DOI:10.1111/1468-2427.12701

– INFORMALIZATION OF THE STATE: Reflections from an Urban World of Translations

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Abstract

The project of globalizing informality requires the circulation of concepts and theories from the 'South' to the 'North'. It also relies on intertextuality and exchanges across languages and sites of academic production. This essay is a reaction to the collection of papers presented in this forum. It argues for more academic conversations between languages and cities in order to contribute to a general state theory.

A few years ago, I moved to Mexico City. Arriving in a new urban, spiritual and intellectual culture, I became fascinated by Mexican and Latin American writings on the state, particularly pertaining to legitimacy, governability (more so than governance), legality, agency and sovereignty. Coming from Canada to research and write in and on Mexico City was very much a personal journey. In these concluding remarks, I offer my reaction to the preceding papers from this standpoint. My objective is not to open up yet another research agenda, neither is it to systematically summarize the contributions of these papers. Instead, I wish to pursue the conversation prompted by this forum: translating informality from the 'South' to the 'North' and then back to the 'South'.

Through my personal journey and discoveries, I wish to illustrate how theoretical translation can flow. The perspective I gained from researching and living in Mexico City, in an intellectual universe that very rarely gets translated into English,[1] has opened up new theoretical sources of inspiration for me. My argument in this short essay is that globalizing our understanding of informality and its heuristic potential for state theory definitely needs the input of some serious empirical work on Northern case studies, which the preceding papers have set in motion. It also depends, I believe, on diversifying our theoretical sources of inspiration. And this necessitates translation.

Translating informality

Harnessing the heuristic potential of informality crucially relies on taking informality 'out' of the global South and using it as a device to understand the global North and its 'high-capacity states'. This means operating in a world of translations between languages and intellectual cultures. In their critical work on 'writing culture', Clifford and Marcus (1986) break from the ethnographical tradition of the Chicago School that sought to represent lived experience 'as it really is'. Instead, they see ethnography as a writing practice involving polyvocality, dialogue and intertextuality. The ethnographer, they argue, creates affective fictions of the world they describe. Ethnography 'is a political and creative practice grounded in the transgression of cultural boundaries, which are shifted, reconstructed or transcended through the encounter in the field' (Rao and Hutnyk, 2006: 1).

Translating informality entails crossing these cultural boundaries through writing. Beyond the idea of using theories about the South to understand the North, globalizing informality means working with a multiplicity of languages. It means translating concepts across contexts; it means, as Clifford and Marcus (1986) would put it, introducing polyvocality and intertextuality in state theory. Who speaks of

1 The postcolonial urban literature, whose critical perspective on informality informs the current theoretical developments in the field, generally comes from former British colonies (India, South Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong). Some of the decolonization literature emerging from Latin America is, however, beginning to be translated into English (see e.g. Quijano, 2000; de Sousa Santos, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Lugones, 2010).

informality? How can the notion travel and globalize in order to contribute to state theory?

In her contribution to this forum, Kusiak (2019: 590) analyzes the multiple translations between 'the letter of the law', 'the spirit of the law', and 'reality beyond the law'. Informality, she argues, is generated by ambiguous and multiple translations. Corruption, she adds, is an act of deliberate mistranslation. Translation is indeed a political act. When a (legal or academic) text is translated, it becomes open to various interpretations that may be far from its original spirit. For instance, Samson (2017) has shown how a court ruling about the use of a garbage dump in Johannesburg has been reinterpreted by waste collectors to give them legitimacy and exclusivity to the site. The law is constantly translated for everyday practice.[2]

The same process of interpretation happens when we translate concepts. Globalizing informality means that theories and heuristic devices travel across widely different contexts. The interesting aspect of this circulation is the process of local interpretation. This entails letting go of the need to remain truthful to the spirit of the law, or even some kind of objective reality negating any form of personalized affective and creative input by the writer describing it (as Chicago School ethnographers sought to do).

