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INFORMALIZATION AS A PROCESS: THEORIZING INFORMALITY AS A LENS TO RETHINK PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN BOGOTA, COLOMBIA

ABSTRACT

Since the introduction of concept of informality in the international debate, different disciplines have addressed the study of this phenomenon intrinsically associated with urban life. Various scholars have proposed extended understandings that question the divide between formal and informal and the role of state on the production of informality. I argue that looking at the paradoxical nature of this relationship which lies neither within nor outside the formal organization of the state can shift the focus of analysis to understand the construction of this category as process that embeds power structures and creates forms of inclusion and exclusion of actors, practices, and spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Discourses about informality are proliferating everywhere —from planning practice to planning education, from the global south to the global north, and from specific disciplines to multidisciplinary ones. Since the introduction of concept of informality in the international debate, different disciplines have addressed the study of this phenomenon intrinsically associated with urban life. Initially presented as an economic dynamic, and later associated with spatial practices, urban informality has become a critical topic for urban planning. Initially in the context of the global south although but later also influencing the discourse of the global north. Informality has been approached, by both scholars and practitioners, from different dimensions of the urban, ranging from informal economies to informal urbanization, the emergence of informal practices that permeate social institutions (McFarlane and Weibel, 2012; Altrock, 2012), and the extension of geographies of informality from the developing world to the global north through transnational diasporas (Perry and Gaffikin, 2012).

Early scholarly work about informality has focused on the emergence and change of informal economies as well as on the historical production and transformation of informal urbanization. Today informality is a central issue for urban planning where its position in the sociopolitical arena frames larger debates about social inequality. These works are then the foundations to understand informality as a condition of contemporary urbanism which is not a product but a process. This shift from presenting informality as a category to defining *informalization* as a negotiated process will help informing urban planning theory, policy, and practice. The hypothesis here is that unpacking the notion of informality as urban pathology will expose

the contradictory nature of planning practice. Thus, examining how informality is constructed and deconstructed by the planning apparatus when seeking global aspirations and the impact of this practice in local space will advance in understanding the political dimension of planning.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE INFORMAL: TRADITIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF INFORMALITY

The concept ´informal sector´ was initially used by Hart (1973) to describe a series of economic practices that that lay beyond the scope of the official framework for regulations of both economy and production of space and were associated with the movement of important amount of labour to the cities. Its early definition presented the condition of informality as opposite and sometimes mutually exclusive to the condition of formality, this dualistic conception of informality was also part of the official discourse in policy implementations at global scale.

The informal in the urban economy

With the rise of globalization and the establishment of the neoliberal project, the conditions of secure labor and employment have decreased and cities worldwide are presenting an increased number of people working under labor categories that are associated with informal sectors of economies such as unemployed, self-employed, partially employed, and casual workers (Portes, Castell & Benton, 1989; Bayat in AlSayyad, 2004). Moreover, Portes, Castell, and Benton (1989) state that in this context, categories of formal and informal are not exclusively defined by the character of the product but also by processes of production and exchange. Consequently, the current scenario presents a complex set of relationships that goes from defined boundaries of formal and informal sector of economy to more tangled interaction that, in different contexts, produce heterogeneous practices yet similar patterns of arrangements.

The informal in the built environment

The concept of informality related to land, property and urban development has followed a parallel trajectory. The term "informal settlements", was introduced in planning debate in mid-1960s by Charles Abrahams and John Turner to designate urban areas growing outside the official regulatory framework. As with the informal economy, informal housing and informal land market were linked to poverty and marginality "…by the late 1970s Caroline Moser was to describe the informal sector as simply "the urban poor, or as the people living in slums or squatter settlements" (AlSayyad, 2004:10). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the work of Hernando De Soto (1989) in Peru presented informality as a survival strategy. Properly addressed as an entrepreneurial quality, De Soto argued, it could become means for social change and insertion on the markets. Today, by linking spatial informality to the phenomenon of accelerated urban growth (Davis, 2006), the phenomenon of informal production of space is presented as a critical milestone for social and human development. Differently from the expectations of natural integration from the informal economy to the formal

one, the formalization of informality in the built environment has always challenged the response capacity of the state.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO INFORMALITY: INFORMALITY AS A MODE OF URBANISM

