

HOW TO DO A CONCRETE ANALYSIS OF CONTEXT



A guide to developing an understanding of the social, political, and economic context of struggles.

“The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled.”

Paulo Freire

What is a Concrete Analysis of Context?

If you are wondering what this form of analysis is, you are not alone. The practice of developing an analysis that is rooted in an understanding of the economy and the other political and social factors that condition our struggles, is not common. However, this form of analysis is an extremely useful and important tool that can radically change our potential to make meaningful change.

A concrete analysis of context seeks to study a moment in time in a specific location, taking into account economic, social, political and cultural factors; analyzing the circumstances, conditions and events that have produced the current moment.

One way to understand a “concrete analysis” is to view it as an examination of the moving and conjoined parts of society that determine what we experience in reality.

The premise of this form of analysis is that a given situation is caused by previous historical events and the balance of power between current political and economic actors to produce a unique context that may never be repeated. It also aims to understand the current relation of forces; in other words the capacity of action of the different political actors who seek to impose their program and interests on the rest of society.

Because a current analysis of context focuses on a specific moment, analyzing a reality that is constantly changing, it is necessary to do it continually in our organizations and communities. With practice it can help us develop strategy, tactics and a coherent and unified political line.



Antonio Gramsci, an Italian revolutionary that spent most of his life participating in trade union councils, and writing Marxist theory from prison, wrote the following quote which can help us understand this type of analysis:

“The study of how “situations” should be analyzed, in other words, how to establish the various levels of the relations of forces, offers an opportunity for an elementary exposition of the science and art of politics — understood as a body of practical rules for research and of detailed observations useful for awakening an interest in effective reality and for stimulating more rigorous and more vigorous political insights.”

“Marx would say...”

One of Marx's greatest contributions to society was his meticulous study of the economy and the political system. He introduced the concept of Historical and Dialectical Materialism which essentially states that the material conditions of society, its productive forces and social relations, will determine the shape of all other elements of society.. He also stated that class struggle was the engine of all historical change and transformation



This was groundbreaking and for this reason he is often credited with being the greatest sociologist of all time. Marxism has been viewed as a scientific approach to understanding reality or a strategic method for overthrowing capitalism. When we do a concrete analysis, we are acting in both spheres: we are both understanding reality based on provable facts and also developing strategy that coincides with that reality in order to transform society. It is an important principle of Marxism that we cannot separate the facts of reality from the practice we take or the tactics and strategies we develop.

Another way to think of a concrete analysis is to imagine yourself analyzing a picture that is loaded with content, understanding that the picture is in action and never stops, almost like a movie. It has many characters and situations that are unfolding, each with a past and a future. In this way, developing a concrete analysis is almost like taking a snapshot of the current reality and analyzing all of the elements present in that reality, and understanding that these elements are related to each other and never stop changing.

By doing this we are essentially analyzing society and social reality. Society is made up of a set of elements that usually change slowly, unless there is a revolution which can produce sudden and systemic change. Social reality is made up of many articulated phenomena, practices and actions, of which our action is also a part. If we can understand these elements, how they relate to one another, and what their history is, then we can develop the ability to better respond to this reality.

Linking our action to a deep understanding of social reality creates a specific relation between theory and practice, between thinking and acting. This in

essence, is praxis. Engaging in concrete analysis creates a relation of integrated thought and action, enabled by a deep theoretic understanding of the factors at hand.



The current context has many characters and events happening at once that relate to one another in different ways. In this picture, refinery workers blockade an oil depot in Douchy Les Mines, France in protest of labor reforms proposed by the government .

Why is analysis important?

When an important and impactful event takes place, we immediately ask ourselves:

- what does this mean?
- why is it important? how important is it?
- why did it happen?
- what will happen next?
- what should be our response to this situation, based on what we represent and stand for?

Generally our answers are informal and quickly formulated without study. The consequence of this is that we end up not going beyond a disintegrated and superficial vision of the current political moment. This can lead to an incomplete, or in the worst case, a poor plan of action. Our lack of analysis can sometimes lead to reductionism which refers to the reduction of what is real and historic to something homogenous or simple. Reality hides many facts and phenomena that we can only understand through careful study. Most importantly, reality can only be understood as the inter-relation of a series of factors, elements, and past and present situations.