In this urban global world of translations, the question is: when do specific interpretations 'stick' and stabilize? As Jaffe and Koster (2019, this forum) so magnificently illustrate in their contribution, informal regimes of governance crystallize over specific interpretations of rules and laws. I would similarly argue that specific interpretations of good governance, legitimacy, agency, sovereignty or legality coalesce to form stabilizing regimes. Decades ago in the US context, urban regime theory exposed how '[p]olitics can be organized around the distribution of patronage, the protection of privilege, the substitution of show for substance, the favoring of factional interests, or the perpetuation of unfairness when forging governing alliances' (Stone, 1987: 18). As a starting point, urban regime theory rejected the idea that the city functioned on the basis of unitary interest. It emphasized instead the pervasiveness of conflict and political arrangements.

Thinking in terms of stabilizing regimes when theorizing the state entails recognizing that it is difficult to predefine moral values. Instead, what is negotiated in a specific time and place is considered (morally and politically) legitimate. It is not about the philosophically good or bad, just or oppressive. This is illustrated by Fokdal's (2019, this forum) fascinating study of mourning practices in Hong Kong. Legitimacy is temporarily reaching a stabilizing and pragmatic arrangement (always temporary because it will quickly be reinterpreted and translated).

In the English-speaking world, critical perspectives on informality have been dominated by a postcolonial literature that does not mention earlier works on informality and urban regimes in the global North (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mbembe, 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012). Largely stemming from the former British colonies, this postcolonial literature speaks to its specific context and tends to focus on subaltern forms of resistance to domination (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Roy, 2016).

But other critical perspectives are developing elsewhere and often in other languages. One may think, for instance, of the strong critical urban voices raised in Turkey or Eastern Europe during recent years (Eder and Öz, 2015; Ferencuhova, 2016; Tuvikene, 2016). In what follows, I will provide some examples of how we could re-read informality and the state, from outside the English-speaking debate and in light of the reinterpretations comprising this forum, through empirical cases in the global 'North'. Operating this geographical and conceptual translation, I am suggesting

2 See also Lamotte (2017) for a study of rule interpretation among gangs in New York City and Barcelona.

here that the project of globalizing informality needs to be polyvocal, intertextual and multilingual.[3]

Circulating from the English-speaking 'South' to the 'North' and back to the Spanish-speaking 'South'

One of the most exciting and difficult tasks this forum sets out to do is to rethink state theory from an interdisciplinary perspective. Haid and Hilbrandt (2019, this forum) underscore the fact that the recently burgeoning literature on informality in the English-speaking sphere shies away from thinking directly about the state. It does not engage in depth with state theory's long tradition of drawing upon disciplines such as political science or political sociology. In an interdisciplinary move, this forum's introductory remarks and the preceding five papers reposition the state, the law and the informal sector, from essentialized objects to relational processes involving various actors, spaces and temporalities. I can only stress the need to continue in that direction. It would be extremely enlightening to see a comprehensive article pursuing this reflection by directly addressing the bridges between classical historical state theory and the postcolonial urban informality literature.

What I wish to briefly do now is highlight how each of the conceptual translations proposed in this forum, from the English-speaking postcolonial literature to empirical reinterpretations thereof in cities of the global North, can be further reinterpreted by bringing things back to Mexico. The point is to illustrate how these multiple translations and conceptual circulations can flow to contribute to general state theory.

– Governance

Governance in Mexico is generally discussed through the prism of (un) governability. This literature is replete with ideas about impossibility, failure and the irrational endeavor of governing *El Monstruo*, the giant that is Mexico City. But beyond these normative assessments comparing practices to an idealized benchmark, solid empirical analyses of governing practices highlight how people make things work on a daily basis. What I wish to emphasize here, following Jaffe and Koster's (this forum) study of Dutch cities, is that what are presented as models of innovation in cities of the North are generally presented as failures in places like Mexico City. What is often analyzed using concepts such as neoliberalism in the North is usually understood as informality in the South. For the same practices, different conceptual lenses are applied. The project of geographical translation proposed in this forum challenges this 'Nor(th) mative' epistemology.

