

Brazil and the Difficult Path to Multilateralism

by Raúl Zibechi | March 8, 2006

The United Nations Multinational Interim Force in Haiti (UNMIF), led by Brazil, represents a step forward for the regional power in establishing a multilateral policy agenda. Nevertheless, Brazil's rise as a regional power is running into difficulties, both domestic and international.

A century ago, the baron of Rio Branco, the Brazilian foreign minister who forged his country's foreign policy for the 20th century, said, "Brazil must not dwell on what it has already accomplished; it must arrive hegemonically to the Pacific." Fifty years later, the country's principal strategist, General Golbery do Couto e Silva, recommended the same course: "For the Brazil of today, there is only one path: expand or perish."¹ At the turn of the 21st century, South America's most powerful nation is on course to realize its geostrategical dream, not by way of military conquest, but instead through large-scale regional integration projects and the expansion of its major companies. At the same time, its participation at the forefront of an important peacekeeping mission gives it much-desired recognition as a world power, which could result in a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Brazil has been expanding by filling in the gaps left by the United States and multinational corporations of the North, in the wake of the breakdown of faith in the Washington Consensus that has allowed progressive and leftist forces access to power. Nevertheless, Brazil's consolidation as a regional and world power—though it champions multilateralism—is leaving a bitter taste in the mouth of those who feel Brazil's steamroller-like advances are creating a new disequilibrium on the subcontinent.

The military presence in Haiti is perceived as a good sign of these contradictions. The nearly 10,000 peacekeepers on the island (7,500 soldiers and 1,897 police officers from 22 countries) under Brazilian command are perhaps the most important step, on military grounds, toward breaking the domination of Washington in the region, should the mission be a success. But the military presence is also drawing criticism, primarily from participating countries from the Southern Cone, where many

analysts maintain that the final result will be, in essence, equivalent to the American brand of hegemony.

The March to the Far West

In Brazilian history the occupation of the Amazon played a role similar to the United States' expansion to the Pacific. The long march west began as soon as the first Portuguese colonists put foot on solid ground, quickly spilling over the boundaries set forth by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) between Spain and Portugal, which fixed the limits at a maximum of 600 kilometers from the eastern tip of the continental coast. The impressive expansion to the West reached the slopes of the Andean mountain range and the Silver River Basin. It was led by colonists from San Pablo who organized major expeditions to the interior (*las bandeiras*) in search of Indians for slaves, gold, and precious metals. By forging partnerships with these *bandeirantes*, poor colonists who saw the adventure as a way to improve their situation gave shape to the borders of what would become an independent Brazil in 1822.

Although formally incorporated as part of national territory, the Amazon was an immense green desert—remote and difficult to access. In the mid-twentieth century Couto e Silva described the area as "the marginal part of Brazil, in large part unexplored, devitalized by its lack of people and creative energy, but deserving to be earnestly incorporated into the nation."² With over 1.5 million square miles, the Amazon makes up nearly half of the country's territory and is its greatest source of potential energy, fresh water, minerals, and biodiversity. Between 1850 and 1950, Brazil's "Amazonian territory" doubled at the cost of its neighbors; Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela lost portions of their land during that time-frame.³ In the 1865 Triple Alliance War (Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay against Paraguay) alone, Brazil made off with almost 35,000 square miles of Paraguay's



territory. But the expansion continued to be a basically irregular process that required populating isolated regions and entailed a systematic disregard for international law, in addition to blatant military force.

Infantry Colonel Alvaro de Souza Pinheiro provides a good example of just how the expansion was carried out. Like the rest of Brazil's armed forces, he believes guerrilla warfare is the most effective way of defending and consolidating the Amazon, which he considers an "area of strategic priority." He maintains that the conquest of the region was "an epic wrought with bloodshed, courage, and determination." As an example, he uses the annexation by Brazil of the state of Acre, finalized in 1904, but started 15 years prior. The region had been ceded to Bolivia in the 1867 Treaty of Ayacucho, but the profits to be made in rubber drew thousands of Brazilians, in large part from the poverty-stricken northeastern region. In 1889, the Brazilians living in Acre decided to defy the authority of Bolivia, create an independent territory, and request annexation from Brazil. Bolivia responded by founding the city of Puerto Alonso (today Porto Acre). In October of 1889, the Brazilians used military force to occupy and expel the Bolivians, and in July of 1899, with the help of the *seringueiros*⁴ and the governor of the state of Amazonas, they proclaimed the Republic of Acre.

