Organizational Bricolage and Insurgent Group Effectiveness in Cities: The Formation and Initial Urban Campaign of the Movement of the 19th of April in Colombia (1973–1980)

Simon Pierre Boulanger Martel
Stockholm University, Sweden

How do rebel groups form in cities? What makes urban-based insurgent organizations effective? Urban armed conflicts have become an important subject of research due to the political, economic, and demographic significance of cities. Yet, we know little about the mechanisms of insurgent group formation and effectiveness in urban contexts. Building on the case of the formation and initial urban campaign of M-19 in Colombia (1973–1980), this article argues that rebel leaders originating from multiple organizations and confronted with intramovement competition have strong motives to employ organizational bricolage to form their organization. Organizational bricolage shapes insurgent effectiveness by producing structures that are fit for achieving certain objectives but not others. M-19’s organizational bricolage combined the armed vanguard, intellectual collective, and populist party forms. This structure was effective to foster public support but ineffective to establish a robust social base and maintain urban operations under repression. The research employs the analysis of organizational repertoires and process tracing to retrace M-19’s formation and initial urban campaign. Empirical material includes an original dataset comprising M-19 founders’ biographical data, archival documents, and interviews with ex-combatants. Studying how rebel leaders employ organizational bricolage sheds light on how insurgent organizations form, behave, and transform after war.

¿Cómo se forman los grupos rebeldes en las ciudades? ¿Qué es lo que hace que las organizaciones insurgentes urbanas sean efectivas? Los conflictos armados urbanos se han convertido en un importante tema de investigación debido a la importancia política, económica y demográfica de las ciudades. Sin embargo, se sabe poco sobre los mecanismos de formación y la efec-
tividad de los grupos insurgentes en contextos urbanos. Basándose en el caso de la formación y la campaña urbana inicial del M-19 en Colombia (1973–1980), este artículo sostiene que los líderes rebeldes, que provienen de múltiples organizaciones y enfrentan competencia intramovilmente, tienen fuertes motivos para emplear el bricolaje organizacional para formar su organización. El bricolaje organizacional influye sobre la eficacia insurgente, produciendo estructuras que son aptas para alcanzar ciertos objetivos, pero no para lograr otros. El bricolaje organizacional del M-19 combinó las formas de la vanguardia armada, el colectivo intelectual y el partido populista. Esta estructura fue eficaz para fomentar el apoyo público, pero fue ineficaz para establecer una base social sólida y para mantener las operaciones urbanas bajo represión. La investigación utiliza el análisis de repertorios organizativos y el seguimiento de procesos con el fin de analizar la formación y la campaña urbana inicial del M-19. El material empírico incluye una base de datos original que comprende datos biográficos de los fundadores del M-19, documentos de archivo y entrevistas con excombatientes. Estudiar cómo los líderes rebeldes emplean el bricolaje organizacional proporciona un entendimiento sobre cómo se forman, se comportan y se transforman las organizaciones insurgentes después de la guerra.

Introduction

How do rebel groups form in cities? What makes urban-based insurgent organizations effective? Between 1989 and 2017, 17% of all armed conflict events occurred in urban areas (Elfversson 2021, 3). Wars remain rural phenomena. Yet, urban armed conflicts have become an important subject of scholarly research due to the political, economic, and demographic significance of cities (Moncada 2013) and the complexity of urban countermovements (Kicukilen 2013). Cities\(^1\) impose unique constraints on rebel organizers. Urban insurrections begin not with the establishment of remote guerrilla camps, nor the launch of a mobile rebel army, but with the creation of clandestine cells hidden in plain sight (Della Porta 1995). The omnipresence of state institutions, the geographical accessibility of neighborhoods, the heterogeneity of the urban population, and the vulnerability to infiltration make it harder for insurgents to organize in urban centers than in distant jungles and mountain ranges (Kalvys 2006, 133; Staniland 2010; Le Blanc 2013). Within a broader movement, insurgents may also compete with other urban-based violent and nonviolent organizations that compel them to innovate to gain a competitive advantage (Krause 2013; Bosi, Della Porta, and Malthaner 2019).

Urban insurrections are militarily ill-advised (Hobsbawn 1994, 169; Kalvys 2006, 133). Nonetheless, some insurgent groups have been rather effective in cities. Effectiveness in this context is defined as an organization’s ability to achieve valued objectives. The Mohajir Qaumi Movement in Pakistan, the National Liberation Front in Algeria, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army mounted robust urban insurrections amidst state repression (Horgan and Taylor 1997; Staniland 2010; Krause 2013). Focusing solely on military effectiveness, however, overlooks important political dimensions of such rebellions. This is important because clandestine organizations often try to avoid armed confrontation with authorities, and may in fact thrive with lower levels of violence (Brum 2014; Duyvesteyn 2021, 163–71). At its peak in 1968–1972, the National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros (MLN-Tupamaros) was a complex insurgent organization “with the capacity to dominate the political situation in Uruguay” (Brum 2014, 396). In contrast, the Red Army Faction in Germany (Della Porta 1995) and the Québec Liberation Front (Fournier 2020) were comparatively weaker but still provoked significant political crises. These urban groups underscore that effectiveness and organizational deficiencies can coexist. To better understand what makes these insurgencies politically significant, it hence seems necessary to disaggregate effectiveness outcomes.

Building inductively on the case of the formation and initial urban campaign of the Movement of the 19th of April (M-19) in Colombia in 1973–1980, this article theorizes on mechanisms of rebel group formation and effectiveness in cities. The case of M-19 provides critical insights into how rebel founders innovate when confronted with intramovement competition. M-19 was a left-wing nationalist guerrilla that formed in 1973 by bringing together activists from diverse left-wing opposition groups. The guerrilla distinguished itself from other revolutionary organizations active in Colombia by its urban composition and modus operandi. It demobilized in 1990. During its initial stage (1973–1980), the organization acted primarily in cities. At its peak, the guerrilla was a significant force in Colombian politics, despite its small size. For instance, M-19’s siege of the Dominican Republic Embassy in Bogotá in 1980\(^3\) was described as “one of the biggest diplomatic hostage crises of the twentieth century” (Shiraz 2020, 1050) and “major successes in political propaganda of all times” (Palacios 2003, 271). Despite its political influence, the guerrilla was in disarray, and its military campaign is generally considered a failure (Pécaut 2001, 85–6; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2004, 264). M-19 thus represents a puzzling case of political effectiveness combined with organizational deficiencies.

Drawing on the M-19 case, this article argues that rebel leaders originating from multiple organizations and confronted with intramovement competition have strong motives to employ organizational bricolage to form their organization. Activated during rebel group formation, organizational bricolage shapes insurgent effectiveness by producing structures that are fit for achieving certain objectives but not others. Organizational bricolage is a mechanism (or subprocess) “whereby a new organization is shaped by drawing on organizational forms that are to hand in a particular environment” (Perkmann and Spicer 2014, 1786).\(^3\) The mechanism describes how rebel leaders innovate by skillfully recombining different models of collective action to create hybridized organizational structures. To describe these dynamics, this article draws from organizational approaches to insurgent groups\(^1\) and organizational sociology. Organizational approaches underscore that group-level outcomes are driven by intra- and interorganizational dynamics, as well as insurgent relations with their social environment (Crenshaw 1987; Pearlman 2011; Parkinson and Zaks 2018; Bosi, Della Porta, and Malthaner 2019). This body of work underlines that organizational structures shape insurgents’ performance on the battlefield (Johnston 2008; Sinno 2008), wartime governance (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016), repertoire of violence (Cohen 2013; Hoover Green 2016), and recruitment strategies (Gates 2002). Organizational characteristics also influence rebel group survival (Parkinson 2013), propensity to remain cohesive or fragment (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; Staniland 2014), and capacity to adapt to electoral politics (Ishiyama and Batta 2011; Bertí and Gutiérrez 2016). Accordingly, an organizational structure is a “system of relationships and rules that integrate members of a movement for the pursuit of collective aims” (Pearlman 2011, 8). Inspired by Clemens (1993, 1996), I contend that organizational forms—also described as forms of collective action or models—are the main building blocks of organizational structures. An organizational form is “an archetypal configuration of structures and practices given coherence by underlying values regarded as appropriate within an institutional context” (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006, 30). The models of hierarchical national armies, secret societies, or clientelist political parties are or-

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\(^{1}\) Cities are “administratively delineated territorial units with a high density of population” that usually have a population of over 100,000 inhabitants (Moncada 2013, 220).

