Interview - Abbey Steele

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Abbey Steele is an assistant professor of political science (with tenure) at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), and holds a PhD in political science from Yale University (2010). Her research interests include civil wars, displacement, and state-building. She has been an assistant professor at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, a visiting scholar at Kobe University in Japan, and a post-doctoral fellow at Princeton University. Her book,*Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War* (2017, Cornell University Press), draws on nearly two years of fieldwork in Colombia, and explains how democratic reforms led counterinsurgent groups to engage in political cleansing. She is currently researching state-building and the peace process in Colombia, and resettlement patterns of the displaced. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in the*Journal of Peace Research*, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, and the *American Political Science Review*. Abbey tweets at @abbey_st.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think exciting advances are happening around investigating some of our long-held simplifying assumptions about war and the state, and creating new ways to understand the complexities that the simplifications mask. For example, Paul Staniland is working on a book that studies variation in the relationship between states and non-state actors that are not uniformly competitive so we can gain a better understanding of where and when states choose to be "weaker" than our theories would expect. But he doesn't just say that the assumption is wrong: he gives us analytical tools for how to characterize new forms of variation, and how to understand them. This leads to big, fundamental questions about politics. For instance, how does variation in arrangements between non-state actors and the state change our understanding of what governance is and who has the legitimate authority to exercise it?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

This is a big question! When I started graduate school, I was pretty unprepared. I hadn't taken any statistics as an undergrad, I didn't know what rational choice was, and I was skeptical of positivism without really understanding it. So I had a lot to learn. Thankfully I had the space and support to do so in my Ph.D. program, and my advisors Stathis Kalyvas and Elisabeth Wood had an enormous influence on how I think. Since then, I have come to think of positivism as logic, which I love. And I think it's both more flexible and more modest than my (shallow) impression of it when I started graduate school. Now I see a lot of social science research as a game of logic: if this is true, then what must follow? What kind of evidence would we need to test such a claim? I find that exciting. In this way, research is like a puzzle.

Another thing I learned in graduate school from observing students further along than I was, like Fotini Christia and Rafaela Dancygier, was that how we *characterize* what we set out to explain is one way that our work can have the biggest impact. I loved how they noticed important phenomena that were previously overlooked. In Rafaela's case, I remember how she characterized forms of immigrant conflict in Europe as between immigrants and natives, or between immigrants and the state, rather than the frequency or scale of conflict. This led to fascinating questions and a convincing theory to account for the variation. I tried to emulate what they did in my dissertation and book, and I still try to in my new projects as well, and to teach students how to characterize the phenomenon they are interested in studying as an important first step in a project.

You've carried out fieldwork while researching the Colombian conflict. How did the close proximity to violence and perilous spaces influence your research?

Quite a lot. It influenced the choices I made in terms of the cases I could select to study in further depth, because I wanted to be able to visit the communities myself. To do that, I had to be reasonably sure that I would be safe enough, and that I would also not endanger the people I wanted to speak with just by being there. Still, I was not always well informed about the risks and I did make some stupid decisions in the field. Thankfully it never escalated beyond my fear and discomfort. Another element I was unprepared for was that it was also lonely in the field because I would return to my small hotel every night at sundown as a safety precaution.

It's also different to be a woman in these contexts, for better and worse. I think some people thought I was less threatening (something I tried to actively play up with some people). But in other ways, I was conscious of my vulnerability. In spite of the risks, it was important for me to visit this region so I could get a sense of where some of the worst violence of the war happened (and where in many ways it felt like it was still lurking). I hope that this more subjective sense influenced how I wrote about displacement from a more analytical perspective, so that it was not too clinical. My aspiration was to be sensitive to the real horrors that people lived.

You recently wrote a book about your work on the Colombian conflict. What are the key factors that help us better understand this longstanding conflict?

The Colombian war is indeed longstanding. One thing that I think is important to convey about civil wars in general is that once they start, they can take on a life of their own. In other words, the same factors that caused the war are not always the same ones that keep them going, or the ones that need to be addressed in order to bring them to an end. Colombia is a good example of this. Many insurgent groups formed on the heels of a previous civil war – I argue in the book that internal displacement during that previous war played a role in the success of the armed groups. Then years later, the drug trade emerged and proved to be a lucrative endeavor for the FARC, first through taxation of the dealers and then through direct involvement. The drug trade also fostered the creation of many new armed groups, some of which became paramilitaries that also began to fight the insurgent groups. This was really important in the perpetuation of the war, even though it was not why the war started.

A particularly sad example of well-meaning politicians trying to address core grievances of the insurgents were the democratic reforms of 1985 and 1988, following peace talks between the government and insurgents (1982-1986). The theory was that one reason the war started was because Colombia's democracy was too exclusionary, and that it should become open to a wider range of political views and participants. Politicians agreed to reforms to introduce more competition into the system, through local elections and the legalization of a political party affiliated with FARC. These reforms backfired, because they gave counterinsurgent armed groups new targets and allies. The targets were the voters who supported the FARC political party: counterinsurgent armed groups displaced entire neighborhoods who elected local representatives from the FARC political party. I call this political cleansing. Political cleansing helped the counterinsurgents conquer new territories, which benefitted their new allies – the local elites who were accustomed to being appointed to their posts and who didn't want to lose their privileges in free and fair elections to local upstarts in the new political party. Meanwhile the FARC refused to demobilize, and the war intensified and spread to new regions of the country. So rather than ending the war by addressing a grievance that supposedly was a cause of the war, the reforms drastically and tragically backfired. Between 1988 and 2003, the number of deaths and displacement in the war increased substantially, and the violence spread dramatically.