In 1901, Bolivia leased the region to The Bolivian Syndicate of New York through the Treaty of Aramayo, but in August of 1902, two thousand Brazilian guerrillas began an insurrection that would defeat Bolivia's troops by 1903. The leader, Plácido de Castro, was then proclaimed governor of the Independent State of Acre. On January 17th, the Baron of Rio Branco won a diplomatic victory with the signing of the Treaty of Petrópolis, in which Brazil purchased the area from Bolivia for two million sovereigns and paid \$110,000 in reparations to The Bolivian Syndicate. Finally, on February 25, 1904, the Independent State of Acre was dissolved and incorporated into Brazil as a Federal territory.⁵

This is only one historic example of how the "march to the West" took place. During the military dictatorship that resulted from the coup d'état of 1964, in which Couto de Silva was one of the principal players, occupying the Amazon became official state policy along with what was called by a military strategist, "Border Revitalization." The occupation of the Amazon and expansion there formed part of the same process: nationalism and developmentalism went hand in hand beginning with the ascent of Getulio Vargas in 1930. To

this end, the Constitution of 1946 obliged the federal government to dedicate 3% of tax revenues to the Amazon over a 20-year period. A considerable part of this effort led to the foundation of Brasilia in 1960 as the capital of the country in the central zone along the Amazon River Basin, displacing coastal Rio de Janeiro. In 1966, Manaus was declared a free trade zone to convert it into a commercial and industrial hub of the Western Amazon. Then, in 1970, the Plan for National Integration laid the groundwork for two major highways, among them the Transamazonian, as well as a vast plan for colonization.

Living Borders

With the return of democracy in 1983, new plans were developed toward the same end. The *Calha Norte* Project of the 1980s sought the occupation of a 100-mile long strip of border with French Guyana, Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, and Colombia, in order to "fortify the Brazilian presence in the border area and organize the communities that developed therein," according to President Sarney's military chief in 1986.⁶ The government put together platoons to line the border, built airports and highways, like the North Perimetral and hydroelectric dams, and displaced the native population with colonial-like force. Among the strategic objectives of the Calha Norte Project was "the construction of a port on the Pacific, an age-old heroic dream of Brazil's geopoliticians," as well as "a highway beginning at the Rio Branco, crossing the Peruvian Andes, and ending at the ocean."⁷

According to Admiral Hernani Goulart Fortuna, former commander of the War College, "the Calha Norte Project of the 1980s is being replaced by the Amazon Protection System (SIPAM, for its initials in Portuguese) and the Amazon Vigilance System (SIVAM)," programs that have been frustrated—in his opinion—by the privatization and foreign takeover of Embratel (the telecommunications company) and the interference of political party interests.⁸ He maintains that although Brazil does not have contentious borders, "there are problems in border areas," since "the enormous northern arc, from Tabatinga on the border with Colombia, to Amapá bordering Guyana, presents a significant vulnerability in matters of drug trafficking, guerrillas, and arms contraband spilling out of the surrounding areas into Brazilian territory."⁹

But Brazilian geopoliticians¹⁰ believed expansion should go even further. Two complementary views illustrate their

designs. In 1935, Captain Mario Travassos argued in his book, *The Continental Projection of Brazil*, that the triangle formed by the Bolivian cities of Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, and Sucre would be decisive in controlling the continent and that whoever was able to control this triangle would dominate South America. On the other hand, in harmony with Cuoto e Silva's theory of "living borders," the former head of the Border Division of the External Relations Department, Ambassador Teixeira Soares, maintains in his book, *The History of the Formation of Brazil's Borders*, that the border is a dynamic concept; "it advances and recedes according to circumstances, being something alive that exerts a natural pressure on whichever border is economically and demographically weaker."¹¹

