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Formality as Exception

Commentary for Urban Studies Journal Special Issue '*Transcending (in)formal urbanism*' co-edited by Prof Michele Acuto (UCL), Dr Colin Marx (UCL) and Dr Cecilia Dinardi (Goldsmiths)

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Naming is an inherently political act. Informality has created a lens through which to view activities that constitute the city. This optic was deployed in the famous International Labour Organisation report (ILO 1972), and it has opened up a vital field of research. However, the notion of informality is problematic in that it constitutes the gaze of the state as the superior, legitimate, and authentic one. As the papers in this special issue demonstrate, there is a lively and insightful research tradition that seeks to engage with informality in all of its dimensions, and to seriously consider the effect that it has on the human condition. The problem is that informality is a relational concept: it is tied to, and legitimates, 'the formal'. Analytically, informality requires a balancing concept of the formal; politically, informality is 'the Other', bound into a teleological relationship with the formal, but unable to ever achieve it. This accounts for the repressive power that the notion of informality has in the context of 'development'.

Radical urban researchers have sought to investigate the phenomenon of informality by turning their gaze toward the 'everyday', or 'ordinary' city. This displaces ontology with epistemology, and presents the informal as constitutive of the urban. The other effect is to displace normative 'Northern' urban theory (which has little concern with informality), by instead focusing on the objects of work, housing, food and social support provisioning that are 'informal' (self-provisioned; that is, by civil society). This tactic of displacement has had some success; however, strategically it is doomed to failure.

The reason why is illustrated by Keith Hart's (Hann and Hart 2011p 114-5) account of how the notion of informal economy entered the lexicon. As an economic anthropologist exploring employment in West Africa he examined the practices and roles of work in society (Hart 1973). Hart was advisor to the ILO study, and wanted to be able to highlight the employment practices that he

had studied. However, what development economists and policy makers were looking for were ways to legitimate state policy, and the state's role in creating employment (Lewis 1992). It is in this context that the informal economy was at once both recognised, and devalued. As Hart (2006) later comments, the label informal is popular because it is negative, it describes what people are not doing; it is a passive and conservative concept that acknowledges a world outside of the bureaucracy, but endows it with no positive identity. Merkel's contribution to this special issue reminds us how this practice renders people invisible and in a negative manner.

Hart (Hann and Hart 2011) further stresses that the 'form' in in/formality is 'the rule': an idea of what ought to be universal in social life, and has in the last hundred years or so become associated with bureaucracy, especially national bureaucracy and the nation-state (see Grashoff in this collection). So, words here are far from innocent, freighted assumptions and expectations, especially so when in policy debates where the 'is' gets translated into 'ought'.

As Neuwirth (2012) has pointed out, the informal economy makes up a substantial proportion of the global economy (he estimates a size equivalent to the US economy). We can also point to the individual nation state where estimates of informal activity exceed 80%¹. The highest figures are in the 'South', but informal economies are also prevalent in the 'North' too (where they are rendered invisible by normative theorising, and a lack of data collection). Moreover, if we extend the informal to include non-economic activities associated with social and community activities (see Carrero, this issue), and illegal activities, it is clear that what we are talking about is not a 'residual', but the majority human experience (urban and non-urban). In this context it would make more sense to view formality as exception, and informality as the norm. Many authors (see for example Roy 2005) have promoted the notion of urban informality as a way to expose activities that would otherwise be excluded as would our understanding of the modes of organisation, the values held, and the roles informality plays in society. By adding the urban label it brings into focus the negative representations of the rural (rural seems not to need the modifier informal). It is this teleology that is the problem, and one reason why we need a different perspective, one which I think that the contributions to this special issue are suggestive of.

In a pragmatic attempt to side-step the teleological problem, and the relational bind, that the notion of informality represents contributors to this special issue have deployed ontological critique (see Marx and Kelling), and epistemological diversions (see Canclini). Elsewhere, Neuwirth (2012) suggests the usage of 'System D'. The idea is that System D escapes the localisation and

¹ see ILO (2017). India labour market update, July 2017. ILO country office for India. New Dehli, ILO.

subjectification of informality (with the implicit moral blaming of actors); he represents it as a parallel system shorn of its moral relativism. In the same spirit, but differently again, I would take inspiration from Baptista's paper in this collection and recommend that we view the 'achievement of formality' as a precarious and an exceptional achievement. Thus, taking it seriously that informality this is relational, but in a different sense to which I have used it above: we should consider informality as a hybrid of what we have hitherto termed formal and informal. In common usage we omit, or gloss over, that the formal means state recognised and regulated. We only need to reflect on the short history of the nation-state to acknowledge both its own recency and incompleteness; let alone the role that nation-states and colonial systems have played in defining the 'reality' of life in the 'South'. It is difficult to imagine a totally formal activity, one that has no informality: even in totalitarian states some activity escapes control. In everyday life we can see that numerous informal practices and systems are required to enable formal ones to operate (see Callon 1998), it is our analytic blinkers that discount the 'informal', or indeed sustain the illusion of the dualism.

In the sense that I am seeking to elaborate, to really 'see' informality we must resist generalisation: there are only particular timed and placed informalities. Each informality exists in relation to a wider (local) social, political and economic setting, as well as a global one (see Cirolia and Scheba's paper). Likewise, informality is not a unitary and purified concept (or reality) (see M'Baye and Dinhardi's paper); it exists in a hybrid, messy, state; this does not mean that the informal is unorganised: the notion of System D potentially recovers informality from this misrepresentation. Empirical research demonstrates the varieties of informality that exist (which, I would argue, can be matched by the varieties of formality² but which are effaced by a unitary notion of formality). Turning the tables on 'formal', displacing, and de-legitimising it, may open up new ways of apprehending, let alone understanding, cities and those who dwell in them.

² A reference to Hall, P. and D. Soskice, Eds. (2001). *Varieties of Capitalism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

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