\(^{2}\) M-19 commando took foreign diplomats and the embassy staff hostage to protest the security measures of the Turbay Ayala government (1978–1982). After two months of negotiations, the militants fled to Cuba with ransom money (Shiraz 2020).

\(^{3}\) Perkmann and Spicer (2014) define organizational bricolage as a process. In contrast, I conceive of it as a mechanism. A mechanism is a “delimited class of changes that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 29). Processes are causal chains that typically include the combination of various mechanisms (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 29).
organizational forms that can be employed to build insurgent organizations.

To reconstruct M-19’s formation and initial urban campaign, I employ the analysis of organizational repertoires (Clemens 1993, 1996) and process tracing (Bennett and Checkel 2014). I adopt a descriptive theory-building approach to unpack how the activation of organizational bricolage unfolds in rebel group formation and shapes insurgent effectiveness. My aim is to draw on one case to develop a framework that captures similar dynamics across contexts. To assess whether organizational bricolage explains M-19’s formation and effectiveness outcomes, I analyze the mechanism against the alternative concept of organizational engineering. First, I map the web of M-19 founding members’ preformation memberships to unpack the group’s organizational repertoire. Second, I analyze how various organizational forms were incorporated into M-19’s organizational structure. I identify the armed vanguard, intellectual collective and populist party forms as the main building blocks of the insurgent group. Third, I retrace how the combination of those varied forms shaped M-19’s effectiveness. Drawing on studies of urban insurgencies (e.g., Staniland 2010; Della Porta 2013; Parkinson 2013; Brum 2014; O’Connor 2023), I assess effectiveness based on leaders’ ability to achieve three objectives: (i) fostering public support, (ii) establishing a robust social base, and (iii) maintaining urban operations under repression. Such conceptualization aims to grasp effectiveness “from the perspective of the actors employing it” (Krause 2013, 261). The analysis shows that organizational bricolage allowed M-19 founders to foster public support but was ineffective to establish a robust social base and maintain urban operations under repression. Empirical material includes an original database compiling biographical information on thirty-nine M-19 founding members, biographies, archival documents, and secondary sources. I also draw from four months of fieldwork in Colombia (September–December 2019), involving thirty-two life history interviews with M-19 ex-combatants, including five founding members.

The article contributes to the literature on the organizational and social dynamics of armed conflicts and political violence. We have yet to fully comprehend how variation in the social origins of rebel organizations shapes wartime outcomes (Brathwaite and Cunningham 2020, 183; Shesterinina and Livesey, Forthcoming). With some notable exceptions (Della Porta, 1995, 2013; Staniland 2010; Uzonyi and Koren, Forthcoming), few studies investigate the mechanisms of urban insurgent group formation. In a similar vein, existing work on rebel organizations examines well-established mechanisms of contentious politics, including resource mobilization (Weinstein 2007), brokerage (Parkinson 2013; Tarrow and Tilly 2015; Roessler 2016), mobilization (Wood 2003; Shesterinina 2021), and patronage (Reno 2007; Seymour 2014). Yet, the role of organizational bricolage in insurgencies is neither well understood nor theorized in a literature that largely conceives rebel leaders as engineers creating organizations from the top-down. This article also contributes to recent endeavors to study rebel group leadership dynamics (e.g., Prorok 2018; Huang, Silverman, and Acosta 2022; Stewart 2023) by focusing on the concrete actions that leaders undertake to repurpose preexisting organizational models. Accordingly, this article develops a framework to capture linkages between rebel leaders’ experiences and organizational effectiveness. By studying what leaders do, we can gain a better understanding of the complex leadership dynamics and interactions mediating the relationship between prewar social structures and wartime outcomes. In that sense, organizational bricolage is an understudied mechanism part of the broader social processes of civil wars (see Wood 2008; Shesterinina 2022).

Significance of the Analysis and Introduction to M-19

Insurgents are effective when they mobilize resources (Weinstein 2007), have access to a safe haven (Kalyvas 2006; Sinno 2008), and build upon robust networks (Gould 1995; Petersen 2001; Staniland 2010), whether ideologically radical (Costalli and Ruggeri 2015) or ethnically homogeneous (Lewis 2020). M-19’s political successes are thus surprising. During its formation and initial urban campaign, M-19 was resource poor,5 did not control territory, acted as a small and isolated group, lacked a clear ideological line, and competed with multiple other revolutionary groups. As Eduardo Pizarro (1996, 84) puts it, M-19 can be defined as “a sui generis partisan movement since, despite the weakness of its societal networks and the absence of a political apparatus, it constituted the guerrilla nucleus most closely connected to the national political process.” At best, existing theories explain the organizational deficiencies of M-19 but offer unsatisfactory accounts of its political influence.

M-19 provides novel insights into how rebel founders originating from multiple organizations innovate in the face of intramovement competition. The guerrilla emerged in Colombian cities during an ongoing armed conflict between left-wing rebels and the government. In 1945–1958, a bloody civil war known as La Violencia opposed the Liberal and Conservative parties. In 1957, the two parties entered in a power-sharing agreement called the National Front. Opposition to the pact grew from different fronts. In the 1960s, left-wing insurgent groups emerged in rural peripheries. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) formed in 1964 by remobilizing communist peasant self-defense groups aligned with the Communist Party. In 1970, the National Liberation Army (ELN) launched a Cuban-inspired guerrilla foco, and in 1967, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) initiated a Maoist people’s war (Pécaut 2001; Villamizar 2017). In the same period, social movements and political parties with urban roots also opposed liberal-conservative hegemony. The National Popular Alliance Party (ANAPO), led by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla,6 obtained increased electoral support (León 2012). In the 1970 presidential elections, Conservative candidate Misael Pastrana took office amid allegations that Rojas Pinilla had won the vote. M-19 emerged as a response to this alleged electoral fraud. The guerrilla was created by militants mainly based in Bogotá and Cali. They were former members of various opposition groups such as the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) and its youth wing (Colombian Communist Youth [JUCO]), the FARC, the ELN and other rural guerrillas, student and intellectual activist groups, and the ANAPO. Founders criticized the dogmatism, sectarianism, and political marginality of existing revolutionary organizations. They vied for advantage within a fragmented opposition movement. To distinguish themselves, they embraced urban guerrilla tactics and an eclectic mélange of nationalism, left-wing revolutionary ideals, and Bolivarianism (García, Grabe, and Patiño 2008).