In short, if on the one hand there exists a country with a high demographic density and level of economic development, and on the other, a poor one with a small population, "the border simply does not exist. It is constantly being pushed."¹² According to these authors, the border between Paraguay and Brazil has receded 100 kilometers in the last few decades: "In that strip, there are some 400,000 Brazilians who were expelled from Rio Grande Do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, and used as instruments for the expansionist plans of the Brazilian military." Something similar could be happening in other countries, in particular Bolivia. There, in the border province of Santa Cruz, some 200 families of Brazilian farmers cultivate 1,350 square miles (350,000 hectares) of soybeans, which represents 35% of Bolivia's entire soybean production. These farmers have political clout, given that they represent a third of the affiliates of the National House of Bolivian-Brazilian Commerce and are members of the Association of Wheat and Oil Producers (Anapo, for its initials in Portuguese), which groups together 12,000 farmers in Santa Cruz.¹³ This separatist region has been a source of coups d'état, like the one carried out in 1971 by Hugo Bánzer, which undeniably received help from the Brazilian dictatorship.

Petrobras—Brazil's Reach in Latin America

The objectives of Brazilian military leaders under the slogan "Brasil Potencia," which roughly translates to "Brazil World Power," while failing to become reality, appear to be advancing today hand in hand with the major Brazilian corporations. The state-owned Petrobras is the archetype for the current expansion of Brazil in South America, but it is not the only case. The business was

founded in 1953 during the administration of Getulio Vargas as part of a campaign that united civilians and military personnel around the slogan "The oil is ours." Today it is the premiere business in Brazil, the second-largest producer of oil in Argentina, the leader in natural gas in Bolivia, and the third-largest industrial company in Latin America. It ranks among the top 12 oil companies in the world and in 2004 it came in 12th place in terms of profits, beating out Coca-Cola and J.P. Morgan Chase, on the heels of Microsoft and Chevron Texaco,¹⁴ making it one of the most profitable companies in the world.

Between 1984 and 1993, it was second in the world only to Venezuela's PDVSA in terms of levels of oil discovery. In 1994, it broke the world record for deep-water oil extraction (its specialty) by drilling over 1,000 meters below the surface of the ocean. With 180 wells, compared to Shell's 55, Texaco's 17, and Esso's 10, Petrobras leads the world in offshore drilling.¹⁵ In 2004, its income was \$43 billion, it had 13,821 wells in production (665 of them offshore), 18,600 miles of pipelines, 509 ships (with ownership of 45), 16 refineries, and its current level of production is 2 million barrels a day.

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The investments of Petrobras in South America are impressive and continue climbing at breakneck speed. In Bolivia, the company has invested \$1.6 billion since 1996, and it controls the country's two primary oil fields and 20% of its gasoline stations. The 260-mile gas pipeline from Tarija to Rio Grande do Sul assures that Brazil will receive 23 million cubic meters of natural gas each day, on which 2,200 businesses depend. Brazil controls 20% of Bolivia's GDP—in addition to natural gas and soy production, the Banco de Brasil registers yearly profits of \$700 million in Bolivia, and major construction companies like Odebrecht have won bids on contracts for over \$330 million.¹⁶

In 2002, Petrobras bought 58% of Argentina's Pérez Companc, the biggest individual oil company in Latin America, for over a billion dollars. It also bought Petrolera

Santa Fe, the natural gas company Mega for \$715 million, and owns three oil refineries. Between 2004 and 2007, Petrobras will invest \$1.5 billion in Argentina toward gas and petroleum exploration and production, an amount exceeded only by Repsol and Pan American Energy.¹⁷ Since Pérez Companc operated in Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador as well, Petrobras's purchase—in addition to making it the second largest petroleum producer in Argentina—has allowed it to increase its dealings across the entire continent.

In 2004, Petrobras took over 51 % of the stocks of Uruguay's Gaseba (Gaz de France). With the purchase of 89 Shell service stations last December, it now controls 22 % of the fuel market. It also received from Shell 134 fuel stations in Paraguay and 39 in Colombia. Soon it will go into partnership with the state-owned Uruguayan oil company Ancap. Petrobras took advantage of opportunities for investment that opened up with European capital flight and the economic crisis of 2002 in Argentina and subsequently increased its presence on the continent.

