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The spaces in between: Constitutive moments and *taypi* in Latin America

Response to McNelly 2022: Harnessing the Storm: Searching for Constitutive Moments and a Politics of Ch'ixi After the Pink Tide

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The spaces in between: Constitutive moments and *taypi* in Latin America

Abstract. In recent years, the Latin American left has achieved important electoral and social successes. Meanwhile, far-right movements across the continent have also come back from the brink, transformed from fringe political phenomena to powerful political vehicles capable of dictating political discourse and policies. In his article *Harnessing the Storm: Constitutive moments and a Politics of Ch'ixi after the Pink Tide*, Angus McNelly (2022) proposes to search for and to create openings for different futures and political alternatives out of the contradictions of capitalism on a regional scale with a focus on transformative movements. Connecting to McNelly's reading of Rivera and Zavaleta, I put forward the concept of *taypi* by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. *Taypi* is the centre of a woven pattern, which she uses as a metaphor for a site of friction in between *ch'ixi* spaces and societies. *Taypi* allows us to interrogate both the creative as well as destructive potential that results from *lo abigarrado* and *ch'ixi* formations in Latin America—including authoritarian and far-right tendencies as part of the constitutive moments. I argue that focussing on *taypi*—regardless of the scope we seek to analyse—draws attention to the organisation that takes place on the ground in both its productive and destructive potential. I conclude that seeking constitutive moments, *ch'ixi* spaces and *taypi* across Latin America makes for a fruitful research agenda.

Keywords. constitutive moments; *ch'ixi*; *taypi*; *lo abigarrado*; Latin American politics.

Resumen. En los últimos años, la izquierda latinoamericana ha logrado importantes éxitos electorales y sociales. Al mismo tiempo, los movimientos de extrema derecha en todo el continente también han vuelto del borde del abismo,

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transformados de fenómenos políticos marginales en poderosos vehículos políticos capaces de dictar políticas y discursos políticos. En su artículo *Harnessing the Storm: Constitutive moments and a Politics of Ch'ixi after the Pink Tide*, Angus McNelly (2022) propone buscar y crear aperturas para diferentes futuros y alternativas políticas a partir de las contradicciones del capitalismo a escala regional con un enfoque en los movimientos transformadores. Conectando con la lectura de McNelly de Rivera y Zavaleta, propongo el concepto de *taypi* de Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. *Taypi* es el centro de un patrón tejido, que ella utiliza como metáfora de un sitio de fricción entre los espacios *ch'ixi* y las sociedades. *Taypi* nos permite interrogar tanto el potencial creativo como el destructivo que resulta de las formaciones lo abigarrado y *ch'ixi* en América Latina—incluidas las tendencias autoritarias y de extrema derecha como parte de los momentos constitutivos. Sostengo que centrarse en *taypi*—independientemente del alcance que busquemos analizar—llama la atención sobre la organización que tiene lugar sobre el terreno, tanto en su potencial productivo como destructivo. Concluyo que la búsqueda de momentos constitutivos, espacios *ch'ixi* y *taypi* en América Latina constituye una agenda de investigación fructífera.

Palabras claves. Momentos constitutivos; *ch'ixi*; *taypi*; lo abigarrado; la política latinoamericana.

Introduction

On October 21st, 2022, the far-right Civic Committee in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia initiated a *Paro Cívico* (Civic Strike) that brought the city to a halt for 36 days. Main roads were blocked, public transport was largely unavailable, and businesses were forced to shut by the *Union Juvenil Cruzeñista*, the armed branch of the Civic Committee (Assies 2006). While the “*paro*” alludes to a general strike, hardly any strike action was actually taken. Meanwhile, the city was controlled by *jefes de rotondas*,² who disseminated new instructions from the Civic Committee to protesters every night at 8pm, after singing the national and local anthem and holding prayer. The same *jefes de rotondas* also decided who could or could not move through the city and under what conditions—hiring moto-taxis and paying tolls at roadblocks for those who could afford it or walking and biking for those who could not. The MAS government and institutionalised social movements countered with export embargoes on soy products and beef (which make up the main economic production in Santa Cruz), and roadblocks of their own to cut off the supply of food and gasoline into the city and impede

² *Jefes de rotondas* are intermediaries between the Civic Committee and the people enforcing roadblocks at neuralgic traffic points, often roundabouts—*rotondas*.

garbage disposal at the local landfill. Although the *paro* was lifted after 36 days, its main demand—to force the national census to be held in 2023—was not met. The census was never the sole purpose of the *paro cívico*. It was, however, a renewal of the conflicts between the multiple *formaciones abigarradas* in Bolivia, emblematic of many similar conflicts across Latin America.

