

## Now we are in power: The politics of passive revolution in twenty-first-century Bolivia

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What happens to popular organizations and leaderships when they take on the leading role in politics, winning over governments and running the state? To what extent does their potential for change materialize into structural transformations concerning the living conditions of historically subordinated social sectors? What are the limitations of these processes, and in what ways can paths be sought to overcome these limitations? Throughout the history of Latin America, many intellectuals, politicians and academics have pondered these questions. In different contexts, these issues have proven to be key problems for popular political forces that eventually managed to attain some degree of hegemony in society, being elected as governors of the state and placing themselves as the governing force in their countries and territories. *Now we are in power* seeks to answer these challenging questions, reflecting specifically on the 'el proceso de cambio' in 21st century Bolivia.

*Now We Are in Power: The Politics of Passive Revolution in Twenty-First Century Bolivia* (2023) by Angus McNelly is a compelling case study regarding one of the most important experiences of governments led by organizations and leaderships originating from the popular movement and elected within the institutional hallmark of the liberal state. The book is product of an extensive ethnographic research conducted between 2016 and 2019, with fieldwork in collaboration with social movements in La Paz, El Alto, Santa Cruz and other locations in Bolivia.

When arriving in Bolivia shortly after Evo Morales' defeat in the 2016 referendum that would have allowed him to run for a third presidential term, McNelly became interested in a significant sentiment of frustration towards the government. Ten years after coming to power, a feeling of distrust among important strata of the population and social movements with 'el proceso de cambio' (the process of change) was widely perceived. Therefore, McNelly's proposal is to reflect on the experience of the 'first indigenous government in the country's history' through some categories of Antonio Gramsci's thinking, such as catharsis, transformism, Caesarism, hegemony, integral state and, notably, the notion of passive revolution. The author considers that the transformations experienced by Bolivian society in the 21st century were imbued with a dialectic between restoration/revolution characteristic of processes that tend to incorporate (at least partially) the transformative force of some revolutionary impulses into strategies that preserve the historical structures of domination.

McNelly undertakes an analytical journey to understand the Bolivian case through a rich dialogue with the Latin American critical tradition that has dedicated itself to understanding the behaviour and relationships of popular

organizations and leaderships with the state in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico. The author is cautious, opting to distance himself from a term as polysemic (and appropriated by different social and ideological sectors) as 'populism'. However, his analysis of the Bolivian framework in the 21st century resembles that of Latin American intellectuals influenced by Gramscian thinking who have sought to understand governments of the mid-20th century (Germani et al., 1973; Wefford, 1980), as well as the more recent wave of governments known as the 'pink tide', in populist terms (Singer, 2012; Svampa, 2018). These authors have reflected on questions such as the ascent trajectory of formerly marginalized sectors to leadership positions within the state; the relationship of these leaderships and organizations with the dominant classes and the historical structures of the state; the way in which, at economic and structural level, extractivism is used as a means to drive social and economic democratization in the country; the contradictions that the expansion of their infrastructure engenders in space and time; the tendency towards Caesarism and transformism with the arrival of popular leaderships and organizations in positions of great power within the state; and the construction of new subjectivities questioning and legitimizing the state and patterns of capital accumulation.

The tradition of Latin American studies based on a dialogue with Gramscian reflections tends to emphasize the character of passive revolution that has predominated in the region. Since the peripheral ruling classes managed to do without and simultaneously block, appease and incorporate a revolutionary popular movement into their state project, they achieved their goals of modernizing the economic relations and infrastructures of their countries without this leading to a real democratization of property relations and their political and social dimensions. From this perspective, the process of incorporating popular and indigenous sectors into formal and legal spaces of political participation has frequently been mediated not only by the (sacred and profane) manipulation of the charisma of elected figures but also by the capacity of the ruling classes to address their social demands in a limited and restricted manner without structurally altering the conditions for perpetuating the process of expropriation and expanded reproduction of capital—thus neutralizing the revolutionary impetus of counter-hegemony.

McNelly presents an excellent case study of how this dynamic of passive revolution unfolded in 21st-century Bolivia. For this purpose, the author focused on three analytical paths. Firstly, he sought to demonstrate the dynamics of pacification of radicalized forces that, while fighting for change, questioned the previous neoliberal model but gradually lost their transformative dynamism as they became institutionalized within state apparatuses. By uniting peasants, indigenous people, cocaleros, trade unionists, socialists, students, feminists and community organizations from the urban peripheries around the 'national' banners of control over natural resources and the refounding of the plurinational state, the Bolivian social movements managed to get their leaders incorporated by the state. However, they also lost some of their political autonomy, being transformed by the force of the state technocracy and the Caesarism of the Morales government. At the same time, meeting many of the popular demands was directly linked to fiscal gains by deepening the extractivist logic and commercial agriculture. All of this produced what Modonesi (2014) defined as a resubjectification of the transformative horizon of social movements, which, in the Bolivian case, brought Evo Morales to power, contributing to a process of resubordination, transmuting them from forces of contestation into forces supporting the state order.

