

Between Exit and Voice: Informality and the Spaces of Popular Agency¹

ILDA LINDELL

Abstract: Recent decades have witnessed deepening processes of informalization and casualization as growing numbers of Africans rely on economic activities outside state regulation, something widely evident in urban areas. Converging multiple dynamics have resulted in new floods of entrants into the informal economy, including a great expansion in self-employment. Juxtaposed to this are the more long-standing informal activities through which popular groups have coped with the lack of formal work opportunities and basic services. Paralleling these trends is, in some contexts, a resurgence of attempts to bring segments of the informal economy under some form of state regulation. This may be interpreted as selective drives towards some kind of formalization, a development that has also gained impetus in international development discourse. These developments confirm that the boundary between what is and is not to be regulated by the state (or between what is and is not considered legitimate economic activity) is a shifting one and constitutes a contested process that involves social struggles and a variety of actors, encompassing both powerful interests and popular forces, including informal and casual workers themselves. This special issue's contributors address the politics involved in and ensuing from processes of informalization/formalization in particular contexts and discuss some of the resulting contradictions, tensions, and conflicts. The authors deviate from the common victimizing views of informal actors by examining varied spaces and forms of popular agency in relation to those processes. The introduction first highlights these issues through a selective discussion of the topics addressed by the papers and then reflects upon the varied forms that agency among informal actors can take along a spectrum that encompasses both strategies of invisibility and visibility, of exit and voice.

Introduction

The last decades have witnessed deepening processes of informalization and casualization in Africa and beyond. Growing numbers of people rely on economic activities occurring beyond state regulation, something that is widely evident in urban areas. Multiple dynamics are converging to drive these trends. The emergence of global production networks and the deregulation of labor conditions are conducive to the casualization and precarization of work in many contexts.² Large firms increasingly make use of casual labor and externalize employment as part of corporate strategies of flexible production. Neoliberal policies of economic liberalization being promoted by international financial institutions across many

Ilda Lindell is a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute and an Associate Professor of human geography at Stockholm University, Sweden. Her current research focuses on collective organizing in urban informal economies in Africa, including links to international movements and relations with other organized actors. She is the editor of *Africa's Informal Workers: Collective Agency, Alliances and Transnational Organizing in Urban Africa* (2010).

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countries in the South have often led to large-scale retrenchments and to a decline in formal employment opportunities. This has resulted in new floods of entrants into the informal economy, including a great expansion in self-employment.³ These dynamics have often been juxtaposed to the more long-standing informal activities through which popular groups in many places have coped with the lack of formal work opportunities and basic services.

Parallel to the widespread trends of informalization and casualization, one can discern in some contexts a resurgence of attempts to bring segments of the informal economy under some form of state regulation, which may be interpreted as selective drives towards some kind of formalization. For example, governments devise new ways of taxing supposedly “untaxed” workers in the informal economy; in some places, they also establish partnerships with informal service providers.⁴ The drive for formalization has also gained impetus in international development discourse. For example, Hernando de Soto’s influential book *The Mystery of Capital* argues for the legalization of the assets of the poor and informal workers as the key to prosperity. These developments confirm that the boundary between what is and is not to be regulated by the state (or between what is and is not considered legitimate economic activity) is a shifting one.⁵ The drawing and re-drawing of this boundary is a contested process that involves social struggles and a variety of actors, encompassing both powerful interests and popular forces, including informal and casual workers themselves.⁶

The contributions in this special issue of the *African Studies Quarterly* address the politics involved in and ensuing from processes of informalization/formalization in particular contexts. They discuss some of the contradictions, tensions and conflicts that have emerged in the context of such processes. The papers deviate from the common victimizing views of informal actors by examining varied spaces and forms of popular agency in relation to those processes. The remainder of this short introduction comprises two parts. The first provides some highlights on these issues on the basis of the contributions—this is a selective discussion of the topics addressed by the papers, whose discussions and arguments are much richer and more diverse than what is presented here. The second part reflects upon the varied forms that agency among informal actors can take. It argues that these range between the individual and the collective, along a spectrum that encompasses both strategies of invisibility and visibility, of exit and voice.