In recent years, the Latin American Left achieved important electoral and social successes and newly elected governments in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Bolivia, or Mexico promise to bring progressive politics into effect. In his context, conservative backlashes are increasingly common. The *paro cívico* is just one example of right-wing social organisation that is backed by a larger movement. We must also consider Lula’s tight electoral win in Brazil and the rejection of the first draft of the Chilean constitution as Plurinational in this light. While neoliberal policies “cannot sustain any semblance of popular support” (McNelly 2022, 100), authoritarian and far-right movements do gather strength in Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia, or Peru (Leigh and de Souza Santos 2020). Meanwhile, both progressive and conservative governments promote unbridled extractivism to the detriment of nature and people who live in or close to extractive sites.

Against this complex backdrop, Angus McNelly (2022) puts forward the project of *harnessing the storm*, i.e., to search for and to create openings for different futures and political alternatives “out of the contradictions of capitalism” (McNelly 2022, 102) and to commit to the principal of hope (McNelly 2022, 121). While this suggestion might seem abstract at first, McNelly concretely suggests reading Latin American realities through the conceptual lenses of two important Bolivian scholars: René Zavaleta Mercado and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. They conceptualised *lo abigarrado* and constitutive moments (Zavaleta), and *lo ch’ixi* (Rivera Cusicanqui), respectively. In this response, I want to make two points: First, not to overlook local organisation in search of regional constitutive moments. Second, I want to bring forward another concept by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, that interacts with McNelly’s suggestions: the notion of *taypi*. *Taypi* is the centre of a woven pattern, which Rivera uses as a metaphor for a site of friction in between *ch’ixi* spaces and societies. Before turning to *taypi*, I briefly revisit *lo abigarrado* and *lo ch’ixi*.

Abigarramiento and lo ch’ixi

Lo abigarrado is an attempt to understand Bolivia and its multiple societies from within *and* in the context of capitalist development. It captures the coexistence of

multiple social formations that are not fully subsumed by the logic of the state nor by the logic of capitalist production. Through the concept of *lo abigarrado*, Zavaleta demonstrates the “diachronous dynamics of capitalist development in Latin America” (McNelly 2022, 111). As McNelly (2022, 107) summarises, at the core of Zavaletas work lies the question of what societies or collectives emerge in conditions of contested, uneven and arrested capitalist development by highlighting the multiple temporalities, systems of authority, and modes of production that make up the *abigarramiento*. This means that *sociedades abigarradas* encompass a set of social relations in which the postcolonial and colonial structures are as much part of society as those that pre-date colonisation (Jasser et al. 2022). McNelly expands the notion of human collectivity beyond the nation state and overcomes Zavaletas methodological nationalism by drawing on Silvia Rivera Cusicanquis notion of *ch'ixi*.

Lo ch'ixi describes the incommensurability of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial elements that co-exist but do not extinguish one another. *Lo ch'ixi*, as Rivera Cusicanqui argues, has the potential to construct an alternative modern project and is guided by the decolonial project of “the creation of the collective ‘we’” (McNelly 2022, 119). While Rivera Cusicanqui calls for the persistence of the colonial wound to be acknowledged, she simultaneously asks how a Eurocentric and exclusive ‘we’ of coloniality can be replaced by an inclusive ‘we’— “A homeland for everyone that envisions decolonisation” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 97). With her focus on collective practice, Rivera Cusicanqui also puts forward a proposal of collective knowledge production and decision making, centring community or collectivities as the spaces where intersubjectivities emerge. Those collectivities can be extremely localised or, as McNelly suggests, regional—as can be the case for Latin American feminist movements.

In his article, McNelly argues to conceptualise *lo abigarrado* and *lo ch'ixi* beyond the nation state to identify constitutive moments on a regional level. By drawing on Zavaletas heterodox Marxism to understand the Bolivian reality, McNelly points to threads of historic events that can lead to identify constitutive moments, i.e., historic moments that mark a profound change in the logics and dynamics of power—as well as a change in the relations within and between different societies. Zavaleta’s method of interrogating history through its records of crises is not only an established method of historical materialism, but also one that allows legibility of the fragmented records of colonial and post-colonial sources (Zavaleta 2009, 214). Rivera Cusicanqui understands crises as “a moment of unveiling, a moment in which society stripped itself of its inherited, stagnant discursive garments” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2018, 28) and, importantly, when constitutive moments are possible. McNelly broadens the concept of constitutive moments with the aim to create a category that is “capable of grasping the

potentiality for change generated by diverse communities and movements across Latin America” (McNelly 2022, 107). He proposes to seek out and pull-on historic threads that can create an opening beyond capitalist development.