5Funding the organization was difficult in the beginning. Militants relied on personal employment, “expropriations,” and the support of their partners to finance their clandestine activities (Santamaría in Behar 1985, 81; Razo and Panesso 2006, 35–6).
6Rojas Pinilla was a General that ruled over Colombia in 1953–1957 after seizing power through a military coup.
The case of M-19 is puzzling because the organization was politically influential despite its small size and organizational deficiencies. At the beginning of 1975, the urban guerrilla comprised about sixty individuals (Villamizar 2017, 373). In 1976, it had grown to 150 members (Ríaaio in Villamizar 2019, 427). By the time it demobilized in 1990, M-19’s estimated membership was between 791 and 2,000 militants (Söderström 2016, 217). At the end of the 1970s, state repression against the organization was effective. Para-doxically, at that time, M-19’s proposals for an amnesty for political prisoners and calls for a national dialogue were at the forefront of the political debate (Pizarro 1996, 106). Furthermore, M-19 broadened the repertoire of violence in Colombia. It was the first group to employ controversial political kidnappings (CNMH 2013, 29; Grabe 2015, 297) and armed propaganda tactics. Armed propaganda actions were highly symbolic operations aiming to generate mass popular support. Starting in the 1980s, the FARC and the ELN successfully implemented the strategies developed by M-19 leaders (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2004, 264). This influential but undertheorized organization can deepen our understanding of how small groups gain political importance in multiparty armed conflicts.

Rebel Group Formation and the Effectiveness of Urban Insurgencies

Research on civil wars underscores that insurgents build capable organizations by either drawing on prior identifications, resources, or networks. These three approaches provide competing accounts of how urban rebel groups form and become effective. While authors may incorporate elements from different perspectives, they tend to be anchored to one main approach. In practice, however, all rebel groups rely on a relatively coherent collective identity and some form of resource and social base. Yet, we lack detailed accounts of the concrete mechanisms urban rebels activate to build their organizational structure and how these sub processes affect their effectiveness.

A first perspective describes how rebel organizers draw on prior social identifications to construct a meaningful insurgent community. Scholars have underlined that class (Scott 1979; Wickham-Crowley 1992), ethnicity (Horowitz 1985), ideology (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014; Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Maynard 2019), and classification systems (Derluagian 2005) shape rebel group behavior and identity. Revolutionary groups are often composed of middle- and upper-class urban intelligentsia and a peasant rank-and-file base linked through different belief systems (Scott 1979; Wickham-Crowley 1992). In a similar vein, Kalyvas (2003, 486) argues that civil wars are based on a master cleavage that “simplifies, streamlines, and incorporates a bewildering variety of local conflicts.” This does not necessarily mean, however, that leaders genuinely embrace popular grievances and ideas. Unpopular rebels can employ insinuating narratives and pandering to mislead politically motivated constituents to join their movement (Thaler 2022). These dynamics suggest that mobilizing groups in socially homogeneous rural areas with strong norms of reciprocity (Kalyvas 2006, 136; Lewis 2020) is easier than in neighborhoods populated by an often-heterogeneous urban working class or lumpenproletariat. Yet, even if insurgents may benefit from a prewar urban stronghold, they tend to be weak in cities due to government control. This is in part because “[intimidation], blackmail, and bribes work better in urban environments, where regular and sustained contacts between handlers and informers are possible” (Kalyvas 2006, 175). Scholars focusing on social identification thus rightfully predict the unlikelihood of urban insurgencies but do not explain why insurgents achieve their objectives under these difficult conditions.

A second approach highlights the importance of resources for warmaking. Poverty, strong demographic concentrations of young men, unemployment, low education endowments, external support, and access to easily looting resources facilitate rebel group formation (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoefler 2004). From this perspective, the characteristics of urban environments shape the types of insurgent groups that emerge. The concentration of state capacity in cities enables the formation of strong rebel groups in the countryside (Nedal, Stewart, and Weintraub 2019), even if cities provide opportunities for rebel financing through robberies or extortions (Le Blanc 2013). Furthermore, according to Weinstein (2007), the access of rebel organizers to economic (money, natural resources, etc.) or social endowments (networks, norms, shared values, etc.) determines whether the organization will attract opportunist or activist recruits. From this perspective, access to resources, as well as the recruitment strategies rebels use to address organizational and military needs, shape their effectiveness (Eck 2014). The resource approach, however, tends to disconnect rebel groups from their social fabric. As Staniland (2012, 148) argues, all rebel organizations “have some social underpinning and some resource endowments; the crucial issue is how they interact.” The resource perspective also assumes that leaders have adequate knowledge about what it takes to act in their environment. In urban contexts, for instance, stockpiling significant quantities of weapons theoretically boosts an organization’s ability to coerce a regime but risks attracting undue attention, compromising the group’s security (see McCormick and Owen 2000). Thus, the resource approach tells us little about the mechanisms allowing leaders to facilitate illicit financing activities, effectively conceal weapons, and efficiently coordinate people for violence under repression in cities.

A third perspective focuses on network structures. Horizontal and vertical ties (Staniland 2014), quotidian interpersonal relations (Della Porta 2013; Parkinson 2013; Shesterinina 2021), prewar organizations (Gould 1995; Petersen 2001; Daly 2012; Braitwaite and Cunningham 2020) and the ethnic homogeneity of networks (Lewis 2020), influence rebel group formation and behavior. Staniland (2010) points out, for instance, that capable urban insurgent groups take root in robust networks in contexts where states are politically constrained in their use of violence. Robust networks may explain why urban insurgencies escalate to higher levels of violence (Staniland 2010) but they do not explain how weak insurgents achieve political objectives. Urban slums may provide important hiding places for militants. However, those types of insurgencies also tend to act in isolation from the masses they claim to represent (Gillespie 1980; Della Porta 1995). They furthermore “need massive active social support to overthrow the government [that] can only form relatively spontaneously” (Le Blanc 2013, 799). From another perspective, networks and organizational processes also shape the strength of urban-based organizations. Parkinson (2013) convincingly demonstrates that clandestine supply networks of Palestinian militant organizations in Lebanon in the 1980s emerged from the overlap of quotidian relations such as marriage and friendship, and formal armed group hierarchies. Trust-based relationships and brokerage through marriage nurtured internal coordination and organizational
survival when formal chains of command were severed. Quotidian ties, however, do not explain how insurgent groups achieve broader strategic goals. Alternatively, I focus on the concrete mechanisms allowing rebel leaders to skillfully organize, manage, and channel human and material resources to achieve diverse objectives in their environment. In the following section, I contend that analyzing organizational forms and mechanisms offers novel insights into how urban insurgents build organizational structures with varying strengths and weaknesses.

Analytical Framework: Organizational Bricolage and Engineering in Urban Insurgencies

The analytical framework draws on organizational approaches to political violence and organizational sociology to unpack the mechanisms of rebel group formation and effectiveness in urban contexts. I conceptualize rebel group formation as a process through which rebel leaders select and put into practice organizational forms with varying degrees of success. Of course, repression, resources, and public support can affect organizational outcomes. However, I expect that organizational forms will shape how insurgents channel their resources, adapt to repression, and seize opportunities to increase their public support. In the following section, I identify organizational bricolage and engineering as two competing mechanisms through which rebel organizers employ organizational models to build their insurgency and achieve objectives. I argue that organizational bricolage is an underappreciated mechanism of rebel group formation, allowing insurgent leaders originating from various organizations to innovate in the face of competition.

