

Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War. By Ana Arjona. (Cambridge University Press, 2016.)

Jorge I. Domínguez, Harvard University

“War is not a homogeneous shock – it shapes regions and local communities differently” (296), Ana Arjona tells us in this impressively researched book. This study of Colombia’s half-century civil war is framed within a theoretical comparative perspective and takes advantage of Colombia’s deep and widespread regional variation, the duration of its conflict, and the multiple armed groups that engaged in combat, including various guerrilla and paramilitary groups.

Arjona argues that armed groups with long-term time horizons seek to establish a type of social order in a war zone that she calls a rebelocracy, where through a social contract with the local community the rebels establish direct rule, intervening broadly and deeply in civilian public and private affairs. Then, the quality of preexisting local institutions determines whether the outcome is a rebelocracy or an aliocracy, the latter being a type of indirect rule where rebels rule in a minimalist way leaving most local affairs in the hands of others. When there is armed competition between rival entities, or when there may be indiscipline within the rebel group, rebel time horizons are likely to be short, leading to the likelihood of what Arjona calls disorder.

The empirical research design is admirable for its variety and utility. Much of the statistical data set draws from 125 communities spread across the country, focused on dyads between armed groups and the communities where they operate. Survey vignettes help to ascertain which type of local social order had developed. The analysis makes clear the statistically significant effects of armed group competition and within-group indiscipline on the type of prevailing social order (the less of both, the more likely rebelocracy will develop) and to rule out plausible alternative interpretations e.g. the lesser explanatory utility of the strategic value of a territory or access to

resources. The analysis also demonstrates that rebelocracy is most likely where prior local institutions are of low quality because the rebels have more to offer persuasively.

Evidence comes also from some 200 in-depth interviews, focus groups, and the construction of clever “memory maps” to reconstruct local community trajectories. This work allows her to characterize how rebelocracy, aliocracy, or disorder come to be, what is ordinary life under these varying circumstances, and what are the prospects for civilian resistance.

Another source of information is a historical case study of the Viotá community, Colombia’s oldest continuously surviving communist region, founded in the 1930s. Arjona employs a quasi-natural experiment, that is, an exogenous shock on three villages in Viotá. A grant of land to a key leader in one village induced other key leaders to move from their original villages to where this leader was. The leader “rich” community sustained its local institutions and resisted guerrilla establishment of a rebelocracy, notwithstanding ideological communion between the local communists and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The leader “poor” communities succumbed to FARC rebelocracy.

Finally, Arjona surveyed ex-combatants about their life prior to enlisting and civilians in the same community about their situation. In this dataset, the control group is non-joiners living at the same time and place where surveyed former combatants joined an armed group, enabling Arjona to compare recruits to their peers who did not choose to join a group.

The combined result is a powerful analytical explanation, empirically illuminating, that sheds light on social order under war. Arjona’s well-organized book is both articulate and subtle. Throughout the book, she is admirably attentive to alternative explanations, the limitations of her evidence, the challenges posed by her argument, and the scope conditions for her work.

What could have made a terrific book better? Scholars who believe in the explanatory utility of access to resources would have wanted this book to explore two other quasi-natural experiments. Arjona says that “all armed groups in Colombia have been impacted . . . by the market of illicit drugs” (14) yet she also notes, “the rebels operated for at least a decade without being involved in the drug trade” (86). Similarly, she reports that the second-largest guerrilla group, the ELN (National Liberation Army) operated from the 1960s to the end of the century without much drug trade involvement, picking it up only during the current century. Would variation across time and between groups shed light on resources as an explanatory argument?

Scholars who believe that ideational explanations may matter for rebellion would regret that Arjona is a relentless explanatory rationalist, noting that ideology is “not considered in the theory” (80). Alas, she is such a good scholar that she gives evidence that ideational explanations may matter in some circumstances and localities for some participants or rebelocratic factions. For example, those who joined armed groups cared much more than non-joiners about the education and health care that the armed groups offered, their dispute resolution institutions to solve private conflicts among locals, and whether the armed groups provided ideological talks (291). Moreover, the two most common entry strategies to establish rebelocracy were “public gatherings to talk about the group’s ideology and its shared interests with the community” (176) in 75 percent of the cases, and “social cleansing” campaigns (80 percent of the cases) to rid the community of thieves, drug addicts, and rapists. Arjona argues soundly that such endeavors sought to initiate and consolidate rebelocracy, hence they serve strategic objectives. However, might a rebel commander have also been motivated by ideology, where implanting ideological goods was worthwhile in itself, even at the risk that the locally disgruntled might support rebelocracy less? Might ideological objectives have been primary in some instances, risking strategic losses?

This splendid book raises and answers fundamental questions about war and order, strategy and its implementation, collective action and individual decisions, all richly researched and argued with elegance and nuance. The quibbles noted should encourage Arjona to do more of what she does so well. She shows insight -- and courage in working in still deeply troubled terrain. She demonstrates skills – and ethical sensibilities, shedding light on “the breathtaking efforts of heroic individuals and communities to defend human dignity” (261).