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Governing the Revolution: A Foucauldian Critique of Passive Revolution in Bolivia

Abstract: This dialogue offers a Foucauldian critique of Angus McNelly's (2023) Gramscian analysis of passive revolution in Bolivia under Evo Morales. While McNelly's framework rigorously illuminates elite adaptation and the incorporation of social movements into the state, it operates at the top-down level of political structure, foregoing a genealogical analysis of how categories such as "indigenous movement" were produced as legible political actors. Moreover, the spatiotemporal apparatus McNelly deploys — Zavaleta Mercado's *sociedad abigarrada* and "temporal dissidence" — generates a blind spot within his own framework: it cannot account for formations of Bolivian social life that never synchronised with the homogeneous time of the state. Applying Foucault's governmentality and biopolitics, this dialogue shows that the plurinational state reproduced neoliberal governmental rationality under a new discursive subject, domesticating Bolivia's *abigarramiento* through constitutional classifications and biopolitical interventions. Resistance is relocated below hegemony, in the *economía popular* — a formation operating on concrete time that, drawing on Mises' praxeology, constitutes the ontological substrate from which political formations momentarily crystallise and to which they return.

Keywords: Passive Revolution, Governmentality, Biopolitics, Sociedad Abirragada, Temporal dissidence, Economía popular, Praxeology, Bolivia

Resumen: Este diálogo ofrece una crítica foucaultiana del análisis gramsciano de Angus McNelly (2023) sobre la revolución pasiva en Bolivia bajo Evo Morales. Si bien el marco de McNelly ilumina con rigor la adaptación de las élites y la incorporación de los movimientos sociales al Estado, opera en el nivel descendente

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de la estructura política, renunciando a un análisis genealógico de cómo categorías como "movimiento indígena" fueron producidas como actores políticos legibles. Además, el aparato espaciotemporal que McNelly despliega —la sociedad abigarrada de Zavaleta Mercado y la "disidencia temporal"— genera un punto ciego dentro de su propio marco: no puede dar cuenta de las formaciones de la vida social boliviana que nunca se sincronizaron con el tiempo homogéneo del Estado. Aplicando la gubernamentalidad y la biopolítica de Foucault, este diálogo muestra que el Estado plurinacional reprodujo la racionalidad gubernamental neoliberal bajo un nuevo sujeto discursivo, domesticando el abigarramiento boliviano a través de clasificaciones constitucionales e intervenciones biopolíticas. La resistencia se reubica por debajo de la hegemonía, en la economía popular —una formación que opera en tiempo concreto que, apoyándose en la praxeología de Mises, constituye el sustrato ontológico desde el cual las formaciones políticas cristalizan momentáneamente y al que retornan.

Palabras clave: Revolución Pasiva, Gubernamentalidad, Biopolítica, Sociedad Abigarrada, Disidencia Temporal, Economía Popular, Praxeología, Bolivia

McNelly's Framework and Its Blind Spot

McNelly's (2023) *Now We Are in Power* offers a rigorous approach to Bolivia's "process of change" under Evo Morales after 2005 — a Gramscian analysis of passive revolution illuminating elite adaptation and neo-extractivist hegemony. Its significance lies in how it "tells the story of the rise and fall of Evo Morales to interrogate the possibilities of radical change within capitalism" (McNelly 2023, 5), tracing the incorporation of social movements into the New Left programme of the state.

Yet this framework still operates at the top-down levels of political structure and strategy, treating Bolivia's popular movements — indigenous and working-class movements — as already genealogically legible political actors whose constitution as categories requires no explanation (McNelly 2023, 5). It thereby foregoes a genealogical analysis (Foucault 1977a) — one that asks not how these categories acted but how "indigenous movement" and "working class" were themselves produced as legible political actors through prior exercises of state power and knowledge in Bolivia's political economy. Moreover, the very spatiotemporal apparatus McNelly deploys to explain Bolivia's revolutionary potential — Zavaleta Mercado's *sociedad abigarrada* and what McNelly (2023, 21) calls "temporal dissidence" — implies a form of resistance his framework cannot reach: one operating below the threshold of political synchronisation, in the concrete time of daily life that passive

revolution never captures. This gap cannot be filled from within the Gramscian tradition. It requires the genealogical work of Michel Foucault.

