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Urban Informality as a Site of Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT *Across the Global South, the realities of urban informality are changing, with implications for how we understand this phenomenon across economic, spatial, and political domains. Recent accounts have attempted to recognise the diversity of informality across contexts and dimensions, as well as its everyday lived realities. Reviewing key debates in the sector, and drawing upon the new empirical studies in the papers presented here, we argue for a shift away from seeing urban informality narrowly as a setting, sector, or outcome. We suggest that reconsidering informality as a site of critical analysis offers a new perspective that draws on and extends political economy approaches, and helps us to understand processes of stratification and disadvantage. We seek to highlight the significance of the informal-formal continuum at the same time as challenging this dichotomy, and to explore emerging theoretical and empirical developments, including changing attitudes to informality; the increasing salience of agency; and informality as strategy both for elite and subaltern groups.*

1. Introduction

Across the Global South, the realities of urban informality are changing, with implications for how we understand this phenomenon within and across economic, spatial, and political domains. Informality is often presented in much critiqued dichotomies: on one hand seen as a problematic unregulated and unplanned reality that must be addressed via regulation, on the other as a celebration of the tenacity of otherwise marginalised groups who exist amidst social, economic, political, and geographic exclusion. Despite informality crossing disciplinary and professional boundaries, it is often applied and investigated narrowly within specific domains, rather than across them. Existing literature tends to view and analyse urban informality *within sectors* (for example housing or labour markets); as *a setting* in which certain groups secure livelihoods or commodities; or as *an outcome* related to legal status. This tends to confine the focus, discussion, and analysis of urban informality to the urban poor; those who commonly live, work, and access services, rights, and entitlements through informal channels and in informal ‘sectors’. Urban informality is all of these things, but it is also more. Artificial boundaries across economic, political, and spatial domains – as well as the oversimplistic formal-informal binary – have masked broader cross-cutting issues of political economy, by removing focus away from other (more powerful) groups and actors involved in urban informality.

We propose working towards a deeper political economic analysis of urban informality, viewing it as a site of critical analysis in which political economies at the local, municipal, and national scale are central. Understanding social and political relationships within and between the state and multiple sets of actors across these spaces (and across economic, spatial, and political domains within them) helps us to understand how resources are distributed and power secured and consolidated. Specifically, by ‘site of critical analysis’ we refer to the ways in which studies of urban informality can bring into focus the winners and losers in urban development, and the processes by which advantage and disadvantage are conferred. Formality offers

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state resources and social status, and hence power. A focus on informality highlights those disadvantaged by their inability to be ‘formal’, but also those advantaged by their ability to be selectively ‘informal’. Focusing on informality as a site of critical analysis thus highlights how opportunities are opened (or closed), and helps us to understand how the processes underpinning economic, social, and political inequality emerge and consolidate.

This framing draws on and extends political economic analysis through an emphasis on the specifically urban dimension of informality. On the one hand, we are responding to recent debates from urban studies, geography, and planning which discuss urban informality as practice, strategy, or critique, which have been extensively discussed in these disciplines, but are less established in development studies. On the other hand, recently observers have criticised the over-abstraction of such theorisations, which risks eclipsing the empirical phenomena which they purport to illustrate (for example Mabin, 2014). Our conceptualisation of urban informality links robust theorisation with detailed empirical observation, through an emphasis on the situated and specifically urban nature of informality, drawing on situated examples. More than a neutral space for political relations, the urban as a site for analysis is central, as specific urban settings are produced by, and in turn reproduce, urban informality in its spatial, economic, and political dimensions. We highlight this through our emphasis on context-specific analysis, and a focus on scale, which is always in relation to the urban setting. In this way, we respond to the ‘structural ambiguity of the term and its ever-changing formations’ (Herrle & Fokdal, 2011, p. 8), but also to somewhat static categorisations of informality as a sector, setting, or outcome that are still found in policy and in some academic literature.

We therefore argue for a continuing focus on informality. While the conceptual difficulties with this concept are well-recognised, continuing practices in urban policy and programming – and associated academic debates – suggest that despite its shortcomings, it remains significant in understanding trends and patterns in urban development. The conceptual reframing presented above proposes bringing together an understanding of urban informality with concerns around inequality, to understand the ways in which diverse groups secure different terms of ‘informality’ in their negotiations with and positioning vis-à-vis the state. Such reframing supports renewed insight into urban informality’s historical and ongoing centrality in shaping urban development across the Global South.

In support of this, this paper offers an overview of some of the key debates shaping current thinking about informality. We suggest that reconsidering informality as a site of critical analysis, rather than a setting, sector, or outcome, requires ‘zooming out’ to explore patterns and processes at the meso- and macro-level, as well as ‘zooming in’ more narrowly on given sectors, settings, or outcomes, or particular groups within these. A multi-scalar perspective on urban informality is illuminating. Systematic exploration of the political economy of urban informality reveals deep insight into a broader spectrum of actors involved, including their roles, relationships, and strategies; and how these simultaneously offer opportunities for extraction, exploitation, and exclusion for diverse groups across different domains. This better enables us to explore ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, and the ways in which urban informality offers different strategies for accumulation or survival to different groups, depending on their terms of integration into formal and informal sectors, systems, and processes and their positioning vis-à-vis the state.

