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Early view

Missing the Indio: On Genealogy and Passive Revolution

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Missing the Indio: On Genealogy and Passive Revolution

Abstract: McNelly's (2026) reply does not address my central claim that passive revolution is "a necessary but insufficient framework" (Sánchez Flores, 2026, p. 7). He answers the citation gap, defends transformism, clarifies concrete time, and acknowledges the omission of the popular economy, but does not engage the genealogical reading that underpins the claim. McNelly (2026, p. 3) interprets genealogy as the tracing of lineages, implying that a more extensive historical account constitutes stronger evidence — hence his emphasis on having "traced 500 years of history" (2026, p. 3). This diverges from both the meaning of genealogy in my critique and Foucault's (2003, p. 7) definition of it as the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges."

Keywords: Indianismo, passive revolution, genealogy, governmentality, self-government

Resumen: La respuesta de McNelly (2026) no aborda mi afirmación central de que la revolución pasiva constituye "un marco necesario pero insuficiente" (Sánchez Flores, 2026, p. 7). El autor responde al vacío de citación, defiende el transformismo, precisa la noción de tiempo concreto y reconoce la omisión de la economía popular, pero no se confronta con la lectura genealógica que sustenta dicha afirmación. McNelly (2026, p. 3) interpreta la genealogía como el trazado de linajes, lo que supone que un relato histórico más extenso constituiría una evidencia más sólida; de ahí su énfasis en haber "trazado 500 años de historia" (2026, p. 3). Ello se aparta tanto del sentido que la genealogía adquiere en mi crítica como de la definición foucaultiana de ésta como la "insurrección de los saberes sometidos" (Foucault, 2003, p. 7).

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Palabras clave: Indianismo, revolución pasiva, genealogía, gubernamentalidad, autogobierno

Introduction

The disagreement concerns the locus of power rather than the sufficiency of evidence. McNelly situates power within the state, read through the nacional-popular tradition of Zavaleta and Gramsci, and frames indigenous struggles as operating within that paradigm. A Foucauldian reading locates power instead in the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, and one such knowledge is precisely what the prevailing category excludes: el indio.

The distinction is fundamental. Now We Are in Power does not differentiate indigenismo from indianismo, a distinction that, following Reinaga (1970), is essential for analysing struggles in Bolivia. Passive revolution "explains who got incorporated and how" (Sánchez Flores, 2026, p. 7), but not "how power made and remade the subjects who initiated and were affected by those state structures" (Sánchez Flores, 2026, p. 7). Biopolitics and governmentality address that gap: they expose the power-knowledge foundation of the structures built to hold "the indigenous" as an object of analysis, while el indio persists as a subjugated knowledge "with a project of self-government" (Ávila Rojas, 2016). This is why I use Foucault, and it is the point I was reaching before the "smoke and mirrors" charge (McNelly, 2026, p. 3).

Biopolitics and lo nacional-popular

I agree with much of McNelly's account of "the indigenous" in Morales' ascent. Biopolitics operates through governmental rationalities, statistics among them (Foucault, 2003, p. 243), and the Bolivian "political scenery" shaped by indigenous social movements (McNelly, 2023, p. 5) sits within that register. McNelly (2026, p. 3) notes that his Gramscian framework, developed independently of Foucault, identifies the same phenomena: a manufactured indigenous subject produced through the indio institucionalizado (Ikemura Amaral and McNelly, 2026) and a "market-friendly indigeneity" generated through a "skilful use of the sublime/profane dialectic." By positioning himself as the archetypal Indigenous subject, Morales

allowed a populace to subsume its will within the imaginary he embodied. This is a compelling account of hegemonic subject-formation.

He implicitly concedes that *lo nacional-popular* never materialised under Morales, remaining an unfulfilled aspiration of ideologues such as García Linera (2010). It was never a settled achievement but an unfinished, repeatedly aborted series of incorporations pursued most resolutely since 1952 — intelligible in Zavaleta's terms if Bolivia is read as hegemonic construction: securing consent, absorbing rivals, legitimising one project as speaking for all. My own biopolitical example was the conditional cash transfer programme: the Bono Juancito Pinto and Renta Dignidad delivered material improvement and optimised collective well-being, at least statistically, while generating new forms of subjection that lent the regime symbolic power (Sánchez Flores, 2026, p. 5).

