

Reflecting on the heuristic potential of informality: A South-North dialogue

5th Annual meeting of the RECIM Lyon, January 16-17, 2012

What is the RECIM?

The RECIM (*Red continental de investigacion sobre la informalidad en las metropolis*) is a network of researchers in Mexico, the United States, Canada, and more recently France and South Africa, working on various "informal" practices in urban settings. Created in 2008, the network's first public meeting took place in Ottawa and Montreal (November 2009), followed by a public meeting in Mexico City (February 2010), a panel session at the Metropolis national congress held in Montreal in March 2010, and a 4th annual meeting in Mexico City in March 2011. These meetings aimed at developing research questions that animate comparative discussions. We began by asking "Under what conditions do informal practices become illegal and punishable under the law?" A special issue of *Reflexión política* reflecting on this central question has been published.





These discussions have emphasised the fact that tolerance of informality will vary across places and that managing urban space is a key element to maintaining a balance between informality and formality. This leads to further questions: "Are there new forms of informality emerging in this global context which affect degrees of tolerance?" Or again, "Are there new forms of transnational learning (or prejudices) which can change degrees of state tolerance to informality?" Under the title of *Rethinking the political: Informality, governance and the rule of law in an urban world,* our 4th annual meeting was marked by rich discussions based on empirical case studies and theoretical reflections (www.recim.info). A collective book will be published shortly by the Programa Universitario de Estudios de la Ciudad (PUEC) of the UNAM.

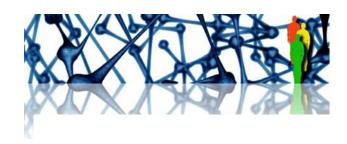
Our objectives







Based on each participant's empirical work, the RECIM seeks to contribute to the redefinition of certain concepts central to social sciences: the rule of law, the modern state, governance, regulation, society, nation, and so on. The idea is to work towards the creation of what Diane Davis calls a "new sociological imagination," in reference to the work of C Wright Mills (1958). We seek to enlarge the notion of informality from being a well-constituted *object of study* to being a *heuristic device* for developing a new social scientific epistemology. Our hypothesis is that informality is an important structuring notion for a critical reflection on social sciences. Indeed, social sciences in the Global North have been based on ideas of formalisation and territorialisation, and as such, have been colonizing the Global South where the dominant tropes have been centred on the notions of development, progress modernisation.



Our approach and the role of annual meetings

The specificity of the RECIM is its South-North comparative outlook, which also combines macro analysis with micro studies of how informal practices unfold on the ground. In order to do so, we propose a dialogical comparative method based on exchanges between researchers. The idea is to be reflexive on our own work, and to use the perspective of an "Other" (in this case colleagues working in a different city, discipline, institutional and national context) to inductively identify differences on how informal practices are treated and defined in various countries. The hypothesis is that informal practices are active in the North as much as in the South, but that our dominant representations of the North (as a nor(th)mative referent in social sciences) prevent us from seeing them. Informality is mostly associated with the Global South and is usually evoked as the manifestation of a less accomplished "development." A critical approach to social sciences would need to tear down this dichotomy.

We do not compare objects (informal settlement, street vending, etc.), but processes through which objects are constituted as knowledge. By talking about the knowledge we produce to colleagues located in different institutional, disciplinary and cultural contexts, we are forced to explain underlying values and taken-for-granted premises. This dialogue is constructed as an interpersonal process based on trust. By testing it ourselves, we aim to propose new ways of doing social sciences.



Specific objectives for the 5th annual meeting:

The 5th annual meeting will be marked by the integration of researchers from France and South Africa, bringing a different perspective to our previously continental American discussions. The meeting will take place in Lyon (France), organised in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair on Urban Policies and Citizenship (RIVES-ENTPE), the Collegium de Lyon (ENS), and the National Institute for Scientific Research (INRS).



INRS

The focus of our discussion this year will be epistemological, building on the work accomplished by the working group on informality led by Frédéric Lesemann and Emmanuel Raufflet. Following a presentation of the work accomplished by the working group, each participant will revisit his/her empirical data with the above delineated analytical perspective in mind. S/he will present (in English or French) a short paper focused specifically on how informality can contribute to redefine social sciences. 20 minutes per presentation.



We hope this meeting will move us forward on better defining how informality can contribute to critical studies. There is a large literature on informality that is very well-structured in certain disciplines or concerning specific objects of study: the informal economy, informal work, informal settlements, informal traffics (drugs, people, pirated goods), or the role of informality in organizational dynamics (e.g., Crozier, 1972). Yet, it seems that in order to enlarge our understanding of informality as a heuristic device, it would be important to locate informality in the context of contemporary political and economic neoliberal globalisation. We are witnessing a "new deployment" of informality in such conditions, perhaps even "new informalities" characterised by the penetration of the market logic in every sphere of collective and intimate life. This leads to new logics of commercial production, but also of self-production. For instance, outsourcing is a practice that introduces informality at the heart of formal firms as much as at the core of individual practices.





This is why we propose to reread certain practices or events as manifestations of informality. For example:

- with its speculative practices that weaken State capacities, the financial sector could be seen as an informal sector:
- with its attempts to adjust to the globalisation of societies, international law could also be characterized by the use of informal practices;
- with their use of clandestine population movements regulated by Mafioso organisations for their labour needs, enterprises are also participating in the informal sector;
- with their defection from state-centred organisations (political parties, trade unions, social movement organisations), new forms of social protest (around environmental issues or the water crisis for instance) blurring the Left-Right divide, can be read as informal forms of political action;
- with the privatisation of State responsibilities associated with the exercise of "legitimate violence" (private police, private armies, private law, the delegation of reprehensible acts to the private sector, mercenary arrangements), the State is also participating; or
- with the transfer of jurisdiction to community groups, charities, or the social economy for the management of schools, transportation, social and health services, the notion of common good is stripped away from the public sphere and thus could be seen as falling "underground" in the informal sector.