Organizational forms and repertoires are central to the formation of insurgent groups. As archetypal configurations of structures and practices (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006), organizational forms shape movement strategies, identities, and the distribution of power. For instance, Lenin’s (1902, 79–80) vanguard party is an archetypal insurgent model. The form underlines the importance of an illegal, centralized and secret structure of professional revolutionaries engaged in subversive actions to bring about revolution. Forms are important because they affect movements’ ability to coordinate actions and challenge preexisting institutions (see Clemens 1996, 206–8). Likewise, in multiparty armed conflicts, how insurgents develop their organizational structure and manage human resources can provide them with a competitive advantage over rivals (Mironova 2019). To select organizational forms, insurgents rely on the repertoire of their broader social movement family (Clemens 1993, 1996; Bosi, Della Porta, and Malthaner 2019). Organizational repertoires vary across normative, practical, and institutional levels (Clemens 1996, 208–9). The location of leaders across various social spaces is therefore important to understand the forms that are likely to be employed for organizational building. In this regard, Della Porta (1995) highlights that Italian clandestine activists in the 1960–1970s were able to expand into radicalized workers’ organizations because industrial conflicts had not yet been institutionalized in Italy. Compared to student-based German clandestine groups, Italian organizations were more hierarchical and centralized due to the distinctive influence of Italian organized labor (Della Porta 1995, 108–9). Urban environments therefore constrain the forms accessible to rebel leaders. Military-, social-interest-, and political party-based armed groups are notably more likely to emerge in urban areas, and capital cities in particular, because of the density of rebel constituencies in such areas (Uzonyi and Koren, Forthcoming).

Some insurgent groups are based on one predominant “parent organization” model (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; Shesterinina and Livesey, Forthcoming), while others draw from multiple forms. In Syria in 2011–2012, for instance, the Free Syrian Army quickly emerged by replicating the model of the Syrian army in which many of its members had been enrolled (Baczko, Dorrorsoro, and Quesnay 2016, 128–30). Other groups may resemble a patchwork of forms that mirror the founders’ prewar memberships. Hackett Fischer (1995) demonstrates, for instance, how Paul Revere and Joseph Warren in the Boston revolutionary movement brought together individuals from an eclectic mix of secret societies, taverns, Masonic lodges, and political committees. Leaders’ prior associative memberships, therefore, seed and constrain accessible organizational forms. Repertoires, however, do not describe how agents actively build their organizations based on these building blocks. Two alternative mechanisms—organizational bricolage and organizational engineering—provide competing accounts of the linkages between organizational repertoires and effectiveness.

Organizational bricolage allows agents to innovate when they are confronted with multiple organizational forms and limited resources (Perkmann and Spicer 2014). First introduced by Lévi-Strauss (2020), bricolage is practiced by agents known as *bricoleurs*. Bricoleurs recombine heterogeneous materials from limited repertoires and articulate them into a new structure (Johnson 2012). As Clemens (1996, 205–6) highlights regarding social movements, “[t]inkering] in the face of ambiguity, competition, or opposition, movement activists are viewed as *bricoleurs* who reassemble familiar forms of organization in order to mobilize challenges to existing institutions.” In the same way, rebel leaders may combine various forms to challenge the state and distinguish themselves from rivals. In insurgencies, organizational bricolage produces hybridized organizations that can combine social, political, and military tactics (see Berti and Gutiérrez 2016). Accordingly, urban-based insurgents have strong motives to employ organizational bricolage as they tend to compete with other (non)violent groups, and often originate from and coordinate between multiple organizations (see Della Porta 1995; Le Blanc 2013; Brum 2014). The mechanism is, however, less likely to appear in contexts where armed groups emerge spontaneously, and collective action models are not available (Fujii 2017). Organizational bricolage is also less probable when leaders have homogeneous memberships within a single preestablished organization, such as an army splinter (McLaughlin 2023), a social movement organization, or a political party (Shesterinina and Livesey, Forthcoming).

Once combined, organizational forms have effects on insurgent organizational structures and effectiveness. As an example, in Northern Ireland in 2012, the New IRA formed by merging preexisting dissident republican organizations and an anti-drug vigilante group. The New IRA combined the release of statements, the targeting of suspected drug dealers, and bombings against politicians and state officials (Morrison 2016). Those practices reflected the group’s diverse organizational origins and urban influence. The *patchwork of actors and forms* brought together in a bricolage may be fit to achieve certain objectives, but not others. Guichaoua (2012) points out, for instance, that in 2008, the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ) quickly rose to prominence by bringing together a fragile bricolage of opportunist and activist actors with heterogeneous objectives. Amid early success in building international support, the
group lacked a formal military structure and quickly unraveled and splintered in the face of repression. Although not an urban guerrilla, the MNJ suggests that the social composition of rebel organizations shapes their effectiveness in the environment they operate. Applied to the research problem, organizational bricolage is effective depending on the degree to which leaders can skillfully repurpose various organizational forms in their environment in ways that fit intended objectives.

Rebels can also build their organizations through engineering. The engineer opens up the set of tools and materials available to him/her to find an effective way to solve a problem. Bricoleurs and engineers act differently under structural constraints. As Lévi-Strauss points out (2020, 23), “the engineer always seeks to open a way through and situates [himself/herself] beyond the constraints that make up a given state of civilization, while the bricoleur, willingly or by necessity, remains on this side of those constraints.” Rebel engineers design and implement what they see as the most optimal organizational structure in their context. Cold War rebels notably imported and adapted revolutionary blueprints proven effective by their predecessors with varying degrees of success. The engineer perspective resonates with the rationalist scholarship on civil wars that highlights how rebels choose organizational structures to maximize efficiency and optimally achieve their goals (Weinstein 2007; see also Gates 2002). Insurgent leaders may emphasize different trade-offs between centralization and decentralization, operational capacity and security, or clandestinity and legality when they design their organization. These trade-offs have important implications for the group’s behavior and performance (Della Porta 1995; McCormick and Owen 2000; Johnston 2008).

When engineering an urban-based organization, rebels must balance between contradictory imperatives. McCormick and Owen (2000) argue, in this regard, that enhanced coordination between subunits within an organization may increase the group’s capacity to act against the regime but impede its long-term survival. Conversely, compartmentalization increases security but reduces the organization’s capacity to act. This implies that a blueprint may be adequate to achieve certain objectives but not others. For instance, Marighella’s (2002, 1971 in Gillespie 1980, 43) National Liberation Action in Brazil, a short-lived urban guerrilla, relied on small spontaneous “fighting groups” composed of four to five fighters. Leaders participated in dangerous actions, and individuals could join with outright freedom of action. This structure jeopardized the security of leaders and undermined internal coordination. Surprisingly, it also made the organization more difficult to repress in its early days (Gillespie 1980, 43). Applied to the research problem, organizational engineering is effective if leaders can design and implement a blueprint that is adequate to achieve their intended objectives. Table 1 summarizes the key observable implications of organizational bricolage and engineering.

### Research Methods and Data

The methodological framework includes the analysis of organizational repertoires (Clemens 1993, 1996) and process tracing (Bennett and Checkel 2014) to retrace mechanisms of rebel group formation and effectiveness. I focus my attention on three types of information central to the argument: (i) M-19 founding members’ preformation organizational memberships (organizational repertoire), (ii) the characteristics of M-19’s nascent organizational structure (organizational forms), and (iii) the ways through which organizational forms shape leaders’ ability to achieve objectives (effectiveness).

First, following Clemens (1993, 759), I reconstruct M-19’s organizational repertoire by retracing rebel founders’ “distribution of multiple memberships in organizational fields – the Simmelian web of group affiliations – and [the] cultural logics informing the deployment of organizational repertoires.” I focus my attention on M-19’s foundational nucleus. The activist core of a movement is important since “[their pre-war activities], even if not directly related to future rebellion, establish the structure of leadership and membership on which armed groups are modelled at the war’s onset” (Sherstennina 2021, 53). If initial conditions for the activation of organizational bricolage are present, one can expect that M-19 organizers had access to a diverse, but limited repertoire of organizational forms.