We seek to add insight to current debates by presenting papers (and perspectives) exploring economic, spatial, and political informality. We believe that drawing on these three traditions highlights tensions and contradictions in how informality has been considered; and that without recognising interconnections within and between these domains, we run the risk of overlooking vital phenomena, processes, and interactions. By viewing informality as a site of critical analysis, we seek to highlight the significance of the informal-formal continuum at the same time as challenging this dichotomy. There is no simple categorisation here; rather there are a set of strategies and positions as both elite and subaltern groups struggle to gain advantage or to cope with disadvantage. This means that understanding urban informality requires a differentiated analysis of actors operating within and across domains. This includes the more ‘typically’ informal ways in which excluded groups or areas are connected to means of making a living, housing, and basic commodities, or to governance processes; but also how other groups create and exploit informal domains to meet their

own ends, such as gaining or retaining social and political power, maximising profit or avoiding costly regulations and taxation.

We open with reflections on key current debates on urban informality across economic, political, and spatial domains, focusing on their historical evolution and the conceptual framings they have afforded scholars. Responding to and moving forward these debates, we present our conceptualisation of informality as a site of critical analysis. We then draw upon recent and new research (including the papers in this section) to show how this lens highlights new and emerging theoretical and empirical developments, particularly changing attitudes to informality; the increasing salience of the agency of diverse groups of actors within informal processes and practices (but also limitations to that agency for certain groups); and practices of informality as strategy for elite and subaltern groups. We conclude with some reflections on what this formulation might mean for future research.

2. Setting the scene: urban informality as a site of critical analysis

Attempts at defining urban informality are often linked to specific epistemological frameworks, and more broadly to debates prevailing in specific disciplines, times, and places. We do not recapitulate these debates here – for space, and because this has been undertaken elsewhere (for example AlSayyad, 2004; Lombard & Meth, 2016). But a few points are worth highlighting for their recurrence and widespread acceptance or contention. Early conceptions of the informal labour sector drew a clear distinction between it and the large-scale, regulated formal sector (for example Hart, 1973; Moser, 1994). This conceptualisation presupposed formality as the norm, and informality as an aberration, a notion that has persisted despite vigorous contestation. While early representations of informality as small-scale, ‘traditional’ peasant activities suggested it would wither away with capitalist development, Marxist academics saw the informal sector (both in terms of labour and shelter) as integral to capitalist dynamics (for example Burgess, 1978; Moser, 1978). Over subsequent decades, three divergent schools of thought have emerged, with informality being positioned within a dualist (that is marginal economic activities for low-income households distinct from modern capitalism), ‘legalist’ (that is excluded from the modern economy due to adverse bureaucracy), or ‘structuralist’ framework (that is subordinated economic units adversely related to formal enterprises within a capitalist economy) (Chen, Vanek, & Heintz, 2006; Rakowski, 1994). These debates can be detected in much current research, whether in terms of direct engagement with and critique of legalist approaches (for example Harriss-White, 2019; Meagher, 2016), the denial of dualist representations and challenge to the separation of formal and informal spheres (for example Angotti, 2013), or recognition of changing structural dynamics influencing the redefinition of the formal and informal (for example Mitlin & Walnycki, 2019).

Despite early housing studies acknowledging the creative and productive potential of the informal sector in its spatial domains – in other words, as emerging urban neighbourhoods with the potential for consolidation over time (for example Mangin, 1967; Turner, 1972) – the hierarchy of ‘formal’ as the norm and ‘informal’ as abnormal and/or inferior has underpinned repressive policy responses, such as inadequate service provision or the eviction of informal settlement residents. Although such responses have been superseded in many contexts by recognition of the potential of formalisation, and by an alternative discourse that supported the merits of informality, the normative inference of the formal/informal framework continues to provide a focus for critical debates.

Challenges to dualistic conceptions abound. Roy’s understanding of urban informality as ‘an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself’ is helpful, moving debates forward by presenting informality as ‘a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another’ (Roy, 2005, p. 148). Similarly, conceptualisations such as Benjamin’s (2008) ‘occupancy urbanism’, Simone’s (2004) ‘fluidity’, and Yiftachel’s (2009) ‘grey spaces’ seek to reframe static and hierarchical conceptions of urban informality, challenging conceptions that enforce hierarchy and favour the formal. Such debates seek to reverse urban

informality's normative inference, and support the agency of marginalised populations whose informal activities are often criminalised and otherwise de-legitimised.

In particular, McFarlane's (2012) re-conceptualisation of informality as critique opens up new ways of understanding how informal and formal actions relate to each other, allowing a recognition that informal practices extend beyond the urban poor to encompass the actions of different sectors including middle- and high-income urban residents, the state, and business interests. The significance of this perspective requires greater attention, especially from spatial and economic disciplines, which have tended to overlook social and institutional aspects of urban informality (Obeng-Odoom, 2016). In contrast, some political studies have long accepted the significance of informal relations and their role in enabling elites to advantage themselves. C. Wright Mills' (1956) study of the ways in which political elites govern the United States, for example, demonstrated how informal political relations blend with the formal functioning of the state. Meanwhile, the informal nature of urban politics in the global South is the subject of ongoing debate (for example, Chatterjee, 2004; Nelson, 1979). In some instances, informal politics is accepted and recognised as instrumental to the operation of formal political outcomes, rather than an aberration to be absorbed into the formal. In others, a critical literature highlights the anti-poor outcomes from informal politics and intermediation, such as clientelist relations (Banks, 2016). Clearly, here, we need a broader understanding of urban informality that captures how similar economic, spatial, and political processes can lead to such different outcomes for different groups.