How did displacement and forced resettlement influence the dynamics of the Colombian conflict?

Displacement was a massive feature of the Colombian civil war, as is common across all civil wars. In Colombia, displacement due to political cleansing helped counterinsurgents make significant territorial gains in the escalation of the war. I think we still do not know all of the ways that this displacement in turn influenced other aspects of the war, but I have written about how internally displaced people (IDPs) in Colombia remained vulnerable to collective violence in the new areas they resettled, because they were suspected of being guerrilla collaborators.

Another form of displacement is what Colombians call *despojo*, or land-grabbing. Many peasants were pushed from their lands so that someone could take them over and claim ownership. This has exacerbated inequality in a country with an already extremely unequal distribution of land. Whether peasants were displaced because of what I call a 'strategic' reason, or an opportunistic one like land-grabbing, in Colombia they are now entitled to land restitution under the 2011 Victims' Law. This promise is extremely difficult to implement, partly because it requires a lot of technocratic work to inventory and survey land and verify past ownership in the absence of legal titles, and partly because the lands are disputed by powerful people who are willing to use violence to maintain the gains they made during the war. Hundreds of people who are fighting for land restitution have been killed in Colombia since 2015. It is a dire situation.

Has the international impact of civil wars altered within the context of a more connected and globalized world?

One devastating impact of civil wars is their human cost. There are more displaced people now than at any other time in history – more than 65 million, according to the UNHCR. In spite of a more globalized world in some ways, our political system has not become better able to manage refugees, in terms of resettlement but also in terms of humanitarian assistance. It remains a serious challenge for governance, human rights, and international relations. International factors also influence the onset, duration and warfare of civil wars, but that is not new. What does change is how that influence looks, but my hunch is that the international system of power (like the Cold War and post-Cold War systems) have more influence on civil wars than for instance, social media or the global economy. To take one example, foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon, though the platforms of recruitment have changed of course.

In a recent paper you analyze and criticize a practice that you call "subcontracted state-building". Can you explain the core of your critique?

A lot of development aid supports institution-building that aims to improve state capacity. This is especially true in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and more recently, Colombia. In general, aid agencies like the World Bank now agree that state-building is important to address a host of security and development issues. But they do not know how to state-build. A common practice is to sub-contract this work to private companies and non-profit organizations that earn large sums to design programs to try to state-build. In the article, my coauthor Jake Shapiro and I argue that even if these contractors knew how to state-build (which I personally do not believe they do), it would still be a practice that undermines the goal for two reasons: first, it triggers all sorts of agency problems, probably most importantly between citizens and the contractors, because there is very little citizens can do to hold contractors accountable, like you would want in a democratic system between government and citizens; and second, it creates perverse incentives for the target state to avoid investing itself in institution-building, because if it did then it would lose the aid on offer. The trouble is our examples of state-building in the West occurred over decades and centuries, and aid agencies are trying to generate virtuous institutions in much shorter time periods.

Do you think the field of conflict studies has succeeded in incorporating women, conceptually and institutionally?

This is another big question! If you mean by "conceptually," has conflict studies incorporated women sufficiently as objects of study, then no, I don't think so. I think a pervasive issue across all social science fields is one that Simone de Beauvoir pointed out decades ago, which I paraphrase: the problem isn't that "male" is associated with "positive" and "female" with "negative," it is that male is also treated as *neutral*. What does this mean for our work in political science? I think primarily that as researchers who strive to simplify the world into some analytically manageable set of relationships, our default is to describe and explain "neutral" phenomena. (I include my own work in this critique, definitely.) One result of this approach is that if you want to understand how women's experiences may systematically differ from men's, then you are suddenly studying something that is perceived to be niche, or a complicating factor to a more fundamental dynamic – not the core aspect of whatever you are studying. There is a lot of excellent work, especially recently, that is dedicated to understanding women's roles in armed groups and as agents in political violence, as well as work on forms of violence that disproportionately affect women as victims, like sexual violence in

war. But my impression is that this type of work is not valued as much as mainstream ("neutral") theories. I still do not have a solution to this problem, but I think we are collectively capable of doing better in this regard.

Institutionally, I think again the challenges that conflict studies faces are not very different from other fields, and I do think there is a long way to go. I think women are leading the way on some of the most interesting trends in conflict scholarship: on in-depth fieldwork, mixed methods, ethical considerations, big questions, and rich and analytically clear theories. But do I see women earning awards, grants, invited talks and promotions at rates that reflect these contributions? I don't know. I think it's hard to account for the gender gap at the top of our profession without taking sexism into account.

Another problem is a gender gap in citations, which has been documented by IR scholars. I recently read an article that of 40 citations, 2 were women – on a topic where there is fantastic, cutting edge work by junior women scholars. That's why I believe that practices in journals to encourage or require authors to check the gender balance on their citations is important. Science is supposed to be a collective endeavor – and if a segment of a community is systematically ignored, then science will suffer as a result.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

I think my advice would be to think deeply about how to characterize what you are interested in describing and explaining: what is this phenomenon? How does it vary? Sometimes, this is how you arrive at a great question. If you have a great question, then you will make a contribution to knowledge, beginning with making us aware that we need to understand what you are studying. Also, I'd say that you'll meet a lot of smart people in this field as you move through your career. Try to create a group of advisors, friends and colleagues, who are also kind and constructive, and reciprocate with them.