



**HAL**  
open science

## Enhancing informality as an opportunity for the reflexivity of social sciences

Julien Rebotier

► **To cite this version:**

Julien Rebotier. Enhancing informality as an opportunity for the reflexivity of social sciences. Reflecting on the heuristic potential of informality: A South-North dialogue, Jan 2012, LYON, France. halshs-00661668

**HAL Id: halshs-00661668**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00661668>**

Submitted on 20 Jan 2012

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Enhancing informality as an opportunity for the reflexivity of social sciences

*5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of RECIM network* (ENS – Lyon; January 2012, 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>)

Julien Rebotier – CNRS, UMR 5603 SET (Pau) / [julien.rebotier@univ-pau.fr](mailto:julien.rebotier@univ-pau.fr)

My statement relies on 3 points and aims at enhancing informality as an opportunity for reflexivity (point 1 and 2) and politicization (point 3) of social sciences.

I'm basing my points on scientific literature, the texts we exchanged within the RECIM network and our previous discussions, as well as on fieldwork not precisely related with informality, but with urban environmental risk, housing issues and informal trade in Latin-American cities (mainly Caracas, but also México, Buenos Aires and São Paulo).

Informality appears to be a double-edge notion. 1- It allows building critical knowledge on social stratification and power relations. And, 2- it opens the door for reflexivity and fundamental questioning of epistemic structures that frame social sciences and their practices. Finally, in a context of rearranging Modernity, and supposedly renewed practices of social sciences, 3- the twofold aspect of informality makes me put into perspective the potential criticism of informality regarding social sciences – it might not be that new –, and it makes me underline the power-related dimension of the notion as for its implications on societies. The same word, “informality”, can uncover very different worldviews, leading to emancipation or reproducing alienation.

1. Informality allows an outward thinking: it tells us a lot about social order. As an analytical category, I will highlight two main interpretations: the functionalist and the structuralist views.

- As a necessary dimension of capitalism, of economies, of justice systems in a **functionalist** view, I'm thinking more in terms of Marxist perspective, in terms of the dual cities of Milton Santos (1975), or in the dependency explanation. Informality makes things work.

We have plenty of examples of that, like the underground economies of Mexican workers in California, or African workers in southern European farms... Figures from the OECD on metropolitan economies can also bring us some clues: in 2003, urban regions in OECD countries are showing smaller activity rates than in intermediary or even rural regions. According to the report, urban regions, in spite of being the focus points of economic growth, are concentrating so-considered inactive individuals in a disproportionate manner (it also says “or working in informal economy”).

- Informality is also analytically useful as it is associated with norms and legalism, in a **structural** perspective. When power relations become incorporated relations more than disciplinary institutions, informality can be seen as a vehicle of such trend. This way we follow Foucault analysis on

power and norms. Informality is constitutive of social organization and ordering.

What is informal and what is not? When do informal activities are considered as illegal and must be eliminated... or tolerated, provided that other kind of power relations or dependency appear? Just one example: in Caracas I asked a local police officer about the many guns that are circulating in the city, and about self-defense (Rebotier, 2012). He told me: we know that they are guns in middle class sectors, but there is a problem when these people's 'houses are stolen. The poor take the weapons back to their *ranchos*. Then the guns are into bad hands. Here is an example of the way similar informal security activities can be considered as both "normal" and "dangerous" according to the people involved, creating or reproducing order and hierarchy.

I hope I have been clear enough in identifying informality as concerning North and South (Archambault and Greffe, 1984), urban and rural contexts as well as different themes or sectors. The first point was related to the observation of society through informality, and the second one, to the way informality can frame societies and the way they work. Let's consider now informality, not as an analytical category, but as a heuristic device, in epistemological terms.

2. Informality allows an inward thinking: it deals with the ways social sciences represent (and act on) the world. Informality is seen as a heuristic device (how do we know the world?). Who is talking about what, in which ways, in which circumstances?

Let's just think about the genesis of the concept "informality", its introduction by the anthropologist Hart (1973), reporting on urban issues, and the further work of the International Labor Organization: we went from an empirical to a normative concept. We also know the importance of the links between informal and illegal, when "seeing like a state" makes statistical categories and classification compulsory, as Scott (1998) says about states looking for mastering a territory, a population or an activity. Social sciences have been involved in such disciplinary trend. And saying what is informal and what is not is closely entangled with the evolution of modern power relations and modern states.

