

MAPPING THE CONCEPTUAL CONTOURS OF THE INFORMAL ECONOMIC SECTOR

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Abstract: The informal economies of the developing world are acquiring ever greater salience for researchers and policy-makers. This is borne out by a recent resurgence of interest in these clusters of economic activity which thrive 'below the radar screen' of officialdom. This article provides a description of the informal sector and uncovers its origins in the 'scholarly imaginary'. The article argues that economic formalisation is inextricably bound up with the processes of modernisation and that formalisation can be subsumed under the rubric of 'statecraft'. Although the informal is logically prior to the formal, once formality has been institutionalised it depends on de facto informal practices for it to function optimally. There is some disagreement amongst scholars about the suitability of the 'informal' epithet and many alternative labels are used. The differing theoretical understandings of the informal sector in the literature are examined before focussing on some of the semantic and conceptual distinctions which inform the current discourse. Four primary categories of research questions are then posited and these are disaggregated to reflect the most urgent issue-areas confronting those bureaucrats, businessmen and researchers who wish to come to terms with the phenomenon of informal economies in today's world.

Key phrases: *dual economy; informal economy; informal sector; policy making; second economy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a marked resurgence of interest in the world's burgeoning informal sector over the last few years. This review article is concerned to articulate what exactly it is that scholars refer to when they speak of the 'informal sector' or the 'informal economy' and to highlight some of the misconceptions which may arise when these descriptors are applied without due aforethought. The article begins with some recent descriptions of the sector before outlining the origins of the concept of informality. The discussion then turns to the various ways the informal sector is conceptualised in the scholarly literature before honing in on a few important semantic and conceptual distinctions which inform that literature.

The article proposes that research questions vis-à-vis the informal sector can be grouped into four main categories. It then proceeds to disaggregate these categories to show how they accommodate many of the more pressing questions facing policy-makers, planners and researchers concerned to map the contours of the informal economy phenomenon.

2. ORIENTATION

It is estimated by the OECD that about 1.8-billion people – half the world’s workforce – operate within the informal economy and that by 2020 this proportion will have increased to two-thirds (Jutting & De Laiglesia 2009:19-20; Neuwirth 2011:18-19). “The informal economy is back in the news and there is now renewed interest in its role in promoting growth and in reducing poverty,” declares Dan Banik (2011:1). According to Neuwirth (2011:16): “There is another economy out there... its edges are diffuse and it disappears the moment you try to catch it. It stands beyond the law, yet is deeply entwined with the legally recognised business world. It is based on small sales and tiny increments of profit, yet it produces cumulatively, a huge amount of wealth. It is massive yet disparaged, open yet feared, microscopic yet global. It is how much of the world survives ... yet it is ignored by most economists, business leaders, and politicians.”

Jerven (2013:47-49, 113), in a stringent critique of the reliability of African Gross Domestic Product (GDP) statistics, observes of the informal economic sector that it constitutes the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’ when GDP figures for sub-Saharan countries are being computed. He reports that, “the most significant event to affect the reliability of data in the postcolonial period was the informalisation of economic activities” and argues that “this seriously undermines our ability to compare the wealth and progress of African economies today” with the result that “the most recent growth data are the result of negotiated prognosis” (Jerven 2013:53). Assumptions about the growth or decline of the informal economy have oscillated, often quite arbitrarily, between quantifying it as having grown in tandem with the formal economy to calculating it as having decreased in inverse proportion to the growth of the formal sector (Jerven 2013:48). Jerven (2013:40) quotes the economist Douglas Rimmer to the effect that it took him a long time to, “fully realise the significance of the parallel, unenumerated economy that is to be found everywhere [in Africa] and that in some African countries has at times overshadowed the formalised economy.”