The enduring nature of informality debates, and in particular the supposed conceptual separation of the formal and informal spheres (noted by Angotti, 2013; Rodgers, Beall, & Kanbur, 2012), is particularly surprising given previous assertions that formal and informal sectors are reciprocally related and entangled (Bromley, 1978). This conceptual separation in academic writing can perhaps be best understood as a construct put forward by academics against a 'pro-formal' argument rarely advanced in academic or professional literature, but manifest in anti-poor practices in towns and cities in the global South (as demonstrated by Goodfellow [2019] and Harriss-White [2019]). Economic and spatial informality are both seen as reason to repress, informally tax, and otherwise further disadvantage already disadvantaged groups (Varley, 2013). Such realities are described by Watson (2009) when she highlights the reasons why urban planning rules cannot meet the needs of the urban poor, since the elitist nature of planning and building standards mean that the urban poor must break the law to secure land and shelter.

What emerges is recognition that informality is much more than the absence of rules or regulation. Crudely put, if the formal sphere follows a set of rules defined by the state, then the informal sphere can be seen as a different set of rules negotiated and enforced by diverse actors who frequently include, but go beyond, city-based or national elites. This may consist, for example, of forms of governmentality enacted via political society on those excluded from citizenship (Chatterjee, 2004), or in pressure to occupy land through direct action by those who cannot access the state on advantageous terms (Benjamin, 2008). Despite the potential de-legitimation of such informal actions and transactions, we should recognise that they are institutionalised in some way, although the boundary between the formal and informal may change over time.

This suggests a need for the revision of analytical frameworks, to account for changing contexts and new (or newly-noticed) forms and patterns of informality. We suggest that urban informality's conceptual potential lies in seeing it as a site of critical analysis, opening up the possibility for new theoretical formulations to help us understand emerging urban phenomena and the relationships and power dynamics (and winners and losers) behind them. For example, the category of informality may obscure as well as illuminate marginalised individuals, groups, and activities in the urban setting that appear disorganised, atomised, or fragmented. This may be for strategic reasons, along the lines of Bayat's (2004) 'quiet encroachment', where practice and/or change is subtle and hidden rather than radical and public, or because certain groups lack the resources to mobilise (for example, Simone, 2004). It may also be because certain (more powerful) groups prefer to stay under the radar when

using urban informality as a way to negotiate and potentially protect extractive processes (see, for example, Weinstein's [2008] discussion of land mafias in Mumbai).

Emphasis on what is dynamic and/or what is becoming visible takes us beyond the formal/informal dichotomy. This leads us to suggest that a third category of 'a-formal' may be needed, to recognise situations where neither formal nor informal rules apply, and where rules are fragmented and unclear, often as the result of their relatively new formation. This may open up spaces of opportunity in terms of appropriation of spaces or markets, as well as creating challenges for actors who must navigate them in the absence of known rules, norms, or networks (as Goodfellow [2019] elaborates). This category responds to the dynamic nature of cities and is particularly relevant to contexts of rapid urbanisation and/or political change. It reflects that formality and informality respond to structural underpinnings, as well as to the ongoing practices of actors immersed in these processes. This draws our attention to the potential insights offered by 'sites' in which relations are being formed and consolidated at times of significant change. In such contexts there may be relatively little institutionalised practice, either formal or informal. This may coincide with what others have called 'the borderlands between the formal and the informal' (Fischer, 2014, p. 5) and the activities that Benjamin (2008) refers to as neither 'informal' or 'illegal' but 'porous legalities' (see also Cavalcanti, 2014; McCann, Fischer, & Auyero, 2014). We introduce the term a-formal to highlight that while the informal may not be enforced by legal processes, it is nevertheless controlled by institutionalised processes that may be as strong (or stronger) as those managed according to formal laws by the judiciary.

Having outlined our call to understand urban informality as a site of critical analysis, we move on to explore how recent literature and the new contributions presented here help to advance this mode of thinking.

3. Urban informality as a site of critical analysis: advancing the concept

As we have illustrated, our call to view urban informality as a site of critical analysis requires a more complex understanding of the political economy of urban informality across spatial, economic, and political domains. In each of these, we highlight the social relations that enable advantage and enforce disadvantage, and the importance of bringing politics, or the 'political', to the fore. This suggests that even before analysing specific domains, we must have a broader conceptual understanding of urban informality that captures its complexity, including the close linkages and overlaps among different dimensions of informality, and between formal and informal worlds. Focusing too closely on individual domains – or indeed, focusing on sub-groups of the population, such as the urban poor – risks overlooking the complex relationships and processes beyond that domain or group that shape and determine them (including, critically, their historical evolution and context-specific nature).

In [Section 2](#) we highlighted that informality is not confined to the urban poor. We suggested looking more closely at broader systems and processes, and how these dictate or determine the terms on which different groups can navigate or negotiate informal domains – whether characterised by extraction, exploitation, and/or exclusion. For Ranganathan (2014, p. 90), informality is 'the flexible and uneven suspension of regulation and law in the production of urban space and materiality'. It is a negotiated process in which different actors have (and negotiate) different forms of authority or subservience. While informality can occur through multiple channels, what differs – and particularly, what determines whether these channels, experiences, and strategies can be used as part of survival or accumulation networks – is the differentiated protections and legitimacies offered by public authorities in their classifications of legal and illegal, and even to different 'types' of illegality (Ranganathan, 2014).

