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CHAPTER 10

The Las Bambas project and China's impact on Peru's extractivist model

ZUZANNA PIOTROWICZ

JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
ORCID: 0009-0002-0083-1675

Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse the socio-environmental conflict surrounding the Las Bambas mine in southern Peru. Owned by the Chinese company Minerals and Metals Group, the mine is one of the largest copper mining sites in the world and a source of controversy for local people, who have been highlighting its severe negative socio-environmental impacts since the project's inauguration. The article analyses actions taken by the Peruvian government, strategies employed by Chinese investors and resistance movements of local communities. Through the case study method, the paper highlights how Chinese state-owned enterprises have leveraged strategic investments to secure access to Peru's vast mineral resources, intensifying land conflicts and reinforcing economic dependency. By situating the Las Bambas project within the broader context of socio-environmental disputes linked to extractivist policies in the country, the article illustrates how this specific case reflects historical patterns of political violence and exclusion in rural zones of Peru.

Keywords: Las Bambas mine, Chinese investments, extractivism, socio-environmental conflict, indigenous rights, Peru.

INTRODUCTION

The Las Bambas mine, located in Cotabambas province in Peru's southern Andean highlands, is a large-scale open-pit copper project operated by Minerals and Metals Group (MMG), a subsidiary of China Minmetals Corporation. Copper concentrate is transported over 400 km by heavy

trucks and has thus triggered tensions due to its environmental and social impacts on predominantly Quechua communities (INEI, 2018). Despite generating significant national revenue (MMG, 2023a), the project has faced resistance over perceived environmental harm, inadequate consultation and unequal benefit distribution. This paper examines the Las Bambas conflict as a reflection of ongoing political exclusion and local resistance to extractivism and neoliberalism, with China playing a key role in shaping the region's resource governance.

The specific research questions guiding the chapter are: how has the development and operation of the Las Bambas mine contributed to socio-environmental conflict in southern Peru? What roles have the Peruvian state and Chinese investors played in shaping the dynamics of the conflict? In what ways do local community responses and resistance movements reflect broader historical patterns in the Andean highlands? All these issues come together in the main research question posed by the author, which is: how does China's growing presence in Latin America's mining sector align with and reinforce the deeply rooted violent legacies of colonial domination that continue to shape extractive practices across the region in the 21st century?

The chapter employs a qualitative case study method, focusing on the Las Bambas mining conflict as a representative example of broader socio-environmental tensions in Peru. The methodology includes analysis of corporate reports and environmental impact assessments related to the mine; media analysis to trace conflict events and the portrayal of key actors; secondary literature review drawing on academic sources related to extractivism, Chinese foreign investment and socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America; and interpretive analysis using theoretical frameworks such as Extractivism and Postcolonial Theory to situate the empirical case within larger structural and historical contexts.

The article begins by defining the phenomenon of extractivism in the Peruvian context and the socio-environmental conflict associated with it. The focus then shifts to the Las Bambas mine case itself, analysing the roots of conflict, situation development and the characteristics of

criminalisation deployed by the Peruvian state and Chinese company. The paper concludes with discussion on whether Chinese state-owned enterprises replicate the exclusionary and colonial practices of Western actors despite using a very different narrative, as well as an identification of the main challenges and opportunities in the future.

THE CONTEXT OF *EXTRACTIVISMO* IN PERU

To begin with, it is important to clarify the key concepts addressed in this paper –particularly extractivism and the associated socio-environmental conflict – and to analyse their meaning in the Peruvian context. Extractivism, in general terms, refers to an economic model based on the large-scale extraction of natural resources for export, typically in raw form and without local industrial processes that generate added value (Gudynas, 2013). As Riofrancos (2020) explains, it is also a syndrome encompassing the various pathological effects of political and economic dependence on resource extraction. In Latin America, extractivism has been deeply tied to colonial history, in which European metropolises exploited resources of their colonies for their own benefit (Galeano, 1973). In the modern context, this model has been perpetuated under the logic of neoliberalism, which promotes economic liberalisation, the reduction of trade barriers and market deregulation, favouring large multinational corporations that dominate resource extraction in developing countries. As Alimonda (2015) states, mining and its far-reaching consequences have played a central role in shaping the enduring structures of Latin American coloniality. This form of coloniality – understood as the persistence of colonial frameworks of social organisation beyond the end of formal colonial rule – is intricately linked to, and indeed constitutive of, the formation and evolution of modernity (Quijano, 2000). Crucially, the European conquest did not simply integrate Latin America into an already established capitalist order. Instead, the emergence of global capitalism itself – and more recently, its neoliberal variant – was

contingent upon the violent extraction of mineral wealth from territories later defined as part of the Americas. As Gudynas (2013) argues, this model not only deepens socioeconomic inequalities, but also perpetuates a form of internal colonialism in which national elites and foreign corporations benefit at the expense of Indigenous and peasant communities, who are the most affected by the environmental and social impacts of large-scale mining.

