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## Capitalism's Bullets in Latin America

*Invisible Empires, State Power and 21st Century Colonialism*

by BENJAMIN DANGL

JUNE 13-15, 2014

The notorious US private militia group Academi – previously known as Blackwater – trained Brazilian security forces in North Carolina in preparation for the current World Cup in Brazil, as reported by sportswriter Dave Zirin. Zirin pointed to the 2009 diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks, which revealed that Washington viewed the expected World Cup-related crises as opportunities for US involvement. Zirin wrote that for Washington, “Brazil’s misery created room for opportunism.”

Capitalism’s bullets follow the World Cup just as they do Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) signed with the US. Five years ago this month, protests were raging in northern Peru where thousands of indigenous Awajun and Wambis men, women and children were blockading roads against oil, logging and gas exploitation on Amazonian land. The Peruvian government, having just signed an FTA with the US, was unsure how to deal with the protests – partly because the controversial concessions in the Amazon were granted to meet the FTA requirements. According to a diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks, on June 1st, 2009 the US State Department sent a message to the US Embassy in Lima: “Should Congress and [Peruvian] President Garcia give in

to the [protesters'] pressure, there would be implications for the recently implemented Peru-US Free Trade Agreement.” Four days later, the Peruvian government responded to the protest with deadly violence, leading to a conflict which left 32 dead.



Police open fire on protesters blocking road in Bagua Grande, Peru. June 5, 2009.  
Photo: AP/Amazon Watch

The US is infamous for its imperial history in the region. But Washington isn't the only empire in its backyard. Global and local forces of capitalism, imperialism and modern-day colonialism are at work across Latin America, from soccer stadiums to copper mines.

China has outpaced the US as the primary trading partner with the region's richest countries; most of its business is in the area of natural resource extraction. And for many nations in the southern cone, Brazil – now a world superpower outpacing Britain as the 6th largest economy – is an imperial force, utilizing much of the region's natural wealth, land and hydroelectric power to fuel its booming industries and population.

Capitalism has many faces and allies, and they're not just based in the global north or within these economic giants. As sociologist William Robinson writes, “The new face of global capitalism in Latin America is driven as much by local capitalist classes that have sought integration into the ranks of the transnational capitalist class as by transnational corporate and financial capital.” From Mexico to Argentina, this local capitalist class has created some 70 globally-competitive transnational conglomerates.

Friends of empire and capital are found at the heights of power among Latin America's political leaders. While the US has spied on Latin America for years, as recently made clear by Edward Snowden's leaks, Chile's Michelle Bachelet administration asked for the US government's help in spying on Mapuche indigenous leaders defending land rights during her first term in

office. While the US supported the coup against Fernando Lugo of Paraguay in 2012, before he was pushed out of office, Lugo himself called for a state of emergency in the countryside to expand repression of *campesino* activists fighting soy company incursions on their land.

For many indigenous communities in Latin America, the state, often in alliance with transnational corporations, maintains a colonialist worldview into the 21st century, particularly in the area of natural resource extraction in mining, oil and gas industries. As Professor Manuela Picq of the Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador writes, “The unilateral expropriation of land for mining today is a continuation of the Doctrine of Discovery. It conceptualized the New World as *terra nullis*, authorizing colonial powers to conquer and exploit land in the Americas. [...] Today, the idea of ‘empty’ lands survives in extractivist practices.”

Indeed, mining concessions have been granted on 80% of Colombia’s legally-recognized indigenous territories, and 407,000 square kilometers of Amazon-based mining areas are on indigenous land. As a part of this region-wide extractivist land grab, Picq explains that 200 activists were killed in Peru between 2006 and 2011, 200 people were criminalized in Ecuador for protesting the privatization of natural resources, and 11 anti-extractivist activists have been murdered in Argentina since 2010.

The mining industry is also typically devastating for the environment, whether it’s run by the state or the private sector. Picq points out that Guatemala’s Marlin mine, owned by the Canadian company Goldcorp, utilizes in just one hour the same amount of water a local family uses over the span of 22 years, and the mining industry in Chile – where the state owns the largest copper producing company in the world – utilizes 37% of the nation’s electricity.

Capitalism, empire and 21st century colonialism come from afar and descend on their victims in Latin America. But these forces are also in the tear gas canisters that Brazil’s security forces use at the World Cup, in the state that extracts natural resources on indigenous territory, and in the free trade deals signed in blood.