If urban informality can be a source of accumulation for some groups, yet a source of survival for others, a greater focus on the political economy underlying social relationships will also illustrate whether and how there is scope for these processes and interactions to be redefined through practice, conflict, and negotiation – and will demonstrate the value in our conceptual lens. We now discuss three areas where significant theoretical and empirical developments appear to be taking place, which this interpretation of informality helps to highlight: state-society interactions and changing state

attitudes to informality; the significance of diverse actors' agency within both formality and informality; and informality as strategy for diverse groups.

3.1. State-society interactions and changing state attitudes to informality

One development in this field relates to the emergence of new continua that link the formal and informal, and which suggest that the blend of activities in many sectors where state and society come into contact – such as service provision, labour markets, and urban governance – is changing. This change has a number of different dimensions (some more recent than others); overall it may represent a change in the nature of being and doing formal and informal.

Attitudes to informality in service provision in the global South are changing. Kennedy-Walker, Amezaga, and Paterson (2015) analyse water and sanitation policy and programming in Lusaka (Zambia), highlighting the expectation that revenue will be raised through spatial expansion into informal settlements. In their contribution here, Mitlin and Walnycki (2019) show the ways in which public and private water suppliers are experimenting in four sub-Saharan African cities, in order to learn from informal supply processes and also to find ways of circumventing the regulatory obstacles that have previously constrained formal provision to 'informal' settlements. While such attempts may expand water access and reduce the scale of informal provision, they cannot address other vital aspects (most importantly, pricing) due to the tension between expanding water access and prioritising cost-recovery. The authors therefore conclude that market integration has occurred within a wider process of 'accumulation by inclusion' on the part of the state.

Waste management is a service that has been subject to considerable contestation. In some cases, a shift to formalisation is evidenced through low-income groups being excluded from traditional roles (for example Fahmi's [2005] study of the Zabaleen in Cairo). In contrast, informal recyclers in Brazil have been invited to participate in formal waste management services through establishing cooperatives of previously informal recyclers (Dias, 2016; Fergutz, Dias, & Mitlin, 2011). Harriss-White's (2019) exploration of the waste sector in small-town India illustrates the contributions a sector-wide approach can make to our analysis of urban informality. Her ethnographic methodology captures dynamics and experiences across the entire spectrum of waste workers, waste management processes, and waste authorities in a specific urban context. She finds evidence of dualist, legalist, and structuralist forms of informality at play simultaneously, illustrating how social and economic segmentation in the waste economy drives all three theorised relationships, as well as generating processes of accumulation for elites, and social marginalisation and precarity for low-paid vulnerable workers. She highlights the ways in which informal activity has been hard-wired into the state's business models to reduce costs, and the politics, bureaucratic architecture, and governance practices through which policy for waste is purposefully and strategically neglected, thereby directly and indirectly incentivising informality in the waste economy.

Her paper demonstrates the value of moving beyond a micro-scale analysis to also view urban processes at the city-level: a reconciliation that Schindler (2017, p. 56) predicts will be 'the next major breakthrough in Southern urban research'. This enables a view of relations between the formal and informal in the urban setting, in support of recognition and analysis of their significance to power in a given context.

Changing attitudes to informal labour markets and workers are also evident. In India, Agarwala (2013) argues that increasingly sophisticated responses by informal construction and bidi workers have secured a social wage to compensate for labour market informalisation in some states. Unable to secure wage increases due to changing labour relations and the difficulties of industrial action in the context of informalisation, workers have become more effective in their efforts to claim formal services from the state. The expansion of pension provision to informal sector workers in Brazil (Hu & Stewart, 2009) is also indicative of changing attitudes of government towards informal labour and the willingness to extend privileges previously reserved for formal employment. At the same time as the rights of informal workers have been recognised in the global South, pressures to reduce wage costs in competitive markets have arguably resulted in an increasingly informal labour market in the global North (with the rise of the 'gig

economy' and companies such as Uber and Airbnb); although legal challenges point to the deep ambiguities, contradictions, and contestations embedded within such shifts.

Further insights on changing state and citizen relations are provided by a literature analysing the co-production of goods and services, although this is rarely considered through the lens of formality and informality. Co-production may be understood as the formalisation of informal collaboration in service delivery between citizens and state, with consequential shifts in both state and citizen attitudes and behaviour. Watson (2014) argues that co-production has developed because formal relations with government planning processes have been inadequate.

While increased collaboration between organised citizenry and the state is frequently represented as positive for the urban poor, the reality is less straightforward. The growth in citizen participation in Indian government, for example, has been widely recognised as favouring higher income groups (Arabindoo, 2009; Ghertner, 2012; Harriss, 2006). Baiocchi, Heller and Silva's (2011) study of the benefits of participatory budgeting in eight Brazilian towns highlights the significance of specific patterns of institutionalisation in influencing the extent to which low-income groups secure their priorities. The ability of citizen groups to manage both formal and informal policies and their capacity to link to political parties while retaining a degree of autonomy are important here. In this context, negotiating the terms of co-production can usefully be recognised as a particular 'site of contestation' with various potential outcomes.

