

Book Review

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Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War.
By Abbey Steele. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, 13.9 million people were forced from their homes in 2014 alone, and 11 million of them were internally displaced. In 2016, the most recent UN figures, a total of 65.6 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide—making 8 out of every 1,000 inhabitants of earth a displaced person. Since the 1980s, Colombia has been home to nearly 6 million internally displaced people, ranking near the highest globally per capita; therefore, Colombia offers an important case study.

Abbey Steele's book, *Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War*, could be hastily summarized as well-written, detailed, and carefully crafted research on Colombia's civil war and the consequences for internal displacement. However, Steele's work far exceeds mere navel-gazing at the bloody and fascinating politics of Colombia, offering a richness and depth that should interest not only scholars of contentious politics but the policy makers tasked with taking action. The central analytical concept of this book is political cleansing, defined as the "expulsion of a particular group from a territory" (2), and the author shows that this collective displacement is a tool for territorial control used according to local political loyalties that can become increasingly salient during civil war. The book "revives the idea that political identities and institutions are integral to civilian displacement during war" (208), showing that local loyalties can prompt strategies of displacement, not simply displacement that is incidental or a mere side effect of violence. Thus, the book offers three main contributions: First, Steele highlights the risk of misunderstanding displacement as a mere by-product of violence instead of grasping its political character as a strategy for territorial control. Second, her book highlights the unintended consequences of political practices, and specifically the role elections play in signaling local loyalties, and thus providing information to armed actors who aim to politically cleanse a territory. Third, Steele's book helps us to

better understand, and critically analyze, how alliances, sometimes unpredictable, are created between political actors. When armed groups adopt political cleansing as a territorial control strategy, in concert with local electoral competition, local elites can be incentivized to create rancorous alliances with national counterinsurgency actors.

After a brief and sharp introductory chapter, the author poses the analytical and theoretical fundamentals that frame the rest of the book. Her theory aims to explain when and where armed groups engage in political cleansing. She argues that this happens when armed groups are fighting over territorial control and when (and where) armed groups have information about civilian political loyalties. Removing disloyal people through displacement, according to Steele, is more likely when the region holds local elections, which signal the presence or emergence of cleavages. The second chapter provides a tour de force summary and explication of the violence and displacement in Colombia before what Steele defines as the "contemporary civil war in Colombia" between 1986 and 2012—to which the third chapter is devoted. The empirical analysis in the fourth chapter shows the link between democratic reforms and elections, and thus the emergence of political cleansing. Then, in the fifth chapter, Steele offers her finest-grained data on a specific municipality, Apartadó. She gathered original data from local archives about voting behavior and from census data on residents leaving the municipality. Her large-*N* analysis based on microdata shows a robust correlation: in urban areas where the rebel-affiliated party had higher support, residents left these regions in higher numbers. This provides indirect evidence of political cleansing. Then, using qualitative methods, she traces the mechanisms that lead to residents' displacement, corroborating her quantitative findings. The author then zooms out in the following chapter and provides large-*N* subnational analyses comparing several areas, shifting from local correlations to more generalizable patterns of forced displacement through political cleansing across Colombia.

In her conclusion, the author explores how her theoretical insights from the Colombian case might travel to other

cases. Using recent work by related scholars, she highlights political cleansing dynamics within other nonethnic wars such as Spain and Ukraine. Steele suggests that the mechanism of political cleansing can be identified in several cases in which elections were held amid ongoing insurgency. For instance, in the case of Iraq, she argues that the shift to sectarian cleavages in 2006 was due mostly to international actors introducing elections.

Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War should be praised for many insights and findings, but it also ought to prompt vital further research. First, the author elaborates a theory on armed groups fighting over territorial control during civil war; however, most of her empirical analyses are limited to studying displacement as a counterinsurgency tool. The book's theoretical core is agnostic of the kind of armed groups—with revealed information, both incumbents and rebels can adopt a political strategy of displacement. However, the empirical evaluation focuses on violent actions by the incumbent. Hence, future research should further explore whether political cleansing is mostly a counterinsurgency tool. Second, what role might external actors play in Steele's model

of political displacement? While her theory appears a “closed polity” model, the political cleansing mechanism could be influenced by the actions of external actors. Understanding under what conditions external actors influence the practice of political displacement, and thus the internal political equilibrium, could be another further avenue of research.

Abbey Steele's book sets high standards for political science scholars, demonstrating the value of clear analytical thinking, counterintuitive theorizing, and an exemplary mixed-methods methodology. Her book also reframes analytical concepts and thus unveils domestic displacement as a strategic behavior triggered by armed groups willing to control territory during civil wars. Her book, by illustration, offers scholars of conflict a vital insight: the logics and practices of politics in times of violence and nonviolence inevitably collide. Behaviors deemed positive in nonviolent times, such as participation in elections, can trigger unintended and vicious dynamics in times of violence. In Steele's words, “civilians' behaviour can become more political during wars and armed groups can and do behave in strategic ways toward them, including in terms of displacement” (208–9).