It is important to understand events in a given moment, integrating the political, economic, and ideological (social and cultural) elements at a local and international level to reach an objective and deep explanation. Collectively researching our reality is an effective means of mobilizing and increasing awareness in the community. In this way the people produce knowledge and stop being a mere consumer of concepts created by others. This in turn allows us to produce a grounded and effective plan of action (strategy + tactics).

To develop a concrete analysis is to follow the belief that while men and women do make their own future and are the protagonists of history, they

do so within the concrete reality of their society that currently exists and its economic foundations. So it's not that the economy alone determines everything nor that men and women have power to change the course of history independently of the current context. Our goal is to insert ourselves into what is real, in order to transform it. Without this clarity, we may find ourselves thinking that things just happen and that our situation is unpredictable and chaotic in ways that are out of our control.

The bourgeoisie or capitalist class has a vast army of academics, intellectuals, and strategists at their disposal to help analyze the world and develop strategies and tactics aimed at maintaining their domination. Because of this, those of us fighting this domination often feel like we are one week late to the game and things that have been planned for years are unfolding and we are only just finding out about them. Our struggles end up being spontaneous and defensive, lacking a deeper awareness of what is at stake and what the best tactics and strategies would be. Our goal through political education and analysis is to transform spontaneous actions into conscious acts based on carefully thought-out strategy.

In sum, a concrete analysis

- helps define a course of action
- can equip us to determine a political position in a given moment
- facilitates a better understanding of our reality in order to make more strategic decisions in any given scenario
- grounds us in what is real, avoiding the creation of a vision or platform that is more of a wish list than a plan

Structure and Current Context

Before continuing, it is important to make a distinction between Structure and Current Context. Both of these are analyzed in political strategizing but they are not the same thing.

Structure is the set of stable elements that determine the form of society, the economy and politics, giving it a certain order and stability. In other words, it is a society's specific economic, political and cultural features and specifically its mode of production. Mode of production refers to the way in which society produces its needs in order to exist and to grow, these include productive forces and social relations of production.

The current context is the present moment which brings with it all of the above elements that interact at a given moment. For example, the way that political parties relate to business owners and capitalists, and the way that those who do not own the means of production or workers are in relation to these business classes. Structure does not change quickly or suddenly except in cases of radical revolution. The current context changes frequently. All concrete analyses must contain some information about the structure as it is appearing in the present moment.

Structure is the overarching frame within which the current context unfolds. Strategy responds to an analysis and understanding of the structure. The current context on the other hand, determines tactics.

Preparing for Analysis

In order to examine the current moment and analyze what different events mean and how actors or figures relate to one another, we need a lot of other information. Events do not happen all of a sudden and social actors do not rise out of nowhere. There is a history to what is unfolding before us every day and there is a Structure within which events unfold.

For these reasons, study and an understanding of the economy, politics, social forces, and history is necessary to develop a concrete analysis. These are the building blocks of our analysis, and with this information we can make sense of what is happening.

Strategy and Tactic

Most of us use the terms “strategy” and “tactic” interchangeably as if they were the same thing, when they are actually two different, albeit related, ideas. Strategies are long term and broader plans related to how your organization believes social transformation can take place in the current moment. Successful strategies lead to long term changes in the structure of society and in many cases constitute changes in the mode of production.

Tactics are subordinate to strategy and respond directly to it. They are actions taken to transform class relations within the existing structure, without modifying or changing the fundamental characteristics of the mode of production. Sometimes one strategy involves multiple tactics.

For example:

*In 2002 the revolutionary government of Hugo Chavez Frías came to power with the **strategy** of ending poverty by expropriating concentrated private wealth and redistributing this wealth to poor families across the country. One **tactic** that was feasible in that context was nationalizing oil reserves in order to produce much needed revenue for the national budget. This added revenue allowed the government to enact important policies of social inclusion that changed the material day-to-day conditions of poor Venezuelanos. A second tactic that was necessary to build consensus around the strategy was to form local neighborhood chapters called Bolivarian circles (which later became Communal Councils or Comunas). These units of organization ensured quick mobilization and effective communication throughout the base and the leadership. This organizational tactic offered the needed political support to stop several US supported coups. Together, the tactic of nationalizing oil reserves and organizing neighborhood chapters contributed to the strategy of ending poverty through wealth distribution.*

Study Habits

Study should be a lifelong commitment for all revolutionaries. Study is necessary to develop a concrete analysis and therefore be qualified to make strategic political decisions within movements. While you do not need to know everything about the political and economic system and the history of your region before developing an analysis of the current reality, in order to become a good analyst a commitment to continual study is necessary.

