Two important trends since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s are the continuing decline in frequency of interstate wars and the prevalence of internal armed conflicts, and the more recent upsurge in the significance of transnational organised crime (TOC). There are extensive literatures on both of these trends but work remains to be done to integrate and theorise the subfields. The challenge is to find ways to manage, both analytically and empirically, the complex sets of variables nested in quite difficult questions: To what extent are the activities of criminal groups present in internal armed conflicts? What influence do TOC activities have on such conflicts? What are the effects of armed conflicts on the origin and evolution of TOC? To what extent do policy responses adequately address the linkages between internal conflicts and TOC? (pp. 18–19).

The collection consists of an introduction that sets out a working hypothesis and a loose analytical framework, a chapter on recent global trends in drug trafficking, seven country cases drawn from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe, and one on the role of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the battle against TOC. The conclusion offers some reflections about the central questions in light of information provided in the country chapters. We are not given the provenance of the book, but the directors and six of the chapter authors are based in the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

The introduction by Josep Ibáñez Muñoz provides reasons and data to support the claims that inter-state wars have become less frequent, that TOC has surged since the early 1990s, and that the two trends are closely interwoven. “The working hypothesis that guides this study is that the relationship between both phenomena [armed conflict and transnational organised crime] is tight and complex, incorporating into itself aspects of the mechanisms that are found in the origin, development, permanence or decline of both” (p. 11, my translation).

Ibáñez Muñoz recognises that the complexity and dynamic nature of the relationship limit the ability to generalise, and he offers a loose analytical framework to describe relationships among insurgents and criminals. The five stylised types of
relationships form a continuum: (1) coexistence, the parallel existence of insurgents and TOC in which neither directly influences the other; (2) parasitism, where one of the actors benefits from the circumstances of the other; (3) dependence, in which one of the actors benefits from the other in an asymmetric fashion; (4) interdependence, a kind of perverse relationship in which the actors benefit symmetrically from the circumstances of both; and, (5) symbiosis, the fusion of both actors in which criminals and insurgents participate jointly in insurgency and criminality (pp. 18–23). A purpose of the framework is that governments need to identify accurately the types of relationships in order to devise effective policies. Ibáñez Muñoz further recognises that the relationships might overlap and evolve dynamically and that multiple types might be in play in different locales in a given country. Two additional factors affect the relationships between insurgents and criminals. First, in most cases the state is weak and may collude with TOC. Second, varieties of external actors – economic, political, military – may intervene in significant ways.

Constanza Sánchez Avilés provides an overview of global trafficking in Chapter 1, particularly in heroin and cocaine, from the late 1990s to about 2010. Drawing mainly on UNODC data, the chapter aims to provide a broader context in which to understand some of the dynamics we encounter in most of the case studies. For her purposes markets are more important than the multiple types of organisations that traffic in illegal drugs. She notes the geography of drug production with concentrations in Afghanistan (heroin) and the Andes (cocaine) and reminds us that consumption of illegal drugs is expanding beyond the developed areas to include countries in developing regions.

The country cases in Chapters 2–8, one each from Asia and Europe, two from Latin America, and three from Africa, illustrate the point made in the introduction that the complexity and dynamic change in markets, actors, and regional and global contexts limit the types of generalisations that can be drawn.

In Chapter 2 on Afghanistan, David R. Brewly-Taylor reports that the heroin trafficking organisations are organised along family and tribal lines and appear to form layers that sell to one another from producers to the top-most organisations, which handle the export of product abroad. The top-most layer of the pyramid protects the industry through their connections with government. The Taliban appear involved in drug trafficking by selling protection or extracting ‘taxes’ on some exports. The United States and United Kingdom pursued both anti-drug and anti-terror strategies, with shifting priorities. For example, the Barak Obama administration decided in 2009 that crop eradication as a supply-control strategy was inefficient and shifted to rural development and product interdiction. Further, Afghan politicians proved adept at manipulating external policies to their own advantage, deflecting efforts away from top-level activity and towards lower levels of production. Central to the Afghan case is the weakness of the central government. “Despite ever clearer evidence of the capture of ‘key elements of the state apparatus’ by trafficking interests, the permanent weakness of the state itself, especially beyond Kabul rules out the notion that it is a traditional narco-state” (p. 69, my translation).