The investments of Petrobras in Ecuador are more problematic. The company operates a 772 square-mile (200,000 hectare) oil field in the Yasuní National Park, *Huaroni* indigenous territory. This enterprise has sparked confrontations between the government and the original inhabitants. Petrobras plans on building two oilrigs each with 12 wells, one pipeline, a processing plant, and a highway as well as other infrastructure. The indigenous people are demanding that Petrobras withdraw from the national park, which has been declared a biosphere reserve by Unesco. The Ecuadorian government halted its activities there in 2005.

In 2006, Petrobras will increase its investments in South America by 40 %. Before 2010, the company will invest \$56.4 billion: 85 % in Brazil and the rest, \$8.46 billion, into its "international expansion" across the subcontinent.¹⁸ The daily paper *O Globo* estimates that in this period, investments will actually reach much higher levels, on the order of \$15 billion over the next four years.¹⁹

Brazil's Financial Clout

The state-run National Bank of Economic and Social Development (BNDES by its Portuguese initials) was established especially to support the expansion of Brazil's major companies. "The Brazilian government found in BNDES the instrument for constructing physical integration" that will serve as the base for the South American

Community of Nations.²⁰ In effect, the bank is "overcapitalizing" and has put together a budget of \$30 trillion, "10 % greater than the World Bank's budget."²¹ The BNDES is well-positioned to become the primary financier of the megaprojects of the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA, for its Spanish initials). IIRSA entails the construction of 300 highways, bridges, hydroelectric power stations, gas pipelines, and other works at a cost of \$50 billion over the course of a decade.²²

The IIRSA, which in a certain sense is an incarnation of the South American Community of Nations (which itself is the result of a strategic proposal by Brazil), will construct a physical platform of free-flowing goods and capital to strengthen free trade. The BNDES is, as suggests a Brazilian researcher, the "*Bolivarian sword of Lula*." It has already provided five billion dollars worth of loans to countries in the region: Argentina and Venezuela each took out \$1 billion, Paraguay and Ecuador \$300 million, Chile and Colombia \$150 million, Uruguay \$228 million, and Peru \$200 million, all for the purpose of developing infrastructure.²³ The countries that will benefit from these loans "will not be able to hire their own contractors in projects financed by the BNDES. They will be required to contract Brazilian construction companies," including Odebrecht, Andrade Gutierrez, Camargo Correa, Queiroz Galvao, OAS, Carioca, and EIT. Moreover, "the BNDES is demanding that all of the materials for the development be imported from the Brazilian market."²⁴

The construction company Odebrecht, Brazil's primary exporter of services, is expanding across the continent. By the end of 2004 it had created 14,885 jobs in Brazil and 7,000 in other countries, primarily in South America. At the moment, its contracts abroad exceed those within Brazil. South America is its major external "partner," representing 12 % of its revenue.²⁵ In Ecuador, Odebrecht is ready to build the controversial airport in Tena, considered an integral part of the Multimodal Manta-Manaos highway that will unite Brazil with the Pacific, among other infrastructure projects.

Integration or Fragmentation

"South America is disintegrating at an alarming pace," maintains analyst Juan Gabriel Tokatlián.²⁶ In his opinion, the Andean world is in a state of highly polarized turmoil. "Pacific South America has strategically opted to side with the United States," as demonstrated by the free trade agreements signed by Chile and Peru, and

Colombia and Ecuador about to follow suit. On the other hand, the South America of the Atlantic is exploring other diplomatic options. At the same time, regional integration efforts are failing miserably, with Mercosur in deadlock or even disintegration. Faced with what is being called the “dispersion” or “disintegration” of the continent, only Brazil is left with strategic options, the alternative of the South American Community of Nations (SACN).

Under Brazilian leadership the SACN provides options for Brazil, which accounts for half of the continent’s population and GDP. In addition, the SACN is tied into the IIRSA. This project, which deserves a detailed study due to the extent of its scope if nothing else, is the largest integration project to come out of the southern part of the continent. Its vision is oriented toward the North, since it is based on the free trade model. IIRSA emerged as an initiative of Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso at the South American Presidential Summit held in Brasilia on August 30, 2000. Its objective is to develop corridors that are “multinational strips concentrating potential and actual flows of trade,” which are defined as “axes of development and integration.”²⁷