The strategic choices made by organised low-income citizens are linked to the limited options they face in contexts where clientelist politics often prevail (Auyero, 2000; Mitlin, 2014; Robins, 2008). Shand's (2015) analysis of community-city partnerships in Harare suggests that co-production may be used by both the state and communities as a strategy to advance the integration of the formal and informal (on the part of the authority) and to protect vulnerable households previously settled in informal neighbourhoods from formalisation on adverse terms (on the part of the community). He highlights complexities within governance debates. While a critical literature has argued that co-production has been associated with the de-politicisation of local government processes, it may also be the case that governance reforms legitimate the involvement of a much wider group of stakeholders in state processes, thereby opening up and changing political negotiations. The significance of such legitimisation should be recognised in a context in which informal status has been used to undermine the confidence and capabilities of low-income citizens.

3.2. The significance of diverse actors' agency

The agency of diverse actors involved in processes of urban informality has been a recurring theme throughout debates on urban informality, but has only recently been addressed more systematically (for example Recio, Mateo-Babiano, & Roitman, 2017). It is particularly important to our framing of informality given the political implications of this perspective, which highlights the agency of low-income groups (but also constraints to this), the importance of relations between different agents, and the significance of stigmatisation.

'Entrepreneurial' interpretations of urban informality recognise the political nature of low-income urban groups' 'quiet encroachment' into urban space (Bayat, 1997, 2000). Castells' (1983) influential account of autonomous communities in Mexico defending their right to organise their own services with support from government was one of the earliest attempts to frame informality as a political act in urban space. In seeking autonomy from the formal rules and regulations that make 'formal' urban living impossible to attain, and in seeking to consolidate, protect, and defend the settlements, services and employment opportunities that they have gained, 'actors [involved] became a counter force, without intending to be so' (Bayat, 1997, p. 53). At times, the 'politics of informality' may extend to episodic moments of open protest, collective mobilisation, and violence, as citizens organise to defend their encroachment into formal spaces as entrepreneurs or residents (Kudva, 2009). This perspective views informality as an agential response to adverse social, political, and economic environments, in contrast to earlier conceptualisations of the poor as politically passive members of a 'culture of poverty' (Lewis, 1967).

However, as Varley (2013) highlights, we should be wary of ascribing the generalised trope of 'informality as resistance' to all residents of informal settlements, and instead try to distinguish how different tactics enable them to survive in particular contexts, and whether and how these might help them challenge their oppression. Recognising that formality is a process that actively disadvantages low-income groups enables us to acknowledge informality as a 'site' in which both direct contestation against formality and other forms of resistance take place as residents struggle, on a day-to-day basis, to manage the failures of the formal.

We must also be careful not to over-glorify the 'heroic' nature of low-income groups' uses of urban informality to negotiate urban spaces, economies, and politics. Recognising the limitations of agency, particularly in relation to low-income groups, helps us to identify the ways in which this opposition is prevented through, for example, actual and symbolic violence. The mediation of state-citizen relationships in informal spaces by informal community leaders, service providers, or 'mafia groups' (amongst others) who have a vested interest in protecting their informal strategies of extraction and accumulation, often prevents more disadvantaged populations from addressing their needs and interests or securing improved citizenship rights. In the context of Dhaka's informal settlements, Banks (2016) highlights the difference between residents with accumulation networks and those with survival networks in terms of opportunities for advancement and 'getting ahead'. Those benefiting from accumulation strategies do so through acting as brokers, managing relations between state and society, and between formal and informal. It is through intermediation between residents of informal settlements and powerful external individuals or institutions (for example utility companies, local politicians, or big business) that they find channels to secure, consolidate, and protect their financial, social, and political gains. In the process they create barriers of exclusion, preventing others' entry into or disturbance of these lucrative economic activities, as well as constraining the ability of low-income households to make livelihood-related investments. Costly household investments in assets or training to improve their livelihoods opportunities are wasted without the political connections needed to translate these investments into increased incomes and capital accumulation.

These complex relations between the state and urban citizens, while a central component of urban informality, may be obscured by a focus on the immediate outcomes (for example higher prices, poor quality) or settings (for example market places, informal settlements) of informal service provision, shelter, or employment. Once again, this underlines the need for a multi-scalar perspective on urban informality that allows us to systematically explore its political economy and associated social relationships within discrete urban contexts.

Our analysis of the changing designations of formal and informal must also recognise the continuing weight of these designations. The significance of informality being a site of critical analysis lies in part in its association with an inferior social status. In towns and cities of the global South, modernity continues to be associated with the formalisation of economic and residency status, while informality is designated as a sign of 'backwardness' and of secondary social status, even if the specific merits of informal livelihoods and residency are recognised. This reflects attitudes prevalent during the colonial and post-colonial periods, and perceptions that development would replicate processes then observed in the global North. Despite neoliberalism's emphasis on the rolling back of the state in later decades, the association of development, modernity, and formality remained. In part this acknowledges the continuing significance of the state in setting the rules required for markets to 'work'.

The value placed on formality provides a legitimation of state presence and its associated activities, based in no small part on historical experiences in colonised countries that established the association between formality and superiority. In terms of economic activity and spatial settlement, the nexus of formal, moral value (associated with order), and safety and cleanliness was reinforced, and set against informality, disorder, and dirt (Burke, 1996; King, 1976; Nations & King, 1996; Songsore & McGranahan, 1998). With the idea of the 'formal as superior' established, the likelihood that populations will absorb and own that message increases. Informality thus becomes a mechanism to strengthen elite governmentalities and associated discourses, perpetuating given hierarchies. While

recognising the significance of diverse actors' agency, therefore, we have to reconcile the limitations to that agency for the lowest-income groups as a direct result of their informal designation, with the strategies and processes used by more powerful actors (both formal and informal) further up the social and political hierarchy.