The politics of informalization/formalization and popular agency

The growing number of people making a living in the city streets has intensified tensions between these workers and regulatory agents of the state in many places.⁷ Raids and evictions, while far from new, appear to be increasingly frequent in the context of neoliberal urbanization. Cities are further exposed to the pressures and imperatives of international competition while at the same time poverty deepens among large segments of urban populations. In this context, city governments often have become more diligent in their efforts to uphold a modern city image, often through interventions that have a direct impact on the livelihoods of the poor. City beautification measures and clearance exercises multiply across cities in Africa and beyond.⁸ The hosting of an international event may trigger such interventions, as is currently happening in South African cities in preparation for the 2010 World Football Cup. In some cases, such events provide the discursive justification for the implementation of forceful measures, masking other underlying motives.⁹ The large crowds of urban informal workers are often perceived as a source of political instability, and state actors may use various means in an attempt to circumscribe and contain this “threat,” for

example by relocating the self-employed to locations far away from the city center or into restricted areas more amenable to control.

Karen Tranberg Hansen's article well illustrates these mounting tensions and contradictions through her analysis of self-employed youth in Lusaka. She describes how the intersection "between externally driven agendas and local political dynamics" has resulted in "new regimes of spatial regulation and new strategies of urban management" that have exacerbated antagonism between urban authorities and vendors. She shows how access to and control over public space is often at the heart of recurrent conflicts. Local authorities resort to evictions and relocations of vendors into designated markets. But vendors gradually and discretely reoccupy the streets and adapt their sale strategies to the harsher regulatory environment. They also use narratives that serve to "subvert the state's lackluster control efforts." Parallel processes of privatization of the management of city markets, driven by both state and donors, have also triggered violent clashes and riots among marketers. Such privatization processes are not unique to Lusaka and have also caused unrest in some other cities, as has happened in Kampala in recent years.¹⁰ They appear to be part of a strategy to increase local government revenues and to more effectively tax the self-employed.

Relations with regulatory powers are not always or simply antagonistic.¹¹ In the process of implementing some version of New Public Management principles by devolving responsibilities to a range of non-state actors, local governments have in some places come to develop close relations with informal service providers. Local government outsources some of its functions by establishing relationships with such providers.¹² The article by Axel Baudouin and his colleagues discusses such dynamics at work in the waste sector of Addis Ababa. After a long period of having neglected informal waste collectors and regarded them as clandestine, the city authorities decided to establish a "partnership" with a share of the small-scale providers. While the stated aim was to improve the severe waste problem in the city, the authors suggest that more was at stake. Set up in a top-down and authoritarian manner, the "partnership" would also serve to facilitate "political dominance and surveillance" of the activities of formerly independent waste collectors. In the process, non-incorporated informal actors were evicted from their areas of operation and in many cases effectively dispossessed. They adjusted their activities and used informal networks to strategize about how to respond to the government's intervention. Unfair competition from state sponsored actors would give rise to clashes between sponsored and non-sponsored groups. Persistent mistrust would lead many to avoid, rather than collaborate with, the authorities.

A lengthier time perspective further exposes the complex and shifting nature of the relations between informal actors and regulatory powers. In her article, Gracia Clark discusses how the relations between rulers and women marketers have evolved in a West African context, from a remote past to the present. She argues that these relations have shifted through time "between alliance and repression," reflecting economic and political shifts. The attitudes of political elites have oscillated between protecting traders and treating them as scapegoats for national economic problems, where the latter have sometimes justified market demolitions and other hostile measures. Women traders and their market organizations, in turn, have either played the role of political supporters or fiercely resisted rulers' attempts at regulating trade and at intervening in their activities, at different points in history. Such shifts in attitudes and relations have been noticed elsewhere.¹³ They remind us that relations between informal actors and the state are complex, varied, and temporal. The

political subjectivities of informal workers are not fixed, nor are the attitudes of state actors towards them.¹⁴

The remaining articles further widen the view of how informal and casual workers deal with changes in livelihood opportunities and conditions by bringing to light yet other dimensions of their agency. Franco Barchiesi discusses informalization, casualization, and outsourcing in the industries of the East Rand, South Africa. On the basis of the rising unemployment and growing job precariousness, he challenges mainstream understandings of wage labor as the vehicle through which social citizenship and emancipation are to be attained. The common binary opposition between “formal” and “informal” sectors that associate the former with social inclusion and the latter with social exclusion is questioned. Barchiesi advocates the consideration of “forms of social emancipation that transcend an exclusive focus on wage employment.” He argues that “The disarticulation of the working class, in fact, is not merely weakening work-based identities, but also creates new spaces for social agency and contestation.” His focus is on workers’ strategies and discourses and the meanings they attribute to formal and informal kinds of work. He describes the way they aspire to self-employment as a means for emancipation from deplorable work conditions in the industrial sector. In this way, he resonates with existing critiques of “capitalocentric” academic discourses, advanced for example in the work of Gibson-Graham, who also stress the importance of “re-subjectivation”, i.e. transformations in people’s subjectivities of an empowering kind.¹⁵