The informal economy has been typified as “the ingenuity economy, the economy of improvisation and self-reliance, the do-it-yourself economy” (Neuwirth 2011:17). Neuwirth

(2011:18-19) continues that: “It is a product of intelligence, resilience, self-organisation, and group solidarity, and it follows a number of well-worn though unwritten rules.” Neuwirth adds that “it was the economy of desperation” but observes that as trade has expanded and globalised the informal sector has scaled up accordingly to the point where nowadays it is “the economy of aspiration. It is where the jobs are.”

This review article provides a selective overview of the literature pertaining to the informal economic sector and attempts to isolate some of the main themes informing this body of scholarship.

3. ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT

There appear to be two strands of opinion as to the actual origin of the informality concept. The first dates the scholarly identification of the sector to 1942 when J.H. Boeke, a Dutch anthropologist, published *Economies and economic policy in dual societies*. Boeke articulated “a vision of a developing economy as a ‘dual’ economy, comprised of the market economy part of the world and a part which lay outside.” Boeke’s ‘dual’ construct was taken up and elaborated upon by Arthur Lewis in the 1950s and by development economists Harris and Todaro in a “two sector framework of equilibrium economics” in 1970 (Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur & Ostrom 2006:1).

A second school of thought proffers a more truncated genealogy and credits another anthropologist (British this time), Keith Hart, with having originated the concept (Banik 2011:1; Jerven 2013:48; Neuwirth 2011:20). It was Hart who coined the term ‘informal economy’ in his 1973 paper “Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana” and who is believed to have introduced the concept to “development studies more generally” (Guha-Khasnobis *et al.* 2006:1). Allied with a 1972 publication produced by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) about employment in Kenya, Hart’s work is said to have “established the importance of the [formal-informal] dichotomy, and led to an outpouring of research and policy focus” (Guha-Khasnobis *et al.* 2006:1).

According to Banik (2011:1), “after an initial period of popularity in the 1970s, and increasing use of the [informal economy] term in policymaking and academic circles in the 1980s and 1990s, its importance in the development vocabulary has gradually waned” until now when it is once again enjoying a resurgence. This assertion of Banik’s is difficult to reconcile with the World Bank’s prolific informal sector research outputs throughout the 1990s and up until the present day. Banik himself does not reference any of these outputs. The World Bank has been a major source of scholarship focussed on the informal economy (see for example Oviedo, Thomas & Karakurum-Ozdemir 2009; Perry, Maloney, Arias, Fajnzylber, Mason & Saavedra-Chanduvi 2007).

Interestingly enough the very earliest available World Bank report on the informal sector (Mazumdar 1974), which appears to have been produced on a roneo machine, makes no reference to Todaro, Boeke or Hart and yet uses the term ‘informal sector’ as though it were already a well-entrenched concept in the discourse.

4. CONCEPTUAL INTRODUCTION

From a meta-analytical perspective all debates about the informal economic sector can be situated within an overarching paradigm of ‘statecraft’ – or of what might be termed ‘the project of modernisation’. If ‘development’ can be argued to be the inculcation of values and practices which resonate with those of modernity, then informal economic sector debates are quintessentially *developmental* questions. According to Shorrocks and Soder (quoted in Guha-Khasnobis *et al.* 2006:v): “The distinction between formal and informal organisations remains central to the theory and practice of development more than half a century after the concepts of formality and informality were first defined and discussed. The distinction influences the way that statistical services collect data on developing countries, the development of theoretical and empirical analyses and, most important, the formulation and implementation of policies.”

The dynamics and the contours of the modernisation paradigm are very clearly delineated in James C. Scott’s (1998) seminal work, *Seeing like a state*. What the state is pre-eminently concerned with is the *visibility* and *legibility* of the citizenry and of its arena of operations. It is a sign of the strength of a state that it can accurately account

for its assets and its people. As Jerven (2013:112) observes, apropos of the accurate reporting of GDP: “the measure may be interpreted as an indicator of the power of a state. It expresses how much a state knows about itself, and this ability to know and to monitor is a direct measure of state power and may also be related to state legitimacy.”