Here are some tips to help those of us who are not full-time students to make studying a part of our lives:

- Prioritize time for study the way you would with something like exercise
- Make and update a list of books and texts that you think you should read to understand different aspects of society.
- First read the materials that are most relevant to your organizing.
- Keep a notebook with notes from your readings. When reading, stop frequently to write the main ideas or themes in the reading.
- Don't be afraid to highlight through a book when you find quotes that seem important
- Write down questions that come up in your study.
- When a reading makes reference to an event or a person that you are not familiar with, stop reading and look it up. Missing too many pieces of information that are present in your texts will make reading confusing and boring
- Write down ideas and comments that you have on the reading. You will not agree with everything you read and attempting to articulate your viewpoint is important.
- FORM A STUDY CIRCLE!** There is no more effective way to study than by sharing thoughts and questions with others.
- Make time to study current events. With apps like News, Flipboard and Pocket, reading the news without being exposed to only one news source is easy.

Elements of a Concrete Analysis

There are a few ways in which one can organize a concrete analysis of the relations of forces. When listening to political analysts or strategists analyze our current moment, you will notice that there is not a single way to do this. The following is one useful and straightforward guide for engaging in this process.

Categories for Analysis

Economic and Political Conditions

The economic and political conditions are what Marx refers to as the material base and superstructure of society. These include the modes of production that reproduce human life in this current moment and the governmental structures, legal institutions, ideologies and other organizations that stabilize that economic system. The cultural explanations that bridge the gap between values and outcomes—the reality that is and the reality that ought to be—are also a part of the material conditions of society. It is always important to put the development of these conditions into a historical context.

Composition of the Hegemonic Bloc

The hegemonic bloc is the combination of political and economic actors and social classes that are part of a class alliance that stabilizes the current economic system. Political and economic actors are institutions such as parties, the church, the government in power, or groups tied by a shared interest such as a particular industry. The actors of the hegemonic bloc have a project which is their idea of how they would like to see society function for the purpose of achieving their goals, desires, and needs. These actors also possess practical instruments that are used to advocate and implement their goals. These practical instruments can be other actors but they can also be laws, natural resources, etc.

This bloc is not always unified and should not be viewed as monolithic. At times we may think that ruptures in the hegemonic bloc are due to pressure from movements when often these arise from internal divergences. Identifying opportunities for counter-hegemonic struggle requires a realistic analysis of these fissures and divisions.

State of Class Struggle

The state of class struggle is the current correlation of forces, or in other words, the balance of power and strength between the hegemonic bloc and groups organizing for an alternative hegemonic model. These relationships can be characterized by conflict or coexistence, or even cooperation. The correlation of forces is always changing and is often described by the organized working class as favorable or unfavorable. In analyzing the state of class struggle it is critical to understand the state of the working class, its actions and mobilizations, who composes the organized working class, the primary demands and character of these demands.

Analyzing the state of the working class means understanding why some groups are mobilized and others are stabilized in the hegemonic bloc.

Sites

Sites are the space and context within which events unfold. A scenario can be a military conflict, a revolution, or a legal setting. In other words, conflict may unfold within an institutional setting, or against the institution altogether.

Events

Events that have a social, political or economic impact. These can reveal the direction of society and its current reality as well as a given social group's understanding of that reality. Identifying events and their characteristics is essential to a concrete analysis.

About Unity and Divisions

It is extremely important to understand that the hegemonic bloc is not always happily united around a common goal. Often times, there are important and meaningful differences of opinion within this bloc and we may either fail to see them or we may be fooled into thinking that two different camps are not both part of the hegemonic bloc, when they are both fundamentally defending the same project.

