Book review

Informality, labour mobility and precariousness: supplementing the state for the invisible and the vulnerable

edited by Polese A., Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan.,

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The last of the informality trilogy (Polese et al., 2017; Polese et al., 2019; Polese, 2022), *Informality, labour mobility and precariousness: supplementing the state for the invisible and the vulnerable* addresses the question of why informality ends up replacing, supplementing, or competing with the state for the invisible and vulnerable, but this time offering a bottom-up view. Informality as a lens to assess the quality of governance and state-citizen relations in post-socialist spaces and beyond proved effective. The collection of informal practices in the edited volume comprises taxonomy similar to the one offered by the "Global Encyclopedia of Informality" (Ledeneva, 2018; Bailey et al., 2018), yet here the practices are not mere subjects but instruments to explain the complex social reality that the vulnerable have to navigate.

The book is organized into three conceptually eloquent sections - coming, staying, and competing- although at first sight the chosen chronological order might seem too simplistic as if narrated solely from the migrant's standpoint. However, as one delves into the *Informality, labour mobility and precariousness*, the perception of simplicity evaporates. The three sections reflect the steps a newcomer undertakes when immersing into a new context, be it a new country or previously unknown culture; be it a new legal landscape or changing political environment. Whereas all chapters clearly demonstrate that informality is a way of surviving and integrating, some pay more attention to the way informal practices evolve in opposition to

state incompetency (e.g., Chapter 7 and Chapter 8) while others at informal networks and the way they substitute local ways of “getting things done” (e.g., Chapter 2 and Chapter 3). Through a combination of empirical research in different contexts spanning Europe, Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia and beyond, the contributors provide an in-depth examination of informality from interdisciplinary angles using various methods such as ethnography, social network analysis, regression analysis and many more.

The volume opens with the editor’s comprehensive introduction which in itself serves as a substantive book review. Abel Polese, an influential researcher, and writer of modes of governance in the majority world, adeptly guides readers through the discourses surrounding informality studies. As Polese promises, the book concentrates not only on economic aspects of informality, but more on the social, cultural, and political settings that render a practice viable, acceptable, or even desirable in various contexts. Below I will critically analyze the three sections of the book in a chronological order by providing summaries of the chapters. I then highlight the strengths and the weaknesses of the volume and provide conclusions.

Section 1, entitled "Coming," features the four most dynamic chapters illustrating the lived experiences of migrants and early-stage immigrants. These chapters explore how migrants integrate into new contexts, shedding light on the complex interplay between mobility and informality. In Chapter 1, "(Im)Mobilities and Informality as Livelihood Strategies in Transnational Social Fields," Ignacio Fradejas-García, José Luis Molina, and Miranda Jessica Lubbers employ mixed methods, including ethnography, binational surveys, and social network analysis, to examine both geographical and occupational mobility among Romanian migrants in Spain. They reveal how migrants navigate the unwritten rules of the host country and creatively adapt home-brought informal practices to the new context by filtering out

practices considered illegal, illicit, or harmful in Spain. The authors provide an etymology of informal practices and their widespread nature.

In Chapter 2, "Restaurant Backyards, Food Stores, and Temples: Invisibility, Informal Labour Practices, and Migrant Networks in the Suburbs of Warsaw," Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska and Helena Patzer delve further into migrants' lives through participant observation and in-depth interviews with 30 migrants from diverse backgrounds. They highlight similarities between migrants and locals in accessing the labor market, while also demonstrating the nuances that exacerbate barriers for migrants, such as lack of knowledge of local labor codes, language barriers, institutional support, and the risk of travel bans or deportation. The authors reveal a vicious circle wherein linguistic exclusion prompts migrants to mobilize existing networks, leading them into the informal labor market, particularly in niche ethnic sectors, thereby reinforcing dependence on migrant networks. Consequently, migrants often find themselves working irregular and precarious jobs without contracts or stability. However, while the authors briefly touch on precarious working conditions towards the end of the chapter, they do not extensively discuss them.

