
Thematic Section

Performing In/formality beyond the Dichotomy: An Introduction

Martijn Koster *Radboud University*

Alan Smart *University of Calgary*

Abstract: This introduction to the special issue “Moving Beyond the Formal/Informal Dichotomy: Implications for Governance” provides an overview of recent debates on informality and argues in favour of understanding in/formality as a performance. Although informality and formality are often presented as opposing or even mutually excluding domains of social practice, ethnographic studies show how they coexist and are intertwined. Our special issue, with studies from the Philippines, Spain, Brazil and Mexico, concentrates on this intertwining of formality and informality, especially in the field of governance. Building upon these contributions to this issue, and the existing literature, this introduction approaches in/formality as a performance and examines the implications of such a view for our understanding of governance.

Keywords: informality, governance, performance, civility, anthropology of the state

Résumé : Cette introduction au numéro spécial « Au-delà de la dichotomie formel/informel : implications pour la gouvernance » donne un aperçu des récents débats sur la question de l’informel et plaide pour une conception de l’in/formel comme performance. Si l’informel et le formel sont souvent présentés comme des champs de pratique sociale opposés, voire mutuellement exclusifs, les études ethnographiques montrent qu’ils coexistent et s’imbriquent l’un dans l’autre. Notre numéro spécial, qui regroupe des études réalisées aux Philippines, en Espagne, au Brésil et au Mexique, se penche sur cette imbrication du formel et de l’informel, en particulier dans le domaine de la gouvernance. S’appuyant sur les contributions à ce numéro et sur la littérature existante, la présente introduction aborde l’in/formel comme performance et examine les implications d’une telle approche pour notre compréhension de la gouvernance.

Mots-clés : informel, gouvernance, performance, civilité, anthropologie de l’État

Entwining the Formal and the Informal

In the last decade, in anthropology and other disciplines, there has been a resurgence in studies of informality. Scholarship has taken exciting new approaches to informality and its intersections with politics, governance and planning. For long, the dominant debates on informality have been structured mainly along dichotomous formal/informal, regular/irregular or legal/illegal lines, where government/law equates to formality, or along the Global North/Global South divide, in which the North stands for formality and the South equals informality (Harris 2017; Hilbrandt et al. 2017; McFarlane 2012). Studies that build upon these dichotomies show, for instance, how government programs regulate or eradicate the informal economy or informal settlements or how informal housing practices deregulate formal planning policies. Formality and informality, in such a view, are considered domains that oppose and often exclude each other.

In contrast to these mainstream discussions, ethnographic studies have often demonstrated how formality and informality coexist (Barth 1993; Heyman 1999; Smart 2001; see also analytical overviews such as Lomnitz 1988). Research in legal anthropology, dealing with official and customary law, has convincingly argued that the question of what is in/formal or il/legal is locally situated (Benda-Beckmann 2001). James Scott (1998, 310), in his classic *Seeing Like a State*, emphasised the inseparability of the formal and the informal: “The formal order . . . is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist and which it alone cannot create or maintain.”

Recently, in anthropology, urban studies and critical planning, an increasing number of scholars have emphasised that the formal and the informal are always and everywhere intertwined (for example, Anjaria 2016; Hernández, Kellett, and Allen 2010; McFarlane 2012; Roy 2005; Varley 2013). In this view, the economy, human