Peru's full-scale transition to neoliberalism began in the 1990s under the authoritarian presidency of Alberto Fujimori. His administration implemented sweeping economic reforms aimed at liberalising the economy, reducing state intervention and promoting foreign direct investment, particularly in the large-scale mining sector. The policies were designed to stimulate national economic growth, but primarily benefited urban centres, while rural Andean communities remained marginalised. Fujimori's reforms included the 1992 General Mining Law, which facilitated resource extraction with minimal state oversight and enabled the relocation of communities (OSINERGMIN, 1992). While decentralisation was also part of the neoliberal agenda, institutional capacity to manage mining development and mitigate its social and environmental impacts remained weak, particularly in remote regions. This strongly deepened social inequalities and reinforced perceptions that the neoliberal model prioritised investor interests over local welfare.

In Peru, since 2004, the institution responsible for monitoring social conflicts is the Ombudsman's Office (Defensoría del Pueblo). Their reports from 2007 to 2017 indicate that socio-environmental conflicts constitute the majority of these cases, representing 68% of the total, while conflicts specifically related to mining are the most numerous, accounting for 62% of all socio-environmental cases (Paredes, 2017). It is worth noting that several key actors are involved in Peru's socio-environmental conflicts: the state, transnational companies, local municipalities and rural or Indigenous communities, among others. All of them played an important role in the Las Bambas case, which will be discussed later. These types of conflicts in Peru mainly arise from

disputes over the use, access to and control of natural resources. Some of the main causes include environmental impacts, the lack of local benefits and the criminalisation of resistance. The exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes, also one of the main sources of conflict, is believed to be rooted in colonial ethnopolitical dynamics. Although the mechanisms promoting greater inclusion and participation of Indigenous communities in dialogue were theoretically developed, such as the Peruvian law of prior consultation (Congreso de la República, 2011) or ILO Convention No. 169 (ILO, 1989, art. 6, 15), which Peru ratified in 1994, their implementation has been weak and inconsistent, hindered by strong ties between political elites and mining interests. Prior consultation is frequently not implemented with communities that may be affected by a project, or it is conducted only after decisions have already been made.

THE LAS BAMBAS CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT, VIOLENCE AND CRIMINALISATION

Mining is central to Peru's economy, contributing around 10% to the national GDP and 60% of export revenues (BBVA, 2023). China, a major investor in Peruvian copper, accounts for one-third of global overseas investment in the sector (Sanborn & Chonn Ching, 2017). The Las Bambas mine was originally owned by Swiss company Xstrata, which received initial approval for its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in 2010 after public consultations with local people. The EIA was well received, largely due to the promise of jobs and community revenue (Peruvian Times, 2010). However, following China's condition for approving the Xstrata-Glencore merger, the Las Bambas mine was sold in 2014 to Chinese state-led company MMG. The ownership change brought significant alterations to the project: while the initial plan involved transporting copper concentrate through a 215-km underground pipeline, the revised version replaced it with a land-based transportation system relying on

trucks using local roads. The roads, already used by residents, were not originally designed for high-volume mining traffic. Nevertheless, the Peruvian government reclassified them to a higher-level national route, amid several reported irregularities (Leyva, 2018, pp. 3–15). Notably, revisions to the EIA occurred during the transition period and were approved after MMG had already taken control.

Following the EIA modification, the transport of copper now relies on a fleet of over 100 heavy-duty trucks traveling daily along a 438-km route on public roads shared with local communities, on route to the Pillones railway station (MMG Las Bambas, 2023a). Although the mining company has allocated over $341 million to upgrade and maintain these roads (MMG, 2021a), the continuous flow of large vehicles has had a lasting and disruptive impact on the everyday life and well-being of nearby residents, farmers and animals (World Bank 2021, p. 82).

