

Methodology of Coyuntural Analysis

Notebook # 5: Problems of Periodization in Coyuntural Analysis

GENERAL PRESENTATION OF THE SERIES

This material that you have in your hands is the product of a practice and reflection of many years of work. As a product of this process, we in SIPRO arrived to this systemization with the contribution of many people and with the valuable collaboration of Enrique Valencia who made the basic text of this edition possible. From his document we try to be loyal to the methodological process he plants in a difficult theme, but essential for those who carry out a labor of education and accompaniment to social processes and the reality of our country.

These materials are aimed at contributing to all of those people from the ngo's, promoters, advisors, students, professionals, educators who accompany processes of popular education and of social organizations, and for those intellectuals who produce coyuntural analysis.

The notebooks we present here are a basic text, a contribution that does not signify the last word over this subject. There is a lot still to be said, proposed, and written over it. For many, the approaches and concepts can be debatable, questionable and anachronistic. We are in agreement over that and that is what it is about: generate a reflection and understanding that begins to find new roads and horizons in this galloping reality.

The content of these notebooks can be used in multiple forms depending on the interest. It can easily be part of an extensive course, used for a more deep and focused discussion on the theme, or it can be used as a tool for consulting. It does exempt its readers from the task of going into depth, questioning, criticizing, connecting, proposing changes and even less so of the challenge of sharing in a more accessible way if the theme is deeply comprehended. This would be the central objective of our proposal.

In the face of the disordered reality in which we live, we see the necessity of stopping to analyze it with the objective of accompanying the historical process of change and be participants of it. That is why in *Servicios Informativos Procesados, A.C.*, we revisit this document and we retransmit it for those actors who want to be an active part of their own history.

We hope that the systemization of these notebooks can be a modest contribution and useful for the best development of the analysis of coyuntura.

Gustavo E. Castro Soto

Introduction

Now let's take a look at an essential methodological task in every research process: how do we delineate the object in coyuntural analysis? In this notebook we will refer to the problem of temporal delineation or periodization.

This problem does not mark just one detail in the analysis rather it attacks the concept at the center of coyuntura. If we do not delineate the periodization we run the risk of a very vague and imprecise coyuntural analysis.

With this notebook we attempt to polemicize periodization and, in particular, we will refer to three mistaken solutions: indetermination, homogenization, and punctuality. Moreover, we define the concept of "current moment" and we suggest criteria for periodization in coyuntural analysis.

This notebook will serve us well in exemplifying coyuntural analyses that occupy us currently and in doing an exercise of periodization that we are utilizing. We hope that these proposals will be of great use.

Gustavo Castro Soto

PROBLEMS OF PERIODIZATION IN COYUNTURAL ANALYSIS

A. Stating the Problem

Generally included in the definition of the concept of periodization is the idea of a "rupture" in time.¹ We have already talked about this in previous notebooks when we referred to "moment" or "period" that include the idea of temporal division or section.

The problem rescued by various methodologists² refers precisely to temporal accuracy in coyuntura:

When does it begin and when does it end?

Which are the criteria that permit the researcher to show these coyuntural limits?

Generally, in the language of social research it is said that "the coyuntura changed" or that "we go from one to another":

What criteria permit us to identify this change?

This is the central question.

Examples.

¹ See Zemelman, 1987a:28; Osorio, 1987:18; Gallardo, 1988:34, 101.

² See Luengo, 1982:280-282; Osorio, 1987:17, 48-50, 68-69; Gallardo, 1988:101-102; López, 1979:35-36, 42, 53; Delich, 1979:14-15.

When did the coyuntura called “July 6th” (1988) begin and culminate?
When did the electoral coyuntura of 1994 begin and end –if it has ended?
When did the coyuntura of the crisis of the party State begin and end—if it has ended?
When did the coyuntura of the Zapatista war begin and end—if it has ended?