3.3. Informality as strategy for diverse groups

In keeping with the literature in this area, we have shown that simplistic dichotomies must be critiqued for focusing on the urban subaltern who are often viewed as 'the informal', thereby overlooking the broader range of actors and processes involved in the creation and maintenance of urban informality. Instead, thinking about the social and political relations that underpin urban informality allows a more detailed and complex account of 'winners' and 'losers', in terms of opportunities for accumulation, and ultimately the use of informality as a strategy by diverse groups in an urban setting – which may include criminal actors as well as urban elites and low-income citizens.

Indeed, an important contribution to this perspective is found in the growing body of literature on business elites and 'mafia-like' groups in cities of the global South. Case studies from Lagos, Mumbai, and Bangalore illuminate the ways in which such groups as the transport *agberos* in Lagos (Agbibo, 2018), Mumbai's 'development mafia' (Weinstein, 2008), and the 'water mafia' in Bangalore (Ranganathan, 2014) become part of Roy's 'organising urban logic'. McFarlane's (2012) account of big property developers not conforming to building regulations in Mumbai also illustrates the ways in which elite social, political, or economic groups can position themselves within the political economy of urban informality in ways that allow them to benefit from a lack of (enforcement of) formal rules and regulations, or from their ability to circumvent existing rules and regulations through financial or muscle power or the right social and political connections.

Understanding such groups' actions and practices, and the implications of these on urban residents, is one important side of the story here. But so too is understanding where these groups' power comes from, particularly relating to violence (or the threat of it), and complex relationships with police and powerful state actors that secure these groups' legitimacy and instil their 'untouchable' status so that their processes of informal accumulation can continue. Agbibo's study of transport *agberos* illuminates the deep political nature of relationships at the root of processes of accumulation that prop up a widespread network of transport touts in Lagos, collecting an estimated \$30,000 a day of tolls. This collection represents a 'trickle-up economy' that lines the pockets of a much denser network of urban stakeholders, including police inspectors, local council chairmen, and political party officials. Political support as well as economic exchange underlines the *agberos*' political legitimacy, their continued dominance of these urban spaces and their ability to withstand the pressures of city reform. Not only do their proceeds directly fund state electoral campaigns, but *agberos* are also important actors in these, using similar tactics of thuggery, intimidation, and violence to influence voters and voting behaviours.

The relationships that cement and consolidate power in these ways are often hidden, but similar social and political relationships rooted in financial exchange and political support are also found in other examples of organised crime or mafia groups. Alongside 'hefty bribes' and political support, Weinstein's (2008) historical analysis of the rise in organised crime in Mumbai reveals a third factor underlining state support for – or willingness to turn a blind eye to – informal practices: these practices also fulfil important responsibilities that the state is unwilling or unable to fulfil. Emerging in the 1950s through providing housing and basic services within densely-populated squatter settlements, the state chose to 'supportively neglect' these early activities because they helped to address the city's housing shortage with minimal expenditure. Over time, the scale and nature of organised criminal groups' activities changed alongside their strengthened political ties: the state continues to 'supportively neglect' the development mafia's various large urban development schemes – despite land being acquired and developed illegally – as by providing shopping centres and high-end

developments, they are also leveraging Mumbai's competitive position and helping it to achieve 'world city' goals (Weinstein, 2008).

Bangalore's water mafia similarly emerged in collusion with state institutions, rather than in response to state absence or failure (as mainstream narratives often suggest) (Ranganathan, 2014). In a similar vein, Swyngedouw (2004) and Rahman (2008) explore the accumulation strategies of informal water suppliers in Guayaquil and Karachi respectively, and the means through which these are initiated, consolidated, maintained, and protected. Urban informality in this context is not just about living in areas designated as 'unauthorised', or about receiving alternative and informal water supplies. It is also about the deliberate and organised forms of water scarcity that enable parallel informal supplies for private gain, backed up by a complex coalition of 'thugs', local politicians, and water department employees. These, and other examples, speak to the notion that informal urbanism is used as a strategy in economic, spatial, and political domains by the urban elite as much as by residents of informal settlements (Roy, 2009, 2011; Varley, 2013; Vasudevan, 2015).

Informal systems may be highly regulated, although not by the state; alternatively, they may be state-regulated, but poorly enforced, as in Roy's (2009) argument that India's planning regime is itself an informalised entity characterised by deregulation, ambiguity, and exception. Here, seeing informality as a state of exception is useful because it emphasises the scale of negotiation – but this does not mean there are no rules. Indeed, representations of exceptionalism are key to the exercise of (il)legitimacy, and such 'exception' is very much a part of the everyday politics practiced by cities across the global South. As these examples show, putting the majority of city residents under a type of rule that can be termed a 'lasting state of exception' also necessitates processes of intermediated citizenship; a brokerage relationship that allows more powerful actors to instil processes of accumulation that offer private gain and further consolidation of power, authority, and legitimacy (Goldman, 2011). Through their intermediation between state and society for marginalised or low-income residents, they also prevent more just (or less exploitative) alternatives from being found.