From the perspective of the local community, one reason for the frustration was therefore the vision of disruption to their daily life by making local rural roads accessible to noisy trucks accompanied by large quantities of fossil dust. Another reason was the undeniable negative environmental impact. Despite MMG's claim to comply with environmental agreements and standards (MMG Las Bambas, 2014 & 2023b), various scholars have shown possible environmental damage (Maiza-Larrarte & Claudio-Quiroga, 2025; Leyva, 2018), which undermined the credibility of the company's sustainability claims. During the construction phase in 2014, the project generated significant volumes of hazardous waste, including over 133,000 tonnes of hydrocarbon-contaminated soil and approximately 8,400 tonnes of waste oils (MMG Las Bambas, 2014 & 2015b). Current annual estimates indicate the production of around 150 to 180 million metric tonnes of tailings and waste, alongside over 2,000 tonnes of hazardous materials. Water usage represents another critical environmental concern, especially in a region such as Apurímac where many residents lack reliable access to potable water (DRVCS, 2020). The 2021–2022 data reveals that Las Bambas consumed between 80 and 100 billion litres of water annually, of which approximately 4%

were freshwater sources (MMG Las Bambas, 2022 & 2023b), and which raises serious questions about the sustainability of resource distribution in an area marked by hydrological stress. The mine is also responsible for annual emissions of approximately 600,000 to 730,000 tonnes of CO_2-equivalent gases. In addition, air quality monitoring data reports the presence of 12,000 to 25,000 particles per cubic metre of harmful pollutants, such as nitrogen oxides and PM10 particles, which are linked to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Land degradation further illustrates the project's ecological toll. By 2020, over 3,380 hectares of land had been disturbed, accounting for roughly half of the total concession area. Despite these disruptions, only 101 hectares – around 3% of the affected area – had been rehabilitated by that year, underscoring the limited scope of restoration efforts relative to the scale of disturbance. While the company reports investing approximately $4 million annually in environmental management, equivalent to just under 0.2% of its $2 billion revenue in 2022 (MMG Las Bambas, 2022 & 2023), the proportionality of this figure casts doubt on the adequacy of corporate environmental responsibility measures. Most of the expenditure is directed towards waste management and environmental monitoring, yet the continuing scale of environmental degradation suggests the need for far more robust and accountable environmental governance mechanisms (Maiza-Larrarte & Claudio-Quiroga, 2025, p. 7).

From an economic standpoint, local communities have sought inclusion in the mining supply chain by requesting roles as transportation providers, aiming to secure long-term economic benefits from the project. What might thus appear as conflicting environmental and economic demands are in reality reflections of the communities' efforts to assert their right to self-determination. It should be stressed, therefore, that the main reason for the dissatisfaction of Indigenous residents – apart from environmental and financial issues – was the way decisions were made and the fact that local communities were excluded from the closed-door consultation process. From their perspective, participation goes beyond merely being consulted; it entails having a tangible impact

on decision-making processes, allowing them to engage in the mine's economic cycle while ensuring that environmental standards are upheld, and that local perspective is respected. Protesters specifically criticised the government of President Ollanta Humala for allowing MMG to modify the EIA without prior consultation with local communities affected by the mine (Los Angeles Times, 2015).

Las Bambas commenced its first copper shipment to China in January 2016, and by 2017 it was responsible for around 20% of Peru's monthly copper output (Rodríguez & Seminario, 2023, p. 9). Contrary to early projections, production has fallen short of expectations, largely due to opposition from Indigenous communities and the company's controversial use of Peruvian police forces to suppress dissent. The escalation of the dispute transformed what was initially a localised mining operation into a broader regional conflict involving MMG, national law enforcement and Indigenous groups from Apurímac. Following the ownership transfer in early 2015, protests quickly erupted at Las Bambas. In February, Challhuahuacho residents struck, detaining contractor workers while demanding improved infrastructure and local labour opportunities. On September 25, community members demanded the dismantling of a processing plant deemed harmful and the annulment of the revised EIA. Violence escalated on September 28, when locals protested near the site against MMG's alleged breaches with Quechua communities, resulting in four protester deaths, 17 detentions and injuries to at least 24 police officers (El Comercio, 2018). A similar incident in October 2016 saw a local blockade of the public road used by the mining company, which led to one fatality among the protesters and injuries to many civilians and police officers (El Popular, 2016).

