Knowing urban informalities

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Abstract

How do Anglo-phone urban scholars know urban informalities? This essay reviews three dominant ways of knowing urban informality noting that, despite the profoundly rich insights they each provide, two critiques of the overall concept endure. These are that the concept is often imprecise and that the contribution to knowing 'the urban' more generally, remains clearly circumscribed to the 'urban non-west'. In our view, these limitations curtail the possibilities of sharpening our understanding of the relationship to inequalities and injustices. We work with these critiques, suggesting they represent two sides of the same problem, associated with binaries. In doing so, we build on the existing emphasis on practices and work across the three dominant ways of knowing urban informalities. This reveals that binaries are not held together magically and transparently so that each is the mirror opposite. Instead, the difference is constituted through unnamed aspects of common denominators – two of which we highlight (property rights and aesthetics) and may be intrinsic to the way urban informality has come to develop. It is through the latent power relations that inhere in these common denominators that urban scholars can achieve greater conceptual precision and make different contributions to broader urban theory committed to challenging injustices.

Keywords: Development, planning, poverty/exclusion, theory, urban informality, urban theory

Introduction

This article improves the effectiveness of the concept of urban informality to analyse urban dynamics and challenge injustices. We are clearly not alone in this endeavour. Others have focused on informality as the 'negotiability of value' (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004) 'assemblages'

(Dovey, 2012; McFarlane, 2012), 'interfaces' (Schindler, 2014, 2017), and the 'relational' (Boudreau & Davis, 2017) to afford key insights into the creation and perpetuation of urban injustices. We seek to build on this work, but what distinguishes this article is that we work with two enduring critiques of the concept of urban informality to investigate the potential for improvements.

The first critique relates to the imprecision of the concept. Urban informality can be just about anything to anyone. An important source for this imprecision is traced back to the characterisation of the relationship between in/formality as a binary. As Rakowski (1994a) and Peattie (1987) note, the difficulties inherent in binaries have defined studies of informality since the beginning. In principle, the problems with binaries – that they rely on singularities, are mutually exclusive and hierarchical – are well rehearsed and we do not dwell on them here. In practice, however, they continue to drive research and urban policy that is out of kilter with a world, in which most people think that they live in a formal world (Benton, 1994, p. 225). Consequently, the concept seems blunt, imprecise and vague – consistently unable to grasp the intricacies of urban dynamics.

The second critique relates to the difficulties of applying the concept of urban informality to the well-established sites of Anglo-phone urban theory – the paradigmatic cities of 'the west'.[1] A well-established focus on how urban informality can/not work across many

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[1] In line with Robinson's (2002) argument that such categories misconstrue our understanding of the world, we refer to them only insofar as their currency is directly linked to our argument about informality. We use 'west' and 'non-west' (with the quotation marks indicating our distance) instead of south-north or developing-developed because the pedestal of 'western' urban theory is the most troubling element of our critique. While

different countries has offered a productive vein of theoretical and practical insights (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2005; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004; Song, 2016; Varley, 2013a; Watson, 2011). Through this work, and that of others, it is widely accepted that 'urban informality' has become a key way in which 'the urban' beyond 'the west' is known (Edensor & Jayne, 2012; Roy, 2012). Nevertheless, it is also clear that knowing the urban 'non-west' in this way ensures that any insights contribute to broader urban theories in particular, circumscribed ways (Roy, 2015). In short, what we know about 'the non-west' remains tethered to 'the west' in relationships that are generally not assumed to trouble the production of 'western' Anglo-phone urban theory (Chattopadhyay, 2012a)[2]. As a result, it is difficult to analyse urban informality as a constituent process of cities beyond the local of cities in the 'non-west' and to find a place for urban informality in broader urban theory.

We argue that these two critiques are related, as two aspects of the same problem, and that it is in examining the presence and operation of what we call *common denominators*, which hold these dichotomies together, that yields insights into ways of addressing this problem. Our view is that the emplacement of urban informality in urban theory is entangled with current ways of knowing 'the local' – insofar as 'the local' of urban informality is always limited by the persistent dualism between 'west'/'non-west'. Due to this double bind ('west'/'non-west' and 'urban theory'/development studies and similar), the discourse(s) on urban informality is (are) frustrated in achieving greater precision and wider contributions.

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using these categories runs the risk of reproducing them, we have no alternative when addressing their implications as a core problem of our argument.
[2]. In this article, we focus on Anglo-phone urban theory as the focus of the article and as a recognition of the positional limitations of our argument in relation to other canons of urban scholarship.