Divisions within the hegemonic bloc can lead to fractures in their power that make victories for the counter- hegemonic bloc possible. Sometimes without this understanding we may find ourselves thinking that our action is the only determining factor in a recent victory, ignoring that there were latent weaknesses in our enemy's camp that played a huge role.



The US Civil War was not a conflict between two fundamentally opposed groups, like between workers and Capitalists. Instead it was a conflict between two Capitalist classes, with different but not radically different interests.

It's Contradictory...

There are internal contradictions in everything. These contradictions are inherent and part of the make-up of social phenomena. Economic theorists and Marx makes reference to these contradictions because the belief is that these contradictions lead to a war between competing opposites, a war (whether military or political) which ultimately breeds change and transformation of the system. Thus, according to Marxism, class struggle—for example the conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie—is natural and the driving force behind all changes and events in history. Therefore finding the way in which these contradictions are manifesting in society at the current moment is a key piece of figuring out where class struggle is going or should go. Identifying contradictions is fundamental to understanding the role of class struggle, as the engine that shapes history- and concretely allows us to have a sense of what may come in the near future.

Questions to Help Develop a Concrete Analysis

I. Economic and Political Conditions

1. what is the economic model/policy in place today and what state is it in (crisis, decline, etc.)
2. what is the macro structure (globally) and what state is it in
3. what is in process at the level of the STATE and to what economic needs does it respond
4. locally, what is the state of the economy, politics, social and environment (crisis, decline, growth), how does this compare to the past, what are the events that produced these current conditions
5. What do we see that is a direct response to the state of the economic model right now
 - a. workers' rights
 - b. social programs and public services
 - c. public vs. private enterprise
 - d. natural resources (who is exploiting them, how is that changing)
 - e. state intervention in the market
6. What is the dominant cultural explanation for the nature of economic and political conditions (and their contradictions)

II. Composition of the Hegemonic Bloc

1. Goals of the bourgeoisie
 - a. Economic
 - b. Political
 - c. ideological
2. Characteristics of the hegemonic bloc
 - a. what are the contradictions, divisions within
 - b. what economic power is represented in this bloc, what productive industries
 - c. what political parties
 - d. what are its ideological tools (media networks, etc)
3. Current strategy of the hegemonic bloc
 - a. what is it doing
 - b. what is it doing next
4. how are these actions and events responding to the goals of Capital
5. what actions is it taking to suppress class struggle (both the concessions it is making and the repressive tactics)
6. what is its long term plan as we see it today
7. Contradictions within the Hegemonic Bloc
 - a. events that unfold producing contradictions and division between different groups and classes

III. State of Class Struggle

1. actions and mobilizations, characteristics and aims
2. segments of civil society participating in class struggle
3. who composes the organized groups
4. where is the larger working class that is inactive, why is it inactive
5. self-criticism: are actions defensive, conciliatory, offensive
6. broader background and historical events that produced the current state of class struggle

IV. Challenges and Opportunities for Counter-Hegemonic Struggle

1. Specific political actions that need to be taken
2. Specific segments of the working class that must be mobilized
3. Actions that seek to put pressure on the capitalist class by damaging its productive capacities
4. Organizing structures that could provide more mobilization, strategic sites of mobilization and struggle
5. Public messaging
6. Ideological program
7. Agitation and propaganda strategy
8. Methods of political organization
9. Ideological formation of cadre
10. Communication

V. Vision for Society

1. A complete concrete analysis must include:
2. an identification of the situation in the current moment
3. a clear vision of the variable principles and indicators
4. identification of the actors and an understanding of their interests and roles
5. an accounting of the main facts
6. identification of breaks and divisions between political and economic actors within the hegemonic bloc
7. identification of facts that could change the future course of events
8. clear limits of the conjuncture being studied

Critical Elements of a Descriptive and Informative Analysis

It's important to detect the connection between events. This means unveiling the chain of events and the logic that governs relations and situations in society. If you look at the toppling of a military dictatorship, for example, there are a chain of events in relation to the class struggle and the actions of the bourgeoisie that led to that moment. Understanding this sequence of events and how they relate to one another allows us not only to break down how things happened, but most importantly, can sometimes allow us to see what may happen next.

