

The Contours and the Theory

Colombia is the third most populous country in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico, and as of 2012 is fourth in size in gross domestic production after Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. It was among the very few countries in the region with almost uninterrupted positive economic growth since the mid-1940s. Such development led to a common saying in Colombia that “it is a country of no busts and no economic miracles,” allowing the country to avoid the demons of the “lost decade” and the debt crises of the 1970s and 1980s, which plagued most of the region. Such stable economic performance contrasts sharply with the country’s political history marred with protracted wars and narco-trafficking. The country’s violent history has led some social scientists and policy makers to believe that an inherent cultural character has contributed to such violent outcome.

Such belief is based on the fact that Colombia is one of the most violent countries in the world because of its high rates of political violence, criminality, and homicides amounting to 63.7 per 100,000 in 2000.¹ The Colombian strand of violence has generated a fine literary genre, mostly in Spanish, attempting to address the root causes of violence focusing on its socioeconomic and political roots. The *violontólogos*, as the students of violence are called in Colombia, have employed multidisciplinary approaches in their studies of this phenomenon that has caused in the last two decades more than 350,000 deaths and 2 million internal refugees threatening the social fabric and the very existence of the country.² Moreover, in the last few years, Colombia’s violence reached higher proportions, spilling over its borders into Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and Panama and becoming a threat to regional and international security. Cross-border military incursions, weapons contraband, and narco-trafficking are almost daily occurrences expanding the radius of the conflict increasingly involving new actors.

Furthermore, narco-trafficking and its political economy compounded the problem, drawing into the conflict the U.S. War on Drugs. By 2000 the Colombian conflict became more entangled than ever with the competing interests of the different U.S. government organizations, agencies, multinational corporations, and politicians. Each of these groups has found in Colombia something to capitalize on, particularly after Colombia became

the third highest recipient of foreign aid after Israel and Egypt. Consequently, Colombia will no doubt occupy a prime position in U.S. foreign policy in the succeeding American administrations. One will tend to assume that all of the above would have prompted more research and studies of the beleaguered country, but that was not the case. There is a serious paucity in the literature that almost every text written on Colombia starts by mentioning the lack of in-depth studies similar to the ones on Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Central America. This lack of interest in the United States has many causes, including the orientations and foci of the Latin American studies programs in the major universities, reinforced by the secondary position Colombia occupied in the U.S. foreign policy and strategic considerations. My study is an attempt to fill some of the scholarly void and to advance our understanding of Colombia.

This book focuses on the conflict that ensued since the 1960s, which became the longest conflict in the country's history and in Latin America. The protraction of the civil war in Colombia is by no means unique today since forty-nine similar conflicts are raging in Asia and Africa, which makes this study urgent. According to a study group from the University of Hamburg, of the forty-nine wars and armed conflicts, twenty-six had their origins during the 1990s, another eight during the 1980s, eight during the 1970s, five during the 1960s, and one started in the late 1940s.³ This book addresses two key issues: why conflicts protract, and when they do, what type of socioeconomic and political structural configurations make their peaceful resolution difficult to obtain. Addressing these two issues also can be useful to guide studies of other prolonged interstate wars.

Most studies on revolutions and political violence are relatively silent on the causes of the protraction of civil wars and pay little attention to the functions of violence in the case of their long duration. The causes and outcomes of revolution received extensive scholarly attention during the last three decades, producing an impressive body of literature. Comparative studies of revolutions include works such as Barrington Moore Jr.'s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, Ted Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*, Charles Tilly's *From Mobilization to Revolution*, and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions*. These works explore agrarian structures, psychological motivations, relative deprivation, and the interplay of domestic and international contexts that cause violent revolutionary change and the breakdown of regimes.⁴ These studies make important contributions to general theories and hypotheses for comparative studies but are inadequate in explaining why some social conflicts are protracted and what type of social transformations occur in such conflicts.⁵

Theories of protracted conflicts explore the relationship among four clusters

of variables—communal contexts, needs, governance, and the role of the state and international linkages—all of which are preconditions for protracted social conflicts.⁶ According to Edward Azar, communal actions and strategies, state actions, and built-in properties of conflict determine the initiation of conflict. He argues that most intrastate conflicts involve zero-sum outcomes in which winners and losers can be differentiated. However, protracted social conflicts result in negative-sum outcomes because of their innate behavioral properties: protraction, fluctuation, and spillover. In his scheme, there are no winners; the process tends to victimize all parties to these conflicts.

