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BOOK REVIEWS

Urban Informalities. Reflections on the Formal and Informal,
by Colin McFarlane and Michael Waibel. London and New
York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 201.

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McFarlane and Waibel's edited book reflects on both the informal and formal through its ten chapters with the aim to "critically interrogate the utility of the formal/informal urban divide" (p. 1). Following this, the volume strongly builds on the pioneering work of Roy and Al Sayyad (2004) and Roy (2005, 2009), who argued to understand informality as a mode of urbanisation, instead of referring it to a specific sector, territory, or status. As most chapters incorporate this notion of informality, the volume's strength might not lie in its conceptual novelty, but rather in its illustrative case studies that offer interesting and multifaceted empirical insights. Put together, the diverse local contexts and topics allow the reader to overcome traditional black-and-white concepts that saw informality as a temporary exception that would disappear through development. Hence, the case studies that deal, among others, with the everyday experiences of street traders, shantytown dwellers, and food wholesalers, help to imagine informality as a *mode*, as something that is constantly negotiable and that lies *within* the scope of the state.

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In this regard, the three most useful chapters are those by Kurfürst, Arabindoo, and Keck, which deal with food and street vending. They embed their analyses in complex local settings and histories, thus, trying to dismantle how informality is used, produced, and shaped beyond simplistic categorisations. As such, Kurfürst shows how the negotiable status of street vending in Hanoi has changed over time and at various levels. She succeeds in distinguishing macro-economic forces, international, local, and central politics, traders' everyday resistance, as well as shifting cultural norms as elements of a complex matrix through which hawkers' degree of informality has continuously alternated. Likewise, Arabindoo elaborates on the shifting perception of street vending by the Indian middle class. While blaming street vendors for their negative environmental impact, the middle class conceptualise informality as the anti-thesis of an emerging Indian 'world-class' city that is nothing more than an idealised middle-class status symbol. In fact, the public accusation of street vendors hides own non-formal (but tolerated and accepted) practices that are likely to have an even stronger negative impact on the environment. The third chapter that deals with food – Keck's analysis of wholesalers – is also convincing in its related argument that informality is rather a label that governments use to keep a status of uncertainty for political reasons. Thus, one may speak about a changing legitimacy of informality that is behind numerous practices trying to cope with prevailing uncertainty.

Hence, what may come out of these three chapters is that in an urban context where formality is the exception, informality is a flexible and negotiable label rather than being a defined status or the outcome of state incapacities. In all three cases, powerful actors use this notion in an arbitrary way to dispraise particular groups and activities that do not fit *their* image of a modern urban 'world-class'.

Gandhi's ethnographic chapter on Old Delhi describes similar practices. He underlines that "the state does not lack the means to intervene" (p. 62), but prefers to create conditions that could be called at the same time flexible and stable. Hence, the system of negotiating informality builds on informal brokers and middlemen that mediate between the poor and the state, insuring security for the former while keeping flexible ways of intervention for the latter – in addition to bribes and votes. To some extent in a similar way, the chapter by Demirtaş-Milz presents the dynamic politics of the Turkish *gecekondu* (shantytown) as the scene of negotiations about formalisation processes. However, the author misses the opportunity to challenge (or reject) the dualism formal/informal and to critically investigate on the effects of formalisation policies on the perception of the *gecekondu* as an informal place.

Although the book has the stated objective to overcome the informal/formal divide, seeing informality as a mode of urbanisation by rejecting its simplistic association with poverty or state incapacity, some chapters do not follow this path. Ley, for example, does not challenge the notion of informality within housing production of the urban poor in South Africa, focusing mainly on institutionalised forms of citizen participation. Although she underlines that informality may be an integral element of planning, the terms informal and formal appear rather as static categories. The chapter of da Silva and Shaw is also rather loosely connected to the overall aim of the book. However, the authors present an illustrative ethnographic analysis of hip-hop culture in Brazilian *favelas*. They describe it as a form of mediation between the formal state and related economic forces of cultural appropriation on the one hand, and the informally institutionalised forms of gang violence on the other hand.

The book ends with two more conceptual contributions that rather stand in opposition to the volume's general approval of Roy's conceptualisation of informality as a mode of urbanisation that lies within the scope of the state. Kreibich's argument that, in fragile states, informality continues to appear because of state incapacity gets a bit lost, as he jumps much too quickly and carelessly from one urban context to the other. The lack of contextual embeddedness ultimately leads to a traditional understanding of informality that confuses it with poverty, anarchy, and a lack of state power. This is rather surprising at the end of a volume that started with the objective of challenging exactly this conceptualisation of informality. Likewise, Altrock's final chapter is not situated in a particular urban context but aims at a structural differentiation of the formal-informal continuum based on institution theory. Following the empirical chapters of the volume, strong doubts emerge whether such generalisation offer added-value to the question of how the label of informality is negotiated, mobilised and contested in planning, governance, and people's everyday experiences.

Except for the rather confusing chapters of Kreibich and Altrock, the edited volume provides the reader with interesting and illustrative empirical case studies that shed light on the complexities and flexibilities of urban informality. However, excluding Keck's chapter that deals with relatively well-off wholesalers, the other contributions remain limited to traditional spheres of informal urbanisation, meaning self-built housing and street vending. In support of Roy's argument that informality is not an exceptional form of urbanisation that merely affects the urban poor, the reader would have loved to read more about informal practices in high-end urbanism.

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