The two chapters on Latin America offer interesting contrasts. In the absence of a political insurgency in Mexico, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira rehearses the data on drug trafficking organisations and the rapid spike of homicides after 2006. He suggests that to label the increase as armed conflict is to “over classify” (p. 104) and thus create incentives to militarise state responses. He uses international law and the
absence of political agendas to argue that criminal organisations do not constitute insurgencies, and that state responses should emphasise strengthening the rule of law and channelling more resources towards development, welfare, and the like. In Colombia the state, leftist insurgencies, and self-defence forces engaged in armed conflict over several decades, and Erika M. Rodríguez Pinzón asserts that “Colombia is not a case of civil war but rather one of war against civilians” (p. 107, emphasis in original; my translation). While drug-trafficking is a significant factor, she argues that the conflicts have political roots and other means of self-perpetuation. The complexity of Colombia offers every combination from co-existence to symbiosis, and the United States plays a significant role as an external actor.

The three African cases also present interesting variations. In the chapter on Somalia and maritime piracy, Pablo Pareja Alcaraz argues that piracy and political insurgency respond to different logics (co-existence), and the international response has been well orchestrated and relatively effective. In contrast, Marta Abegón Novella’s analysis of political insurgency and illegal diamond mining in seven African countries (e.g., Angola, Congo) more closely approximates symbiosis, and she suggests that the international effort, led by the United Nations, to curb the sale of ‘blood diamonds’ has been ineffective. Symbiosis between political insurgents and criminals involved in kidnapping and migrant and drug-trafficking also characterises the Sahel, according to Jordi Quero Arias. In addition, insurgents benefited from illegal arms trafficking from Libya after 2011. French intervention has been significant, at least in the short term.

Ignasi Torrent provides a straightforward analytical model to guide his analysis of the eight countries that constitute the Balkans. The model identifies both structural and short-term factors that, along with state weakness, led to weak economic growth, erratic governance, and pervasive corruption, conditions that in turn fomented TOC (trafficking in drugs, arms, persons, and tobacco) and varieties of internal conflict. In several cases, the state is a major player in TOC. The major external actors, the European Union and the United Nations, have been largely ineffective.

Caterina García Segura develops two points in her chapter on the United Nations. First, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) not only plays a leading role in combating TOC, its collective legitimacy also empowers it to define what constitutes transnational crime. Second, the UNODC’s role in collecting and reporting data on various types of crime is problematical because of the influence wielded by several of its more powerful members. These points are illustrated in a discussion of policies against terrorism and drug trafficking. For example, US support for prohibitionist policies to counter drug trafficking puts the burden on drug-producing rather than drug-consuming countries.

The conclusions apply the framework of coexistence, parasitism, and so forth to the country cases and reflect on the difficulties of generalising about internal conflicts and transnational crime. With so many variables in play, the relationships are essentially context-specific. The authors want to push us beyond simplistic explanations, like ‘greed or grievance’ to explain crime and conflict, and ask us to recognise the complexity of actors, motives, and contexts. “The factors that explain changes or leaps between categories have to do with transformations in the level of the actors (interests, motivations, relative power), the dynamics (phases of conflict, changes in supply and demand in markets, effects of political measures), and the context (strength of state structures, degree of international intervention). In any
case, the point is to appreciate the dynamic character between the phenomena”
(p. 229, my translation).

In sum, the collection does not claim to blaze new trails for our ability to theorise
about the complex relationships between internal conflict and TOC. It succeeds in
the more modest goals of clarifying concepts and providing a rich array of country
cases that are not tightly woven into the introduction’s framework but that are
generally well described. The book might serve well in upper-division undergraduate
or graduate courses in international relations in which instructors could work with
students to develop hypotheses about the causes of different patterns of dynamics
between internal conflict and TOC, the types of international responses that emerge,
or the kinds of policies that governments might pursue.