This binary notion of winners and losers has been challenged by new approaches employing theories on economic utility, cost-benefit analysis, rational choice, and political economics to tackle different dimensions of protracted social conflicts.⁷ This book belongs to this developing genre. It draws on the advancement achieved in this field of inquiry to revise Azar's model to explain why and how certain class structures and institutional arrangements contribute to the perpetuation of violence for long periods of time. It gives an assessment of the functional outcomes that organized violence tends to generate within given social structures, political arrangements, and international political economy. Finally, it analyzes the protraction of conflicts in terms of the best available arrangement given the dynamic interplay between balance of forces (structure) and actors' goals and strategies (agency).

This book defines a system as a group of units or components related by their common characteristics, where the latter are the qualities of the components. The pattern of interaction between the units constitutes the thread that ties them in a systemic relationship.⁸ Thus, a system is a set of interacting units.⁹ In a war system, the common thread between the actors is their exercise of violence, and this activity links them together in a systemic relationship that in turn forms the dynamics of the system.

This book argues that a war system is formed under three key conditions, all of which are present in Colombia. These conditions are (1) the failure of the institutions, the channels, and the prevailing political mechanisms to mediate, adjudicate, or arbitrate conflicts among antagonistic social and political groups; (2) the antagonists' success in adapting themselves to conflict by establishing a "positive political economy" through accumulating political and economic assets that make the condition of war the best available option given the balance of power and the higher cost of peace; and (3) a balance of forces among the conflicting groups or actors that results in a comfortable impasse.¹⁰

My main thesis is this: The convergence of these three variables leads to the establishment of a war system that tends to perpetuate itself, and where any of these conditions is lacking, conflicts are most likely to terminate

faster. Following Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervis's lead and applying some of their key concepts at the domestic level, the attributes of the war system are determined by how its main units (guerrillas, state, and organized crime) stand in relation to one another in the spectrum of power.¹¹ Thus, the relation of power becomes a core aspect of my theoretical model.

Analyzing power relations among actors is not possible without developing an appreciation of the assets that they acquire through war (political and economic) that they could not access under conditions of peace. This aspect is explored by assessing the political economy of scale of violence, which is to say an X increase in the input of violence applied by actor Z may increase Z political and economic assets by XY. Here, the war system's theoretical model guides us in exploring the dynamics and dialectics between the relations of power and the political economy, that is, between the attributes of the system and its corresponding units.

Violence associated with protracted conflicts can evolve into a distinct system that theories of revolution and protracted civil wars cannot explain because such theories focus on causes and outcomes. The interim period that lies after the initiation of a violent conflict and before its final conclusion becomes a "black box" overlooked by the majority of studies. This interim period deserves special attention particularly because of the number of ongoing protracted conflicts that have yet to be brought to a resolution: Angola, Afghanistan, Sudan, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi, Algeria, and Congo, among many others. My main goal is to cast light on a dimension of violence that has received little scholarly attention and to recommend policies and devise new strategies for conflict resolution.

METHODOLOGY

This book is based on two types of information: structured interviews and literature review of primary sources supplemented with secondary sources. More than 200 interviews and dozens of informal ones were carried out in different regions of Colombia between 1994 and 1998. The interviewed were members of business groups, guerrilla commanders, military officers, state officials, Colombian analysts, peasant leaders, labor union leaders, and paramilitary informants. These interviews explore various political views on the causes of the conflict, perceptions of the warring actors, and opinions regarding the conflict's possible resolution. The interviews helped me form an accurate assessment of the costs and benefits of war and peace as seen by the mentioned groups (see Appendix).