But this level reads aggregates. The revolution McNelly counterposes to a passive one — one that would break the domination of the *indio* through a communist-nationalist rupture — remains a deferred aspiration among Bolivia's political economists. *Lo nacional-popular* is the modern imperative to convert the categorised peasantry ("the indigenous," *campesinos*, *originarios*) from a perceived threat into active participants in national life. Zavaleta placed the *obrero campesino* as the subject of state transformation, privileging class over race in characterising the indigenous question (Ávila Rojas, 2016, pp. 189–190). McNelly substitutes "indigenous social movements" without leaving Zavaleta's frame; either way, a narrative venerating five centuries of indigenous history leaves the subject a function of the nation-state.

Reinaga, by contrast, conceives *el indio* as a political subject pursuing self-governance against any colonial authority (Ávila Rojas, 2016). Hence the insufficiency claim, evident across McNelly (2023) in his marginalisation of the *indio* (as a concept) and his conflation of "indigenous" with "*indio*." Bolivian history must be read as a construction, and those who did the constructing identified. Genealogy leads here: how did the indigenous come to be the subjects they are? The question returns us to Reinaga's charge against Diez de Medina's *discurso indigenista mestizo* (Ticona, 2014), which concealed an "anti-*indio*" standpoint, and to his distinction between producing *pensamiento* and producing *literatura* (Cruz, 2018, p. 167).

In relation to this, McNelly (2023, pp. 76–104) produces what Reinaga would call *literatura*. Framing Bolivia's "bifurcation" as two Bolivias, he opposes *cambas* — a

lowland elite characterised as white-mestizo, racist, with a "protofascist youth wing" — to kollas as migrants from rural areas. This biopolitical division splits a single population into the healthy and the dangerous (Foucault, 2003, p. 255), mirroring the Bolivian state's own discourse under Morales. The framing echoes Reinaga's *La revolución india*, which also identifies two Bolivias; but a decisive difference remains, and it is where pensamiento would begin. Reinaga's indio is stateless and pursues self-government regardless of any sovereign-centred revolution; McNelly's indigenous subject holds one, to be governed by the nation-state.

Biopolitics thus complements McNelly's analysis at the level of state formation— itself an indirect engagement with *lo nacional-popular*—and deploys indigeneity to frame concrete political actors while rendering their project of self-government contingent on the nation-state, thus ignoring the nature of the insurrection of subjugated knowledges in Bolivia's context. There, the *proceso de cambio* carried inherent contradictions and produced a *de facto* new discursive register that nonetheless did not displace its prior governmental rationality. McNelly would agree with this analysis, yet his Zabaleta framework has a limit: it fails to understand the nature of these subjugated knowledges.

Governmentality and the micro-rationalities of rule

Governmentality names a rationality running from the process that brought Morales to power to the literature describing it — one reason I called McNelly's work "top-down" (Sánchez Flores, 2026, p. 2). He will object that his ethnography of the El Alto School of Political Formation (2023, pp. 63–73) does this work, and it does. But the site decides the finding: conducted inside a government school, it observes incorporation from within, not the micro level escaping it. The quantum level of social relations persists where the state is not. McNelly (2023, p. 5) recognises its "messiness," but recognition is not enough.

This is visible in his emphasis on "re-subjectification," which presupposes a subject already constituted, then remade: radical, pacified, defensive. That complements my emphasis on new forms of subjection at the level of aggregates, but the emphasis belongs on subjectification, which constitutes the subject rather than presupposing one. There governmentality intervenes, precisely where McNelly takes for granted a "rationality of governmental practices" (Foucault, 2008) while treating an already re-subjectivised object.