Upon answering these questions respond:

Why are these limits proposed? With what criteria?

It has to do with the construction of a concept: coyuntura.

It does not have to do with empiricism where we only want to identify, without theoretical effort or “seeing” in the events the mark of coyuntural limit.

With this we arrive at an important conclusion:

Events by themselves do not indicate to us the initial or final limit of a coyuntura.

Rather, what is required is a theoretical interpretation or conceptual construction.

Let us demonstrate 3 mistaken proposals in the problem of periodization:

a). “Indetermination”. Coyuntura is understood as an “(always) indeterminate sum of weeks and months”.³

In this way one commits the following errors:

1. It doesn't matter in what period the analysis is done, but the chosen time is easily called “coyuntura”.
2. Inexactness in the exercise of analysis.
3. Doing “analysis” under the need to elaborate periodical reports.
4. It is a pragmatically, not theoretically, determined solution.
5. The method of presentation is superimposed over the research.

b). “Homogenization”. Here coyuntura is understood as a “regular period of time”, always the same.⁴

In this way one commits the following errors:

1. Considering the reconstruction of “a” coyuntura, in the interpretation of “a” regular report (weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually).
2. Considering, therefore, that coyuntura is always weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually. Which would mean equating “political time” and “physical time”.⁵

³ Osorio, 1987:17.

⁴ Ibid. See Delich, 1979:11.

3. The method of presentation is superimposed over the research.

Therefore, this proposal of periodization is erroneous since “political time”:

- Takes the form of discontinuity: the peaks and valleys of contradictions, ruptures and velocity in change.
- Two coyunturas can even intersect in a determined period.
- Between one period and another there is no absolute separation. Even in the times of radical ruptures.
- In the historical process the characteristics of a new period begin to develop in the previous one.⁶

c). “Punctualization”. The concept of coyuntura is reduced to an “act” or “happening” and therefore temporal delineation is considered unnecessary: it is included in the fact; it is purely punctual.

In this way one commits the following errors:

1. Restrict the content of the concept of coyuntura to the single event or happening.⁷
2. Leave the concept of coyuntura in ambiguity and therefore in polyvalence.
3. Understand coyuntura in such a wide sense and with multiple applications that now they serve practically no purpose.

Examples of this erroneous interpretation:

1. The “coyuntura” of the CTM leader’s, Fidel Velásquez’, declaration every Monday.
2. The “coyuntura” of the increase of minimum wages.
3. The “coyuntura” of the fall of the stock market.

But while some events are irrelevant, there are some significant acts⁸ that are a substantial part of a coyuntura, especially those that indicate new relations of forces. We will call these: “happenings”.

We can encounter “acts” that over time generate a “happening”.

Example.

The police pick up some drug addicts from the streets. They are beaten and even tortured (“act”).

⁵ López, 1979:33.

⁶ Garces, 1979:8.

⁷ Delich, 1979:13.

⁸ See Souza, s/f: 6; and Zarco, 1988:82.

At the root of this event, parents organize to protest the act and demand respect of human rights.

Later, neighbors and other organizations get together to recover justice, security, professionalization and the purging of security forces; they demand rehabilitation centers and treatment for drug-addicted youth and other demands. In that way, vigilante brigades arise, public-political-cultural acts at the root of the topic, etc.

In this way, the “act” becomes a “happening” because of the mobilizations and the demands achieved.

Therefore, delineation IS NOT:

- A problem with a simple solution.
- An empirical problem that is content in “seeing” in order to find the limits or the ambiguities or avoid confronting the question.
- Theoretical entanglement that centers the analytical discussion in interminable discussions about whether it deals with a coyuntura or not.
- A “historical separatism” (periodization understood as a historical process where there is no relationship between one moment and another).

Delineation IS:

A theoretical-practical problem that demands explanation of criteria.

