⁷⁷ María Clemencia Ramírez, *Entre el Estado y la guerrilla: identidad y ciudadanía en el movimiento de los campesinos coccaleros del Putumayo*, Bogotá: Icanh-Colciencias, 2001.

⁷⁸ And there is experimental evidence that risk proneness rises with the stake when calculating over losses (and falls over benefits). See Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky, *Choices, values, and frames*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁷⁹ Richani (2002), p.63.

acknowledged by a large body of quantitative cross-national research.⁸⁰ By concentrating on war, new correlations are found but others are blurred. I believe that in fact an important aspect of the very meaning of peasant rebellions is lost by Collier's operationalization. The main source of greed as seen by Collier and Hoeffler is plainly the lack of opportunities in the legal economy of the respective country.⁸¹ This sounds rather funny. A major source of rebellion and revolution in modern times has always been the perception by disenfranchised and/or poor people that they have no prospects in the incumbent state of affairs – the crossroads between biography and history once again – and only with an extraordinary *tour de force* can this be accepted as an instantiation of greed. Epstein has offered a much better notion, hardship, following from which everything else seems to fall into place:⁸² when rebel groups grow, they become much less ideological and much more focused on organisational success, because the new entrants, coming from the popular sectors, have a lower educational level⁸³ and are reacting to hardship, not to doctrine. So-called greed would be simply a function of scale and opportunity. But the label is erroneous, because a position in the guerrilla movement is not a substitute for a legal job or of another type of illegal activity. Restrictions and risks are too big, and benefits small; rents trickle down to the rank and file, yes, but not even as a monetary allowance but as basic provisions. This is neither good business, nor a great channel for upward social mobility. Put differently, hardship is a common motivation behind illegal activities, i.e. criminality and rebellion. But there is a critical difference between them: in the former individuals engage in collective action only when they have opportunities to obtain relatively big benefits (as individuals). The selective incentives that the first type of leadership will use will be economic; the second type will focus on norms and ideology. Both will use force against defectors.

Once the confusion between greed proper and hardship is overcome, the yawning gap between individual and organisational interests becomes pretty obvious. Guerrilla leaders face three type of challenges. They have to address collective action dilemmas, principal-agent structures, and competition by other potential entrepreneurs of rebellion (or by anti-subversive coalitions that appeal to the same type of militant). No good explanation of contemporary war is possible without understanding how they do it. In particular, a rationalist account of war cannot fail to do it, lest it fall into a blatant ecological fallacy and violate the assumptions over which it is built.

Providing microfoundations is thus crucial, but does not seem possible via a purely materialistic account. Political theory has long known very well that promoting wars only using economic incentives is a poor strategy, because mercenaries are disloyal and greedy

⁸⁰ See for example: Kurt Schock, 'A conjunctural model of political conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Mar 1996, vol. 40 no. 1, pp. 98-133; Edward Muller, 'Income inequality and democratization: reply to Bollen and Jackman', *American Sociological Review* Dec 1995, vol 60, pp. 990-996; Edward Muller, Mitchell Seligson & Hung-der Fu, 'Land inequality and political violence', *American Political Science Review* vol. 83 no. 2, Jun. 1989, pp. 577-586; Matthew Krain, 'Contemporary democracies revisited. Democracy, political violence and event count models', *Comparative Political Studies* Apr. 1998, vol. 31. No. 2, pp. 139-164; Pablo Fajnzylber, Daniel Lederman & Norman Loayza, *Determinants of crime rates in Latin America and the World - An empirical assessment*, Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 1998. Of course, there are also critics; see for example Charles Brockett, 'Measuring political violence and land inequality in Central America', *American Political Science Review* Mar 1992, vol. 86 no. 1, pp. 169-176. I am not aware of any refutation of Krain or Schock.

⁸¹ Collier & Hoeffler 2001.

⁸² Joshua Epstein, 'Modeling civil violence. An agent based computational approach', *PNAS* vol. 99 no. 3, 2002, pp. 7243-7250.