First in 2004 with Naser AlSayyad and then in 2005, Ananya Roy proposed a radically different definition for urban informality. Informality, she stated, should be understood as a *mode of urbanism:* "an organizing logic, [a] system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself" (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004 in Roy, 2005: 148). She developed her argument by unfolding two contemporary debates traditionally seen as contradictory. The first one depicts informality as the chaos that characterizes great part of urban growth in the global south and that is being transferred to the global north through migration (Hall & Pfeiffer, 2000; Perry & Gaffikin, 2012).The second one challenges the idea of urban chaos and presents informality as an alternative path for development (De Soto, 1989). Roy's analysis of these two approaches, "one of crisis and the other of heroism" (2005: 148), suggests that their underlying assumptions are more similar than different, both define informality as being in opposition to formality and both aim to achieve some kind of integration of informality into the formal systems. Her definition of informality as a mode of urbanism implies the coexistence with other modes that overlap not only spatially but also in time.

Trying to bridge the divide between formality and informality, Roy develops four policy epistemologies to support "working through rather than against power structures" (2005:155). The first one is related to the ideology of the aesthetics of the space, the second one involves the right to effectively participate in the market and to generate wealth transfer; the third one elaborated the notion of informality as a state of exception; and the last one refers to the overlapping of the local and global.

Bridging the divide: (in)formality in current debates

After Roy's provocative shift in the conceptualization of informality, different authors have focused on either questioning or bridging the divide between formality and informality. Different authors have called for overcoming the dichotomy of this divide by examining the role of institutions (state) as its capacity to categorize, legitimate, limit, control, and sanction practices related to urban development. From Roy understanding of informality as mode of urbanism, to Altrock's analysis that drawing from institutional theory proposes the distinction between complementary and supplementary informality. And Porter's analysis through the lenses of property right as wells as Perry and Gaffikin's paradoxical understanding of the relationship between formality and informality as multi-actors process. To McFarlane and Weibel's analysis of the multiple conceptualizations of the divide formal/informal leading to the idea of informality as a negotiable value. A common aspect of this works is that the formal/informal divide is presented as a condition movement, fluidity and impermanency. Thus, understanding informality as a mode of urbanism can lead to their further understanding as a set of negotiable practices, not in an attempt to fix it or to find consensus but to enlarge the understanding of the possibilities of informality for planning process, practices and theory. By delocalizing

informality from slums, marginality and precarious labor and placing in context the formal/informal divide, the authors argue will provide a better understanding of the problem while unlocking both the potential and limitations of the concept of acknowledging informality as a governing tool, a way of life, means of knowing, set of dispositions, and a continuum of practices.

Manufacturing urban pathologies in different geographies

In a Latin American context, debates about informality and informal cities have been central to socio-political debates and have frame broader discussions about marginalization, inequality and social justice. However, Fischer argues, little have been studied to understand the "enduring features of urban life [is] persistently defined as symptom of contemporary crisis" (2014:11). Beyond conceptualising the divide between formal and informal, her historical analysis makes visible the aftermaths of discursively constructing informality as informal by providing a closer examination of the discursive trajectories of informality. Informal cities, she states, existed before they were named. The "emergence as a category of urban pathology" (Fischer, 2014:13) was more related to the integration to modern debates about modernity, progress, and development. The discursive construction of the informal presented traditional patterns of the urban fabric as deeply anti-modern and underdeveloped, in constant need of intervention in order to overcome the awkwardness of its development.

On another hand, framing the question from a developed context, Nabil Kamel approaches the notion urban informality through analysing the dislocation between patterns of urbanization and socio-spatial practices. He points how physical layout and formal regulations governing urban space have been and are still designed for ideal societies instead of current social realities embodied by a diversity of lifestyles and social needs. As a result of this discrepancy between official place making and people's realities and needs the built environment becomes *ill-suited* for inhabitants that later engage in their own place making tactics to resist an imposing reality that does not fit their needs. Using De Certeau (1984) concepts of "tactics" "strategies" Kamel (2014) analyses the effect of planned development (strategies) and resident's responses (tactics). By using this framework, everyday life actions regarding place making can be understood as acts of resistance to a dominant socio spatial order, more specifically as the struggle of marginalized social groups for reclaiming their right to the city.