Questions

1. What is the central question for the temporal precision of coyuntural analysis?
2. Explain in your own words the 3 erroneous proposals of periodization.
3. Explain the difference between “political time” and “physical time”.
4. What is the difference between “act” and “happening”? Can you give some examples?
5. Give some examples of what you have called “coyuntura”.
6. What IS and IS NOT “delineation”?

B. The Concept of the “Current Moment”

We have shown in Notebook No. 4 that in coyuntural analysis the day-chronos is elemental, a short period or time segment, where a determined relation of forces is expressed.

The investigation of a present period of time that is described generally as a short duration or in the short term⁹, is different from the study of long duration.

At the present time, methodologists are accustomed to calling this “short” period:

⁹ Luengo,1982:280; and Giménez, 1981:25, respectively.

The “current moment”¹⁰ or a “given or determined moment”.

The use of the concept of **moment** is generalized practically. The same word, moment, includes the meanings of:

Brevity Example: “it is just a question of a moment”

And

Present Example: “the discussion of the moment”.

In a strict sense, speaking of the current moment could seem redundant. But for clarity’s sake we will keep both words, since one could also say correctly “the past moment”.

Some call the wide segment of time, “epoch”.¹¹

How did this conceptualization arise?

Most probably the generalized use of the concept of the current moment was driven most notably by the classic quote of F. Engels, who commented on K. Marx’s study about French history between the years 1848 through 1851.

Let’s look at 4 interpretations:

1. Engels pointed out the “eminent way of comprehending lived history of the moment, this profound penetration in the events, at the same time they are produced”.¹²
2. Marx, in the cited text, spoke of “periods” or “phases”, lapses in time that hardly reached a few months.
3. Gramsci referred to the analysis of a “historical period”.¹³ In one understood lapse between February 24, 1848 and December 2, 1851, he showed three periods, which he divided in turn. From there, some are prone to distinguishing between **epoch, period** and **moment**.
4. Garces distinguishes between:
 - Historical period or epoch—the domination of a class or period of life of a mode of production or historical block.
 - Strategic period—determined by certain equilibrium in the correlation of forces.
 - Tactical period—in which the correlation of forces is modified, but without substantially altering the central equilibrium of the social system.

¹⁰ See Arroyo, 1977:15; Delich, 1979; Gallardo, 1988:64; López, 1979:30, 36; Luengo, 1982:280; Poulantzas, 1978:110; Ruiz, 1988:13; Ruiz Sahagun, 1984:3; Souza, s/f:6; Zarco, 1988:71.

¹¹ López, 1979:35-36; and Luengo, 1982:280.

¹² Engels, 1980b:406.

¹³ Marx, 1980c:413, 484-485; Gramsci, 1975:67; Garces, 1979.

- Conjunctural period—determined artificially by the researcher.

Conjunctural period → Tactical period → Strategic period → Historic period

But what are we left with? Methodologically we will manage as synonyms:

PERIOD = MOMENT

CONJUNCTURAL PERIOD = TACTICAL PERIOD

However, the way in which Garces equates the mode of production with the historical block could be debated.

Taking this conceptual origin into account as well as the applications that have made it, we can separate the concept into its elements:

Moment



Expresses a short period of time.



But:

and

Current time



Identifies the specific temporality in which the coyuntural analysis is centered.

--the indication of brevity (microhistory, in the temporal sense), in light of great extension (macrohistory), simply shows a temporal distinction in a very lax sense

That in which events are being produced and are opening new opportunities for different sociopolitical projects.

That's when social transformation takes place.

and, therefore, demands the discussion of the criteria of periodization.

Therefore: Coyuntural analysis is the analysis of and in the present.¹⁴

Nevertheless, since Notebook No. 4 we have been mentioning that in the current or present moment the past and the future are interwoven in some way.¹⁵

We can then speak of a wide present that includes a period of diverse forms:

- a) the previous past that still has reality → “we have done”
 - b) the present in a strict sense → “we do”
- or
- the action that is taking place → “we are doing”
- and

¹⁴ Zemelman, 1987a:27. Also see López, 1979:29; Osorio, 1987:48-49.