The 'losers' are seen as those on the 'wrong side' of rules and regulations who lack the power to negotiate around them. There is a tendency for those who have most to lose to also be most vulnerable (with little recourse) to state enforcement and 'crackdowns' on urban informality. The 'losers' also experience higher prices for similar or worse services. We can find many examples reflected in the literature in both residential and economic spheres about state-driven 'wars of attrition' against informality, with clamp-downs leading to small and large-scale evictions of informal settlements and businesses (see Simon, 2015 on Operation Murambatsvina; and Bhan, 2009 on Delhi). As we touched upon in the previous section, the stigmatisation and value judgements which occur on the basis of informal status are significant. This highlights the notion that urban informality is not just a study of the urban poor or urban subaltern groups: beyond poverty, there is a strong linkage with inequalities in power (political) and resources (economic and spatial), which determine who can speak or negotiate and who is heard. The important question to ask, as Roy (2009) highlights, is why some forms of informality are criminalised and rendered illegal (and subject to eviction) while others enjoy state sanction or are even practices of the state?

However, we should be equally wary of the widespread yet overly simplistic notion of the powerful using informality to their advantage. As highlighted throughout this section, we suggest that any investigation of informality must account for the relationship between citizens and the state: in other words, the terms of integration into state rules and regulations. The state's reaction to different 'types' or instances of informality may range from tolerance to accommodation to demolition – or even to covert or explicit partnership, in the case of some of the 'winners' we highlight above. In most of the examples mentioned here, these groups have strong and historical links to state parties or officials. Exploring the reasons behind these different stances and behaviours must be critical to any analysis of informality, alongside an understanding of the nature of and heterogeneity within these relationships, focusing on who can benefit from them (in terms of accumulation/political support/appropriation/negotiation/avoidance around 'excessive' or inconvenient legislation) and who loses out as a result of them. This perspective also highlights the need to revisit commonly proposed 'solutions' to informality, looking beyond formalisation and regulation to possibilities for negotiating

more advantageous terms of inclusion. Incorporating the ‘informal’ may require bringing it into the formal in ways that reflect the nature of informal processes in terms of flexibility, and its incremental and context-specific nature.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the political – alongside debates about spatial and economic informality – highlights the extent to which notions of space and economy are still dominated by the formal. As Goodfellow (2019) suggests, the informal aspect to politics has long been recognised. Exploring the ways in which political informality has shaped – and continues to shape – Kampala’s development, he develops a four-fold typology of informal politics that he then applies to changes in the context of Kampala’s marketplaces over the past two decades. Understanding changes, he argues, requires an exploration of the shifting balance of power and politics between vendors, tycoons, and state actors. Moves towards privatisation brought new and powerful actors (business entrepreneurs) into the fold, curtailing the previous successes vendors had experienced in renegotiating their marketplace terms through formal channels. His case study illuminates the ways in which urban spaces and politics become important political bargaining chips in national and municipal contests over power and popularity. Over time, he details, this ‘elite-level, anti-formal politics’ (and the increasing political penetration into the marketplaces that accompanied this) disintegrated the trust networks through which vendors previously mobilised and organised around, dividing and disordering them, and dampening protest – effectively stripping the marketplace of any systemised form of politics through which vendors could negotiate value.

While our analysis emphasises a multiplicity of activities and interpretations in terms of the strategic uses of informality by different groups, we must also recognise that the ‘state of exception’ highlighted by Roy (2005) may be associated with attempts by formal agencies to extend support to disadvantaged groups seeking advancement. Sites and services programmes, for example, sought to replicate informal subdivision and increase the affordability of government programmes (Buckley & Kalarickal, 2006). While some accounts highlight the difficulties formal agencies face in this, given their institutionalised logics of operation (Parnell & Hart, 1999), a further generation of efforts have better understood how to offer institutionalised support to low-income groups while minimising the conditionalities related to formalisation. Urban development efforts in Thailand (Boonyabanha, 2009) and Pakistan (Hasan, 2008) are notable here, alongside land reform and titling processes in Mexico (Lombard, 2015) and Brazil (Fernandes, 2011). The designation by Nairobi County (the city authority) of a special planning area for Mukuru informal settlement in Nairobi is another recent example; through this provision formal rules and regulations have been lifted, creating possibilities for new development trajectories to emerge (Lines & Makau, 2018).

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented an historically-informed account of debates on informality, integrated with evidence of new empirical tendencies in this field. This has led us to propose a renewed understanding of informality, not as a distinct category, sector, or outcome, but as a site of critical analysis, drawing on and extending political economic analysis in specific urban contexts. We started from a focus on the three domains of economic, spatial, and political informality, but proposed that looking *within* and *across* these domains allows a more complex and nuanced view of the social and political relationships through which these function. This suggests moving beyond an analysis of low-income and/or marginalised groups that rely on informal activities, resources, and relationships for their shelter, political, and economic needs, to instead carry out a differentiated analysis of the actors operating within the spaces of urban informality. In particular, we highlighted the need to explore how excluded groups or areas are otherwise connected to the governance processes, basic commodities, or means for making a living that they must rely upon to survive and advance their interests; but also how other, diverse groups might exploit spaces of informality for their own ends. In other words, we argue for bringing together an understanding of informality as an opportunity for accumulation with concerns about inequality, in order to understand how the benefits secured through these informal processes are distributed across different interest groups. In fact, we suggest that the separation of economic, spatial, and political spheres is an unhelpful segmentation which risks

overlooking the central role of the political economy – and the social and political relationships underpinning this – in constructing urban informality across urban space and society.

