

Builders, Miners, and Terrorists: Dynamite, Explosive Developments, and Ecological Injustice in the Andes

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I will devote two months at the Carson Center to develop a scholarly article from a larger book manuscript, “Boom! An Explosive History of Peru,” examining how dynamite—an emblem of industrial progress—became a central force in both the construction and unraveling of Andean environments. Drawing on fieldwork in Peru and archival research in the United States, the article situates the Andes as a critical site for rethinking the Capitalocene through the lenses of environmental history, infrastructure studies, and ecological justice. During the residency period, the article will be prepared for submission to a leading journal in environmental history or political ecology.

At its core, the project argues that the modern Andes were not simply shaped by abstract processes of development, but materially and violently transformed through the repeated use of explosives. Dynamite enabled states and corporations to carve railways through mountains, expand extractive frontiers, and reengineer ecosystems in the name of progress. Yet the same material also became a tool of resistance and disruption, deployed by insurgent groups and marginalized actors to contest these infrastructures. By tracing this dual history, the project reveals how technological systems of development simultaneously produce and destabilize political and ecological orders.

In line with the focus on environmental and ecological justice, this project intervenes in urgent global debates by foregrounding the uneven distribution of environmental harm. In the Andes, long-durée history of infrastructural and extractive expansion fell disproportionately on Indigenous, rural, and working-class communities. These groups not only endured displacement, ecological degradation, and state violence, but also—as my first book revealed—generated their own forms of resistance. Communal politics and knowledges have been and continue to be dismissed or criminalized within dominant narratives of modernization. By centering these perspectives, the project contributes to a more inclusive archive of environmental justice.

Conceptually, the project challenges universalizing accounts of the Capitalocene by treating it as a situated historical process rather than a singular global epoch. The Andes emerge as a highly engineered environment, where landscapes were blasted, tunneled, and repurposed to serve transnational circuits of capital. This reframing highlights how ecological transformation is inseparable from colonial legacies, state power, and uneven development. Dynamite, in this context, is not merely a tool but a lens through which to examine the entanglements of material force, political authority, and environmental change.

Ultimately, this project offers a new framework for understanding the built environment as a contested terrain of ecological struggle. It argues that the infrastructures of modernity are not neutral achievements of engineering, but sites where power, violence, and environmental change converge. By tracing the explosive remaking of the Andes, the article contributes to broader conversations about the historical roots of environmental inequality and the ongoing legacies of extractive development.