– Agency

In Latin America, informality is not clearly grounded in a chronology of modernization and then neoliberalization (Boudreau *et al*., 2016). While influenced by Marxism, as well as other economic explanations of informality adopted by the World Bank, theories of informality in Mexico cannot be understood without making reference to spiritual practices and cultural production.[4] Mexico has been influenced by Marxist traditions, but its interpretation of Marxism has remained largely separate from English-speaking debates (Duhau, [1992] 2016). For the last three decades, studies of informal settlements have been marked by tales of resistance and political confrontation (Connolly, 1985; 2013). But such agency can hardly be conceived as a

3 If I may add a note here (as a former IJURR editor) on the editorial position of this journal: IJURR's project is to foster a global critical debate on urban and regional research. This poses real practical challenges for non-native English speakers but, as discussed in two editorials published in the journal, IJURR is earnestly seeking ways to 'globalize' the debate (Boudreau and Kaika, 2013; Boudreau *et al*., 2015).

4 One may think, for example, of magical realism and the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. But I would also emphasize, in the case of Mexico in particular, the rich tradition of urban chronicles famously exemplified by the work of Carlos Monsiváis (for a contemporary reiteration of such work translated into English see Gallo, 2004).

dichotomous struggle between the dominant and the dominated. The debate is marked by a more porous conception of agency characterized by actors constantly changing roles, or playing more than one ambiguous role in the confrontation between informal settlements and the state. Conceptualizing the state as 'informality as practice', as suggested by Lombard (2019, this forum) in seeking to understand the phenomenon of 'beds in sheds' in the UK, prevents falling into the trap of rigidly separating the state from the market and civil society, and thus adopting a false linear and developmentalist perspective. It further enables us to account for the various and fluid roles played by actors who can 'be the state' at the same time as they 'are the proletariat'.

– Sovereignty

Globalization not only increases the power of the market over state actors, but it also produces urban ways of life that affect our conception of the space, time and rationality of politics. Understanding how people engage politically and govern a world of cities calls for sensitivity to networks, a non-linear and tactical understanding of the political process, and what I have called elsewhere the 'visceral registers of micro-politics' (Boudreau, 2017: 168). Latin America is one of the most urbanized regions of the world and has been so for a very long time. It is characterized by impressive megacities dominating their countries. The urban–rural dichotomy translates into power struggles. In the latter part of the twentieth century, scholars spoke in terms of 'internal colonialism' to describe these relations (Walton, 1975; Davis, 1994). Urbanity, and its share of affectivity and spatial and temporal fluidity, is at the very core of Mexico's definition of sovereignty. This was fantastically illustrated in Lomnitz's (2008) opus *Death and the Idea of Mexico*.

– Legitimacy

The Latin American decolonial discussion of informality emphasizes the intermingling of colonial, neo-colonial and indigenous cosmologies. The close coexistence of *pueblos originarios* (original peoples and their villages) and the modern planned city, the cultural glorification of *mestizaje* and the constant presence of what Echeverria (1998) calls 'baroque modernity' give state theory and informality a different set of conceptual devices in Mexico. While studies of European and Anglo-American countries generally assume, following Weber's (1930) work on Protestant ethics, that the modern state is rationally separated from religion, Echeverria (1998) suggests that Latin American modernity would be best understood as the result of a 'baroque ethics'. By this he means that, in Latin America, there has never been a binary choice to privilege 'reason' over 'passion', exchange value over use value. The baroque ethics is about ambivalence, about choosing both. In many ways, this comes close to the argument developed by Fokdal (this forum) when interpreting mourning practices in Hong Kong. Legitimacy is situationally produced. Whilst mourning may be seen as a highly moral object, the essay illustrates how the legitimacy of new practices is gained through the ambiguous coexistence of 'reason' and 'passion'.