In Chapter 3, "Informal Networks Among Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Case of Croatia," Ružica Šimic´ Banovic´, Vlatka Škokic´, and Mirela Alpeza examine the entrepreneurial activities of early-stage expatriates in Croatia, a relatively closed and ethnically homogeneous society. They address the limitations of ethnic entrepreneurship research by shifting focus from Western developed countries to the former socialist economies of Southeastern Europe. The authors demonstrate how expatriate networks fill gaps left by formal organizations, particularly in the initial stages of business setup. They argue for increased cooperation between migrant entrepreneurs and local business organizations to facilitate the integration of immigrant

entrepreneurs by jointly delivering public services. This approach aims to overcome the exclusionary aspects of local informal practices and reduce reliance on the economy of favors in Croatia.

In the concluding chapter of the "Coming" section, titled "'Performance of Illegality' Toward Migrants Living with HIV in Russia: From Social Exclusion to Deportation," Daniel Kashnitsky explores the intricate dynamics of informality, mobility, and precariousness for migrants with HIV. Kashnitsky begins by framing the migration context in Russia as a "border spectacle," where migrants' presumed "illegality" is deliberately highlighted through clandestine migration policies, fostering constant uncertainty and stress. He then delves into how this precarity is magnified for migrants with HIV. For them, the "border spectacle" unfolds as a two-part drama: firstly, their residency is deemed illegitimate, barring access to healthcare; secondly, HIV-positive migrants find themselves trapped in a hostile environment, facing legal restrictions and limited rights, unable to leave due to HIV-related travel bans. What sets this chapter apart is its comprehensive approach, examining the implications of migration from both individual and epidemiological perspectives. As host countries restrict access to treatment, migrants' well-being deteriorates, often compelling them to return to their home countries, where societal stigma forces them to conceal their condition, endangering their families. While earlier chapters explored how informal practices assist migrants in navigating challenges, Kashnitsky's chapter leaves readers pondering the efficacy of such practices in alleviating the burdens imposed by stringent migration policies on HIV-positive migrants.

Section 2 "Staying" returns hope to the reader by providing evidence when tension between the state and society results in more positive outcomes for the local actors, actors who were lucky to stay. In Chapter 5 "Institutions and the Informal Economy: Tax Morale of Small

Businesses in Armenia and Georgia," Johanna Paquin attempts to explain the paradox of why Georgia's informal economy is larger than that of Armenia's despite Georgia's faster transition toward market economy and better economic development. Paquin tests the institutional incongruence hypothesis (IIH) to understand if misalignment between norms, values and morals of people and the state - in other words, between informal and formal institutions - explains the difference in the sizes of informal economies between the two chosen countries. Paquin reveals that IIH has a weak explanatory power to explain the paradox between the sizes of the Armenian and Georgian informal economies and calls for deeper bottom-up qualitative ethnographic studies.

As if accepting Paquin's call, the next chapter "Left in the 'Shadows': The Informal Moral Economy of the Russian Far East" by Aimar Ventsel provides a deeper bottom-up account of entrepreneurs but from Yakutia. This is a careful and intricate chapter that explains lived realities of small and medium sized (SME) entrepreneurs of the Republic of Sakha and the "informality bargain" they enter with the state: "I do my informal business by filling the gaps that you (the state) did not fill, and in return you ignore the informal nature of my business as I do not require your resources". The author first provides a brief history of the evolution of entrepreneurship in the aftermath of Soviet Union without trying to portray Russia as a monolith. It is not the history of the utilitarian approach of neoclassical economy, rather it is an alternative history where entrepreneurs think in categories not of profit maximization, but rather moral ones. The author makes an argument not mentioned in previous chapters – informal practice of "blat"[1] better explains state-entrepreneurship relationship related to bigger businesses in more central and thus attractive regions for the state, whereas small business-

[1] First introduced into academic debates and conceptualised by Ledeneva (1998), "blat" refers to ways of getting things done through personal contacts, associated with using connections, pulling strings and exchanging favours.

state relationships in the Far East of Russia are better understood by the Chinese informal practice of "guanxi"[2]. Doing business in the shadow is a deliberate choice and in the context of Yakutia means avoiding contact with state institutions to sustain moral responsibility before kin and family, whereas in "blat" network "shadow" means complex intertwined collaboration with the state. Author explains that the state turns a blind eye on remote communities and their engagement in illegal or unofficial activities not because it is tolerant toward them, but because the opportunities for rent extraction are not as substantial.

