# The banality of displacement: Discourse and thoughtlessness in the internal refugee crisis in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Colombia has one of the largest internal refugee populations in the world. For years government agencies and NGOs presented vastly disparate statistics, with government figures showing much lower estimates of the amount of internally displaced persons, or IDPs. In this article I suggest that the discourse of displacement in Colombia was dominated by a "war over numbers" at the expense of a more complex characterization of the displaced population. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's suggestive ideas on the banality of evil, I propose the notion of the "banality of displacement" to examine two distinct but related processes. First, the normalization of violence over time has made forced displacement appear as a mundane social fact in Colombia. Second, this banality is actively produced through an "attitudinal thoughtlessness" in government and NGO circles. To illustrate this banality at play, I focus on two interrelated aspects. First, I examine the history of IDP management in Colombia, in particular the disputes over displacement statistics. Second, I explore the "colour-blindness" in the counting strategies and the lack of reliable data regarding displaced Afro-Colombians. In a final section I discuss ways in which the banality of displacement has been contested, both from civil society and by the Constitutional Court, which has challenged the Colombian government over its handling of the displacement crisis. I also suggest more broadly how a re-reading of Arendt brings a critical sensibility to other geopolitical contexts, exemplified by geographers' engagement with the "war on terror."

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The victims wander about marked by the label of the displaced and the exiled; the excluded and the refugees. They are trivialized in reports and statistics from different governments that minimize the numbers and dispute them with the Non Governmental Organizations in articles and soundbites in the mainstream media.

Abad Colorado (2007, p. 3)

## Introduction: images of destruction, displacement and despair

In March 2006, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver organized a photo exhibition by Colombian photojournalist Jesús Abad Colorado entitled Memory, Place, and Displacement. The images chosen were the product of Abad's photographic journey over the previous decade to document the suffering of the exiled in Colombia. The visitor to the exhibition comes quite literally face to face with this suffering. An elderly woman holds her grandson tight in her arms, despair etched on her expression, as she joins hundreds of villagers fleeing a massacre in Bellavista in the north-western Department of Chocó in 2002. A peasant farmer – crouching on a disused truck tire – covers his face in agony, his baby son tightly pressed to his chest, mourning his wife's death in a guerrilla attack on an oil pipeline that left 78 people dead in the village of Machuca in Antioquia in 1998. A young girl stares out from behind a window covered in raindrops; the photo's accompanying lines tell us that she was one of hundreds of people returning to their village from which they had fled after threats from paramilitary groups, only to be displaced again some six months later by the same armed group. In another photo, a little girl stands amidst rubble, flicking through a textbook that she salvaged from what used to be her school building in Juradó in the Chocó, destroyed in a guerrilla attack on the adjacent police station in 1999.

The photos in the exhibit depict many other landscapes of fear and destruction that the armed conflict in Colombia produces, such as the destroyed church in the village of Bellavista on the banks of the Atrato River in the Chocó. In May 2002, 119 Afro-Colombian campesinos found their deaths there, as they were caught up in the crossfire between guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia FARC and right-wing paramilitaries.[1] Abad Colorado's photo shows the shattered statue of Christ on the floor amid the rubble of the village church (Fig. 1). It seems that more than just the

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**Fig. 1.** Bellavista, Chocó, May 2002; note the shattered statue of Christ in the foreground amid the rubble.
*Source:* Abad Colorado (2007, p. 24); with permission from Jesús Abad Colorado.
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material building is destroyed. Faith itself took a hit. And the pathetically broken limbs of Christ – no longer on the cross but on the floor – send a powerful message about the utter despair and broken fabric of society in the village that the armed attack left in its wake.

Images of this tragedy slowly spread around Colombia, as hundreds of villagers fled the massacre's site in great panic amidst continuing fighting between the armed groups. They produced a rare public outcry in a country, where the phenomenon of forced displacement has become part of the day-to-day reality for many (Jaramillo, Villa, & Sánchez, 2004; Meertens, 2000; Segura Escobar, 2000).