In exploring the three key variables of the war system model, the book examines (1) the failure of state institutions in mediating, arbitrating, and adjudicating the main sources of social conflict; (2) whether the antagonistic

actors succeed in adapting themselves to a war condition as the best available alternative given the power relations and the higher costs of peace—and managed to establish a positive political economy; and (3) whether the balance of forces among the conflicting groups or actors does not allow any one group to establish its own hegemony.

In exploring the efficiency of states' institutions in mediating, arbitrating, and adjudicating social conflicts, Barrington Moore's contention that determining the default axis around which social conflict is organized in a given society is imperative in social research is relevant.¹² An example is agrarian structures, which promote labor-repressive and authoritarian tendencies within the landed oligarchy generating resistance within the peasants and wage laborers. Passing the threshold from class antagonism to class violence is also largely determined by the role of states' institutions in mitigating or exacerbating conflicts. This study focuses on one salient source of conflict in Colombia: struggle over land.

In analyzing the efficiency of state institutions in solving social disputes, the research would investigate the reform strategies implemented before and during the civil wars. In this context, the research would analyze to what degree the dominant classes (or fractions of a class) blocked these reforms. Since the struggle over property rights is central, the analysis focuses on the role of the Ministry of Agriculture and particularly Instituto Colombiano de La Reforma Agraria (INCORA; Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform), the state agency in charge of the implementation of land reform. The effectiveness of state institutions is assessed by exploring (1) the number of land disputes that the state institutions were able to adjudicate during the last four decades; (2) the number and size of land titles distributed to landless peasants in relation to the total fertile land available during the same period; and (3) the extent to which these measures mitigated peasant-landlord conflicts.

The second component of the war system is exploring the political, economic, and military assets that the warring groups accumulate or lose during the civil wars. This will aid in evaluating the political economy. Three main scenarios drawn from civil war experiences can be sketched:

1. If the political economy is negative for one side (for example, for the guerrillas), then the other side (for example, the state) has less incentive to negotiate (other than the terms of surrender) since it has a better chance of prevailing. In fact, most civil wars (80 percent) fought between 1945 and 1990 ended in the capitulation of one side. If any of the main contending forces is registering a negative political economy, then the war systems are most likely aborted early on.¹³
2. If the contending forces, however, are recording a positive political economy—even if it is asymmetrical—the conflict is more likely to be

protracted, particularly when the balance of power does not allow either side to decisively defeat its opponent. In this phase, the war system is more likely to consolidate.¹⁴ Colombia's civil war has been in that phase since the 1980s. Under a positive political economy, the price of peace versus the political, economic, social, and military costs of war becomes higher because it could entail radical reforms (such as a power-sharing formula and a unified reformed armed force) for the dominant classes. And given the balance of forces, the opposition is not likely to accept a settlement that does not consolidate the economic and political gains achieved during the war.

3. If the escalation of conflict inflicts higher costs on the main warring actors (in terms of fatalities, resources, and loss of political assets, measured in terms of dissension and erosion of support base), this might lead to a negative political economy, which may create favorable conditions for mediation and a negotiated settlement.

These three scenarios or phases should be seen as a continuum and in a dynamic mode. Most civil wars pass through a combination of these phases. Thus, our assessment of the political economy is essential to evaluating the phases of civil wars and the life cycle of the war system (inception, maturation, and decline). Hence, I modeled the war system as a function of the political economy of war and the power relations between the units.

In order to measure the political assets of the participants in a conflict, one must take the political influence that a given group had prior to the outbreak of hostilities as a point of reference and compare that with the political status of the group during the different phases of the conflict. The indicators for the measurement of political influence are as follows: (1) contrast the areas, municipalities, and districts that were under the control of opposition forces prior to the initiation of hostilities with those after; (2) determine the increase or decrease in the opposition's capabilities to influence public policy, political reform, and electoral politics; and (3) evaluate whether the opposition gained or lost political recognition nationally and internationally by exercising political violence.