PART III – DEFINITION IN URBAN POLICIES IN BOGOTA

Latin-America region has experienced one of the most dramatics processes of urbanisation in the 20th century. From having none of the most populated cities of the world, has passed to have several of them in a short period of time. The speed of growth together with a generalized shift in politics and economic policies has overwhelmed the capacity of the cities to respond to the increasing social demands. During the last three decades, Latin American cities have oriented urban policies to strategic approaches that promote stronger relationship between public and private sector while insisting in greater "participation" from society in public

affairs. This logic has been presented in the political discourse as an alternative vis-a-vis neoliberal urban management.

To further advance in this research I analyze how categories of formal and informal have been defined in urban policies addressing issues related to urban informality from the 1990s to the present in Bogota. During this time frame Bogota as many other cities in Latin America, experienced active public intervention to transform spaces of informality. This exercise reviews the general planning instruments of the city to illustrate changes in the definitions of categories associated with informal production of urban space during different administrations. At this stage, it will focus only in the general instruments of city planning from 1990 to the present: Acuerdo 6 (1990), Decree 619 (2000), Decree 430 (2003), Decree 190 (2004), and Decree 364 (2013). As shows the next figure these five plans have been implemented by different mayors that since 2000 have used the POT in particular and urban development policies as a decisive political instrument.

To illustrate changes in the definitions of categories associated with informal production of urban space I used four entries to review the five mentioned plans: INFORMAL, ILEGAL, UNDERGROUND (clandestino), and INCOMPLETE (related to settlements). These four categories are neither exclusive nor excluding. However, from my practice as planner I can say that they refer directly to the political notion of informality while categories such as upgrading, legalization, normalization, and so on, refer more to the actions taken regarding informality. The four categories analyzed show interesting shifts in conceptualization about urban informality. For example, the general plan ruling from 1990 to 2000 barely used the concept informality. The only time the word is used refers specifically to its economic dimension. From 2000 to 2013 the word is used to refer to the general condition of informal urbanization and housing policies. Only in the last version of the plan (already suspended) seems this concept to gain importance but again mainly related to informal urbanization and building regulations. However, this is the first time the term informal is used directly related to upgrading programs and regarding other planning instruments.

PART IV – INFORMALITY AS A NEGOTIATED PROCESS

Tracing the trajectory of informality shows various different connotations of the concept. Informality as practice has been an intrinsic feature of the urban and the city; informality as a discursive category was formulated in the emergence of modernity and development theories; informality as pathology has been framed from in contrast to the paradigms of development; formalization as a project has been framed by the ideas of order, modernity, and progress. In this evolutionary process of becoming informal, certain people, traditions and everyday practices has been continuously labelled and stigmatized as inherently wrong and consequently has been excluded from the formal systems jeopardizing their full access to their rights.

However, conditions of exclusion are unique in each place. They may be related to historical and cultural orders regarding difference, to difficulties in the articulation to markets and in the access to land, and to struggles over inclusion in the political arenas. Although the occurrence and importance of these dimensions

vary in each place, they are often manifested in some form of spatial segregation that reinforces social differences. This is one reason that analyzing the role of planning policies and practices in exacerbating or ameliorating conditions of exclusion becomes a key element in understanding that the notion of the informal city cannot be separated from the practices of the state.

Understanding informality as an expanding phenomenon and relational category suggest a move in the analysis of informality from the perspective of movement of geographies of growth, from the global north to the global south and the study of the increasing flexibility that affects different dimensions of urban life and urban development. This proposed understanding is based on the assertion that the relationship between formality and informality is neither a fixed nor an abstract concept. Moreover, it acknowledges the paradoxical nature of this relationship, which lies neither inside nor outside the formal organization of the state; rather, the relationship lies in processes of negotiation where categories express power structures and create forms of inclusion and exclusion of actors, practices, and spaces.

Understood as practice, informality has the potential to influence planning policy. However, more than other logics of production of space it requires continuously negotiating the terms the relationship between needs, sources, and the regulatory frameworks. This exercise is just a first attempt to illustrate the contradictory nature of planning, as presented in the hypothesis. Particularly in the case of Bogota and presumably in the context of Latin American cities, planning discourse and practices has refashioned urban informality from pathology to an instrument for global competitiveness.

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