The question we are asking in this 5th meeting is: <u>Can the notion of informality shed new light on contemporary processes of State restructuring and citizen-state relationships?</u>
Would such rereading through the lens of informality provide new tools or analytical categories to social sciences and contribute to its critical reorientation after over 60 years of social scientific knowledge production based on the notions of territoriality, formality, rationality, nationality, wage society, and modernity?





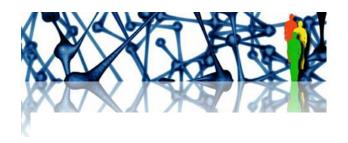






Organising committee:

Felipe de Alba, Coordinator Frédéric Lesemann Anaïk Purenne Julie-Anne Boudreau



PROGRAM

January 16, 2011

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	9h00	Welcoming words by the Director of the Collegium de Lyon and the Director of the Laboratory RIVES
	9h30-9h45	Introduction to the workshop – Frédéric Lesemann and Felipe de Alba
	9h45-	Frédéric Lesemann. Informality: Reflections on what we know -
	10h30	L'informalité : le point sur nos connaissances communes
	10h30-11h	Coffee break
	11h-12h30	Understanding informality: Perspectives and approaches
		 Charlotte Lemanski. Conceptualising informality from the South: An India-South Africa comparison – Une conceptualisation de l'informalité à partir du sud: Une comparaison de l'Inde et de l'Afrique du Sud. Alan Mabin. Is the trend to more or less informal? Words from social life in São Paulo and Johannesburg – La tendance va-t-elle vers plus ou moins d'informalité? Quelques mots provenant de la vie sociale à São Paulo et Johannesburg Pierre-Joseph Ulysse. Informality: A « great analyser » of contemporary modes of social, political, and economic restructuring - L'informalité: Un « grand analyseur » des modes contemporains de restructuration de la vie sociale, politique et économique
ŀ	12h30-	Lunch
	14h30	Lancii
ŀ	14h30-	Informality and environmental issues
t-gard	16h30	 Felipe de Alba. The informal and the political in environmental issues: First traces of an analytical framework - L'informel et le politique environnemental: Premières traces d'un cadre d'analyse Maria Fernanda Paz. Contested formality, informality to fear: An analysis from the point of view of environmental conflicts in Mexico - Formalité contestée, informalité à craindre: Une lecture depuis les conflits environnementaux au Mexique Emmanuel Raufflet. Management and informality: Models and definitions - Gestion et informalité: Modèles et définitions Thierry Coanus. Risk management dealing with the informal: The misrecognition of non-technical practices and representations as a factor of vulnerability - La gestion des risques aux prises avec l'informel: Le défaut de reconnaissance des pratiques et représentations non techniques comme facteur de vulnérabilité Fabrice Riziolli. Mafias and « ecomafias »: In-between legality and illegality, or the end of a distinction - Mafias et « ecomafias »: Entre légalité et illégalité, ou la fin d'une distinction
	16h30- 16h45	Coffee Break
ľ	16h45-	General discussion
	17h30	
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January 17, 2011

Г	9h00-11h	Pooding informality, Enictomology and mathods
	91100-11II	Reading informality: Epistemology and methods
		 Julien Rebotier. Enhancing informality as an opportunity for the
		reflexivity of social sciences – Accentuer l'informalité pour ouvrir des
		opportunités de réflexivité en sciences sociales
		 Jérôme Monnet. Dualization and de-legitimization: Informality as a
		heuristic device for re-interpreting the public-private, outdoor-indoor,
		economic-domestic dichotomies – Dualisation et délégitimation:
		L'informalité en tant qu'appareil heuristique pour la réinterprétation des
		dichotomies public-privé, extérieur-intérieur, économique-domestique
		 Blandine Destremau. Informality as a transnational gray zone:
		Reflections based on the case of migrant domestic workers in the
		Middle-East - L'informalité comme zone grise transnationale:
		réflexions à partir du cas des employées domestiques migrantes au
		Moyen-Orient
		Analiese Richard. Locating Informality: Anthropological Concepts and
		Ethnographic Methods – Situer l'informalité: Concepts
		anthropologiques et méthodes ethnographiques
		Martin Lamotte. TBA
ı	11h-11h15	Coffee break
ľ	11h15-	Informality and the governance of insecurity
	13h15	Philip Bonner. Behind the Gate: 'Informally' constructing gated'
	101110	communities beyond the reach of the state – Derrière le portail: La
		construction "informelle" des gated communities au-delà de l'État
		Éric Charmes. Towards (in)formalization: Social control and collective **Towards (in)formalization: Social control a
		urban spaces – Vers l'(in)formalisation: Contrôle social et espaces
		collectifs urbains
		 Anaïk Purenne. The dilemmas of informal surveillance: The example
		of the Community Policing Centers in Vancouver – Les dilemma de la
		surveillance informelle: L'exemple des Community Policing Centers à
		Vancouver
		Anne Wuilleumier. TBA
t-gar	13h15-15h	Lunch
	15h-16h30	Urbanity and informality: Everyday companions?
		 AbdouMaliq Simone. The device of endurance in a city between the
		lines – L'endurance comme appareil dans une ville entre les lignes
		 Enzo Mingione. Diversity and change in the informal sector at local
		scales: the interpretation with an embeddedness approach - Diversité
		et changements dans le secteur informel à l'échelle locale:
		Interprétation à partir d'une approche encastrée
		 Julie-Anne Boudreau. Acting, living, seeing the city- Agir, vivre, voir la
		ville
ŀ	16h30-	Conclusions
	17h30	