This analysis cannot consist merely of a listing of facts and recent events. It is important to relate these to the structure and attempt to understand what caused them, and if possible, what are potential outcomes of the current contradictions.

Although our goal in developing this analysis is to create strategy for the purpose of furthering class struggle, we cannot create an analysis that focuses only on the dichotomy between workers and the bourgeoisie. This may obscure important factors such as fractures between one class or another, or division based on race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

One key opportunity that opens up when we critically analyze the political and economic context using hard facts is that we may find openings for action that the conjuncture creates. Noticing new phenomena is one of the most important parts of doing concrete analysis. These phenomena can alter the likelihood of a given political action being successful or unsuccessful.

For example,

In 2013, massive protests swept through Brazil culminating in a demand for political reform and against the private financing of electoral politics. This demand for political reform was the agenda of the social movements during this period of mobilization where the correlation of forces was in their favor. In 2016 when the coup d'etat was consolidated, this demand was also made by the Right, in the effort to make changes that would favor their program, making it impossible for social movements to continue pushing that demand. Therefore, the capacity to effect reforms is not only

a question of wills but of the correlation of forces between the competing interests in society. The same tactic can be instrumental in one moment and very damaging in another. Finally, this example demonstrates how the Right has the capacity to incorporate the demands of the Left, to then re-purpose them for their own interest.

If we understand that all history is the history of class struggle, we can then also infer that the movements and struggles of the current moment, and the contradictions that a society of classes present, are key parts of the conjuncture at a given moment. Since these struggles are direct responses to objective conditions in the

productive, social and political system, they are a basic reference point to understand the changes that occur in a given conjuncture, even if they are not the only factor.

About that Bias (and also the need for facts)

A concrete analysis is never neutral, it is based on a particular understanding of the world and our desire to either transform that world or maintain the status quo.

Nonetheless, in questioning the status quo we must be careful not to construct a concrete analysis that is factually deficient, made up of information that is not true or is just wishful thinking.

A concrete analysis should be based on the reality, however unfavorable that is to our current struggles, as that is the only way to develop effective political action.

Conclusion

We live in a historical moment where the global domination of capitalism has produced enormous challenges to the formation of a project for society that follows a different logic than the logic of the current system. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the continued deterioration of anti-Imperialist and Socialist projects across the world, the legitimacy of an anti-Capitalist system and struggle is under constant attack and scrutiny even within the Left. The hegemony of one mode of production brings with it an ideology that is subordinate to the values and goals of that vision. This ideology is characterized by the false rhetoric of “freedom” and “democracy,” as supreme and unquestionable values that must guide the organization and development of all of society. These words, in their vagueness, obscure the complex and multi-layered system of class domination that is present throughout the world.

Cultural domination is a byproduct of the hegemony of this ideology. Economic exploitation and military invasion is always accompanied by an ideological invasion, which is the promotion and propagation of a set of values and ideas about what progress and development mean; a “development” that we know implies the profit of the few and the misery of many. To maintain its control of the world economic system, capitalism needs to build consensus for the false ideas that support its model. Whether we like it or not, our understanding of reality often fits into the frame of beliefs, values and ideas that have been constructed by the bourgeoisie to support the project of expanding capitalism and producing profit for the few.

In this light, we can aptly characterize the development of concrete analysis as an important weapon of struggle. By applying a dialectical materialist frame to our understanding of current events, we are opening up new possibilities for the development of strategy and tactics that increase our collective power.

Our study of the present and past is the only way to project our future. Therefore, an analysis of context is an indispensable tool for all forms of struggle.

References

Como Hacer un Análisis de Coyuntura (Elementos para el Análisis Político) (Vol. 5, Cuadernos de Formación para la Práctica Democrática). (2002). Guatemala: Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Políticos.

Peloso, R. (n.d.). *Sobre Análise de Conjuntura*. Reading, São Paulo, BR.

Pomar, V. (2015, November 21). *Análise de Conjuntura*. Lecture presented at Mestrado de Políticas Públicas in Fundação Perseu Abramo, São Paulo, BR.

Stedile, JP. (2015, May). *Análise de Conjuntura*. Lecture presented at Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes, São Paulo, BR.