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# Insurgent Collective Action And Civil War In El Salvador (Cambridge Studies In Comparative Politics)



## Synopsis

Elisabeth Wood's account of insurgent collective action in El Salvador is based on oral histories gathered from peasants who supported the insurgency and those who did not, as well as on interviews with military commanders from both sides. She explains how widespread support among rural people for the leftist insurgency during the civil war in El Salvador challenges conventional interpretations of collective action. Those who supplied tortillas, information, and other aid to guerillas took mortal risks and yet stood to gain no more than those who did not.

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## Customer Reviews

"...worthwhile, because [Wood] manages to bring the war before the reader's eyes, primarily through the words of the many men and women she interviewed over a period of almost 10 years...The very fact that so many people were willing to speak with her testifies to the level of trust she achieved with them." America"Elisabeth Wood's rigorous study of individual motivations and mobilization in El Salvador will be required reading for students of collective action and civil war. Her unique combination of rich ethnography and rigorous theory represents social science at its best." Stathis N. Kalyvas, Yale University"This book addresses an absolutely fundamental question in both social history and the study of revolutions: Under what circumstances and with what motivations do rural people mobilize collectively to achieve change? Building on ethnographic fieldwork and oral histories, Wood argues that the actions of rural people in El Salvador constituted an 'assertion of

citizenship' not reducible to any calculation of the probability of altering outcomes or achieving exclusive benefits. With a delicate sense of social process, she demonstrates the 'pleasures of agency' that were possible even in the shadow of civil war. This is an elegant, important, and inspiring study." Rebecca J. Scott, University of Michigan"Wood shares with us the voices and experiences of Salvadorans who, most extraordinarily, were interviewed in large numbers over many years and with amazing diligence and intensity by the author, despite their contemporary involvements in a hideously violent civil war. Particularly notable is her careful, even meticulous, discussion of the problems of establishing 'real' memories in such a setting. She is also good, very good, at dissecting debates about collective action theories and theories of revolution. And the discussions about the social import of mapmaking are just flat out lovely and feel so very human, which is (alas) not something you can say very often about a work of sophisticated social science. While her own discipline is political science, she draws on and herself surely enriches the fields of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and Latin American studies writ large." Timothy Wickham-Crowley, Georgetown University"This is a well-written and enlightening book, exemplary in its clear and convincing discussion of methodological choices, empirical data, and theoretical explanation." Contemporary Sociology, Jon Shefner, University of Tennessee"Wood goes beyond the traditional revolutionary intellectuals' accounts that tend to dominate the discussion of revolutionary action to describe the formation of revolutionary identity among campesinos in El Salvador's rural areas" -Ryan Wilson, Latin American Perspectives

Widespread support among rural people for the leftist insurgency during the civil war in El Salvador challenges conventional interpretations of collective action. Those who supplied tortillas, information, and other aid to guerillas took mortal risks and yet stood to gain no more than those who did not. Wood's explanation is based on oral histories gathered from peasants who supported the insurgency and those who did not over a period of many years, and interviews with military commanders of both sides.

Landless peasants-- campesinos in El Salvador supported a revolutionary movement even though they knew there would be no material benefit for them. If the insurgency was victorious the land upon which they lived but did not own would be distributed to all regardless of their participation or lack of participation in the struggle. Yet they did so at significant potential cost to themselves and their families--the Army and the death squads went after anyone even thought to be in favor of the rebellion. This doesn't fit any of the accepted explanations for rural activism in the face of state

power. The FMLN, the main guerrilla organization, couldn't provide areas of safety for its supporters. There was little class consciousness in the classic sense--the campesinos wanted freedom and land did not see themselves as a class that should control the means of production that produced wealth for their rulers. Liberation theology, with its doctrine that social justice was god's will, hadn't really taken hold in El Salvador, particularly hampered after the murder of Oscar Romero. Wood, a meticulous researcher and a masterful prose stylist, found that "moral commitment and emotional engagement were the principal reasons for the successful collective action by unorganized and generally illiterate peasants and agricultural laborers. This is an important and, despite its unquestioned scholarly quality, very moving book. With an ABD in physics at Berkley followed by her PhD. in political science at Stanford and tenured appointments first at NYU and then at Yale Wood has had all her academic tickets punched but it is clear that she has tremendous empathy with and respect for the campesinos whose actions are the subject here. The Salvadoran civil war was one of the most public bloody conflicts of the Americas. Men and women were shot dead in public by uniformed soldiers or recognizable death squad members (called "unofficial security forces" by those with a macabre sense of humor). Corpses were left in streets or at crossroads as a reminder that no one was safe and that the forces of the state operated with impunity. The Air Force was used to bomb neighborhoods of San Salvador, the capital, in what might be an unprecedented show of indiscriminate force against potential enemies. Within this hell of fear and violence thousands of rural residents of a very poor country acted together for social change and opened the doors for democracy in El Salvador.

Wood's book is an excellent weaving together of the of strands of the land question in Usulután department. The use of before-the-revolution-and-after "agrarian reform" maps constructed by former rebel participants and supporters is particularly ingenious. She does a great job of even-handedly assessing a still contentious issue in the historiography of U.S. foreign policy. She treated her interview subjects with great care and fairness, and tried to get at the roots of what made the Salvadoran conflict a civil war. A criticism is that she appears to accept too eagerly reports of rebel arms transfers along the Usulután coastline. Hundreds of millions the GOES received from the U.S. made those canoes full of rifles for the FMLN from Nicaragua pale in comparison.

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