– Legality

Discussions about legality in Mexico generally revolve around the state's incapacity to comply with its own terms. Yet, a new generation of legal scholars is currently producing promising work not on state failure, but on the traces of the law in the urban context (Azuela, 2016). The question they ask is not whether laws are correctly implemented or how to measure informality. Instead, they ask what effects does the law, applied or not, have on the city. The law is thus conceived not only as a legal document, but also through its various interpretations and declinations in state practice and the public discourse. For instance, a formal legal concept such as the *amparo* (enshrined in Mexico's constitution) serves to protect the rights of individuals by giving judges discretional power to block the application of a law that would impede basic rights (Roush, 2012: 223). More than an unreachable constitutional tool, the *amparo* forms part of the services offered by legal offices across the city, as commonplace as advice on insurance contracts or divorce proceedings. In everyday language, it also refers to a negotiated deal struck by intermediaries to protect individuals against an impersonal bureaucratic system or a hostile third party. The *amparo* is thus a legal instrument, a form of daily language used to speak of protection against the law, and a set of habits deployed by lawyers and citizens when thinking about stopping a specific real estate project or reserving a space on the sidewalk for 'illegal' street vending. Again such ambiguity serves to discuss how enacting the law is both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' affair, something very well illustrated here by Kusiak (this forum).

The papers in this forum also offer a wealth of fascinating cases studies, detailing empirically how the state functions through networks, tactical moves and affective registers. This is particularly striking in Picker's study of two 'spaces of exception' in Montreuil, where camps housing Romani people were governed through public–private partnerships with local NGOs. Redefining key concepts like sovereignty as 'the power to impose exceptions to the rule', studying 'innovative' informal governance, 'juggling legitimacies' or shedding light on 'rules-lawyering', this forum is a valuable resource of fascinating cases to inspire a redefinition of state theory that incorporates theories of informality.

The strange language of urbanization

In closing these reflections, I wish to return to a debate published in 2009 in these pages, where AbdouMaliq Simone and I experimented with intertextuality and translations. We asked six authors writing about Mumbai, Rio, Toronto, Cape Town, and Montreal: 'How does an analysis go "from there to there" and fold these different cities into each other, yet take cognizance of, and experience, the textures of their different histories and characters? How can one write about these lines? How, to paraphrase Fulvia Carnevale, can a strange language be found in the predominant language of urbanization?' (Simone and Boudreau, 2009: 989–90). We then took the liberty to put these texts in conversation. The idea was to shed light on unexpected articulations 'between emplaced yet always mobile voices; voices that speak of specific cities and people, while participating in a transurban language of urbanization' (*ibid*.: 990)

Haid and Hilbrandt's (this forum) project of globalizing informality speaks to this theoretical search for articulation based on locally grounded empirical discussions. Roy and Ong (2011) speak of 'worlding', or the art of being global, in terms of speculative experiments that cannot be subsumed within a unifying logic of capitalism. This stream of work has been hotly debated in the journal in the past three years (Scott and Storper, 2015; Hall and Savage, 2016; Mould, 2016; Robinson and Roy, 2016; Walker, 2016). Haid and Hilbrandt's intervention in this forum, calling for translating informality, seeks 'an approach that captures all cities within the same field of analysis because and in spite of their differences' (p. 553). Their focus on rethinking state theory is inspiring, as it enables general theory-building in the great tradition of Charles Tilly (1990) or Michael Mann (1986; 1993; 2012a; 2012b) for instance. This would partly answer Scott and Storper's (2015) call for general theory.

In conclusion, I wish to suggest that engaging with state theory through informality forces us to take urbanization very seriously. As the papers of this forum demonstrate, the political process of claiming, resisting, transforming power relations, ways of doing and policies, takes place through networked movements, affective and intuitive action, non-linear (non-developmentalist) understandings of political change, distributed agency and multiple registers of action articulating the everyday with the visibly 'political' event. This can be captured within the idea of an urban logic of action (Boudreau, 2017). The urban logic of action affects the modern state because such urban politics increasingly escapes the reach of, and is not directed towards, the geographically bounded state. In this sense, it is a force of informalization.