To map this repertoire, I first inductively identified M-19 founding members (thirty-nine in total) by drawing on the literature on the guerrilla (e.g., Villamizar 1995a) and founders’ testimonies (e.g., Vásquez 2000; Grabe 2011). I then collected data on founder’s preformation education, occupation, and memberships in theoretically relevant organizations, including political parties, guerrillas, youth organizations, and social movements. To gather such information, I consulted a variety of sources, including memoirs, biographies, published interviews with founding members, archival documents, news articles, and the rich historical literature on M-19 and the Colombian armed conflict.

Archival documents were retrieved from the Oiga Hermano, Hermana blog (http://www.oigahermanohermana.org/), and a fund digitized by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (Corporación para el Fomento de la Investigación y el Fomento Comunitario-Museo del Caquetá, https://www.archivodelosddhh.gov.co/saia_release1/ws_client_om/). For ethical reasons, the biographical data only comes from openly available sources and not from interviews with founding members. The online appendix includes a table summarizing the biographical profiles of M-19 founders. It also provides details about coding procedures, desk research ethics, and a full list of references.

Second, I employ process tracing to analyze M-19’s formation against the competing mechanisms of organizational bricolage and engineering. Process tracing is “the analysis

### Table 1. Observable implications of organizational bricolage and engineering

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<tr>
<td>Role of repertoires in organizational building</td>
<td>Leaders draw from a limited repertoire</td>
<td>Leaders open up the set of forms available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of organizational effectiveness</td>
<td>Patchwork of organizational forms</td>
<td>Blueprint based on a predominant form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of fit between constituent parts and objectives</td>
<td>Design and implementation of an adequate blueprint</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purpose of either developing or
testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms” (Bennett and
Checkel 2014, 7). Following Bennett and Checkel (2014),
I elaborate observable implications of those two competing
accounts. If bricolage is the main mechanism characterizing
rebel group formation, M-19 should resemble a patchwork
of preformation organizational forms repurposed to achieve
new objectives. However, if M-19 was formed through engi-
eering, a particular blueprint should subsume leaders’ pre-
formation organizational experiences. Besides the materials
mentioned above, I leverage insights from thirty-two life his-
tory interviews with former M-19 militants carried out dur-
ing fieldwork in Bogotá and Cali in September–December
2019. The interviews were conducted in Spanish. Five inter-
viewees were founding members, including two men (Inter-
views 8 and 14) and three women in leadership roles (Inter-
views 22, 23, and 32). Twenty respondents were active
during the period analyzed (1973–1980). During inter-
views, I asked questions about militants’ premobilization
and wartime activities to capture complex interactions be-
tween individual trajectories and organizational processes.
Details about fieldwork ethics, interview protocols, and a full
list of interviewees can be found in the online appendix.

Third, I assess whether effectiveness outcomes are the
product of variation in the degrees of fit between forms and objectives (organizational bricolage) or the design and implementa-
tion of an insurgent blueprint (organizational engineering).
To do this, I also employ process tracing. I retrace the ef-
fects of organizational forms on M-19’s ability to (i) foster public support, (ii) establish a social base, and (iii) maintain urban operations under repression. For this purpose, I
analyze documents from various M-19 guerrilla conferences (e.g., M-19 1977a) and a pamphlet entitled La Carta Nacional (M-19 1977b, 1977c) in addition to the above-mentioned
materials. Those historical texts provide detailed accounts
of M-19’s structure, leaders’ assessments of the deficiencies of their organization, and the results of an internal survey
carried out within the organization (M-19 1977b).

Organizational Bricolage and M-19’s Urban Insurgent
Campaign (1973–1980)

M-19’s Origins and Organizational Repertoire

M-19 founders originated from multiple nonviolent and vi-
elent political organizations. The core group that founded
M-19 in 1973 emerges from an urban cell created by Jaime
Bateman and Luis Otero. Those two individuals were im-
portant cadres in the Communist Party’s youth wing, also
known as the JUCO. In 1966–1970, Bateman served as a pol-
commisar for the PCC in the FARC rural guerrilla.
In 1970, FARC leaders ordered Bateman and Otero to
organize a clandestine group to strengthen their politi-
cal work in cities (Villamizar 1995a, 33, 2019, 313–4). The
FARC/PCC urban cell was primarily composed of JUCO and
PCC activists based in Bogotá and Cali, but founders also
had additional organizational experience. For instance,
communist militants like Afraino Parra and Yamel Riaño
had participated in the Frente Unido social movement.
Furthermore, Iván Marino had been expelled from the FARC
in 1968 but integrated Bateman’s group after a short stint
with a Venezuelan guerrilla (Villamizar 2019, 132, 178, 288).
María Eugenia Vásquez (2000, 63–73) was an anthropology
student active in a youth organization linked to the Rev-
olutionary Independent Labor Movement (MOIR) party.
In 1972, Bateman and other group members were banned
from the PCC. Their clandestine activities contravened the
party’s policy of remaining legal amid its links to the FARC
guerrilla (Riaño and Panesso 2006, 36). M-19 founders thus
formed the guerrilla in a context characterized by competi-
tion with former comrades and other opposition groups.

In the following years, their initial nucleus expanded and
broadened its organizational repertoire. The group was
first called Comuneros and later adopted the name M-19
in a meeting in October 1973 (Villamizar 2019, 371–5).
M-19’s communist core was reinforced with additional
former guerrilla fighters, student activists, and intellectuals.
For instance, Germán Rojas was a bomb maker with experi-
ence in two failed attempts to implement a Cuban-like fico
in Colombia (Grabe 2015, 269; Villamizar 2017, 189–211).
Gladys López and José Helmer Marín had been engaged in
the ELN guerrilla and left-wing Catholic groups (Villamizar
2019, 363). Founders had strong connections to universities
and intellectual activist milieu. Twenty-four out of thirty-
inine organizers had received a university education. No-
tably, Gustavo Arias, a law student at the Universidad Nacional
in Bogotá, had organized an activist group called Pijao Re-
belde, comprised of students and workers. The group was
later merged with M-19 (Arias in El Salmón 2018; Villamizar
anthropology student, was engaged in cultural groups that
organized literacy campaigns and critical theater plays in
Bogotá’s marginalized neighborhoods. She also frequented
the La Mama Theatre with Peggy Kielland and Eddy Ar-
mando, who were part of the FARC/PCC cell. M-19’s con-
nections to education institutions are consistent with find-
ings from other contexts highlighting the role of universi-
ties as sites for political socialization and connecting rebel
cadres (Wickham-Crowley 1992; Reno 2011; Stewart 2023).

M-19 also emerged from within the ANAPO party. Some
founders had been active in the party in addition to their
PCC and FARC memberships. Álvaro Fayad was a mem-
ber of the ANAPO before 1970 (Grabe 2015, 268) and
Carlos Pizarro had been involved in party activities (Riaño
and Panesso 2006, 32). A foundational meeting in January
1973 also took place at the estate of an ANAPO senator
(Villamizar 1995a, 47). The core group brokered an alliance
with an ANAPO faction in 1973 when Jaime Bateman and
Carlos Pizarro met with Carlos Toledo. Toledo was a prom-
nent ANAPO parliamentarian who was tasked with creating
armed cells to prevent another electoral fraud. He was con-
vinced by Bateman’s insurgent project (Toledo in Luna 2002,
41–2; Villamizar 2019, 367–8). Moreover, Andrés Almara
es, a trade unionist, was among the ANAPO parliamentarians
who aligned themselves with the emerging urban guerrilla
(Villamizar 2019, 367). In summary, M-19’s core group had
access to a diverse but limited organizational repertoire
comprised of Marxist–Leninist cells, political parties, rural
guerrillas, student clubs, intellectual collectives, and trade
unions. The experiences of M-19 founders in multiple orga-
nizations highlight that preformation social conditions were
deductive to organizational bricolage. Table 2 summarizes
the main memberships of M-19 organizers.