¹⁵ López, 1979:41.

it reaches the near future.

- c) the immediate future as a potential present and as the tendency of action that is taking place. → “we will do”

Of course, as we express it in the definition, we consider coyuntural analysis capable of being achieved in the analyses of past history.

This widened present or period¹⁶ is the object of coyuntural analysis and not the instantaneous, punctual present, that in the second that we mention it, it has already become past.

Thus, we arrive at a proposal:

The current moment is a brief current period or widened present.

How does one construct its limits theoretically? In what way does one conceptualize them? This is the next step.

Questions:

1. Explain in your own words what is the “current moment”.
2. What differences do you find between “epoch”, “period” and “moment”.
3. What would it mean to equate the terms “mode of production” and “historical block”?
4. What is the difference between “moment” and “current reality”?
5. Explain in your own words what WIDENED PRESENT is.

C. CRITERIA OF PERIODIZATION

Let’s take into account 6 affirmations:

1a. The fundamental element to discern the temporal limits of a coyuntura is the modification of the correlation of forces¹⁷ to the inside of a historical block.

In general, the methodologists consulted are in agreement about this criteria.

Gramsci proposes his famous analysis of the relations of forces.

Foucault shows that power is the “game of mobil relations”, that by means of “incessant confrontations” the multiplicity of the relations of forces is transformed.

¹⁶ Chapter 1.

¹⁷ See Gallardo, 1988:34; Giménez, 1981:25 and 101; López, 1979:35; Luengo, 1982:280; Osorio, 1987:48-49; Ruiz, 1988:13; Gramsci, 1975:65-76; Garces, 1979:2.

Garces affirms that going from one step to another is determined by the correlation of forces.

However, if we stay with this simple affirmation we do not advance very much since in reality the relation of forces is in permanent change.¹⁸ If there are continuous transformations, as insignificant as they are, how does one identify the conjunctural traffic?

2a. Periodization always refers to the “shifts” or “significant changes” of confrontation and the articulation of forces.¹⁹

The problem that we come up against now is how to characterize when a shift of this type exists.

Examples:

1. In the 18th Brumaire, Marx periodizes in relation to the stage in which:
 - a. The proletariat finds itself with arms in their hands.
 - b. To the constitution of the Republic.
 - c. To the sinking of the parliamentary regiment and triumph of Bonaparte.

These three phases are subdivided consistent with movements in the relations of forces that mean “defeat”, “dictatorships” and “triumph” of some sectors.²⁰

2. Cuba, Nicaragua (FSLN), El Salvador (FMLN), Guatemala (URNG) and—some would include—Mexico (EZLN): How can you characterize their “revolutionary conjunctures”? Why?

This second affirmation can fall into the following dangers:

- Only “revolutionary conjuncture” can be conceived of easily and mistakenly as “displacements” and “significant changes”.²¹
- In certain political dialects conjuncture is confused with revolutionary situation; in such a way that when one says that “there is a conjuncture” it means “there is a revolutionary situation”.
- Pessimism and defeat when the “revolution comes down”, clouding the search for new conditions of change and waiting for other “revolutionary” conditions to arise by themselves.
- To seek and consider that only through arms is the correlation of forces modified, the rest is pure reformism.

¹⁸ See Foucault, 1983:174-175.

¹⁹ Giménez, 1981:25, and Gallardo, 1988:34, respectively.

²⁰ Marx, 1980c:484-485.

²¹ See Ruiz, 1988:13-14.

Example 1. In the case of the National Guatemalan Revolutionary Unit (URNG), there are those that consider that the objectives of armed struggle—which has lasted more than 30 years—will be achieved exclusively through this medium. While there are those who think that it will be achieved through political and negotiated means. What is the temporal limit that can characterize this change of struggle (from the military to the political)?