The state, most especially its planners, is always involved in simplification exercises to try and get a grip on what it needs to know. According to Scott (1998:183): “Legibility is a condition of manipulation. Any substantial state intervention in society... requires the invention of units that are visible... Whatever the units being manipulated, they must be organised in a manner that permits them to be identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated and monitored... the greater the manipulation envisaged, the greater the legibility required to effect it.”

These elements are in their turn the preconditions for formality to take root. This formality is: “... the great achievement of modern statecraft. How hard-won and tenuous this achievement was is worth emphasising. Most states... are ‘younger’ than the societies that they purport to administer. States therefore confront patterns of settlement, social relations, and production, not to mention a natural environment, that have evolved largely independent of state plans. The result is typically a diversity, complexity, and unrepeatability of social forms that are relatively opaque to the state, *often purposely so*” (Scott 1998:183-4) [italics added].

The fragility of formality in certain contexts is well illustrated by Jerven’s (2013:45-47) account of the so-called “lost decades” of African development in the 1980s and 1990s. Jerven recounts that in Zambia national accounts reports simply ceased appearing after 1973 to the extent that, 34 years later, officials from the country’s Central Statistical Office were unable to say whether they had been mislaid or simply never produced. In Uganda “the formal economy collapsed in the late 1970s” and was replaced by an “untaxed economy”. No duties were collected on imports and exports, so the Ugandan government lost all “financial interest in documenting cross-border trade” (Jerven 2013:46,51). In 2004 it was reported of Cameroon and Mozambique that “the national

accounts do not record either the volume or the value of the exports, nor the tax and customs revenue” (Jerven 2013:47).

Conceptually speaking it must be borne in mind that the informal is *logically prior* to the formal (Neuwirth 2011:24). It is not a ‘chicken and the egg’ scenario. The informal is the ‘natural’ default Hobbesian state of affairs out of which formality arises. This condition of formality may be as a result of an evolution going back centuries, as is the case with much of the developed world or, alternatively, the result of a sudden convulsion of accelerated modernising (nearly always with catastrophic outcomes) as typified by Stalin’s enforced collectivisation of the peasantry (Werth 2007), Mao’s Great Leap Forward (Dikotter 2010), or Nyerere’s *ujamaa* experiment in Tanzania (Calderisi 2006:103-113; Scott 1998). It can also be imported via colonisation, conquest or as a consequence of globalisation pressures.

Although the informal is logically prior to formality *at source* it must be emphasised that, as already illustrated, formality can ‘degenerate’ (the word is used advisedly here as a move in the direction of informality can sometimes represent an advance on an existing state of affairs) into informality, for example as a result of war, revolution, independence, or a government losing its hold on its people. Sometimes, as instanced by the public transport sector in Nigeria, the state voluntarily relinquishes its responsibility for a function and simply abandons it to the private (and largely informal) sector (Neuwirth 2011:47-48). Again, it may be the case that: “A lack of opportunities in the formal sector can... be consistent with the voluntary exit of formal sector workers, if the marginal benefits (that is, wages) of informal and formal sector jobs are equal. The main distinction between exit and exclusion depends on whether formal sector jobs make workers better off relative to informal jobs” (Oviedo *et al.* 2009:21).

The fact of informality’s being logically prior to formality must not be interpreted as implying that informality is more desirable or necessarily better. The evolution of tax collection from informally enforced tribute on pain of death or enslavement, to the modern day systems of PAYE or VAT, bears stark testimony to that.

The consequences of formality may be largely benign (for example as in generous 'welfare states') or positively vicious (citizens being set to inform on one another as in North Korea). Formality is not incompatible with a very considerable degree of individual discretion and freedom (as in Denmark for example) although it can also find expression in the extreme levels of repression endured in totalitarian states whose version of 'enlightened' modernity is a grotesque counterfeit. But as Neuwirth (2011:183) observes: "Ideology... is not the issue in the economic underground."