Indeed, as Loïc Wacquant (2010) talking about the neoliberalizing state as an encompassing social fact, or as Robert Castel (1995) talking about the disaffiliation, social scientists are observing and interpreting a world where inherited disciplinary institutions (the school, the Church, the state, the army, the family...) at least in northern / occidental countries, are deeply transforming, and even disappearing. Individualism, uncertainty, improvisation, serendipity... are characterizing the hyper or post-modern condition.

Opening breaches in modern and too rigid patterns in social sciences of interpretation is necessary. Criticism is mandatory, we all know that. But reflexivity is also mandatory as the withdrawal of the state, the emergence of horizontal organs of governance, alleging for equity, or the voice given to traditionally hidden and marginalized actors, are not reducing inequalities, marginality or exclusion. Rearranging Modernity is only transforming social reality as well as the ways we are

observing it. The ways we are making comments on what we are observing is **performative**: it makes differences and has implications on it.

In terms of housing issues, the role of the models we have in mind is crucial: the right to the city, the global and competitive city, the creative city or the sustainable city, deserving the city (following Oszlak, 1991 or De Soto, 1987). All these models are framing the solutions envisioned. Many works are trying to make things work, make informal mobilization have weight on decision, make spontaneous organization be recognized in governance mechanisms, aiming at more democracy... Regarding housing issues, informal arrangements can entail fragmented as well as collective initiatives. But today, most of them do not question the market that is taken for granted. Most of these either collective or individual initiatives try to be part of a housing market that has been incorporated. In Argentina, collective mobilizations only got significant during a 2-years political opportunity window after the 2001 crisis, through the law 341. Cooperatives and associations could assume loans collectively so that marginalized families can get a house. But in 2003, the windows shut down, and the loans were endowed individually, making private property the only horizon in solving housing issues in Buenos Aires, as it used to be in that city (Rodríguez, 2009).

By concentrating on informality and the “opportunities” it offers, we might naturalize contingent circumstances, taking them for granted, and we might under consider other aspects that are critical in shaping ones’ life, and particularly of those lacking of different kinds of resources, and capital. Informality must not be considered as an emancipating tool *per se*. We do not have to answer only the “how” question, but also the “why” and “in which circumstances” question.

In the context of transforming Modernity, informality is an excellent opportunity for interpreting transforming societies. But we must do so in a contextualized and situated way, as inequalities, discrepancies, hierarchies, differentiation, domination... have not disappeared at all. “Informality” is just another way to deal with them.

3. Here comes the last point, in more general terms:

As a heuristic device, informality helps us as social scientists to better catch the social reality we are observing, but maybe not in such an innovative and different way as we were used to see in the past.

- The crisis of modernity (and its characteristics) is the framework within which our epistemological questions are emerging, but an “excessive” modernism (not modernity) has already encountered many contestations and critics.

Just to mention some examples, I’m thinking about the current work of Yves Chalas and Olivier Soubeyran (2011) about improvisation in environmental planning and about the output-driven planning. I would like to cite also an article from the last issue of *IJURR*: “positively radical” (Wyly, 2011), where the author says that in the mid 19<sup>th</sup>, positivism was a way to materialize and set the explanation into scientific ground, far away from esotery and superstitions. The paper ends denouncing relativism and the excess of culturalism as a one-fit-all framework for supposedly emancipating

interpretation. Finally, I would like to mention the paper of Alejandro Portes (1972) denouncing the discourses on the “irrationality” of the Pooors. Questioning Modernity and rationalism is not that new. Modernity can also be seen as a constant movement of comings and goings, and not necessarily as a monolithic worldview. This way, informality may be just another hit in such trend.

- Informality invites us to consider localism, relativism, cultural aspects... which are all questioning the modern explanation in national-centered social sciences. But these notions entail potential drifts that must be pointed out:

In *Seeing like a state*, Scott (1998) is not making the apology of localism, of ideal marginalized communities, nor he is criticizing the State *per se*. And for instance, right-wing sectors are using constructivist statements to question the human implication in climate change today, relying on relativism and on the equivalence of different kinds of discourses (Godard, 2011). Another example: De Soto (1987) argues for distributing property acts to invaders in southern cities, while we know that the problem is not the property act that comes with benefits **and** obligations (Van Gelder, 2009). The issue consists in securing the tenure of the land, not having an act of property.