For MMG, escalation of the conflict posed a serious risk to the viability of its global mining activities. In contrast, the Peruvian government remained focused on safeguarding the economic benefits derived from Las Bambas, which led to widespread criminalisation of protests (Saldaña Cuba & Portocarrero Salcedo, 2017, p. 334). Criminalisation practices manifested through the targeting and criminal profiling of protesters,

selective and prejudiced application of legal measures, as well as lethal use of force against them. It is therefore worth delving into the very issue of the apparatus of violence in this case and the repressive mechanisms that have enabled MMG to operate in Las Bambas. Some scholars tag corporate practices in Latin America as authoritarian (Glasius, 2018; Rodríguez & Seminario, 2023), since transnational companies can procure exclusive use of force in the region's states to offset and suppress civil protest, even within a formally democratic framework. On August 13, 2015, the Director of the Peruvian National Police and the CEO of Las Bambas mine formalised a Cooperation Agreement (Policía Nacional del Perú, 2015), which reaffirmed the mutual commitments established in 2012 by Xstrata with the police. However, under MMG's administration, a new framework emerged in favour of Chinese interests. The agreement granted Las Bambas the power to manage police operations under its own private jurisdiction, including the ability to adjust payment schedules or dismiss officers for misconduct. In other words, the Peruvian National Police came under the influence of Chinese state capital. Operational directives then classified Indigenous protesters and organisations opposing the government and MMG as "adverse forces", thereby equating dissent in historically marginalised areas with terrorism. In contrast, "friendly forces" were defined to include the Peruvian army, political actors, judicial authorities and the firefighting department (Seminario, 2023, pp. 147–157).

The authoritarian strategies, however, are not unique to Chinese-owned mining operations. Western companies operating in Peru have similarly relied on repressive tactics to manage opposition. A notable case is the Conga mining project, operated by Yanacocha (majority-owned by US-based Newmont Mining), where widespread protests against environmental damage were met with a state of emergency, militarisation and deadly police repression (Millones, 2016, pp. 640–647). While each mining-related conflict has its own characteristics, the pattern of violence – especially the targeted and racialised killing of Indigenous and environmental leaders who call for corporate

accountability – has become a recurring and systemic feature of not only Peruvian, but also the entire Latin American extractive industry (Global Witness, 2023).

REPRODUCING INEQUALITIES IN SINO-PERUVIAN COOPERATION

Since the early 2000s – and more markedly after the 2008–2009 financial crisis – significant changes have emerged from within the global capitalist system itself. These shifts have restructured the international division of labour and given rise to new centres of economic growth that increasingly extend into postcolonial regions for large-scale raw material extraction. In this context, China's growing prominence in economic globalisation is reshaping the dynamics of global capitalism and its accompanying practices in the Global South, especially in Latin America. The acquisition of Las Bambas was strongly backed by China Development Bank, which provided a blend of equity investments and government-guaranteed loans, supported by high-level diplomatic engagement to secure the endorsement of the Peruvian government at both national and regional levels (MMG, 2014b). China's influential role in the global mining sector is particularly notable, given that it accounts for approximately half of global copper demand (Rodríguez, 2018). The dominant market position enables China to exert considerable influence over supplier countries. In stark contrast, Peru's economy has become increasingly reliant on extractive industries (Crabtree & Durand, 2017, pp. 27–53), and particularly on Chinese state-linked investments (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2012, pp. 111–122), reinforcing structural asymmetries in this relationship. Las Bambas has become a contested extractive site, where promises of economic growth and poverty alleviation clash with widespread experiences of marginalisation, abuse and injustice. In this context, the operational frameworks of state capital and neoliberal authoritarian governance have fostered a remarkably coordinated set