Moving from social to explicitly political dimension of informality, Chapter 7 "Azerbaijani Meykhana: Cultural Policy and Local Actors' Agenda" by Aneta Strzemż alska, the interplay between nationalism and cultural policy is examined through the lens of meykhana, a form of folk rap. Strzemż alska contrasts the state's utilization of meykhana with how ordinary people engage with it, revealing a complex dynamic between formal and informal practices that influence high-level politics. The state's deliberate depoliticization of meykhana involved reclassifying it as a genre of folk art, thus diminishing its original function of challenging power structures. Consequently, through institutionalization and standardization, folk art was co-opted by the state as a tool for nation-building, aligning with the state's agenda.

The "Staying" section concludes by addressing a significant question: what can a traffic policeman and a midwife reveal about governance in Uzbekistan? In Chapter 8, "Political vs. Everyday Forms of Governance in Uzbekistan: The Illegal, Immoral, and Illegitimate," authors Abel Polese, Rustamjon Urinboyev, Mans Svensson, Laura Adams, and Tanel Kerikmäe delve into the intricate landscape of alternative governance, where grassroots actors engage in everyday informal practices such as traffic ticketing or "suyunchi" to address the shortcomings

[2] Similar to "blat" but for a Chinese context and without negative moral connotation (Ledeneva, 2008), the usage of "guanxi" implies calling on personal or social connections to get things done, acquire a scarce commodity, or gain access to an opportunity. In other words, it is a dyadic social exchange relationship, in which one person helps the other, and in return, the other owes a social debt (Yang, 2002).

of the state in meeting its citizens' basic needs. Despite the state's formidable coercive capacity, its ability to uphold the rule of law and provide essential services is deficient. Through a comprehensive examination of governance frameworks ranging from Fukuyama's narrow view to Krasner's concept of "good enough governance" and Ledeneva's notion of informal governance, the authors elucidate the most suitable analytical frameworks for understanding governance in Uzbekistan. Ultimately, they assert that the concept of informal governance, intertwined with state policy-making mechanisms, along with Scott's concept of infrapolitics—where ordinary citizens' everyday actions shape state policymaking—best characterize governance in Uzbekistan.

The third section of the book, titled "Competing," shifts its focus towards analyzing the interaction between formal and informal sectors and its broader implications for public policy. It commences with Anil Duman's Chapter 9, "Mixed Perceptions of State Responsibility Among Informal Sector Participants in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)," which extends the discussion beyond post-socialist countries to the MENA region. Duman investigates the political ramifications of a high informal sector across 12 MENA countries using logit regression analysis. The chapter explores how the division between formal and informal spheres, alongside the diversity among informal sector participants, shapes individuals' political and economic perspectives. Duman's analysis indicates that the relationship between informal employment and political and economic outlooks loses significance with the introduction of country-level fixed effects. She suggests that the diversity within the informal sector, rather than the distinction between formal and informal sector actors, is crucial, highlighting income as a mediating factor influencing the connection between political opinions and employment. Delving further into the MENA region, Joseph P. Helou's Chapter 10, "State Collusion or Erosion During a Sovereign Debt Crisis: Market Dynamics

Spawn Informal Practices in Lebanon," offers an ethnographic examination of how informality acts as a buffer in response to the sovereign debt crisis triggered by state mismanagement. The chapter unveils how Lebanon's sectarian elites, driven by their economic and political interests, have steered the Lebanese economy towards unproductive sectors, resulting in widespread mistrust towards government institutions. Helou proposes that the path to Lebanon's recovery lies in the hands of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, urging caution to avoid perpetuating harmful practices that could exacerbate the informal sector's grip on the economy.

In Chapter 11 "Perceived Pull and Push Factors of Healthcare Professionals Intention for Mobility: The Case of Romania" Elena Druicaˇand Rodica Ianole-Calin analyze migration and mobility choices of predominantly female healthcare practitioners in Romania. The study explores the primary factors influencing the departure of health professionals from the country, analyzing potential drivers such as wages, working conditions, and the prevalence of informal practices. By correlating these findings with the participants' overall job satisfaction, the authors uncover distinct explanatory variables that differentiate the motivations of medical doctors and nurses to seek opportunities abroad and how these factors intersect with their professional satisfaction.