***Taypi*: the spaces in between**

To seek out these threads, McNelly draws on Rivera Cusicanqui's work. She, in turn, encourages her readers to pay attention to the small spaces during crises to find the “multiplicity and diversity of thinking practices that emerge everywhere” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2018, 31). Rivera Cusicanqui already alludes to a broader, more regional perspective that is territorialised and rooted in daily life:

The vision *desde lo pequeño* [from the small] can be subversive in a sense that we cannot yet adequately name. I will say for now that I would like to see a world of regions, not of nations, of river basins, not of departments or provinces, of mountain chains, not of value chains, of autonomous communalities, not of social movements (Rivera Cusicanqui 2018, 33).

When tracing and pulling the threads from the small spaces and everyday practices in connection to regional developments, after experiencing yet another *Paro Cívico*, I argue that it is necessary to focus both on the hopeful practices of care and autonomous organisation that Rivera Cusicanqui envisions without losing sight of authoritarian organisation that can also take place in small spaces— at roundabouts and shopfronts pelted with garbage for opening during a *paro*.

To engage with this duality, I examine Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of *taypi*. She conceptualises *taypi*—the centre of a woven pattern—to interrogate spaces of social friction more closely. The aim is to capture both the productive form of imagining and weaving threads beyond capitalist accumulation, as well as their destructive potential of *taypi*. To continue the weaving metaphor, we turn to constitutive moments and *ch'ixi* elements to identify “pointers as to which historical threads to pick up and trace forwards and backwards” (McNelly 2022, 102) in the patchwork of modernity in Latin America. The empty centre space of the weaved pattern that characterises the indeterminate and incommensurable social formation should be brought into focus in our analyses. This means to also pick up historical threads of coloniality and racialised social organisation, not to strengthen them but to understand their historic relevance for current friction in *taypi*.

Considering the creative and destructive potential of those frictions is necessary as well, if we expand constitutive moments, *lo abigarrado y lo ch'ixi*

on a regional scale. Rivera Cusicanqui alerts that:

The present is the setting for simultaneously modernizing and archaic impulses, of strategies to preserve the status quo and of others that signify revolt and renewal of the world: *Pachakuti*. The upside-down world created by colonialism will return to its feet as history only if it can defeat those who are determined to preserve the past, with its burden of ill-gotten privileges. But if the preservers of the past succeed, the past cannot escape the fury of the enemy (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 96).

In this regard, I want to come back to contemporary far right and anti-feminist movements in Latin America. The ultra-Christian movement *Con mis hijos no te metas* in Peru (Meneses 2019), white supremacist movements in Mexico (Álvarez-Pimentel 2020), far-right *Bolsonarismo* in Brazil (Paine and de Souza Santos 2020), or the civic movement in Bolivia have come back from the brink, transformed from fringe political phenomena to powerful political vehicles capable of dictating political discourse and policies. The new far-Right is well connected and determined to preserve the past and their ill-gotten privileges. To promote the principal of hope in the face of a creeping conservative menace, emancipatory grassroot movements also inspire and draw on one another. As McNelly points out, feminist movements in Latin America are working on politics of care beyond and within kinship and personal connections to form collectives of support on multiple scales and, most importantly, on the ground. In this regard, it is necessary to lean into the creative potential of *taypi*, of the collective ‘we’, while keeping the destructive potential and the exclusive ‘we’ promoted by far-right movements in mind.

Conclusion

What McNelly proposes—to look for constitutive moments to “pick up and trace forwards and backwards through the contours of history to better grasp the current conjuncture and what is at stake” (McNelly 2022, 98)—is a monumental task, especially thinking of the entirety of Latin America and other colonised geographies and peoples. However, a regional reading of constitutive moments could give important hints for political and communitarian strategies across the continent. To weave the threads of constitutive moments both locally and on a regional scale into a fabric has the potential to produce an entire body of work, reading multiple Latin American realities through *ch'ixi* and other, locally grounded concepts. This would be an important contribution to better understanding the realities and fault lines of current conflicts, as well as the potential of the contradictions that are worth leaning into imagining different futures.

Zavaleta and Rivera Cusicanquis concepts are rooted within *and* outside

colonial and capitalist societies and can “create space for futures drawn from both beyond and outside capitalism” (McNelly 2022, 103). The richness and flexibility of *lo abigarrado* to account for constitutive moments and for historical and regional specificities makes it a fruitful approach to better grasp national and regional currents and historic developments. It allows to read multiple, overlapping societies both in their own right and in relation to capitalism and to the state. Nonetheless, here I want to emphasise two principal conclusions. First, regardless of the scope of political and social movements—local, national, or regional—it is imperative not to disregard micro-level formations of these collectives: the organisation that takes place on the ground, in the communities where people live. And second, not to lose sight of the productive and destructive potential of *taypi*.

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