The economic assets are the incomes that the warring factions generate through the extraction of protection rent from the population under their control. The state, the guerrillas, and organized crime each has an extraction strategy, and estimates of incomes are available in the form of increases in military spending and budgets during the civil war, salary hikes for soldiers and officers serving in areas of combats, the guerrillas' annual income, organized crime income through narcotrafficking, and arms sales.

This book assesses the interdependence among organized crime, the state, and the opposition. This evaluation is based on several indicators: available estimates of organized crime annual income, economic impact of such incomes at the macro- and microeconomic levels, available estimates of incomes of the opposition extracted from organized crime, and the degree to which organized crime has managed to penetrate state institutions (including the military), measured in terms of the number of public officials serving sentences or investigated for receiving money from organized crime. In order to evaluate the power relations between the guerrillas and the state, the research relies on the following indicators: (1) number of major military confrontations that involve more than 100 combatants on each side and changes in the fatality ratio between the two over the last fifteen years; (2) number of municipalities under the control of the guerrillas over the same period;¹⁵ (3) ability of the state to regain lost territory; (4) changes in the political leverage the guerrillas enjoy in the elections of local officials, mayors, and governors; (5) changes in military strategies of both sides; and (6) changes in the types of armaments used.

Since power relations is a systemic attribute, the research explores the distribution of power among the warring parties in an attempt to investigate whether a change in this distribution affects the dynamics and dialectics of the war system and its stability and how this structural change affects actors' behavior, such as their rent-extraction strategies, and political assets (that is, their political economy). Since the relationship between the system and its units is not unilinear and is interactive, the research examines also how changes in the actors' strategies, goals, and assets could alter the system dynamics. Simply stated, the war-system dynamics are studied in terms of symmetrical and complementary changes. The first leads to a conflict spiral, where actors become more aggressive and heavily armed (currently the situations in Colombia, Angola, and Afghanistan), or complementary, where one side becomes more appeasing in front of the other's growing power (the final stages of the civil wars in Cambodia and Lebanon fit this model). The latter leads to the breakdown of the war system, whereas the former destabilizes it, and its perpetuation becomes an open-ended question depending on the case.

BOOK MAP

Chapter 2, "Institutional Failure: Genesis of the War System," provides a brief historical background of conflicts over land since the Spanish conquest and the institutional failure of the postindependence state in solving conflicts between landlords and peasants. This failure has been compounded by

intraelite disputes, producing a perpetual hegemonic crisis of the state during most of twentieth century.

Chapter 3, “The Military and the Comfortable Impasse,” introduces the military institution as a category with its own interest and points out the merits of discussing it on its own rather than under the “rubric of the state.” The quasi-autonomy of the military in handling the civil war with little civilian authority oversight led to the development of a bloated military bureaucracy, military strategies, and vested interests contributing and reinforcing the comfortable impasse with the guerrillas. This chapter attributes the quasi-autonomy and the latitude of the military to the state’s hegemonic crisis and the lack of consensus within the dominant classes.

Chapter 4, “Guerrillas and the Impasse,” discusses the second actor in the war-system, the guerrillas. This chapter presents a brief social history and sociology of the guerrillas in Colombia and identifies their main base of support and leadership social composition. This chapter contends that the guerrillas—particularly, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)—as a peasant-led, peasant-based insurgency, embody the peasants’ historical struggle for land. However, the political strategies of the FARC and those of the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN; National Liberation Army) of building local power instead of seizing political power have contributed to the establishment of the war system. Of particular interest is analyzing the political economy the guerrillas built under the comfortable impasse that consolidated their local power as well as the war system.

The role of organized crime in the war system is analyzed in chapter 5, “Paramilitaries, Organized Crime, and the Dynamics of War.” This chapter focuses on narcotraffickers and their armed paramilitary groups. It demonstrates that since the consolidation of the paramilitary groups in the mid-1990s, the dynamics of the war system have changed, ushering in a new phase in the system’s life cycle. The chapter argues that the post-1995 phase is characterized by a higher intensity war, and hence the positive political economy achieved under comfortable impasse is being eroded.