Jan Theron and Jill Wells and Arthur Jason explicitly address the scope for and forms of collective agency in relation to the casualization and informalization of work. Theron discusses the emergence of a variety of organisations among groups of the self-employed in South Africa. He discusses the prospects and limitations of these organizations through the presentation of a number of empirical cases. He is particularly hopeful about the current upsurge of cooperatives. While not necessarily exercising “political voice,” they are seen as holding potential for the economic empowerment of the self-employed and for instantiating a social economy based on principles of “self-reliance and community solidarity.” Theron’s interpretation stands close to an emerging strand of work that advocates a politics centred on “community economies,” i.e. “economic spaces or networks in which relations of interdependence are democratically negotiated.”¹⁶ The focus in this work is to make visible a variety of alternative economic practices that are not necessarily subservient to the logics of capitalism.

Wells and Jason discuss the increasing informalization and casualization in the construction sector across several cities in Africa and beyond and the implications for collective organizing in the sector. They show how these trends have resulted in a growing complexity of employment relations, which includes the increasing incidence of recruitment through labor agencies. In spite of the work precariousness that these developments involve, the authors see new possibilities for alliance and collaboration between the workers and the labor agencies in pressing large contractors for more advantageous deals and government agencies for public sector contracts. Wells and Jason also document how groups of informal construction workers have come together in Tanzania to form an umbrella organization that lobbies state actors for the interests of these workers. This development can be situated in a wider contemporary trend whereby organizations of informal workers increasingly represent the concerns of their constituencies in the public sphere.¹⁷ A scaling up of organizing, as manifested in the formation of the umbrella organization in Tanzania, is also

occurring elsewhere, with the emergence of federated bodies at the national as well as at the international level.¹⁸

The latter three articles thus identify new spaces for agency as well as emerging possibilities for collaboration, in the context of processes of informalization and casualization – namely, changes in workers’ subjectivities, the resurgence of cooperatives and the social economy, and possibilities for new kinds of alliances. The three articles also discuss the prospects for traditional trade unions to organize workers in the informal economy.¹⁹ A number of activists and researchers advocate for the role of trade unions’ role in this respect. They speak for a “social movement unionism,” whereby trade unions should organize beyond formal wage labor and reach out to informal workers. The articles here express reservations about such a role for trade unions. Wells and Jason suggest that labor recruitment through intermediary agencies makes it difficult for trade unions to reach out to workers in the sub-contracting system. Theron argues that trade unions in South Africa have been slack in responding to casualization and that the self-employed should organize on their own. Barchiesi is very sceptical of a prominent role for trade unions, given the marked weakening of workplace-based identities. In other contexts however, organizing across formal and informal work spheres is already occurring, a situation which thus warrants continued debate on this issue.

The multiple spaces and forms of popular agency

The agency of people in the informal economy has been interpreted in contrasting ways. One long-standing set of interpretations has emphasized individual agency and conceived of the politics of informality in terms of “exit,” invisibility, and avoidance of the state. In the 1980s, a group of political scientists saw the growth of economic informality in Africa as representing a broad societal disengagement from the state.²⁰ In this view, in response to declining state performance in a context of statist economic models, individual economic actors avoided the state and circumvented official channels and state regulations. This “exit option,” Azarya and Chazan stated, supersedes the “voice option” in contexts where the latter is ineffective or impossible.²¹ The consequences of this disengagement, it was argued, were far-reaching in terms of the reach of the state. Across the Atlantic, a similar line of argument was being advanced by de Soto, who celebrated the individual informal entrepreneur for his ability to undermine state regulations.²² Through their informal practices, he argued, people were resisting legal exclusion and instantiating an “invisible revolution.”

Albeit on a different ideological terrain, other scholars have also emphasized individual and “quiet” forms of resistance. James Scott argued that, in the absence of open protest and direct confrontation, political struggle takes the form of a myriad daily practices of resistance, characterized by small-scale individual actions.²³ Such practices constitute disguised and deliberately concealed resistance, rather than public claims and overt resistance. Asef Bayat’s similar approach to “the politics of informal people” in the South stresses how they, through their individual everyday actions, not only resist but also gradually conquer new space from dominant groups and undermine the capacity of the state to exercise surveillance.²⁴ He calls it a “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” to refer to “the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people in relation to the propertied and the powerful.”²⁵ This is “not a politics of protest”, he claims, “but of redress,” that is, one that avoids overt collective demands and large-scale mobilization.²⁶ Informal