M-19’s Organizational Patchwork

M-19’s organizational structure resembled a patchwork of
models that mirrored leaders’ preformation memberships.
Guerrilla founders combined the armed vanguard, intellec-
tual collective and populist party organizational forms to build their organization.
M-19 incorporated features of the armed vanguard form. The core group established a Central Commission inspired by the schemes of Marxist–Leninist organizations. This unit fulfilled primarily administrative and communications functions but lacked a hierarchical structure (Grabe 2015, 266). Founders were also inspired by Latin American urban guerrillas' part of their broader movement framework. However, they did not want to implement a blueprint. They sought to forge their own path (Gabe 2015, 274) and recipe for revolution (Interview 14). M-19’s estatutos [internal norms] were a hybrid between the rules of the Tupamaros, Montoneros, and FARC (Villamizar 2019, 445). The armed vanguard form was the basis for a patchwork that included other models. Document #2 of a foundational meeting in October 1973 states that M-19 will “[continue] to be a Marxist-Leninist organization that develops armed struggle in urban centers, [and] will work for the agglutination and unity of action of the national revolutionary movement as a condition for seizing power” (in Villamizar 2019, 376). The term “agglutination” is significant here as it implies the combination of different forms of collective action, akin to a bricolage. Founders drew from their past experiences but also altered the practices of preexisting models. This is apparent in M-19’s propaganda. Bateman had previously served as Secretary for Agitation and Propaganda in the JUCO (Gómez 1999 in Villamizar 2019, 139). The FARC/PCC urban cell preceding M-19 also edited two propaganda publications (Villamizar 1995a, 33). Similarly, M-19 practiced pamphleteering, but militants departed from the practice of producing dense, hard-to-read documents prevalent among Marxist–Leninist organizations. Instead, they favored short and accessible texts accompanied by caricatures and images (Grabe 2015, 263). Those propaganda innovations reflect the influence of founders’ social backgrounds as communications specialists. M-19 organizers included one publicist, two graphic designers, two journalists, and two theater professionals.

M-19’s origins in student collectives, reading groups, and universities contributed to its distinctly urban style (Pécaut 2001; Boulanger Martel 2022). In addition to the armed vanguard model, the intellectual collective form was melded into M-19’s organizational structure. For instance, prior to the foundation of M-19, Yesenia (Interview 28) and a group of friends created a club where they read literature, played sports, made music, discussed politics, and debated. They also provided informal education to workers in collaboration with trade unions. This club of friends started small but eventually involved thirty people and had its own small factory. Yesenia’s “club” is not an exception but part of a wider network of activists that composed the insurgent organization (see Grabe 2015, 254–5; Vásquez 2000, 57, 63–4). M-19 founders nurtured their insurgent project by engaging in collective discussions over revolutionary manuals, history textbooks, Colombian literature, and even science fiction (Artunduaga in Grabe 2015, 279–80). M-19’s incipient rebel governance practices (O’Connor 2023), such as the seizing and distribution of loads of milk, bricks, and toys, also closely resembled the activities of activist clubs. Radicalized intellectuals played a pivotal role in establishing initial propaganda and intelligence practices (Grabe 2011, 90–3, 2015, 260; Vásquez 2000, 98–9; Interviews 8, 22, 28, and 31). For instance, during labor strikes in 1976, M-19 kidnapped and subjected José Raquel Mercado to a “revolutionary trial.” Mercado was a trade union leader who was criticized for his proemployer positions. Prior to the operation, M-19 members conducted surveillance on Mercado’s movements. They studied his role in labor conflict negotiations and the literature on workers’ movements to develop their “framework for analysis” (Grabe 2011, 90–1). The militants then “built a case” against Mercado, accusing him of corruption and treason against the working class. M-19 made

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Table 2. Preformation organizational memberships of M-19 founders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political parties</th>
<th>Number of founding members</th>
<th>Notable founding members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PCC</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Jaime Bateman, Luis Otero, Yamel Riaño, Iván Marino, Rosemberg Fabión, Álvaro Fayad, Carlos Pizarro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANAPO</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Carlos Toledo, Andrés Almarales, Israel Santamaría, Evereth Bustamante</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOIR</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>María Eugenia Vásquez</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guerrillas</th>
<th>Number of founding members</th>
<th>Notable founding members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FARC (rural)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jaime Bateman, Luis Otero, Iván Marino, Afraino Parra, Álvaro Fayad, Carlos Pizarro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasant Student Workers Movement (MOEC)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Germán Rojas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELN</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gladys López, José Helmer Marín</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other organizations</th>
<th>Number of founding members</th>
<th>Notable founding members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Mama Theatre</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Peggy Kielland, Eddy Armando, Vera Grabe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frente Unido</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yamel Riaño, Afraino Parra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pijao Rebelde</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gustavo Arias</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Behar 1985; Beccassino 1989; Villamizar 1995a,b, 2017, 2019; Vásquez 2000; Lara 2002; Riaño and Panesso 2006; Grabe 2011, 2015; León 2012; See online appendix for additional sources and details.
demands of the government and aligned with trade unions. Militants encouraged students and workers to vote in assemblies on Mercado’s “guilt.” Additionally, they urged people to express their stance by painting “Yes” or “No” on city walls (Villamizar 1995a, 82–92). Ultimately, M-19 executed the union leader. This dark episode was characterized by research activities and the use of labor and student assemblies to amplify M-19’s propaganda. These actions highlight that the practices of intellectual collectives were not only subsumed to an insurgent blueprint but also grafted onto the patchwork that composed M-19’s emergent organizational structure.

M-19 also built on ANAPO’s populists party model. M-19 organizers assumed the symbols and the past of the ANAPO but not its direction (Soto in Grabe 2015, 275). The party experienced electoral decline and internal divisions after the defeat of Rojas Pinilla in 1970 (León 2012). While M-19 contributed to this decline, it also capitalized on the party’s grassroots mobilization and public communication apparatus. Throughout the 1960s, ANAPO developed so-called commandos to mobilize voters and infiltrate trade unions. These commandos were typically led by a family tasked with organizing party activities in their neighborhood. M-19 leaders sought to consolidate their power within these grassroots groups. In 1974, Almarales, along with other M-19 cadres and ANAPO members, led the editorial of a newspaper called Mayorias. The publication promoted socialist positions in the ANAPO and aimed to strengthen the group’s influence with the party’s base (Villamizar 2019, 418; Vásquez 2000, 134). In 1975, the party leadership expelled Almarales and other prominent party members (Vásquez 2000, 134). They were denounced for their grassroots activities and socialist orientation (Alternativa 1975; León 2012). As a result, in 1976 a faction called the Socialist ANAPO disavowed from the main party and abstained from participating in elections (León 2012). This faction acted as M-19’s “legal arm” (Villamizar 2019, 404, 416–8). Socialist ANAPO commandos in Bogotá gradually transitioned from party units to clandestine cells that hosted meetings, stockpiled weapons, and safeguarded sensitive propaganda material (Medellín 2018; Interview 6). Some party militants unknowingly joined M-19 as local leaders became guerrilla commanders (Medellín 2018, 83–9, 105–6). The populist party form was therefore incorporated into M-19’s patchwork structure alongside the armed vanguard and intellectual collective models. These insights resonate with Arjona’s (2014, 2016) work on wartime social orders. The M-19 case highlights that insurgents can employ organizational bricolage to create new wartime institutions that structure their interactions with civilians.