Over the past three decades, forced displacement seems to have seeped into the fabric of Colombian society. Different from many other refugee crisis in the world that put certain countries temporarily on the map as "displacement hotspots" – such as the ongoing civil war in Syria – the displacement crisis in Colombia has been evolving at a slower, yet creepingly consistent pace. Latest estimates suggest that over the last thirty years a total of six million Colombians have been forced to abandon their homes (CODHES, 2014; IDMC, 2014). This trend is less characterized by spectacular displacements resulting from large-scale bombing campaigns and military aggression of a civil war type scenario as in Syria – one may

also think about Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Iraq – but by the smaller scale, yet unceasing removal of people from their lands.[2] Displacement has become such a persistent feature in society that Colombians seemingly have got used to it and its manifold manifestations: women and children begging at street intersections; boys balancing machetes on their fingertips at traffic lights to attract drivers' attention and an occasional coin or bill. These scenarios are part and parcel of the urban landscape that has become accustomed to absorbing the survivors of rural tragedies.

This normalization process is accompanied by a standardized vocabulary in the media and in government reports, where refugees are labelled "IDPs" (internally displaced persons), categorized as victims of DID or CID (development- or conflict-induced displacement) and subject to IRLR models (impoverishment risk and livelihood reconstruction) (Muggah, 2000). Abad Colorado's photographs are an angry reaction to these labelling processes and disembodied representations of violence and terror. His representation of forced displacement differs in that he urges us to put faces to the suffering. As he outlines in the foreword to the exhibition's catalogue:

> Men and women from *mestizo* communities, blacks and indigenous people from all over the country, are not anonymous beings. They have a face and a name and are part of a nation where armed men and women and government officials take oaths with flags and crosses to defend. They still hope, still long for, still desire, this war to end. They want that monster called violence not to continue grabbing their lands, their lives and dignity. They want to live in tranquility. They have been tired and victims for years, for centuries. (Abad Colorado, 2007, p. 3)

In this article, I reflect on how and why such an embodiment in concrete faces often gets lost in debates over the armed conflict in Colombia. For this, I introduce the notion of the "banality of displacement," with which I want to capture two distinct but related processes. First, the normalization of violence over time and the steady uprooting of rural communities in Colombia make "forced displacement" appear as a mundane, banal social fact. The emergence of the IDP – or internally displaced person – as a social category accounted for in government and NGO statistics attests to this development. Second, this banality is not merely an observable phenomenon; it is actively produced in displacement discourse through what I refer to as "attitudinal thoughtlessness" – or a lack of critical thought invested.

Whereas the first aspect reflects our common understanding of the term "banal," the second aspect draws on the writings of philosopher Hannah Arendt, specifically on her Report on the Banality of Evil from 1963. Although not theorized in great depth by Arendt, her take on "banality" goes beyond the more common associations of this notion with "normalcy," "routine," or "mundane." Instead, she stresses "thoughtlessness" – or a generalized pattern of a breakdown in critical thinking – as a mechanism through which evil is enacted. Such an approach to banality, I argue, beyond merely exposing thoughtlessness per se, can help re-instil critical thought to counter the normalization of the phenomenon of displacement in Colombia and elsewhere (more on Arendt below).

To illustrate this banality at play, I focus on two interrelated aspects. First, I examine the administrative and statistical history of "IDP management" in Colombia, and in particular the disputes over displacement statistics that have caused significant tension between government agencies and NGOs. By dissecting the ways in which the counting of the internally displaced takes place, I demonstrate the overall effect that these quarrels over statistics produce in presenting the displaced persons as mere numbers. Debates over how to prevent displacement, for example, are absent from these competing statistics. Second, I examine the "colour-blindness" in the counting strategies, reflecting on how it can be explained that no reliable data exist on the ethnic representation of the