This dialogue proceeds in three movements. First, it identifies the blind spot McNelly's own spatiotemporal apparatus generates. Second, it applies Foucault's analytics of governmentality to show how the plurinational state reproduced rather than departed from the governmental rationality of its neoliberal predecessors. Third, it locates resistance in the *economía popular* of Bolivia's informal markets, drawing on Foucault's capillary power and Mises' praxeology. The 2003 Gas War and Morales' 2005 election followed the same dynamic Foucault (2008, 27) identifies in liberalism during the French Revolution: oppositional vocabulary — *liberté, égalité, fraternité* — absorbed into the rationality of governmental practice it had challenged, transforming indigeneity from emancipatory politics into liberal nation-state building (Postero 2017; Webber 2010). The consequential question is not how social movements were absorbed — McNelly answers that — but what new forms of subjection that absorption simultaneously produced. Foucault (1982, 778) examines precisely this: the modes of objectification through which human beings are made subjects via classifications derived from fields bearing the status of sciences. In Bolivia, those instruments are the ethnic categories, development metrics, and constitutional classifications through which the plurinational state rendered its heterogeneous population knowable and governable.

McNelly (2023, 13–14) provides three interconnected theses. The passive revolution thesis comprises subaltern struggle culminating in crisis, followed by reconciliation and transformation, producing a hegemony sustained through extractivist accumulation (McNelly 2023, 14). The neo-extractivist thesis holds that resource rents forge the conditions for movement incorporation while undermining the hegemonic foundations they construct (McNelly 2023, 14). The resistance thesis draws on Gramsci's (1971, 58–59) concept of *trasformismo*: opposition leaders absorbed into the ruling bloc, movements turned from offensive actors into defenders of the Left in state power (McNelly 2023, 13).

To theorise the spatiotemporal conditions of this process, McNelly (2023, 20–21) draws on Postone's distinction between abstract time — measured by clock and calendar, placing spaces in developmental hierarchies (Postone 2009, 214–215) — and concrete time, immanent to daily tasks, irreducible to universal measure (Postone 2009, 201–202). In peripheral formations, these coexist in tension — "temporal dissidence" — captured by Zavaleta Mercado's (1986) *sociedad abigarrada*: Bolivia where "the multiple temporalities of manifold modes of production are not constrained to the homogeneous time of the state" (McNelly 2023, 21, citing Lagos

Rojas 2018, 140). Passive revolution itself, McNelly notes via Kipfer (2013, 85), plays out as a dialectic of deferral, ruination, suspension, and abandonment.

Here a structural blind spot emerges within McNelly's own apparatus. He uses temporal dissidence and *abigarramiento* to explain passive revolution's conditions of possibility but does not follow through on what Zavaleta's concept implies for resistance: that the most durable formations of Bolivian social life are precisely those that never entered the homogeneous time of the state. The kinship networks, reciprocal exchange, and market logics documented by Tassi et al. (2013) and elaborated by Tapia (2002) inhabit Postone's concrete time in a form that abstract developmental time cannot homogenise. They were never absorbed because they were never synchronised. McNelly's resistance thesis captures only the fraction of Bolivia's *abigarramiento* that converged during 2003–2009. The remainder is analytically invisible to him — a blind spot generated by his framework's own terms. As Morton (2007) notes more broadly, this limit becomes apparent when Gramscian categories reach their historical boundaries. A Gramscian analysis sees from above. Foucault forces this analysis downward.

Governing Through Indigeneity

If McNelly's framework cannot see what passive revolution does to temporalities that never synchronised, a Foucauldian reading asks a prior question: what did it do to those who did synchronise — what subjects did synchronisation require? Governmentality — the "rationalities of governmental practices" (Foucault 1980, 258) — operates as a *dispositif*: a heterogeneous ensemble of institutions, discourses, and material arrangements implementing a governmental rationality (Foucault 2008, 131), through a power-knowledge nexus that renders the population an object of surveillance, analysis, intervention, and modification (Foucault 1980, 125; 171).

Crucially, Foucault (2008, 131) identifies neoliberalism itself as a governmental rationality — the strategy of applying market principles to a general art of government. The Bolivian state under Morales did not depart from the rationality of its so-called neoliberal predecessors; it reproduced it under a new discursive subject. Where McNelly sees a transformation of hegemony, a Foucauldian reading sees the continuity of the same *dispositif* beneath a changed discourse. By constitutionally imposing a plurinational subject, Morales governed *through* social movements rather than against them — incorporating their temporal dissidence into the homogeneous time of the state by reclassifying it as a constitutional category. The 2009 Constitution is the continuation of market-oriented population management under an indigenous

rather than liberal-individual discursive register. Indigeneity became a state-building technology rather than an emancipatory one (Postero 2017; Fabricant and Gustafson 2011). The plurinational state did not represent Bolivia's multiple temporalities, rather, it domesticated them.