Any formal system is shot through with informal practices (improvisations, bending the rules, short cuts etc.) and without which it would soon grind to a halt. Even Adam Smith averred that: "Merchants engaged in the hazardous projects of trade, all tremble at the thoughts of being obliged, at all times, to expose the real state of their circumstances... the miscarriage of their projects, they foresee, would too often be the consequence" (Neuwirth 2011:17). There is therefore no such thing as unalloyed formality (Chen 2006:77). The image here is of the intimate intertwining of the strands of the DNA helix. As Scott (1998:6) has observed: "Designed or planned social order is necessarily schematic; it always ignores essential features of any real, functioning social order. This truth is best illustrated in a work-to-rule strike, which turns on the fact that any production process depends on a host of informal practices and improvisations that could never be codified. By merely following the rules meticulously, the workforce can virtually halt production."

The inter-dependency of the formal and the informal is further elucidated by Scott (1998:351-2) who avers that: "Collectivised command economies virtually everywhere have limped along thanks to the often desperate improvisation of an informal economy wholly outside its schemata... all socially engineered systems of formal order are in fact subsystems of a larger system on which they are ultimately dependent, not to say parasitic." These systems of formal order may be dependent on an array of autonomous informal or antecedent processes which are not maintained or brought into being by the formal system. Scott points out the degree to which many cities in the developed world rely on essential services provided by slum dwellers in order to function. Formal

command economies are undergirded by a plethora of minor commercial transactions that are, strictly speaking, illegal. The formal economy's social concomitants (pension systems, social security, and medical benefits) are typically "underwritten by a mobile, floating population with few of these protections."

The 'dualistic' conception of the informal sector, whereby it is theorised as being essentially separate from a "dynamic, progressive, perhaps capital intensive" formal sector, has been subjected to criticism by Deborah Potts (2008:151-153) who adduces the example of Zambia to show that "the relationship between the formal and informal sectors in the cities has been complex and decidedly not one of disconnection."

5. SEMANTIC AND CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Although the formal and the informal require one another for self-definition it seems perverse, and is perhaps indicative of a modernist bias, that that which came first (the informal) should be labelled as the negation of that which came later. This is why some scholars have taken to eschewing the term altogether and talk in terms of some other formulation – the 'second economy', the 'subsistence economy' or 'System D' for example (Neuwirth 2011:25). Neuwirth (2011:25) reports that even Keith Hart came to have reservations about the 'informal' tag. He quotes Hart as saying that: "The label 'informal' may be popular because it is negative. It says what people are not doing – not wearing conventional dress, not being regulated by the state – but it does not point to any active principles they may have for doing it. It is a passive and conservative concept that acknowledges a world outside the bureaucracy, but endows it with no positive identity."

In the South African context it should be noted that the 'second economy' so often referred to is not necessarily coterminous with the informal sector although it may contain "an informal or microenterprise sector of small traders, artisans and service providers" (DBSA 2005:13). The semantic delicacy that is such a feature of the literature can sometimes descend into pedantic hair-splitting. Neuwirth (2011:20) for instance attributes the formulation of the term 'informal *economy*' to Keith Hart in 1973 (Hart apparently intended it non-judgmentally) whereas Banik (2011:1) claims that Hart

introduced the term ‘informal *sector*’ and that “the informal sector has since then been replaced by the broader term ‘informal *economy*’”. It is difficult to see why so much is made to ride on these distinctions although Banik’s claim is consistent with an ongoing endeavour within academia to expand or amplify the concept of the informal sector to embrace more social dimensions. It will be suggested here that this redefinition of the terrain runs the risk of obfuscating important issues and leads to a lack of focus.