actors proceed discretely and unnoticed to address immediate material needs; they seek invisibility and autonomy from state discipline and regulations. This quiet and atomized action is depicted as being the form of politics characteristic of people in the informal economy, who are said to lack the capacity to sustain their own organizations with a clear leadership and ideology. This long-standing emphasis on everyday and individual forms of resistance has inspired empirical work on informality.²⁷ Notions of invisibility and everyday forms of social agency are also central in more recent work. AbdouMaliq Simone stresses the importance of “new forms of livelihood and sociality” in urban Africa, whereby people and resources are “assembled in ways that deflect publicity, scrutiny, and comparison.”²⁸ From this point of view, people handle the deepening uncertainty of urban living through ephemeral actions and diffuse forms of social collaboration that take place outside of formal associations. “Africans must operate through forms of the spectral to proffer some counter-reality,” it is argued.²⁹ Everyday social practices and networks are deliberately masked, dissimulated and made opaque, in ways that render them illegible to and ungovernable by the state. Thus, people may resist government decisions by collaborating “in ‘silent’ but powerful ways.”³⁰

A different and emerging body of work has emphasized the presence and significance of collective forms of struggle among people in the informal economy and disadvantaged groups. Chen et al. (2007) discuss various kinds of membership-based organizations among the poor across many different contexts in the South and how such organizations often play a role both in improving conditions among poor workers and in claiming rights.³¹ Fernández-Kelly (2006) and her associates, in a collection with the suggestive title *Out of the Shadows*, contest the idea that informal workers strive for keeping a low profile or refrain from overt complaint and from negotiation with the state.³² Drawing on cases from Latin America, they examine a range of collective mobilizations and the complex and varied forms in which informals engage with state actors—rather than disengaging from or avoiding it—ranging from confrontation, negotiation and alliance. A forthcoming anthology, *Africa’s Informal Workers: Collective Agency, Alliances and Transnational Organizing in Urban Africa*, addresses the politics of informality in sub-Saharan Africa from the vantage point of collective organizing in the informal economy.³³ It discusses the growing number of associations through which informal workers develop collective visions and sometimes challenge state discourses and become visible as political actors. The book also addresses how some of these associations relate to other organized actors (particularly trade unions) as well as participate in international networks of organizations of informal workers. The contributions reveal both the achievements and the limitations of these initiatives. As Kate Meagher, one of the contributors, expresses, even if manifestations of “voice” are multiplying, for many informal workers, “informal political voice has not yet replaced the politics of exit.”³⁴

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be said that interpretations of the politics and agency of informal people have either tended to focus on individual everyday practices and invisible or quiet forms of resistance, or conversely, to emphasize collective mobilization and organizing initiatives among informal workers.³⁵ It is thus worth making the point that agency among informal and casual workers can assume multiple and varied forms. “Resistance” more generally has occasionally been conceived in such a broad manner, as ranging from small acts to larger forms of social organisation such as social movements; as encompassing both subtle moves and open confrontation.³⁶ In a similar vein, in Edgar Pieterse’s conceptualization of urban politics in the South, “insurgent citizenship”

can manifest itself through a varied range of transgressive practices.³⁷ He stresses the existence of “multiple ... and overlapping spaces of political practices in the city,” ranging from individual everyday practices of circumvention to collectively organized forms.³⁸ This is a good starting point for a broader approach to the agency of informal workers.

While the contributions in this special issue interpret the agency of informal workers in diverse and contrasting ways, taken together they provide a broader picture and illustrations of the diverse forms that such agency can take, in relation to processes of informalization/formalization. The articles by Hansen and by Baudouin and his associates illustrate how the urban self-employed have gradually taken over public space or come to dominate the waste sector, mainly on the basis of their individual daily practices—including tactics of avoidance of the state in the latter case. In both cases, while the authors see few signs of stable collective organization, they report how these actors occasionally resort to vehement collective manifestations in the form of riots and clashes, in response to various state interventions that threatened their livelihoods. Barchiesi also sees little scope for collective organization on the basis of work related identities in the context of processes of casualization. Rather, he focuses his attention on the subjectivities and discourses of individual workers and the ways in which they perceive self-employment as an opportunity “exit” the from capitalist production process. The other articles illustrate various kinds of collective organization in the informal economy. Clark analyzes market women organizations in a West African setting and the critical role played by their leaders in recurrent negotiations and interactions with regulatory authorities through history. Both strategies of engagement and disengagement are part of this history. Theron and Wells and Jason discuss the possibilities for collective organization—in the first case, the emergence of worker cooperatives, and in the second, the creation of an umbrella worker organization who engages with the state and various other actors.