By 1976, M-19 had experienced considerable growth and started to develop a more formal organizational structure. The guerrilla had approximately 150 recruits, 100 arms, and 1,200,000 USD (Riaño in Villamizar 2019, 427). However, the leadership found that the armed vanguard’s “apparatus” largely isolated the group from the masses (M-19 1977a, 1977b, 1977c; Villamizar 2019, 445–6). Beginning in 1976, M-19 drew on the Argentinian Montoneros to construct a more hierarchical structure known as the Political Military Organization (OPM). One can expect that, if engineering became the prevalent mechanism in the guerrilla’s reorganization, the OPM blueprint would have subsumed other organizational models. Instead, the OPM formalized the patchwork of forms incorporated in M-19’s structure. A document from the Fifth Conference of 1977 highlights that while “breaking from the conception, practice, and organizational forms of the apparatus, [a transitional period meant to] pick up on the positive things already achieved” (M-19 1977a, 6). The OPM aimed to be “capable of combining and centralizing the most diverse forms of struggle and the most distinct grievances of the people” (M-19 1977a, 6; see also Villamizar 2019, 468). The mention of the combination of forms of struggle is significant here, as it refers to a strategy adopted by the PCC during the IX Congress of 1961. The strategy stipulates that the party would maintain its legal structure while supporting illegal rural guerrilla activities (Villamizar 2019, 153; see also Phelan 2019). In contrast, M-19 leaders advocated for the combination of legal and illegal activities in a single organization. M-19’s new structure retained its patchwork features. The guerrilla had a compartmentalized structure with specialized commandos and clandestine propaganda activities (M-19 1977a, 6–9). This structure reflected the militarist conception of the armed vanguard model. Militants were also tasked with embedding themselves in communities and carrying out various forms of mass-based work (M-19 1977a, 6). These activities are consistent with the practices of the intellectual collective form. Finally, the base commando served as the “fundamental unit” in M-19’s structure and consisted of three to five members (M-19 1977a, 6). This unit shared remarkable similarities with the grassroots structure of the ANAPO populist party.

M-19’s Organizational Structure and the Effectiveness of Urban Insurgency

Organizational bricolage allowed M-19 leaders to foster public support but undermined their ability to establish a robust social base and maintain their urban operations amid government repression. Different degrees of fit between the guerrilla’s forms and objectives explain these outcomes. Below, I describe how M-19’s organizational structure shaped the effectiveness of its urban campaign between 1973 and 1980.

Combining the armed vanguard, intellectual collective, and populist party forms fitted M-19’s objectives to build support. By melding together different models of collective action, leaders made use of the combined effects of legal, illegal, clandestine, and public actions to spread their message. M-19 organizers were skilled propagandists, for whom armed violence was not an end but a means of communication. All actions were subordinated to political objectives (Pizarro 1996, 84–5). In its first armed propaganda operation in 1974, M-19 seized the Sword of Simón Bolívar, a symbol of Latin American liberation from Spanish colonial rule. The operation was preceded by a sophisticated advertisement campaign in El Tiempo newspaper to build expectations (Grabe 2015, 262–3, 305–6). M-19’s seemingly contradictory clandestine and public activities complemented one another to propagate the guerrilla’s message. Clandestine armed actions, such as kidnappings and bank robberies, funded the Mayorias newspaper and Socialist ANAPO grassroots work. In turn, those activities were meant to bolster support for M-19’s proposals (Vásquez 2000, 134–5). Militants distributed leaflets and bulletins, developed relations with journalists, jammed television channels, and occupied public buildings and newspaper facilities (García, Grabe, and Patiño 2008, 11). Through clandestine means, M-19 militants infiltrated urban institutions to achieve their objectives. This observation echoes similar dynamics seen later in the Colombian armed conflict. Gutiérrez (2021) finds, for instance, that the FARC effectively promoted their political agenda by subverting local Community Actions Committees aimed at undermining guerrilla support in rural areas.
M-19’s hybrid clandestine-public *modus operandi* amplified its message, sometimes with mixed effects. Former members underline that the kidnapping of Mercado in 1976 resulted in an influx of new recruits and increased sympathies, but also drew public condemnation (Villamizar 1995a, 82–92; Grabe 2011, 92–3). Other actions propelled M-19 into the spotlight, despite its small size. One of the most iconic operations was the seizure of around 5,000 arms from an arsenal in the *Canton Norte* military base north of Bogotá. Militants dug an 80-meter-long tunnel from an apartment building to a weapon stockpile they seized on New Year’s Eve 1979. The risky operation involved both clandestine and public actions. Militants acted in secrecy while digging the tunnel, but later contacted the press and released a communiqué to justify their actions (Arteaga in Behar 1985, 162–4). *El Tiempo* (1979) reported the event on their front page on January 3. The newspaper discussed M-19’s propaganda document and the fact that Carlos Toledo had revealed his identity as a guerrilla leader. M-19’s audacious operation unleashed unprecedented repression but was politically effective. Repression drew attention to the issue of human rights in Colombia. Paradoxically, the authoritarian tendencies of the Turbay Ayala government legitimized M-19’s calls for peace talks, a national dialogue, and an amnesty for political prisoners (Pizarro 1996, 106). Although survey polls did not exist at that time (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2004, 264), experts note that M-19 had garnered significant public support (Pizarro 1996, 106; Palacios 2003, 271).

Despite its political successes, M-19 had important organizational deficiencies. The guerrilla’s organizational patchwork did not allow insurgents to consolidate a durable social base. In 1977, M-19 sought to break from its relative isolation by forming integral cadres involved in clandestine mass work (M-19 1977a). O’Connor (2023) highlights in this regard that M-19’s clandestine rebel governance practices enabled the group to make connections with urban constituents despite lacking effective territorial control. However, these practices failed to establish a *robust* social base grafted onto its leadership structure. In 1977, leaders conducted an internal evaluation to assess how base groups interpreted and implemented the organization’s directives (M-19 1977b). They expressed concern that only 50% of the groups responded to the survey and that communications between the leadership and the base were slow (M-19 1977b). Militants also found that balancing seemingly contradictory public, legal, clandestine, and illegal roles was challenging (M-19 1977b). Only 20–25 percent of M-19’s effective were acting at full speed. Moreover, leaders lamented that base groups were not properly distributing the organization’s publication, nor were they discussing and studying propaganda material systematically (M-19 1977b). Those dynamics indicate a mismatch between M-19’s organizational structure and capacity to achieve objectives. In the same vein, Bateman (in Villamizar 1995a, 19) underlined that M-19 could not implement its revolutionary agenda within ANAPO structures due to the characteristics of the party. The armed vanguard and intellectual collective forms emphasized a strong ideological program and collective discussions that could hardly be harmonized with ANAPO’s populist party clientelist practices. As M-19 founder Yamel Riaño (in Riaño and Panesso 2006, 65) argues:

> The Anapo had its own dynamic, the dynamic of the shopkeeper who gathered 10 or 200 people when the leader told him: “Bring them together.” Because it was the shopkeeper who knew everyone, who sent the young ones to tell them about a meeting, and 50, 100, or 200 people would gather in any patio of the house to hear the leader who came to speak. And we wanted to make a Leninist party out of it, we turned it into cells, we called it “Anapo centers”, ten members who had the structure of the democratic centralism of the party. We wanted to copy that and we were wrong because it was not a party of cadres, but a party of the popular masses.