At the moment, the experience of the cases of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Mexico—with the EZLN-- , the constant is the pressure of the hegemonic block to look for another way to exit the conflict besides the armed way and pass to another stage of struggle: the political-electoral.

Therefore, we find the **extremes** in the application of the concept of **coyuntura**:

Wide meaning	↔	Restricted meaning
↓		↓
Coyuntura = event		Coyuntura = “revolutionary” stages

The following distinction does not help either:

“Simple coyuntura”	↔and	“complex coyuntura”
↓		↓
They are considered as the situation in which there is no change in the correlation of forces.		It reserves the national character and the idea of substantial modification in the Correlation of forces in the sense of change in the principal contradiction.
↓		↓
If there is no change, then there is no coyuntura.		Complex coyunturas can easily be reduced to revolutionary ones.
		↓

Delich comments that revolutionary periods are the exception and that it is of interest to rescue the “common, gray conjunctures” that “hide lines of power” and in which, we add, there are relevant modifications.²²

To reduce analysis to the obsessive search of “revolutionary” coyunturas impedes:

The reconstruction of the real

↓

⇒ that crosses periods where the sociopolitical alterations are found within an historical block

↓

and not necessarily in the final moment of block changes or social formation.

²² Delich, 1979:13.

These “gray” alterations are a basic concern of coyuntural analysis precisely in order to place itself in the path of preparation, as Gramsci would say, for organic movements.²³

3a. What is “significant” is not imprinted on the events.²⁴

Coyuntural limits do not exist for themselves; in order to arrive at the hypothesis or conclusion that is relevant, a conceptual framework is necessary.²⁵

From this conceptual framework emerge the parameters to characterize the specific weight of an articulation of forces. That is, the basis from where we will define the force that has diverse social sectors.

In the diagnostic that we perform on this articulation of interests of diverse groups we reproduce the

objective balance of forces.

That is: the correlation that is found in reality independently of the will of the actors.

In the example that we have already mentioned, there is a conceptual framework behind the affirmations that the revolutionary coyunturas are the only transcendental ones.

4a. For coyuntural analysis, the framework is the strategy:

The road across which one is thought to arrive at:

The transformation of the historical block

Already/now;

The integration of a new social formation.

Because the strategy²⁶ implies:

A structural analysis AND a hypothesis of social change

↓

that will provide the parameters for:

characterizing the relevance of the political-social alterations; defining the corresponding tactics.

²³ Gramsci, 1975:67-68.

²⁴ Explains Delich, 1979:14.

²⁵ Luengo, 1982:282.

²⁶ E. Luengo: Ibidem: 282; Garces, 1971:13.

Example 1. Among other elements that define its conceptual framework in Mexico, the EZLN has been distinguished from other armed movements looking to modify the correlation of forces through:

- a. The management of its strategy and tactics.
- b. Its disposition to negotiate only days into the beginning of the confrontation.
- c. Therefore, not looking to take power only through the armed path.
- d. It is said to be of eminently indigenous origin.
- e. Proposing a front, not of armed organizations, but of the grouping of civil society, “nationalizing” in that way the conflict in the struggle against the hegemonic block—and respecting—the stages of struggle of each organization.
- f. Prioritizing the management of the mass media.
- g. Involving civil society in defining the struggles, strategies and tactics of action.
- h. Widening the support bases, without crossing the borders of its geographical lands, achieving the support and national sympathy in order to consent to the humanitarian to the region.
- i. Not abandoning any posture or ideological banner (Marxism, Orthodox Marxism, Leninism, Communism, etc.).
- j. Do you see another difference?...

The problem of periodization is also resolved through the “practical interest” of the class organizations for which the investigation is realized. Here we define the long term “practical interest” as strategy.

For Garces, the coyuntural period pertains to the calendar times determined by the needs of analysis; it is “artificial” time, not “natural”.