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Almost all of these corridors will run from the Atlantic to the Pacific because, as Andrés Barreda points out, currently the center of the global market has moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific.²⁸ For this task, the IIRSA was created to overcome “the physical, statutory, and social barriers” that hinder the efficient flow of goods. It is obvious that this project would mostly interest Brazil. According to the Bolivian Forum on Environment and Development, reaching Pacific ports “would allow it to realize its desire to gain the high ground in Latin America, a result of the Brazilian strategy of the 1980s to achieve regional leadership by adding to its zone of influence the surrounding countries of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, then Bolivia and Chile, next the rest of the

Andean community, and finally all of South America, with the ultimate end of strengthening its economy in the face of the FTAA.”²⁹

Barreda notes that five of the twelve corridors uniting the Atlantic to the Pacific pass “through the strategic bottleneck of Bolivia.” In this region, “crossing the Andes presents fewer difficulties,” which leads to a process of “consolidating the Interoceanic Transport Corridor in Bolivia as the principal route for transporting goods to the southern Pacific,” according to the Bolivian Forum. Extensive Brazilian presence in Bolivia fits with the Brazilian strategy traced years ago to control the continent. These business ventures do not benefit everyone equally, but rather, in order of largest to smallest, where first place belongs to the large transnationals. According to Barreda, the network of highways and public works “will allow large companies easy access to market interests and enable them to appropriate and commercialize intellectual property, culture, and even life.”³⁰ In addition, the business community of Sao Paulo will be the primary beneficiary considering the weight Brazil will acquire in the region and the possibility of trade with Asia.

Brazilian Imperialism?

Considering the ensemble of changes taking place in the region, could one argue that a new kind of Brazilian imperialism is being born?

The military has expressed very clearly the objectives and ambitions of a sector of Brazilian society. Based on the legacy of Golbery do Couto e Silva, this sector defines Brazil, because of its size, as a “pan-region.” With the end of the Cold War and now with globalization, Severino Bezerra Cabral of the Superior War College believes that “the landscape of the pan-region is metamorphosing into what could be defined as the necessary emergence of a ‘megastate.’”³¹ It is a vision of the world that vehemently rejects unilateralism. He is betting that the development of the country will serve as a magnet so that neighboring economies will ally themselves with the push Brazil is making, since “once the unification of the Amazon and Silver River Basins is complete and the Bioceanic Corridor constructed, Brazil’s manifest destiny will be defined: that of expanding itself in the eyes of humanity.”³²

With respect to this goal, the incorporation of the Amazon “into Brazilian civilization is a geopolitical maneuver that, if successful, would raise Brazil to the

status of megastate. But Cabral warns that unlike the United States and the U.S.S.R., “Brazil must not act as an ‘expansionist power.’” Instead, the rise to become a “South American megastate should be based on a projection of power accepted or even required by neighboring countries” in what would be “a set of integrationist and non-confrontational geopolitics.” He ends by assuring that Brazil’s insertion into a multipolar order, today still under U.S. hegemony, “will take place only if the country emerges as one of the two megastates of the 21st century.”³³

The goal is to achieve “Brazil World Power,” based on a solid foundation. Brazil is already the world’s 10th largest industrial power and it has enormous potential to keep growing if it continues to intensely exploit the Amazon. Nevertheless, according to some strategists, these goals are being met with resistance within the country itself, as “a good portion of our political, business, and even intellectual elite is against the Brazilian cause, investing instead in the End of History and one way of thinking, in reference to the U.S.-led model of economic integration”³⁴

In addition to the military, a second group of actors is made up of businesses, in particular those run by the State. “Petrobras is demonstrating behavior in Bolivia similar to that of any transnational oil company, especially with respect to environmental and social responsibility, executing similar strategies to those of other companies operating in the country, both in terms of minimizing its responsibilities for the impact it generates as well as its strategies to avoid social and procedural obstacles,” concludes one study by the Bolivian Forum.³⁵ A similar statement can be made about other businesses operating outside of Brazil. Business logic is always the same and it consists of maximizing profits, not empowering the State, much less affirming multilateralism.