With regard to distinctions then, there is another in the literature that should not be elided. While this essay is mainly concerned with informal *modes of economic activity*, including self-employment, there is a significant body of literature concerned with informal employment as such (see especially Banik 2011; Jutting & de Laiglesia 2009). This ‘take’ on informality tends sometimes to read like ideological justification for the policing of the formal sector and might be construed as being more of a purely labour issue – the informalisation (or casualisation) of labour as opposed to the informalisation of business *per se*. Atkinson (2012:2-3) in a study of spaza shops (small retail grocery outlets) has pointed out that there is no neat distinction between formal and informal traders and that business formality “is a continuum, with various dimensions.” Atkinson adds that “there are at least two different ways of understanding the meaning of the term ‘informal sector’.” The first is concerned with the type of *enterprise*. These informal enterprises typically lack formal characteristics such as “operating from premises in demarcated business zones; ownership of property” and registration with various state entities. The second approach focuses on the type of *employment* “which lacks formal labour characteristics such as security or regularity of work, better earnings, non-wage benefits, protective legislation, and union protection.” Atkinson concludes therefore that “informality is a hazy concept.”

‘Hazy concepts’ are not conducive to clear focus. The fact is however that the concept of the informal sector *has* been expanded to incorporate gender concerns and informal labour issues. This is unfortunate insofar as it provides a platform for ‘special pleading’ by constituencies who claim entitlement to the best of both worlds without the burden of the responsibilities implied by formality. It also serves to distract attention from the practical ‘hard’ economic and political considerations and shifts the discourse in the

direction of advocacy for the 'voiceless poor' and so forth. Implicit in this move is a tacit critique of the allegedly intrinsic exploitativeness and social injustices of free-market capitalism. It is as though the formal-informal debate were being recast to serve an 'anti neo-liberal' agenda very broadly defined.

Something similar follows from the stance adopted by those whose sympathies lie with the NGO community. Here the emphasis of the informality discourse is very much on human rights, so-called 'business rights', the notion of 'decent work', and the extension of social protections to informal operators. These scholars' inputs typically detail "the challenges involved in politically mobilising groups in the informal economy to effectively claim their rights and entitlements" (Banik 2011:4). It would be an interesting matter to learn what the entitlements of, say, illegal immigrants ought to be, as well as to know whom it is incumbent upon to make good their rights – whatever these may be (see for example Ferraris 2009).

Just as a thatched roof is an *unnatural* state of affairs that needs periodic maintenance and replenishment, just so do formal systems, which are always artificial constructs, have to be constantly fortified against atrophy, compromise and erosion by the relentless pull of informality. Formality takes effort, skill ('statecraft'), surveillance and resources to maintain and is in a real sense the *work* of government if it wishes to perpetuate itself. Insofar as informality tends to deny the institutions of formality these resources (for example licence fees or tax monies), it serves as a direct threat to it. But the situation is not so simple as will become apparent.

Those familiar with the work of Foucault and Weber will recognise many of the elements already articulated in this analysis by Scott (1998). Shapland and Ponsaers (2009:5n7) for example, point out that Foucault, in his 1979 work *Discipline and Punish*, "argued that wide margins of tolerance of informal or illegal work can serve to provide considerable space in which dominant social groups can control other groups."

The notion of 'other groups' introduces a further important dimension which sometimes seems to be overlooked. This is the problem presented by illegal immigrants, say, who often make up a large proportion of those in informal 'wage employment'. The crucial

feature here is that these individuals are illegal in their *being where they are* as opposed to being illegal in *what they do* although of course the latter condition may also apply. This is of especial salience in the context of highly developed, formalised economies, such as the USA whose ‘aliens’ from Mexico provide a classic instance (Vollmann 2010), and of South Africa which is viewed as highly developed relative to very many sub-Saharan nation states. Pike, Sharp and Black (2010:91) point to the apparent ease with which the South African economy seems to have absorbed millions of illegal Zimbabweans as evidence that the informal economy in the country is probably a lot bigger (and perhaps a lot less visible) than is generally acknowledged officially.