Other founders also suggest that the armed vanguard model could not be organically linked to ANAPO’s social base, and did not fulfill M-19’s objective to mobilize broad sectors of society (Rojas in Beccassino 1989, 158; Vásquez 2000, 137). Even though the guerrilla integrated some of ANAPO’s grassroots structures, the poor fit between the populist party model and other forms contributed to the weakness of M-19’s social base.

The combination of public and clandestine practices exposed the leadership and undermined M-19’s urban operations. In 1975, M-19 staged various actions to commemorate the death of ANAPO’s founder, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Jaime Bateman distributed M-19 propaganda in a crowd and was caught on camera. Gustavo Arias also led a group that disrupted an ANAPO event and was promptly identified by the authorities (León 2012, 252; Villamizar 2019, 499–12). Furthermore, during the kidnapping of Mercado in 1976, state officials suspected that Mayorías was a public manifestation of the clandestine M-19. They monitored the newspaper’s headquarters and interrogated Socialist ANAPO militants (Vásquez 2000, 135; Villamizar 2019, 498–9). Security services began compiling a dossier on M-19’s possible leaders, members, and *modus operandi* (Villamizar 2019, 443). They also infiltrated the group (Vásquez 2000, 136). In 1977, M-19 acknowledged that repression had been effective (M-19 1977b, 2). According to a former commander (Interview 3), combining forms of collective action was a mistake:

> The combination of forms of struggle from our position was not possible. It is not possible to play this game like in three-cushion billiard, because the war is so intense from the institutional perspective. [Government institutions] cover all forms of struggle. The political, the electoral, the military, the Church, the economic, everything, everything. And a guerrilla does not have the capacity for that game.

The incompatibility between public and clandestine practices implied that militants often achieved political impact at the expense of organizational viability. During the *Canton Norte* episode in 1978-1979, mass propaganda objectives were prioritized over vital components of M-19’s clandestine urban operations. Leaders took considerable risks by involving 120 militants and breaking the cover of a profitable medical supply company (Bateman in Villamizar 1995b, 36–9; Villamizar 2019, 478, 484). Militants did not act as a closed and compartmentalized apparatus necessary for this type of operation (Arteaga in Behar 1985, 163–4; Villamizar 1995a, 125–9). In raids that followed, M-19 safe houses were uncovered, key leaders were captured, and most weapons were seized by the authorities (*El Tiempo* 1979 6a; Villamizar 2019, 484–6). By the end of 1979, M-19’s urban activities were severely compromised. The majority of its leadership and 312 militants were imprisoned (Villamizar 1995a, 156). Bateman later highlighted that what mattered for the organization was its political project, “which was worth more than ten thousand structures” (in Villamizar 1995b 39–40). The armed vanguard model required that militants remain in the shadows to operate in cities. However, this approach clashed with the overtness of the political spectacle advocated by this “intellectual” guerrilla. While organizational
bricolage was effective to build public support, it created fissures in M-19’s foundations. Once exposed to repression, organizational inconsistencies contributed to the demise of the guerrilla’s urban operations.

**Conclusion**

M-19 was politically impactful yet organizationally defective. The urban guerrilla pioneered organizational innovations that made it an important force in Colombian politics, despite its small size. The fact that more powerful insurgent competitors later adopted M-19’s strategies underlines the urban guerrilla’s significance in the Colombian context. The case of M-19 suggests that bricolage could be a feature of urban armed conflicts (see also Elfverson and Höglund 2018 on institutional bricolage). Urban rebel groups tend to emerge from the alliance of radicalized elements within student organizations, trade unions, political parties, social movements, or prisoner collectives, among others (see Della Porta 1995; Brum 2014; Morrison 2016). Armed militancy in cities also rests on the necessity of balancing clandestine and public activities, and the combination of political, military, legal, and illegal forms of action (see Gillespie 1980; Della Porta 1995, 2013; O’Connor 2023). As insurgents expand into the cities, they may therefore employ organizational bricolage to diversify their repertoire. For instance, in Colombia since 2006, the ELN has intensified its urban campaign by combining different forms of actions, including political work, military operations, and bombings (Larratt-Smith, Trejos, and Aponte 2021). Studying how insurgents incorporate different models of collective action can hence shed light on how they coordinate rural and urban fronts.

As bricolage is a universal concept (Johnson 2012), it offers a general mechanism of rebel group formation, innovation, and transformation observable beyond urban contexts (see Guichaoua 2012; Kindersley and Rolandsen 2017). More precisely, organizational bricolage describes how wartime institutions (Arjona 2014), and organizational subunits and divisions (Parkinson and Zaks 2018) are created. Future research could therefore assess whether organizational bricolage is applicable to other types of organizations, such as progovernment militias, rural-based guerrillas, or criminal syndicates. Aligning with the broader organizational turn in the study of insurgencies (Parkinson and Zaks 2018; Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; Malone 2022), this article calls for a greater disaggregation of the characteristics of leaders, organizational forms, and objectives of rebel groups to better understand how they operate. Methodologically, the framework developed in this study can help researchers capture complex processes linking leaders’ prior experiences and the structure of their organization. This approach could inform studies into how the multiple organizational origins of insurgent groups shape their wartime practices and effectiveness. The urban background of M-19 leaders and the combination of the armed vanguard, intellectual collective, and populist party forms had distinctive effects on the guerrilla’s modus operandi. Following this logic, leaders’ memberships prior to formation should shape the repertoire of violence (Cohen 2013; Hoover Green 2016) and governance practices (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016) of rebel organizations.

Organizations emerging from bricolage have different strengths and weaknesses based on the types of forms integrated into their structure and how well those forms fit with objectives. This argument has implications for how governments engage with insurgent groups. A “best practice” approach to counterinsurgency seems futile (see Staniland 2014, 37). This is because rebel groups may respond differently to repression and negotiations depending on the distinct organizational forms that are integrated into their structure. Furthermore, organizational bricolage may facilitate the reformation of rebel groups. As an example, FARC dissident formations that emerged during the current peace process in Colombia were formed from the recombination of various fragments of the former guerrilla’s organizational structure, including fronts, financing units, mobile columns, and urban militias, among others (Álvarez, Calderón, and Vélez 2018). Applied to rebel-to-party transitions, organizational bricolage also suggests that the various forms included in the patchwork that make up an insurgent organizational structure can facilitate or impede its adaptation to postwar politics (see also Zaks 2017 on proto-party structures). It may be easier for rebel groups formed and organized around armed political parties, grassroots activists, or mass movements forms to refashion those structures for peaceful electoral competition. Conversely, other militarized forms such as clandestine cells, military special forces, and rebel intelligence units, may be harder to repurpose into democratic political party structures. Once demobilized, rebel bricoleurs may build party bureaucracies by skillfully repurposing and recombining various forms available in their environment. Future research could investigate whether postrebel party transitions involving organizational bricolage produce different types of postwar outcomes than rebel successor parties that are built on the implementation of blueprints through party engineering. By studying how rebel bricoleurs skillfully recombine models of collective action into hybridized organizational structures, we can gain a better understanding of how insurgent organizations form, behave, and transform after war.

**Supplementary Information**

Supplementary information is available in the International Studies Quarterly data archive.

**References**


