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Early view

Driven by Theory, Missing the Mark

Angus McNelly

King's College London, UK

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Abstract: In a recent review of my book Now We Are in Power in Alternautas, Elias Moises Sanchez Flores offers a 'Foucauldian critique of passive revolution in Bolivia'. For Sanchez Flores (2026: 1), passive revolution in my book '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 actor'. Moreover, my spatiotemporal apparatus 'generates a blind spot', failing to 'account for formations of Bolivian social life that never synchronised with the homogeneous time of the state'. Following these assertions, there are two major charges that must be answered: (1) I offer a top-down framework that misses creation of new subjects; and (2) there is a blind spot in my spatiotemporal apparatus that cannot account for, for example, the popular economy. I will address each in turn in what follows.

Keywords: passive revolution, abigarramiento, popular economies, Foucault

Resumen: En una reseña reciente de mi libro Now We Are in Power publicada en Alternautas, Elías Moisés Sánchez Flores ofrece una «crítica foucaultiana de la revolución pasiva en Bolivia». Para Sánchez Flores (2026: 1), la revolución pasiva en mi obra «opera en un nivel descendente (top-down) de la estructura política, prescindiendo de un análisis genealógico de cómo categorías como "movimiento indígena" fueron producidas como actores políticos inteligibles». Asimismo, mi aparato espaciotemporal «genera un punto ciego», al no «dar cuenta de formaciones de la vida social boliviana que nunca se sincronizaron con el tiempo homogéneo del Estado». A partir de estas afirmaciones, se plantean dos críticas principales que deben

[1] Angus McNelly, Lecturer in International Development at King's College London, UK. He is the author of "Now We Are in Power: The Politics of Passive Revolution in Twenty First Century Bolivia" (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023), and is currently researching the longue durée of natural resource led development in Bolivia. Email: angus.mcnelly@kcl.ac.uk

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2779-1581

ser abordadas: (1) que ofrezco un marco analítico descendente que pasa por alto la creación de nuevos sujetos; y (2) que existe un punto ciego en mi aparato espaciotemporal que impide dar cuenta, por ejemplo, de la economía popular. A continuación, abordaré cada una de estas cuestiones por separado.

Palabras clave: revolución pasiva, abigarramiento, economías populares, Foucault

In a recent review of my book, *Now We Are in Power,* in *Alternautas*, Elias Moises Sanchez Flores (2026) offers a 'Foucauldian critique of passive revolution in Bolivia'. For Sanchez Flores (2026: 1), passive revolution in my book '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 actor'. Moreover, my spatiotemporal apparatus 'generates a blind spot', failing to 'account for formations of Bolivian social life that never synchronised with the homogeneous time of the state'. Following these assertions, there are two major charges that must be answered: (1) I offer a top-down framework that misses creation of new subjects; and (2) there is a blind spot in my spatiotemporal apparatus that cannot account for, for example, the popular economy. I will address each in turn in what follows.

Whilst I am sympathetic to critical readings of my work that bring added depth, Sanchez Flores misses the mark. For one thing, he offers no citations to *Now We Are in Power* beyond page 21, meaning that many of the critiques are not representative of the empirical, ethnographic part of my analysis. This leads to strange assertions based on Foucault rather than the actual text of *Now We Are in Power*, and understandably leads to a top-down reading of the book; something that originates with Sanchez Flores rather than the text itself. I will not provide an exhaustive list of counterpoints to all Sanchez Flores' contentions, but a handful of counterclaims will suffice to defend my rebuttal.

Sanchez Flores (2026: 2) claims that I treat 'Bolivia's popular movements—indigenous and working-class movements—as already genealogically legible political actors whose constitution as categories requires no explanation'. A significant flaw, I admit, if it were to be true. Nonetheless, the citation given is from page 5, ignoring

the section 'Social Movement Lineages and Catharsis in Bolivia' that lays of the genealogy of working-class and Indigenous movements (McNelly, 2023: 28–33). Here, I trace 500 years of history to lay out the accumulation of social struggles and the long histories of social movements (à la Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 2003) that formed the basis of social movement struggles between 2000 and 2005. Sanchez Flores hardly gave me a chance to lay out a genealogy! Chapter 4 on Evo Morales as an Indigenous apostle explores how the MAS positioned itself as the representative of Indigenous movements (see, in particular, McNelly, 2023: 113–115), cultivating a market friendly indigeneity that Aiko Ikemura Amaral and I have subsequently labelled the *indio institucionalizado* (see Ikemura Amaral and McNelly, 2026). Here, I trace how the MAS formed from different Indigenous movements and how Morales, through a skilful use of the sublime/profane dialectic, positioned himself as the archetypical Indigenous subject. Indeed, Sanchez Flores' (2026: 5) assertion that 'the categories Indígena, Originario, Campesino fix identities and condition rights according to a grid of ethnic specification' is precisely the argument I make when discussing the creation of the *naciones y pueblos indígena originario campesinos* (Indigenous originary peasant nations and peoples, IOC) in the 2009 Constitution (McNelly, 2023: 118). Smoke and mirrors abound, it seems, in Sanchez Flores' review.