of repressive practices designed to facilitate the extraction and export of copper from the Andes to China. Rodríguez & Seminario (2023) use the term "para-coloniality" to describe operational strategies of Chinese state capital, which, although not rooted in Eurocentric colonial history, reproduce and benefit from its enduring structures. In the case of Las Bambas, this is reflected in how Chinese investments rely on the coercive apparatus of the Peruvian state to suppress dissent and facilitate resource extraction. The Sino-Peruvian extractive domain is further shaped by mutually reinforcing discourses of global empowerment. On the Chinese side, state investments are typically portrayed as a form of mutual benefit, with officials asserting that China has historically been subjected to Western imperialistic pressures (Strauss, 2012). This narrative gained institutional reinforcement with the release of "China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean" (2016), in which the Chinese government explicitly frames its engagement with the region as a "shining example" of South-South cooperation, based on equality and shared development. Such discursive strategies seek to legitimise China's expanding presence in Latin American extractive sectors, even though asymmetries between these partners are tangible. Meanwhile, alliances between the state and business interests in Peru promote Chinese investments by constructing a national identity centred on mining, framing any opposition to the mining model as not only anti-development, but also as a threat to the very essence of Peruvian identity (Himley, 2014, pp. 178–179). In this context, the resistance of rural communities against extractive projects cannot be seen solely as an environmental struggle, but as an act of reaffirming agency of historically and structurally marginalised communities – as well as redefining of what is means to be Peruvian.

In the case of Las Bambas, although MMG formally commits to human rights, stating in its 2018 Sustainability Report its adherence to UN Principles (MMG Las Bambas, 2018), the company in this instance followed only the Peruvian state's formal approval of the modified EIA. Their approach therefore ignored complex local dynamics and the sensitive history of broken promises in mining-affected communities. The

core issue, however, lies not just in adopting human rights frameworks, but in how these standards are interpreted and implemented. While instruments such as ILO Convention no. 169 and the Peruvian law of prior consultation emphasise broad, inclusive participation, interpretations of what it means to effectively listen vary greatly between state actors, firms and peasant communities. For local organisations, participation goes beyond mere consultation, as it involves direct decision-making power and equitable access to economic and environmental benefits. Therefore, the conflict reveals the limitations of current participatory frameworks, which reduce community involvement to formal consultation, neglecting the deep histories of dispossession experienced by Indigenous populations. Local actors are not just passive recipients of imposed norms but rather active norm-makers, who seek to expand and reinterpret international human rights standards on their own terms. This points to both challenges – such as decolonising business practices, addressing regulatory ambiguity and overcoming entrenched state-corporate alliances that enable the criminalisation of dissent – and opportunities, including the potential for bottom-up norm innovation, stronger transnational solidarity and the development of more binding accountability mechanisms for foreign investors. Ensuring meaningful participation, redistributive benefits and culturally contextualised environmental safeguards should thus be central to any future framework guiding extractive investment in contexts marked by historical marginalisation and socio-environmental vulnerability. This necessitates action on multiple levels: the Peruvian state must strengthen regulatory enforcement and prioritise the protection of affected communities over short-term extractive revenues; foreign corporations and their home states should adhere to robust human rights and environmental due diligence frameworks; and the international community, including global institutions such as the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, should play a more assertive role in fostering binding standards and monitoring compliance. Without such shared responsibility, current dynamics will only reproduce extractive injustice under the guise of development and cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Mining-related conflicts are often marked by violence and reflect the deeply entrenched global inequalities embedded in the international division of labour under capitalism. Historically dominated by Western corporations, the landscape of resource extraction is now increasingly shaped by the rise of Chinese state capital in the Global South. This chapter examined the intersection of Chinese state capital and extractive practices in Peru, focusing on the Las Bambas mining project. It was shown how Chinese investments, while not directly rooted in Eurocentric colonial history, continue to perpetuate colonial dynamics in the Global South. They do this both by exploiting Peru's neoliberal legal and economic framework, which sustains the country's position of peripherality and dependence on foreign capital, by excluding Indigenous groups from decision-making processes that would be compatible with local dynamics, and by employing strategies of criminalising resistance that reflect colonial echoes of marginalisation and repression.

There remain several areas for further research, particularly how global power dynamics are shifting with the increasing influence of Chinese investments in the mining sector. Additionally, the question of what the long-term socio-environmental consequences of Chinese extractive practices in the Andes will be. The relationship between the evolving role of China and the continued persistence of local resistance movements also raises important questions about contemporary forms of economic exploitation.

This chapter contributes to the overall theme by investigating the links between resource extraction, social conflict and environmental degradation, highlighting the complex intersection of state-corporate power and local resistance in the context of the mining industry. It underscores the need to reconsider the global development framework, particularly in light of emerging powers such as China, and how their investments can reshape economic and environmental landscapes in the

Global South. The discussion challenges the current discourse on development and offers a more nuanced understanding of the ways colonial legacies persist in modern global relations, even if under other auspices.

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