Reinaga names this colonialismo epistémico: the disregard and marginalisation of the rationality of Indian subjects, peoples and nations (Cruz, 2018, p. 160). The question

broadens to passive revolution's macro-structure—how Morales' regime sought to liberate the indio. Where *lo nacional-popular* governs, liberation means assimilation into a national project, whilst the micro-political alternative recognises the indio as a political subject with an autonomous project of self-government. Yet liberation is conceived only as a Jacobin event, though "revolutions of Western origin" (Cruz, 2018, p. 164, citing Reinaga) cannot achieve *la liberación del indio*, as 1952 and 2005 showed. To analyse the indio at all, one must decline to join an intelligentsia that subsumes their knowledge into the abyss of *lo nacional-popular*, and instead produce *pensamiento* at the level on which they produce a project of self-government.

Informality in Bolivia operates precisely at that micro-political level. I agree that the popular economy "demonstrates the inability of the Bolivian state to represent Bolivia[n] society" (McNelly, 2026, p. 5); but agreement alone produces literature in this context, since *pensamiento* requires interrogating the assumptions it inherits, above all the nation-state. Biopolitically, the failure of *lo nacional-popular* consists in indios, campesinos and originarios never having been converted into a legible population (Scott, 1998). McNelly (2026, p. 4) partially concedes the indio's project of self-government through Mamani's (2005) *microgobiernos barriales*. Yet citing Gago's (2015) "neoliberalism from below" returns the analysis to *literatura*: it names the phenomenon with an imported category rather than interrogating its fitness for what it names.

In discussing "some important processes of class formation within the informal economy" (McNelly, 2023, p. 175), his analysis relies on biopolitical metrics — minimum and average wages — sharpening when it addresses the "petty bourgeoisie." When he invokes "exploitation and expropriation" (2026, p. 5), the framework has already identified its antagonists: a "petty bourgeoisie" characterised by "the ideology of entrepreneurialism" (2023, p. 175), cast as subjects of capitalist hegemony awaiting exorcism by those who preach class consciousness through *literatura*. The analogy is not my own. Reinaga contends that indigenistas emerge from "cualquier ángulo o latitud ideológica" [any ideological angle or latitude], left or right, unified by a project undertaken on the indio's behalf running "desde cristianizarlo o civilizarlo hasta sumarlo a la lucha de clases" [from christianising or civilising him to enlisting him in the class struggle] (Cruz, 2018, p. 167).

Modonesi's formulation, which McNelly adopts, intensifies this. The triad — "the problem of the subjectivity as an actor, of subversion as an act, and of the subordination-insubordination of the subaltern classes" (cited in McNelly, 2023, p.

64) — admits only two legible modes of subaltern conduct: capitulation and resistance. Since the passive-revolution literature already codes the indio as a communitarian, anti-market subject, indigenous action taking commercial form falls outside both poles and becomes structurally illegible. Within this dyad, establishing a commercial enterprise registers only as covert subordination or as resistance. What it cannot register is purposive action whose ends are not settled by its form: such action may enrich or impoverish, succeed or fail, benefit one party at another's expense, or come to nothing. The claim is not that commerce is benign but that its valence is indeterminate, immersed in Bolivia's complex cultural values, and that indeterminacy is what the dyad forecloses by assigning each act a political sign in advance.

The categories thus erase the indio as an actor whose conduct may bear no determinate relation to domination, and close off the micro-political level, which McNelly's framework admits only as a moment within its dialectic of incorporation. This is not romanticisation. It is the more modest claim that what occurs at that level, in Bolivia's context, exceeds the grasp of a dialectical reading. I recognise that the threat is real — exploitative cooperativistas in Potosí, expropriations by *interculturales* — and merits its own analysis. But for the indio, Christianisation and class struggle form one continuum: reading the informal as a dialectical subject of class formation, neo-marxism assumes the role the Catholic Church held under colonisation, a doctrine of salvation whose remedy is assimilation.