An open and embracing approach to the multiple forms of agency of informal workers can bring to light the complexity and diversity of their political practices. It moves away from polarized views that restrict the field of vision to either manifestations of voice or of exit. Indeed, individual and collective forms of agency need not be seen as opposed or exclusive of each other. Rather, one can see them in the context of a broader spectrum, a continuum: at one end, individual circumventing practices dominate; at the other end, one finds collective interest groups with articulate visions; in between, there is a vast field of intermediate forms (the diffuse social networks, different forms of collaboration and cooperative work, etc). In this continuum there are no clear-cut divisions or fixed positions, as individuals and groups move along it, in no predetermined direction. Their insurgent practices may evolve from one form into another, from the individual to the collective and back again. They may seek engagement with regulatory powers only to later withdraw into the shadows and vice versa. Different modes of agency may dominate at different points in time, as political practices are temporal and influenced (though not determined) by the particular societal and political contexts in which they occur. But there is no reason to assume a linear progression, for example from individual atomized practices towards collective ones, given the inherent indeterminacy of such practices.

One should consider the possible coexistence of different modes of social agency, as individual informal workers may engage in both individual and collective forms of action. In their relations to the regulatory powers of the state, informal workers may ally or engage with specific state actors while avoiding and disengaging from others.³⁹ This broadened perspective allows for new kinds of questions to emerge that are of potential political

relevance. For example, one may inquire into whether different kinds of social action/political practices can have complementary political effects. Pieterse's relational perspective on diverse urban political domains is useful here. He calls attention to the interfaces between different domains of political practice, the ways in which they relate to each other, and may combine and reinforce each other. In this context, he proposes a politics that is attentive to "the intersections of the individual and the collective."⁴⁰ This is a more fruitful way of looking at the agency of informal workers than assuming that they prefer, or are consigned to, one particular kind of political practice or another. The challenge is to inquire into the shifting and situational strategies of invisibility and visibility and into the dynamics operating between exit and voice, for a fuller understanding of the politics of informality.

Notes

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1. The articles in this special issue were initially presented at a conference on "Informalizing Economies and New Organizing Strategies in Africa", held in 2007 under the auspices of the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden. Other contributions to the conference are forthcoming in an anthology: I. Lindell, ed., *Africa's Informal Workers: Collective Agency, Alliances and Transnational Organizing in Urban Africa*. London and Uppsala: Zed Books and The Nordic Africa Institute, 2010).
 2. Cross and Morales, 2007; Bayat, 2004.
 3. Bryceson, 2006; Hansen and Vaa, 2004.
 4. Jordhus-Lier, 2010; see also article by Baudouin et al. in this issue.
 5. This was earlier suggested by Castells and Portes (1989). This understanding of boundary does not deny the interlinked nature of formal and informal economies.
 6. For a thorough discussion and analysis of how the state, capital and popular groups have been involved in the production of informality in a West African city, see Lourenço-Lindell (2002).
 7. Brown, 2006; Amis, 2004.
 8. Potts, 2008; Roy, 2004; Hansen, 2004; Lindell and Kamete, forthcoming. See also Hansen's article in this issue.
 9. Lindell and Kamete, forthcoming.
 10. Lindell and Appelblad, 2009.
 11. Lindell, 2010a and 2008.
 12. Jordhus-Lier, 2010.
 13. Potts, 2008; Hansen, 2004; Cross, 1998.
 14. For a lengthier discussion on the varied and complex relations between informal workers and the state, see Lindell (2010a).
 15. Gibson-Graham, 2002.
 16. Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 15.
 17. Lindell, 2010.
 18. Lindell, 2010.
 19. See Lindell (2010a) for a discussion as well as several chapters in the same book.
 20. See for example, Azarya and Chazan (1987); MacGaffey (1988).
 21. Azarya and Chazan (1987), drawing on A. Hirschman (1970), *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms and States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

22. de Soto, 1989.
23. Scott, 1985 and 1990.
24. Bayat, 2004.
25. Bayat, 2004, p. 90.
26. Bayat, 2004, p. 93.
27. See for example Tripp (1997).
28. Simone, 2004, p. 14.
29. Simone, 2004, p. 9.
30. Simone, 2004, p. 13.
31. Chen et al., 2007.
32. Fernández-Kelly, 2006, p. 1.
33. Lindell (2010). The anthology results from the same conference as this issue.
34. Meagher, 2010.
35. A third strand of work that is not discussed here sees the politics of informality mainly in terms of elite capture or vertical clientelist relations. See for a discussion, Meagher (2010) and Lindell (2010a).
36. Sharp et al., 2000, p. 3. See also Cross (1998) for a similar position.
37. Pieterse, 2008.
38. Pieterse, 2008, p. 89.
39. See Cross (1998) and Lindell (2010a).
40. Pieterse, 2008, p. 119.

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