A third key actor is the Brazilian government itself. Every time a political crisis unfolds in a country of strategic importance to Brazil, it applies diplomatic pressure. One of the clearest cases was President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva’s interference in Bolivia to defend the interests of Petrobras, when the 2004 referendum on hydrocarbons was held. On this occasion, Lula signed a declaration with Carlos Mesa—nine days into the referendum—stating that both leaders hope “the results of the referendum allow bilateral cooperation to continue and the development of new projects of mutual interest, an environment of stability, predictability, and judicial security.”³⁶ It was a

strong endorsement for Mesa and bucket of cold water for the social movements, some of which were calling for a boycott of the referendum.

In crisis situations, Brazil has intervened diplomatically in Bolivia through Lula’s international adviser, Marco Auerlio García, “to evaluate the situation by dialoguing with various political forces.”³⁷ In Ecuador, something similar took place. On July 7, 2005, the Ecuadorian Minister of Environment halted the work of Petrobras in the Yasuni National Park. On July 26, Lula sent a letter to the president of Ecuador: “I would like to express to your Excellency my concern over the government’s recent decision to suspend the activities of Petrobras in block 31, a decision that jeopardizes the very future of the project.”³⁸ Two weeks later, on August 16, the Brazilian Foreign Secretary, Celso Amorin, traveled to Quito to “analyze issues of regional integration and the presence of the oil company Petrobras in Amazonian Ecuador.”³⁹

During the visit various projects made headway: \$190 million in financing from Brazil so Ecuador could begin to build a hydroelectric power station, \$70 million financing for the construction of an airport in Tena, credit for building the Quito-Guayaquil highway, the sale of three jets from the Brazilian company Embraer to TAME; and Ecuador’s purchase of low-priced generic drugs from Brazil. Concerning Petrobras, Amorin suggested that his country “is interested in ensuring a positive outcome.”⁴⁰

In 2005 the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (BIA) opened four South American branch offices (before then it only had offices in Washington, D.C., and Buenos Aires) in Venezuela, Colombia, Paraguay, and Bolivia. According to Brazilian analysts, “This decision to increase its regional sphere of intelligence operations is a type of ‘imitation’ of the CIA.”⁴¹ When Congress questioned the director of the BIA, Mauro Marcel de Lima e Silva, in May of 2005, columnist Janio de Freitas of the *Folha de Sao Paulo* wrote that the crisis in Ecuador was a good example of the dangers threatening Brazilian diplomacy. “Brazil felt betrayed by the firing of Lucio Gutierrez, who showed a particular sympathy for Lula’s government,” he wrote, going on to assure that his country’s intelligence would not have remained neutral.⁴² The director of the agency recognized that the expansion of Brazilian intelligence is a measure seeking “the exchange of information on terrorism, drug trafficking, security, and also economic issues.”⁴³

In spite of this collection of facts, it is not simple to argue that Brazil is brandishing a form of political imperialism, although its quest for hegemony is evident. Brazil has limiting powers still in its way, first and foremost the United States, but also Argentina and Venezuela. However, the gravest obstacle to Brazil's rise as a mid-level power embracing multilateralism comes from internal instabilities. Petrobras is no longer a state-run or even Brazilian-owned company. During the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, 49% of the company was sold off to private interests, mostly American. At the same time, the BNDES manages state funds, but mostly for the purpose of financing major automobile exporters, which are all multinational corporations from the North.

Moreover, Brazil ranks eighth in the world in terms of inequality, surpassed in Latin America only by Guatemala. As the editor of *Desemprego Zero* (Zero Unemployment) suggests, the market does not need leadership. If instead of "being a major market for the competition of transnational corporations (and a few local ones), [Brazil] decided to become a nation seeking the best interests of its citizens, living in a Welfare State, it is likely that we would drag the other South American countries, voluntarily, along the same path." In contrast, under the framework of neoliberalism, there is no place for strategic planning, because the sole agenda is to strengthen the forces of the market. In his opinion, the only way out—both in terms of strengthening nation states and multilateralism—is by endogenous development founded on "domestic policies of social welfare and full employment, and a foreign policy of independence."⁴⁴

Raúl Zibechi, a member of the editorial board of the weekly Brecha de Montevideo, is a professor and researcher on social movements at the Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina and adviser to several grassroots organizations. He is a monthly contributor to the IRC Americas Program (www.americaspolicy.org/)

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Production Information:

Writer: Raul Zibechi

Editor: Laura Carlsen, IRC

Translation and Layout: Nick Henry, IRC