The concept of urban informality has been a central focus within studies of the urban since it was first observed. Although theoretical debates have heavily critiqued and attempted to move beyond the formal/informal dichotomy, in policy and practice this retains relevance. We have drawn upon recent research and the new empirical contributions in this issue to argue for a revised conceptual understanding of urban informality, building upon more recent scholarship (McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2005, 2009; Simone, 2011) that argues for new ways of understanding how informal and formal actions relate to each other across different urban spaces and groups. While the political economy of urban informality has not previously been ignored, its significance has perhaps been obscured by the narrow focus that studies of urban informality have often taken, across particular sectors, settings, or outcomes. This is especially the case from economic and spatial perspectives.

We argue here that seeing urban informality as a site of critical analysis across economic, spatial, and political domains allows us to better understand power in context and to apply theories of informality more clearly to the complex and messy empirical realities that they relate to. This requires moving away from viewing and analysing urban informality within particular sectors or settings or across particular outcomes, which has resulted in a tendency to discuss urban informality as primarily associated with the urban poor, those who live, work, and access services, rights, and entitlements through informal channels and informal sectors.

Moving towards a deeper political economic analysis of urban informality in which local, municipal, and national political economies take centre stage is important, as it suggests a more systematic exploration of the social and political relationships within and between the state and multiple sets of actors across these spaces. This allows for a more detailed account of urban informality's 'winners' as well as 'losers': the former includes those advantaged by their ability to be selectively 'informal' to meet their own ends (for example, to gain or protect social and political power, to maximise profit, or to avoid costly planning or tax systems), while the latter includes those disadvantaged by their inability to live and work formally. Seeing urban informality as a site of critical analysis in this way allows us to bring together an understanding of urban informality with concerns of inequality, to see how opportunities are opened and closed (and to whom), and to understand how the processes underpinning economic, social, and political inequality emerge and consolidate. A multi-scalar perspective is imperative if we are to take account of the broader spectrum of actors involved in urban informality and to understand how their roles, relationships, and strategies offer opportunities for extraction, exploitation, and exclusion for different groups, across different domains, but also in specific contexts. As demonstrated by the contributions of Goodfellow (2019) and Harriss-White and (2019) their rich empirical detail, the specificities of informal strategies are embedded in social processes that reflect both historical context and the political economic pressures and sub-structures of the present.

Applying our conceptualisation of urban informality as a site of critical analysis to recent research and the contributions presented here, we highlighted three emerging developments. Firstly, changing attitudes to informality, framed in terms of state-society interactions and the ways in which a blend of activities along an informal-formal continuum is changing, with implications for urban poor and elite groups. Rarely is the 'informal' a space marked by the absence of the state, and this is particularly evident in Harriss-White's (2019) contribution that highlights how informal activity is hardwired into the State's business models to reduce cost, thereby directly and indirectly incentivising informality in the waste economy. In their four city contexts, too, Mitlin and Walnycki (2019) highlight the ways in which the state itself is learning from informal service provision.

Secondly, we highlight the increasing salience of the agency of diverse groups of actors within informal processes and practices. This in part marks a continuation of longstanding academic research into the ways in which disadvantaged urban populations find ways to live and make a living in the city (Bayat, 1997, 2000; Castells, 1983). We extend this lens to also highlight the limitations to that agency for certain groups: for the urban poor, informality may be subject to renegotiation, but the underlying rules of the game shaped by more powerful actors means there are limits to this.

Thirdly, our new conceptualisation highlights practices and representations of informality as strategy for elite, as well as subaltern groups, putting into play the idea of both ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of urban informality. Case studies of organised-crime groups and business elites illuminate the ways in which powerful non-state actors position themselves to carve out or take advantage of informal spaces (Agbibo, 2018; McFarlane, 2012; Ranganathan, 2014; Weinstein, 2008). Where these differ is in whether strategies and actions help individuals or groups to get by, or can be used as the basis for accumulation. We see that the same social and political relationships that more powerful actors broker to instil processes of accumulation simultaneously prevent more just (or less exploitative) alternatives from being found for more disadvantaged groups. In our attempts to understand social and political relationships within and between the state and multiple sets of actors across different urban spaces and domains, we see that urban informality is complex, messy, and changing; competing social and political processes and contestations are taking place across different levels, at different times.

Despite often being hidden, as Goodfellow (2019) points out in his contribution here, it is these informal processes, and the informal politics that underline these, that shape urban development in many parts of the global South, as much as – if not more than – formal political institutions or interventions. It is here that conceptualisations of informality struggle to bridge the ongoing disjuncture between theories and realities of informality. The realities of informality are often hard to identify, due to the low status, illegal or hidden nature, or semi-formalised representation of informal practices and processes. When informality is practiced by the wealthy and powerful they are frequently keen to keep it hidden. This final consideration reaffirms our belief that for future research, the most productive theoretical engagements with urban informality will be those which take it as a starting point for critical exploration of the relationships, attitudes, agency, and strategies which it defines, rather than seeing it as a setting, sector, or outcome. Only then can we reveal deeper insight into the broader spectrum of actors involved in urban informality, including their roles, relationships, and strategies and how these simultaneously offer opportunities for extraction, exploitation, and exclusion for different groups, across different domains.

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