A governmentality of assimilationism thus runs through McNelly's analysis at the level of micro-relations — a form of thought expired for a heterogeneous formation that, since 1952, has refused incorporation into *lo nacional-popular*. It settles into indigenism, "an ideology produced by non-indigenous people about the indigenous object" (Cruz, 2018, p. 160, citing Reinaga), and, biopolitically, into a division of the social body between healthy and dangerous. Foucault (2003, p. 262) holds that state socialism failed by never rejecting biopower, only reallocating it; McNelly's treatment of informality does the same, a dynamic visible only through a governmentality reading.

Deeper still, "indigeneity" became a state-building technology rather than an emancipatory one, and passive revolution is not exempt from using it to frame a type of class-struggle analysis. Untoja (2026) traces the mechanism: "indígena" is treated "as if it designated an obvious empirical reality" when the realities are self-determining peoples — Aymaras, Quechuas, Guaraníes — and any such category demands prior clarification of "its meaning and the type of entity it purports to designate"; class owes that accounting too. From an indianist perspective, those who

dressed Marx in abarcas and aguayos, however sympathetically, worked from a criollo-mestizo, state-centred, class-primary framework that subsumes Indian political subjectivity into "the popular" (see Untoja, 2018). McNelly (2026, p. 6) will object that this naturalises el indio "as an a priori feature of the Bolivian social formation", thus a contradiction in my analysis. Yet this objection assumes genealogy requires everything to be state-constructed. It does not: subjugated knowledges are historical without being state-derived, which is the whole point of *savoirs assujettis*. El indio is the product of a different history, one the state's categories cannot narrate.

A brief primer on Hayek

Hayek was not in my review; McNelly introduced him, and the citation does not carry the weight it is given. He writes that "one could argue that Hayek would similarly view informal economies as a failure, rather than a success, of market society" (2026, p. 5). Yet Hayek (2006, p. 39) states only that competition requires an appropriate legal system, not that economies lacking formal integration have failed as market societies. The inference rests on a premise never supplied.

The law/legislation distinction gives my argument its shape instead. Taxis, whose native instrument is legislation, characterises the *proceso de cambio* under Morales; *kosmos* is a spontaneous order that coordinates dispersed knowledge no classification can capture (Hayek, 1973, in Butler, 2026, p. 52). Reinaga's indio — a political subject with a project of self-government (Ávila Rojas, 2016) — belongs to the *kosmos*: the granular knowledge the state lacks, gravitating regardless of legislation or constitutional reform. The absence McNelly attributes to the popular economy therefore pertains to the legislature, which he does not differentiate from law in Hayek's sense. In this reading, the Mercury case (Zaconeta Torrico, 2023) confirms this: artisanal gold mining requires an evolved liability and community property-rights regime, not an unenforceable licensing scheme given by the nation-state as Taxis.

McNelly (2026, p. 6) treats informal expansion as "the dysfunctional outcome of societies undergoing acute and uncoordinated transitions to market economies," explained by depeasantisation (Araghi, 1995) and compounded by shock therapy. At the aggregate level, this is defensible. But it remains at the continental scale, never reading Bolivia in granular terms. The granular reading is not unavailable to him: he

cites Tassi's ethnographies of the *economía popular* approvingly (2026, p. 5). The difficulty is that his framework receives that evidence only to recode it as "last resort" and "dysfunctional outcome" (2026, p. 6) — remaining where the analyst, like a physician, pronounces what is "dysfunctional" in the Bolivian social body, with great analytical authority, and never asking how the indio built the networks that enabled subsistence alongside a leviathan in permanent crisis.

Conclusion

Citing Foucault to arrive at indianismo — and the Hayek McNelly introduced — was, apparently, “driven by theory, missing the mark.” I contend otherwise: he traces lineages, whilst I trace the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. One concession is owed: a review that compressed that argument made “smoke and mirrors” available. But naturalising *el indio* is not the purpose of this analysis; otherwise, I would be saying that a knowledge may be historical without surrounding the figure of the nation-state. My final question is whether passive revolution can account for *El Indio*’s self-government without converting him into “the indigenous” or disregarding the present he inhabits. As Reinaga put it, the indigenists praise the Indian past but ignore the Indian present (Cruz, 2018, p. 165).

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