

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.

Book Information

Series: Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics

Paperback: 332 pages

Publisher: Cambridge University Press; 1st edition (August 4, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0521010500

ISBN-13: 978-0521010504

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (2 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

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.

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