Moving beyond the physical spaces, Chapter 12 "E-nformality: Smartphones as a New Regulatory Space for Informal Exchange of Formal Resources" co-authored by Aksana Ismailbekova and Gulzat Baialieva presents the notion of "e-nformality," which encompasses the evolving spatial and physical interactions and tensions between individuals and the state, in accessing online services. The authors examine the interplay between ICT technologies and emerging manifestations of informality, namely how informal networks are formed and

facilitated by smartphone applications. The authors analyze the diverse perspectives emerging across different generations of Kyrgyz citizens, exploring how age and degrees of post-Soviet identity shape the avenues individuals choose to access services and opportunities beyond the scope of formal channels.

The final chapter of the book's concluding section, "Work, Subsistence, and Distress of the Homeless in Moldova" by Petru Negura, sheds light on the experiences of homelessness in Moldova. The author first contextualizes homelessness within the context of post-Soviet mass pauperization, detailing demographic, and socio-economic changes among shelter users from 2004 to 2017. Negura highlights that homeless individuals face barriers in accessing the formal labor market and are compelled to engage in informal work. The study argues that involvement in informal labor restricts homeless individuals' control over the labor process and exacerbates their social and economic marginalization, perpetuating their precarious societal position.

Engaging with the realm of informality studies often demands repeated exposure to familiar content, yet this book distinguishes itself by presenting an array of distinct perspectives on informality in each chapter, each deeply rooted within its nuanced context. The conceptual exploration of “informality” has garnered substantial attention in scholarly discourse surrounding post-Soviet societies. The inaugural chapter's examination of Romanian migrants in Spain stands out, as it scrutinizes a transnational social field that spans both post-socialist and non-socialist milieus. This offers a valuable lesson, dispelling the notion that informality is solely a vestige of the Soviet era; rather, it permeates universally. The book imparts several noteworthy insights, reflective of three decades of informality studies. It cautions against oversimplifying reality into dichotomous frameworks of formal versus informal, emphasizing the limitations of such reductionist perspectives. A compelling facet of the book lies in its

portrayal of informal practices re-emerging across diverse contexts, showcasing their inherent dynamism.

While the compiled volume stands as a commendable scholarly contribution, there exist potential areas for enhancement that warrant consideration. One such aspect pertains to the establishment of stronger interconnections between individual chapters. For instance, in Chapter 6, the introduction of concepts such as “blat” and “guanxi” could have been enriched through cross-referencing Chapter 3, wherein a compelling analytical contrast is offered through an exploration of economies of favors. A noteworthy observation is the encompassing scope of the book, which delves into various intersections with informality, encompassing themes such as migration, entrepreneurship, and health. Nevertheless, an underexplored dimension remains evident, as gender-related aspects receive limited attention. Though the initial chapters predominantly center on the masculine nature of migration and business, a distinct exploration of the gender-related implications of these phenomena is notably absent.

Furthermore, while many chapters used clear and engaging language, some chapters become overly intricate making the complex subject matter inaccessible even to the reader who knows the subject. To illustrate, both Chapters 7 and 12 exhibit an abundant use of buzz concepts such as nationalism, institutionalization, and standardization, yet these constructs are left unarticulated, potentially diminishing their impact. Additionally, a critique pertains to certain graphical representations within the book. Some graphs and tables used in the book were not reader-friendly and did not serve the purpose of justifying the claims as in Chapter 10 when the numbers were not rounded and too many indicators were presented in Table 1 whereas a pie chart could have more effectively conveyed the intended message. To sum up, while the book's merits are evident, including its comprehensive thematic exploration, a few pivotal

aspects such as gender-related analysis, coherence between chapters, clarity in conceptual utilization, and the optimization of graphical representations could collectively amplify its scholarly impact and reader accessibility.

The book serves as a compelling call to action for scholars engaged in informality and migration studies. It underscores the significance of unveiling the intricate layers of oppression that intersect not solely with migrant identity, but also resonate along the axes of ethnicity, nationality, health status, and gender. This call challenges future researchers to delve deeper into these multifaceted dimensions, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within the realms of informality, mobility, and precariousness.

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