Secondly, McNelly highlights the processes of construction and reconstruction of space and its different scales throughout social struggles for the reproduction of extractivist capitalism's hegemony. This results in the production of multiple meanings and experiences in the diverse territorialities that constitute a country as ethnically, socially, economically and geographically diverse as Bolivia. The expropriations of indigenous peoples and peasants throughout history and the more recent years of neoliberalism not only territorialized the resistance but also spread it to the periphery of major urban centres, turning them into places of effervescence and political contestation from which the most significant forces of change in the country emanated. In El Alto, the major stage of catharsis for popular movements against the neoliberal model, an identity forged in contrast to the elites, which are located spatially nearby in the neighbouring city of La Paz, and further away in the lowlands of the eastern part of the country, was produced. The regional elites of the so-called 'media luna', concentrated especially in the department of Santa Cruz, responded to the catharsis of social movements leveraging a strong regionalist identity that culminated in a

movement for federative autonomy to manage the revenues derived from hydrocarbons and agribusiness. This was instrumental in decreasing the activism of social movements towards the government and facilitating a pact between the government and lowland elites. Finally, the process of passive revolution also divided the country between those places that were 'forgotten' and those that benefited from 'el proceso de cambio'. While the territorial redefinitions brought about by the Morales' governments yielded the conquering of territorial rights for indigenous and peasant communities, they also involved investment in large infrastructures aimed at improving conditions for expropriation and expanded reproduction of capital and preserving the monopoly of land ownership.

Thirdly, McNelly engages with the concept of Bolivian Marxist sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado *sociedad abigarrada* (motley society), understood broadly as a heterogeneous society, where 'the multiple temporalities of manifold of modes of production are not constrained to the homogeneous time of the state' (p.21). From this perspective, the author reflects on the tensions between the different temporalities bequeathed by the uneven and combined development of the market economy in a diverse society like Bolivia, where different ways of life and production, each with a particular—concrete—time, coexist and confront the way of life and production of capitalist society and its—abstract—time of accumulation and expanded reproduction of capital. The author believes that the economic and political dimensions of passive revolution are co-constitutive, making the analysis of certain transformations in the superstructural plane that define the times of the different worlds of the contemporary world always in a dialectical relation to the economic structures of production. This aspect, understood in a Latin American key, is very interesting in that it dialogues, for example, with Brazilian authors such as Fernandes (2020) who have used Gramscian theoretical tools to understand capitalist modernization in their country. This reading is based on the perception that the great modernizing transformations were carried out based on conservative pacts between the former slave-holding colonial elites, incorporating popular demands and leaders into the formal and legal political process in a very limited way. But these changes were only possible by perpetuating ways of life and production corresponding to other historical times. From this perspective, the main characteristic of Latin American conservative modernization was the combination of capitalist and noncapitalist forms of exploitation and expropriation of labour.

In this way, McNelly argues that through these analytical paths, it was possible to define at least two characteristics of passive revolution processes. First, the multiple constitutive processes of a passive revolution are always 'ongoing and in need for renewal' (p. 188) and therefore always result from the different conflicts and compromises existing in the constantly tense relations of force in society. Secondly, the contradictions engendered within passive revolution processes themselves, depending on variations in power relations and class struggles, can either reinforce their tendency towards pacification and incorporation of counter-hegemony in a (re)subordinated manner to the state and capitalist order or become irreconcilable, leaving the historical horizon always open to new movements of contestation and catharsis against the historical resilience of the extractivist model as a pattern of capitalist accumulation.

The book is divided into six chapters that lead us through the set of social struggles waged from movements contesting the prevailing neoliberal model in the late 1990s, the rise of Evo Morales to power in 2006 and its final crisis between 2016 and 2019, when Morales was forced to resign and self-exile in the face of protests against his attempt to run for presidency again. In this sense, in Chapter 1, the author provides an overview of the social movements of El Alto, responsible for the catharsis that led to the ethical-political contestation of the neoliberalism. In Chapter 2, the author explores the transformation of social movements in the face of their incorporation into the state following Morales rise to power. In Chapter 3, the reactions of the elites are discussed, taking on regionalist traits, since the lowland elites of the media luna departments began to dispute control over revenues from natural resource exploitation and agribusiness, reducing the space for social movements to continue with their radical transformation project. In Chapter 4, McNelly discusses the role of Caesarism in the passive revolution process, highlighting how the personification of the state in Morales figure played an important role in legitimizing and contesting the 'proceso de cambio'. In Chapter 5, some spatiotemporal dimensions of extractivism and its infrastructures, which formed the economic basis of the 'proceso de cambio' are explored, highlighting how the temporalities of this development model were established in different territories of the country, shaping the tensions and aspirations inherent

to its promise of progress and modernization. Lastly, Chapter 6 assesses the crisis that led to the end of Evo Morales' governments, indicating it as a consequence of an accumulation of contradictions within the passive revolution process itself and its dialectic of restoration/revolution, which led to an excessive pacification of social movements, discredit and contestation regarding promises of change, and a new offensive by elites and conservative oppositions who, despite having achieved considerable economic gains, saw the opportunity to finally discard the first indigenous government of the Bolivian State.

McNelly offers us an important inventory of the contradictions of one of the most important experiences of popular government in Latin America, making it an essential reading not only for those interested in learning about the Bolivian reality but also for reflecting on the limits and possibilities of these experiences in promoting a critique and self-critique for future processes of counter-hegemony.

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