⁸³ Michael Walzer, 'Intellectuals, social classes, and revolutions' in Skocpol Theda (ed.), *Democracy, revolution and history*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1998.

soldiers make bad fighters. Constant, in his critique of the Napoleonic wars, spelled out in detail the reasons for the technical inferiority of greedy soldiers. They have extremely short time horizons and very high levels of risk-taking, which are the worse possible conditions for the evolution of cooperation.⁸⁴ luxury and looting corrupts them; pecking orders divide them. They defend very poorly, because they first look after their own lives. Defense requires careful coordination, putting collective over individual survival. They loot remorselessly. In synthesis, they do not have pity in success but lack coordination in defeat. This is clearly a self-defeating war. “People need, to associate mutually [in war], something more than their own interest. They need opinion [ideology]; they need a morality. Self interest isolates them”.⁸⁵ Keen’s motto (we have to hear insurgents, because if we do not “we are lost”)⁸⁶ appears in this context as the best possible piece of advice. In Colombia, FARC has developed its own organisational ‘opinion’ and morality to fill the gap between individuals and organisation, and to compete with adversaries. It needs the rents to wage the political war, it’s true, but that doesn’t entail it waging the war for the purpose of gathering the rents. Understanding war should imply deciphering the mechanisms that simultaneously explain the entry of thousands of individuals into armed illegal groups, and the relatively high military efficiency of some of these groups. The criminal rebels thesis is lacking because – even once cleaned of its functionalist outgrowths – cannot explain why guerrillas like FARC can remain united, fight well and hold tightly together in difficult situations.

In this context Becker’s statement suggests itself: criminals are not necessarily narrow materialists.⁸⁷ But this returns us to the starting point. Without narrow materialism what can be made about the criminal rebels thesis? Not too much, I am afraid.

On the other hand, the Colombian war shows that the links between organized crime and rebellion can be extraordinarily strong. Such links – especially in ‘armed colonization’ areas – offer the big opportunities. Another necessary aspect, small motives, is given by the decay of peasant economies and the regulatory failures typical of ‘armed colonization’ areas. Hardship, but also resentment and feuding, are eminent among the motivations for today’s war – a landscape that brings us very near Hobsbawm and his primordial peasant anger. However, the tension between the economic and political dimensions of the organisation of anger has put an ocean of blood between the guerrillas and the peasants. FARC is a peasant army that lacks a solid peasant constituency; indeed, it often shoots, kills and bombs country people. That is, by the way, one of the basic reasons why FARC members rarely switch sides, but social bases and networks almost always do. The primitive rebels thesis thus cannot be applied directly to contemporary Colombian war, because: a) it would fall victim to the original criticisms issued against the social bandits vision – FARC is extremely unfriendly towards the people from which it draws its members; and b) it would fail to address a main advance of FARC and partially ELN, their ability to solve the problem of scale (they are one or two orders of magnitude bigger than, for example, traditional Colombian bandits of the late 1950s).

⁸⁴ Constant (1997). The argument has an “axelrodian” ring (see Robert Axelrod, *La evolución de la cooperación*, Madrid: Alianza, 1986.

⁸⁵ Constant (1997), p.137.

⁸⁶ David Keen, ‘Incentives and disincentives for violence’, in Mats Berdal & David M. Malone (eds), *Greed and grievance. Economic agendas in civil wars*, Boulder & London: Lynn Rienner, 2000, pp. 19-43.

⁸⁷ Gary Becker, ‘Nobel lecture: The economic way of looking at behavior’, *The Journal of Political Economy* vol. 101 no. 3, June 1993, pp. 385-409.

What social history can offer us is a type of explanation and a set of fundamental questions about the constraints and opportunities that enable organisations and political actors to put together small motives and big opportunities in a stream of sustained peasant rebellion. It highlights that the hinge between the local and the global is given by the changing nature of State regulation (and failure). But recognizing the decisive role of the changes in the State implies questioning the changing frontiers between the legal and the criminal. Colombia and other cases show eloquently that banditism and criminality are categories open to political contention, especially in situations of civil war.⁸⁸ Rather than a reification of the legal-criminal dichotomy, an analysis of the transformation of the criminal into political and vice versa is needed.⁸⁹ In the Colombian case, this is closely related to an understanding of how some guerrillas were able to solve the problem of scale without cold war ideologies or class-based politics.

⁸⁸ Sánchez and Meertens (1983).

⁸⁹ Josiah Heyman, *States and illegal practices*, Oxford & New York: Berg, 1999.

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Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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