By juxtaposing a crude reading of Gramsci with Foucault, Sanchez Flores (2026: 3) claims passive revolution ignores the production of subjects. Again, this is a claim made with no reference to the text, completely ignoring my account of how transformism is *experienced* (McNelly, 2023: 63–73). One of the theoretical contributions of *Now We Are in Power* is to flesh out how passive revolution operates as a process of re-subjectification: how new radical subjects are produced in moments of crises and how there is a dialectical process of making new, pacified subjects through social movement incorporation and the technocratic implementation of social movement programmes. As one of the principal Latin American scholars of Gramsci, Massimo Modonesi (2012: 144), argues, 'The question of the contradictory and ambiguous process [of passive revolution] is principally about the revolutionary form, that is to say, the problem of the subjectivity as an actor, of subversion as an act, and of the subordination-insubordination of the subaltern classes in historical processes' (cited in McNelly, 2023: 64). Through an ethnography of the El Alto School of Political Formation in 2016, I analyse how social movement actors experience incorporation and how they experience being remoulded into defensive subjects dependent on the state for social change. This is a rich account of re-subjectification building on six-months of observing how the MAS government and, by extension, the Bolivian state presented itself to El Alto social movements in

meetings and the incomplete and contested nature of incorporation revealed by these dialogues. I agree with Sanchez Flores that we need to account for the processes of subject making; that is why I included them in the book.

Secondly, Sanchez Flores finds an apparent blind spot in my spatio-temporal reading of passive revolution through René Zavaleta Mercado's (2013) notion of *lo abigarrado*. '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', Sanchez Flores (2026: 1) contends, 'one operating below the threshold of political synchronisation, in the concrete time of daily life that passive revolution never captures', encapsulated by the *economía popular* in Bolivia. This statement needs to be unpacked at the theoretical and empirical level.

In theoretical terms, 'that capitalism is marked by the articulation of one temporality (abstract time) by another (concrete time)' (McNelly, 2023: 21) does not imply the destruction of concrete time, any more than the domination of use-value by value implies the elimination of use-values. Concrete time and use-values are the material, lived basis for the parasitic existence of capital. This particular observation is unpacked in detail vis-à-vis extractivism and infrastructure in chapter 5. Moreover, *abigarramiento* captures the effects of colonialism and capital on Bolivia, creating a society where different historical strata co-exist and articulate one another, a radical difference that implies the impossibility of representation by the state and its abstract time (McNelly, 2022: 112–113). At moments of crisis, these different social layers operate on the shared time of politics (McNelly, 2023: 76), marking crisis with a radical potential to constitute something new (see Zavaleta, 2008). This certainly does not imply that passive revolution resolves *abigarramiento* and produces synchronism—this is impossible. Rather, it underscores how passive revolution plays out over time and space, and that paying attention to these dimensions provides a deeper reading of social movements, crises, the production of new subjects and the political formations that follow.

In empirical terms, Sanchez Flores has a point. I do not discuss the developments in the popular economy in detail in the book, undoubtedly an oversight given its significance during the Morales years. There are, however, two caveats to this concession. Firstly, this does not mean that I ignore or discount the concrete communal practices of kinship, underpinned by obligation and reciprocity (see, for example, McNelly, 2023: 43–46). The spatial dimension of catharsis was the creation of what Pablo Mamani (2005) calls *microgobiernos barriales* (neighbourhood micro governments) through communal practices such as *ayni*, *apthapis* and *ch'allas* (McNelly, 2023: 44). Black October in El Alto, I argue, would have been impossible

without these communal practices. Secondly, I agree with Sanchez Flores (2026: 7) that 'the *economía popular* [popular economy] is not a residue of failed state incorporation. It is the substrate from which Bolivia's political formations'. Nico Tassi's excellent work with his colleagues on the popular economy sheds light on how *abigarramiento* operates in twenty-first century Bolivia and how communal practices that underpinned social movement resistance and *microgobiernos barriales* have sustained expanded commercial circuits (Tassi *et al.*, 2013; Tassi, Hinojosa and Canaviri, 2015; Tassi, 2017). The popular economy is a place of 'survival and accumulation' driven by 'necessity and […] purposeful agency' (Sanchez Flores, 2026: 6). And it certainly has, togther with programmes redistributing augmented hydrocarbons rents, offered new opportunities and led to increased material consumption.