Transformations in conceptions of space, time and rationality, brought about by urbanization, profoundly affect the very definition of the political process. As state institutions lose their monopoly over governance—that is, over the distribution of justice and authority—urban ways of life are bringing new political forms to the fore. In the modern world of nation states, the political process was conceived as comprising containers (i.e. territorially delimited entities). Politics, understood in this context as conflicts generated by the confrontation of opposing interests, took place within the confines of national boundaries. The modern democratic and sovereign state was there to mediate conflicts by guaranteeing the rules of the game (elections, protection of civil rights, monopoly over legitimate violence, etc.). The state was thought to have full control over its territory and was there to protect citizens. It was the main interlocutor of all political claims. In this bounded world, conflict and contention was tolerated as long as they sustained the state.

In the contemporary world of cities, where nation states' sovereignty and boundaries are profoundly challenged by global flows, the state still plays a central role. But cultural and economic flows, and the mobility of people and merchandise across borders, have significantly affected the bounded spatial conception of the world. In a world of cities, politics is no longer seen as the exclusive domain of the state. Action unfolds in networked, fluid and mobile spaces that are not fixed by clear borders. Global social movements, social media campaigns, political tourism, are evidence that in order to understand politics we need to think in terms of networked and not only bounded spaces.

In the modern world of nation states, time was seen as directional and having constant velocity. Politics was defined in strategic terms: a political act was enacted with a clear goal and was carefully considered in order to evaluate its chances of success. The world was conceived in linear terms. For instance, there were developed and under-developed countries. The assumption was that, with time, under-developed countries would catch up and modernize. Time, particularly the temporality of political change, was conceived as a historical march towards progress.

In the contemporary world of cities, people still act strategically and hope for a better future. But other forms of political action are increasingly visible. Acting spontaneously, without strategy, developing tactics in response to immediate situations, without thinking too much about the consequences of action, acting out of passion or rage rather than ideology … this draws our attention to a different conception of time and political change. The temporality of action is fragmented, composed of multiple situations and dominated by the 'here and now' more than the future, by tactical rather than strategic thought.

In a world of nation states, the stability of the space of action and of linear time facilitated pretension to scientific rationality as the motor of legitimate action. People calculated, planned and acted because we thought we could master the parameters of the issue at stake. Of course, people still act in this way, but they also increasingly assert other rationalities of action based on creativity, unpredictability, sensorial stimulation, intuition, emotion and loss of control.

This leads to a more diffuse form of political action, where leadership is absent (or at least invisible or negated). Action unfolds in specific time and place through a network of relations. We recognize political action only if we decenter the gaze from leaders and analyze specific situations instead (how actions unfold in time and space). The motor of this process is not so much antagonism and contention as impulsion. By impulsion I mean the intensification of the multiple encounters and experiments that are characteristic of urban ways of life.

State informalization forces us to think about how we live together in open-ended and perennially temporary ways. The strange language of urbanization is understandable only if we attempt to read power relations as they unfold in specific places and moments. This is what the papers presented in this forum successfully do. Yet informality, for all its arbitrariness, uncertainty and ambivalence, also produces patterns and structures, as Lombard (this forum) so amply demonstrates in her study of beds in sheds. For this reason, the project of globalizing informality by rethinking state theory is extremely promising. Perhaps more than an 'epistemology of the South' (de Sousa Santos, 2009) or 'beyond the West' (Edensor and Jayne, 2012), such re-theorizing of the state entails globalizing informality by engaging with the strange language of urbanization. Thinking the state with an epistemology of urbanity means, to my mind, engaging with its informalization (Magnusson, 2014; Boudreau, 2017).

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