Chapter 6, “The Dominant Classes and the Prospects of Peace,” investigates the economic and political implications of the war system on the interests of the dominant classes, particularly on the conglomerate groups. This chapter postulates that the coincidence of the increased costs—especially after 1995—of maintaining the war system with a new configuration of the dominant classes and the growing impetus of globalization provides the basis for the reconstitution of a new hegemony that could dismantle the war system, arguing that the elements of a “historic compromise” between peasants and the bourgeoisie are already in place.

Chapter 7, “Colombia’s Civil War in Comparative Perspective,” discusses three other areas of protracted violence: Italy, Lebanon, and Angola. This chapter casts the Colombian case within a broader context, examines the validity of the war-system theory, and generates questions for future research on protracted conflicts.

Chapter 8, “Third Parties, War Systems’ Inertia, and Conflict Termination: The Doomed Peace Process in Colombia, 1998–2002,” explains the failure of the 1998–2002 peace talks between the FARC and the Pastrana’s government. This chapter highlights the problematic of third party interventionism exemplified by the United States and the lesser-known role the UNDP played by in jump-starting the negotiations in 1998. It explains how both forms of interventions stimulated contradictory incentive structures undermining then a peaceful solution of the conflict. By sequencing these two interventions and the different dynamics they created the chapter differentiates between them, assessing their respective impact on the incentives of the FARC, the Pastrana government, and the Colombian military.

In the wake of the collapse peace process and the election of the right-wing President Alvaro Uribe Velez in 2002 Colombia’s civil war entered one of its most violent phases since the 1960s. Chapter 9, “The War System: From Comfortable Impasse to Unstable Equilibrium, 2002–2012,” investigates the changing dynamics of the war system, characterizing this new phase as “unstable equilibrium” denoting a qualitative shift from the comfortable impasse that was until then governing the conflict. This chapter argues that two core factors induced this change. A more vigorous and aggressive military intervention of the United States in the conflict through Plan Colombia and covert operations, and the increasing military power and political influence of the right-wing paramilitaries, which reached its zenith in the early 2000s. This chapter benefitted from newly declassified and leaked U.S. documents revealing the magnitude of the U.S. involvement that in the literature is either assumed or undervalued.

Finally this chapter discusses how and why FARC’s Plan Rebirth (Plan Renacer) adopted in 2008 succeeded in redressing the military balance that was until then severely skewed in favor of the state. Consequently, this evolution in the correlation of forces led some bourgeois factions not tied with the landed oligarchy represented by Santos to realize that the political and economic gains of sustaining the war system might have exceeded the possible costs of a negotiated peace with an insurgency whose defeat was uncertain.

Chapter 10, “Bastard Rentier Capitalism: The Political Economy of Organized Crime in Colombia Sicarios and Caudillos,” discusses the burgeoning neoparamilitaries as mutations of the old paramilitaries, which mostly demobilized by 2006, and their subsequent role and impact on the war

system unstable equilibrium. The chapter sheds light on the characteristics of these groups and their respective relations and interaction with the other actors in the war system and its political economy. It underscores their pivotal role in the transformation of the rural political economy into a rentier mode of production and capital accumulation.

Finally, Chapter 11, "Colombia's War System in Comparative Perspective," presents a comparative analysis of protracted civil wars defining the determinants' variables of civil wars' duration. It revisits the case of Angola, discussed in chapter 7, and introduces the protracted civil wars of Sri Lanka and Nepal, which produced different outcomes, one ending by the defeat of Tamil's rebels and the other by negotiated settlement. This chapter has three goals. The first is to assess the explanatory power of the war-system theory through examining whether the three conditions that led to a war system in Colombia were present in these cases, namely: the state's institutional failure in arbitrating and/or adjudicating divisive social conflicts, a comfortable military impasse, and consequently, whether the political economy created by actors violent interaction costs less than the possible costs of a negotiated peace. The second goal is to examine the dynamic interplay of these three conditions and why war systems either collapse or endure and what accounts for these outcomes. Finally, in a more ambitious goal, this chapter lays down precepts that can be used in future qualitative as well as quantitative research on protracted civil wars for cross-country validation that could deepen our understanding of conflict duration and termination.