In his work on natural resource management and democratic governance Jesse Ribot invites us to rematerialize our critical social scientist perspective on informality, as a way to ground our analysis, and not to loose structural power, economic and social relations that keep framing “informal” situations. As for him, there is no such thing as “given” liberation informality, good and bad informal situations, like *liberation ecologies* (Peet et Watts, 2004). Ecology like informality can be considered as renewed contexts, where society makes sense. But social stratification and inequalities keep extremely conspicuous in these contexts. Other opportunities and constraints are shaped. And we still have to make them visible.

#### 4- Conclusion:

By talking about informality,

- We are considering opportunities for individual appropriation and even potential emancipation (as De Certeau, 1990 or Scott, 1987 say). But even if the agency of the many little ants seems to be growing with current globalization and the crisis of Modernity, individual paths, strategies or appropriations of the world are not falling from the sky.
- Thus, informality can also be considered as a set of circumstances that frame differently the same social stratification, inequalities or power relations.

We need to make significant differences out of our different views of informality as these views entail different political contents.

It invites us to be more reflexive, as the way to talk about informality is a highly politicized and performative activity. In neo-liberalizing societies (Wacquant, 2010; Peck et Tickell, 2002), we all know which discourse on flexibility, innovation or resilience... is gaining ground.

## 5- References:

- Archambault Edith et Greffe Xavier, 1984, *Les économies non officielles*, La Découverte, Paris.
- Castel Robert, 1995, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale : une chronique du salariat*, Fayard, Paris.
- Chalas Yves et Soubeyran Olivier, 2009, "Incertitude, environnement et aménagement. Quelle rupture? ", 135-157, dans *Comment les acteurs s'arrangent avec l'incertitude?*, Y. Chalas, C. Gilbert, D. Vinck, (Eds.), Editions des archives contemporaines, Paris.
- De Certeau Michel, 1990, *L'invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire*, Gallimard, Paris.
- De Soto Hernando, 1987, *El otro sendero*, Diana, México.
- Godard Olivier, 2011, "Le climato-scepticisme médiatique en France: un sophisme moderne", 1-33, *Cahiers de l'école polytechnique* 20 (1).
- Hart Keith, 1973, "Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana", 61-89, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 11 (1).
- Morice Alain, Lautier Bruno et De Miras Claude, 1991, *L'Etat et l'informel*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- OECD, 2006, *Examens territoriaux de l'OCDE. Villes, compétitivité et mondialisation*, Paris, OECD Editions.
- Oszlak Oscar, 1991, *Merecer la ciudad : los pobres y el derecho al espacio urbano*, Humanitas, Buenos Aires.
- Peck Jamie et Tickell Adam, 2002, "Neoliberalizing space", 380-404, *Antipode* 34 (3).
- Peet Robert et Watts Michael (Eds.), 2004, *Liberation ecologies. Environment, development, social movements*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Portes Alejandro, 1972, "Rationality in the slum: an essay on interpretive sociology", 268-286, *Comparative studies in society and history* 14.
- Rebotier Julien, 2012, "Pratiques de sécurité et inégalités à Caracas. Nouveaux resorts d'une logique ancienne?", *JSSJ* 4, en ligne.
- Rodríguez María Carla, 2009, *Autogestión, política del hábitat y transformación social*, Espacio Editorial, Buenos Aires.
- Santos Milton, 1975, *L'espace partagé: les deux circuits de l'économie urbaine des pays sous-développés*, Marie-Thérèse Guérin, Paris.
- Scott James, 1987, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Heaven, Yale University Press.
- Scott James, 1998, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Heaven, Yale University Press.

Van Gelder Jean-Louis, 2009, "Legal tenure security, perceived tenure security and housing improvement in Buenos-Aires : an attempt towards integration", 126-146, *International Journal of Urban Regional Research* 33.

Wacquant Loïc, 2010, "La fabrique de l'État néolibéral «Workfare», « Prisonfare» et insécurité sociale", 151-173, *Civilisations* 59 (1).

Wyly Elvin, 2011, "Positively radical", 889-912, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35.