Example.

Let’s start from a diagnostic that tells us that the trend in the last few years has been principally the defeat of worker mobilizations with respect to salary demands.

And let’s suppose that a strategy that is focused on the necessity to consolidate popular movements is the way to the articulation of a counter-hegemonic block.

The relative victory of the magisterial movement in May 1989 means, if not a fundamental change in the trend, its relevant alteration or inflection that requires explanation in order to make future changes in power possible.

5a. The following will be fundamental to coyuntural periodization: changes in power—

to the interior: of the leading block; of the subaltern blocks.

Between: the leading block; the subaltern blocks.

In other words: the confrontations in and among the conservative subjects and those of social change in the context of a strategic horizon.²⁷ This horizon contains contradictions.

Garces shows that the “quality of every strategy is only measurable in relation to the strategy of the enemy”, which implies the need to be permanently analyzing:

1. The strategy of the principal adversary, and
2. Making the strategic modifications necessary to confront it.

Now we can synthesize some more characteristics of coyuntura and its periodization:

1. There is no predetermined duration of a coyuntura.
2. Each coyuntura has its own rhythm that depends on the conjunction of the very contradictions that it contains.
3. Every coyuntura has its own cycle formed by, among other aspects:
 - A rupture or a moment of inflection in relation to a former period;
 - A development of contradictions;
 - A peak of conflict;
 - The consolidation of a new correlation of forces.
4. Coyunturas are heterogeneous cycles, each with a particular rhythm.
5. What can influence the “speed” of a coyuntura is the conscious practice or praxis, oriented to strengthening one of the poles of contradiction.

6a. Therefore, there is no predetermined time, but a change in a period through praxis can be projected, anticipated and produced.

Gramsci calls it “grade of strategic preparation of the theater of struggle”.²⁸ However, this “anticipation” is not at all easy.

On the theoretical side: it requires an act of consistent analysis that includes past periodizations. ⇒ (an historical reconstruction of the correlation of forces in its important phases, one will be able to pass more securely to the diagnostic of the new correlations.

On the side of praxis: and with a strategy, one will be able to make possible the same practice that will produce a change in the disposition of the social forces.

To synthesize, periodization:

1. will be able to fundamentally bring about the significant changes of the contradictory relations of a historical block, in the framework of a strategy.
2. will take in from the beginning of this movement (cycle), the development of the contradictions, until its culmination characterized by a new correlation of forces.²⁹

²⁷ Garces, 1979:3.

²⁸ Gramsci, 1975:83.

We can now detect a difference in the temporal delineation in the case of a:

Synchronic analysis \Rightarrow A point in time is chosen (and also its criteria) in which an analytical break is developed.³⁰ \Rightarrow It is a case of, among others, an opinion survey conducted on a day x .

And

Diachronic analysis \Rightarrow (as in the case of coyuntural analysis) \Rightarrow The division into stages is part of the final result of research, which does not eliminate the beginning with a hypothesis.

According to Garces the analysis of a coyuntural period is synchronic. It is characterized this way by its concept of coyuntura: “a singular event of social reality that generally unites two periods”. That is, coyuntura equals a happening.

We formulate, then, the following process:

Conceptual framework \Rightarrow initial hypothesis of periodization \Rightarrow research \Rightarrow hypothetical reconstruction based on the coyuntural period \Rightarrow the real production of a new period.

Questions:

1. Give examples of “displacements” or “significant changes” in the correlation of forces.
2. How would you characterize the periods of “revolutionary” coyunturas in the cases of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala?
3. Explain in your own words the distinction between coyuntura in the wide and restricted sense, simple and complex.
4. Explain in your own words what conceptual framework means, and give examples.
5. What is understood as strategy?
6. What is the correlation of forces and explain its characteristics?
7. Explain any difference in temporal delineation.

²⁹ Osorio, 1987:69.

³⁰ Garces, 1979:13.