Nevertheless, we need to be careful not to romanticise the popular economy, which is also a space of exploitation and expropriation, reproducing, in Verónica Gago's (2015) words, 'neoliberalism from below'. Elsewhere, I have argued the popular economy is also a space which reproduce capitalist logics and relations, theorising urban Indigeneity and the popular economy as an *abigarrada* yet modern phenomenon which demonstrates the inability of the Bolivian state to represent Bolivia society (McNelly, 2022a).

There is a latent Hayekian reading of markets as spaces of freedom drawn forth from Sanchez Flores' doctoral framework based in Austrian School economics that leads to a reading of the popular economy as *only* a Foucauldian space of resistance. Ironically, one could argue that that Hayek would similarly view informal economies as a failure, rather than a success, of market society:

> 'The functioning of competition not only requires adequate organisation of certain institutions like money, markets, and channels of information—some of which can never be adequately provided by private enterprise—but it depends above all on the existence of an appropriate legal system, a legal system designed both to preserve competition and to make it operate as beneficially as possible' (Hayek, 2006: 39).

To be sure, popular economies often (and by necessity) devise their own forms of markets, information, perhaps even enforcement of economic claims. They are embedded within social relations and practices from prior modes of production, civilisation and societal forms (in Zavaleta's schema of *abigarramiento*) (see Tapia, 2002, 2016). But their incomplete integration into the wider ecosystem of property-rights and (the state's) legal system, Hayek would argue, frustrates the

'entrepreneurial spirit' of the subaltern. Indeed, that was the argument of one of Hayek's Latin American disciples, Hernando De Soto (1989), in his influential book *The Other Path.* Moreover, the liberating force of market competition was, for Hayek, often supplemented—even perfected—by the introduction of tailored social policies: 'To prohibit the use of certain poisonous substances, or to require special precautions in their use, to limit working hours or to require certain sanitary arrangements, is fully compatible with the preservation of competition' (Hayek, 2006: 38–39). Popular economies – whether *ferías* or tin mines – by definition lack access to these basic state provisions and end up undermining their socio-ecological basis: popular economy gold mining in the Bolivian Amazon is catastrophic for the environment (Arriaza, 2023; Zaconeta Torrico, 2023), something Hayek would have recognised.

Thus, while Sanchez Flores (2026: 6) claims that 'the Bolivian state has struggled to absorb this sector for decade', this reads the problem backwards. The expansion of informal economies is the dysfunctional outcome of societies undergoing acute and uncoordinated transitions to market economies. In the context of post-war capitalist development in the Global South, the rapid commercialisation of agriculture led to a massive wave of 'depeasantisation' (Araghi, 1995), with millions of people flooding into urban centres. Lacking employment opportunities, communal practices and relations based on notions of obligation and reciprocity where transformed, along with intercommunity networks of *tambos* and the topographical archipelagos across the Andes first conceptualised by John Murra (1975), into popular economies. During the neoliberal 'shock therapy' of the 1980s and beyond, this problem was merely compounded, increasing poverty levels and eroding life-expectancy, leading to a 'lost decade'. The popular economy, as Rivera Cusicanqui (1996) demonstrates, was more often than not a last resort.

Oddly enough, Sanchez Flores (2026: 7) assertion that 'the *economía popular* is […] the substrate from which Bolivia's political formations […] momentarily crystallise and to which they return' falls foul of his own genealogical framework. It naturalised the popular economy and treats it as an *a priori* feature of the Bolivian social formation, rather than, as I have shown in my brief sketch above, a product of how world history played out through Bolivia's *sociedad abigarrada*. Social movements, contends Sanchez Flores, require a genealogy and account for subject formation, whereas, apparently, the popular economy and its subjects, do not. This, returning to Hayek, is what happens when markets are seen as the natural way of organising human societies.

In sum, although I appreciate Sanchez Flores' attempt to re-read my book through Foucault—and, more latently, Hayek—I have shown that his reading comes more

from Foucauldian theory than the arguments as they develop throughout my book. I am sympathetic of calls for bottom up readings of progressive governments, given the state centric frameworks that can predominate academic analysis from across the ideological spectrum (see Gutiérrez, 2014; Salazar, 2015). Nevertheless, dogmatic presentation of scholarship as top-down, drawing from theory without close readings of how particular frameworks develop in the process of their analysis, runs the risk of erecting strawmen and discounting the contributions different theoretical perspectives can bring. In wielding a sledgehammer, Sanchez Flores shatters all pretence of nuance and of generous readings of scholarship to learn with, rather than against, academic foils.

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