Where McNelly (2023) sees neo-extractivism as shaping political conditions, Foucault (1972, 35–36; 42) sees it producing subject positions through a grid of specification — an amalgamation of nature, raw materials, and national development that produces the subjects it claims to govern. Through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and examination, disciplinary power produces docile bodies (Foucault 1977, 184–194): the categories *Indígena*, *Originario*, *Campesino* fix identities and condition rights according to a grid of ethnic specification. An "indigenous gaze" —the state's act of looking at heterogeneous Andean peoples and seeing only what its own classificatory grid allows it to see, flattens Bolivia's *abigarramiento* into legible statistical parameters — health outcomes, education rates, poverty indices. The complexity Zavaleta identified as Bolivia's constitutive condition is reduced to a measurement. At the population level this operates biopolitically (Foucault 2008): the *Bono Juancito Pinto* and *Renta Dignidad* produced real material improvements while functioning as mechanisms of conditional inclusion. Biopolitical interventions produce both improvements and new forms of subjection simultaneously — precisely what McNelly cannot see. The apparatus of surveillance, classification, and discipline remained intact — producing passive revolution's central figure: the plurinational subject that asserted "Now We Are in Power."

Resistance in Concrete Time

If the foregoing showed what passive revolution did to those who synchronised, what remains outside that synchronisation is where resistance actually lives. McNelly's resistance thesis can only see resistance that has already entered the state's temporal and categorical grid. It cannot see resistance operating in concrete time: immanent to daily tasks, irreducible to the homogeneous measure the plurinational *dispositif* requires. Foucault insists power is capillary — circulating freely as centres of observation whose effects move as silently as the movement of "celestial bodies" (Foucault 1977, 213). Where power is capillary, resistance is equally diffuse — "exercised from innumerable points" (Foucault 1978a, 93–94), never exterior to power but inscribed within it. Power comes from below (Foucault 1978a, 94). The individual is not the opposite of power but one of its prime effects (Foucault 1980, 98).

The Bolivian case offers concrete empirical ground for this claim. Parra (2016), commenting on Tassi et al. (2013), documents the *economía popular* of Bolivia as an institutional alternative to state structures — rooted in historical superpositions of Andean peasant economy and mining unionism, sustained through kinship and reciprocity across the commercial corridor connecting the highlands to the eastern lowlands. This *economía popular* is precisely what Zavaleta's *abigarramiento* implies but McNelly's resistance thesis cannot reach: a formation operating on concrete time, on the seasonal and reciprocal logic of Andean exchange, that predates the MAS project and persists despite it. For Lazar (2008), the daily practices of El Alto's inhabitants reveal a citizenship constituted through affiliations of neighbourhood assembly, union membership, and market participation that precede and exceed the Republican categories through which the plurinational state attempted to render its population legible.

The informal vendor in Bolivia is not outside the political. These vendors enact a daily practice of non-compliance — eluding the state's legibility apparatus through deliberate dissidence and persistence, driven simultaneously by necessity and by purposeful agency. Necessity and evasion are not mutually exclusive: vendors pursue subjective ends through scarce means, whether survival or accumulation, and in doing so elude and play with the state's apparatus of capture. The Bolivian state has struggled to absorb this sector for decades; where full capture proves impossible, these actors embed themselves in the interstices of state structures on their own terms. This is resistance in the Foucauldian sense: not a movement ready to be absorbed, not a banner, but a practice that eludes and plays with capture. It is also, in Zavaletan terms, the persistence of concrete time against the homogenising imperatives of the state's abstract developmental register.

Mises (1949, 11–12) argues that the bottom-up coordination of scarce means toward subjective ends is prior to any top-down political formula — human action, purposeful and irreducible, is the ontological foundation from which all social formations emerge. The *economía popular* is not a residue of failed state incorporation. It is the substrate from which Bolivia's political formations — including the Gas War catharsis McNelly identifies as passive revolution's anchoring moment — momentarily crystallise and to which they return. Social movements do not generate power; they are constituted by the micro-practices of individuals whose daily action produces the social fabric they later claim to represent (Foucault 1980, 98; Mises 1949, 11–12). McNelly's framework, by privileging organised resistance as its unit of analysis, mistakes the effect for the cause.

Passive revolution remains a necessary but insufficient framework. It explains who got incorporated and how — yet it cannot explain how power made and remade the subjects who initiated and were affected by those state structures. McNelly's framework, drawing on both Gramsci and Zavaleta Mercado's *sociedad abigarrada*

(Zavaleta Mercado 1986), illuminates Bolivia's motley formation with genuine analytical power. Yet both traditions share the same blind spot: they theorise from above. A Foucauldian reading does not discard McNelly — it descends below his analysis to where subjects are formed: bureaucrats, politicians, economists, and everyday vendors in the markets of Bolivia's political economy. The question Bolivia's process of change leaves open is not whether elites adapted. It is what kind of subjects that adaptation required — and what "informality," as a categorical nexus between power and knowledge, represented for Bolivia's plurinational process of change.

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