6. INFORMAL SECTOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Broadly speaking, once definitional issues have been cleared up, informal sector research typically resolves itself into addressing the following four questions:

- How big is it? (macroeconomic analysis)
- How does it function? (case studies)
- Is it a good or a bad thing? (normative/ethical issues)
- What, if anything, should be done about it? (policy discourse)

Each of these dimensions is very much influenced by the perspective (e.g. top-down; bottom-up; official; objective outsider; business stakeholder) adopted and these perspectives in turn are usually informed by some kind of ideological bias i.e. neo-liberal, libertarian, statist, high-modernist, Marxist and so on.

In addition to this, each of these four dimensions has its sub-elements, its sub-sub-elements and so forth. For example:

- How big is the informal sector worldwide? How big is it in West Africa? In a particular city? Amongst the recently retrenched? Amongst women? Amongst a specific occupational category, say, traditional healers?
- How do the characterisations of the informal (its gradations) hang together? These gradations may encompass informality that is open to public scrutiny, Informality

which is hidden from view (the ‘underground’ economy), or activity which is straightforwardly criminal. The housewife who supplements her income by baking cakes for a small confectionary outlet and the poacher peddling ground-up rhino horn are both functioning informally and yet would seem to require very different theoretical treatment and different policy approaches (this point is repeatedly made in the literature – see for example Neuwirth 2011:20). Is the prevalence of informality often culturally determined?

- How do illegitimacy, illegality and criminality differ? How is it that the illicit may be legal? Why in some countries (say Nigeria) is the informal aspect ‘read’ by academia as something vibrant, colourful and healthy (Meagher 2010) whereas others’ (say Russia’s) informal sectors are viewed as dark, murky and threatening (Ledeneva 2006)? Is its desirability, or otherwise, context-dependent? Are there ‘one size fits all’ strictures that can be applied?
- Should the informal sector be suppressed or encouraged? Should formalisation be encouraged? If so by carrot or by stick? What might the effects of this be - in the short term and in the long term? Can the formal sector survive without the informal? Should a particular formal sector (say Peru’s - for which see de Soto 1989) be managed in the direction of greater informality? Are some informal sectors (say those of Italy or Nigeria) simply impervious to ‘capturing’ by the state (for Italy see Parks 2001)? Should the tax regime be modified to achieve policy ends vis-a-vis the informal sector?

7. CONCLUSION

This discussion has delineated some of the conceptual thinking informing recent analyses of the dynamics of the worldwide expansion in the informal economic sector. Although informal economic activity has been on scholars’ radar screens since the early 1940s, focus on the sector has waxed and waned over the intervening decades. Of late though, there has been a resurgence of interest in the sector, most especially insofar as informality impacts on African economies, and the sector is increasingly being represented in the scholarly literature as the wellspring of considerable dynamism and

ingenuity. There are dissenting voices however, more especially from the ranks of officialdom, which see informality as something to be discouraged and overcome, if not rooted out altogether.

When one speaks of informal economic activity one has to be very clear about what exactly is being referred to, as the discourse in some circles has been expanded to include issues of rights and entitlements for illegal workers. Misunderstandings can arise, for example, where the informalisation or casualisation of labour practices is conflated with the informality of business operations. There is generally no clear-cut demarcation between the formal and the informal and each may incorporate elements of the other. It may be more useful, therefore, to conceive of informality as occurring, with varying characteristics, in gradations on a continuum in the direction of formality.

This article has explored some of the conceptual and semantic distinctions informing the literature. It has provided a 'road map', which is intended to be merely suggestive, of the terrain which ongoing research on the informal sector is likely to cover. The purpose of this review was not to resolve any of the thorny issues the informal sector presents policy-makers with. Rather it was the intention to lay bare some of the complexities attendant upon discussions of informality, and in the section on putative research questions, to present the tensions which researchers and policy-makers are likely to be confronted with as the informal sector acquires ever greater salience in the developing world.

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