In addressing this double bind, we identify common denominators as pre-calibrated registers or mechanisms. These registers or mechanisms obscure sets of power relations in the background of debates which currently foreground the well-known problems of working with dichotomies outlined above. In identifying these mechanisms of common denominators, we address a weakness that has long plagued working with informality: that it "offers a way of helping the poor without any major threat to the rich" (Bromley, 1978, p. 1036) because it leaves latent power relations untouched.

We commence by qualifying the context of our argument in order to locate our claims more precisely. We then proceed to characterise three different contemporary approaches – urban informality as *condition*, *laws*, and *currency* – to show how each has valuable characteristics, yet when considered as separate approaches, each in their own way, contribute to the double bind. However, working across the different approaches we identify the operation of common denominators that animate Ann Varley's (2013b) insight to question how the difference within the binary pair of in/formality is produced *in practice* rather than *in principle*. In this process, we recognise the immense value of existing approaches and propose to work across them; bringing them together in a distinctive way rather than discarding them. Through such means we hope to point to one way to disentangle the concept from its subordinated position in urban theory and improve its analytical precision in practice.

Caveats

In order to clarify the limits of our contribution, we locate our argument in relation to understandings of urban informality and urban theory, both of which are very contested. As a consequence, we need to be wary about identifying a singular historical trajectory of debate. Prior to the burgeoning interest in an 'urban informality' of cities in 'the non-west' that appears to bring together interests in both economic activities and housing (to cite the dominant historical strands), older perspectives had a slightly different emphasis. That is, early debates about informality were very much focused on informality *in* urban economies or *in* housing production systems rather than *urban* informality per se, that is, suggesting a particular *urban* quality to informality (Hart, 1973; Moser, 1994; Peattie, 1987; Rakowski, 1994b).[3] It is useful to note that studies of economic informality have been more consistent in focusing on informality in typically 'western' countries than those focused on the built environment and governance (Gërxhani, 2004; Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur, & Ostrom, 2007). This strand though has remained focused on relatively micro-economic issues and does not immediately appear to offer insights to a broader debate. We hazard a guess that this may well be to do with the qualities associated with 'urbanness' that concepts of urban informality try to develop as we show in our discussion of common denominators below.

Added to this, seminal (Rakowski, 1994a) and recent sentinel contributions (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004; McFarlane and Waibel, 2012b) all offer different ways of thinking about urban informality.[4] To repeat, the notion of 'urban informality' is relatively recent (AlSayyad,

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[3] An important early distinction between 'structuralist' and 'legalist' analyses of informality can be conceived of as typically *applying* analysis of informality *to* 'the urban' (see Rakowski, 1994a).

[4] It is interesting that Laguerre's outstanding analyses of informal San Francisco in *The informal city* (1994) has had relatively little impact on analyses of broader urban theory and appears yet to find a deservedly fuller appreciation in the urban theory canon.

2004). Despite the diversity, there seems to be a provisional consensus that urban

informality relates to "an organising urban logic…[which]…is a process of structuration that

constitutes the rules of the game" (AlSayyad & Roy, 2004, p. 5). They go on to argue that

this logic operates through the fixing and mapping of value/s, which has informed many

other conceptualisations, including McFarlane and Waibel's (2012a). We use this as an initial

entry point, but through considering the three different approaches, we try to reach toward

something else.

A similar lack of agreement on what constitutes 'urban theory' and how this is produced

(with a specific focus on who and where this production is located), adds another layer of

difficulty. Inevitably, agreements on 'urban theory' are hard to find (Harding & Blokland,

2014) and current debates continue to unfold (see for example, Brenner & Schmid, 2015;

Roy, 2015; Scott, 2017; Storper & Scott, 2016). It is also evident that where urban theory is

produced has consequences for whether it counts as 'theory' or 'empirical evidence' of

theory (Robinson, 2006). For the sake of focusing on our argument here, we work with

'urban theory' as a set of ideas, concepts and practices that relate to the urban as

'multiplex', as characterised by the dense overlapping multiple networks of times, spaces,

networks and relations (Amin & Graham, 1997). In so doing, we are drawn to relational

accounts of the urban that underpin trying to unravel how theorisations of the urban in 'the

west' are tied to those in 'the non-west'.

Knowing urban informality

We review three contemporary approaches to the way in which urban scholars and policymakers know urban informality – informality as condition, laws and currency. Deploying 'knowing' as both ways of thinking and acting, our categories emerge from trying to make sense of our own work at the interface of theory, policy and practice. We know that reducing so many nuances to three approaches introduces many risks of simplification and misrepresentation. However, there is some value in presenting these approaches as emblematic of common assumptions. Our intention is not to characterise any one scholar's work cited here as solely falling into one categorisation, but merely that an insight they offer illustrates an aspect of a broader approach. What we point towards in this section is that, despite the rich insights of all three approaches, some of the imprecision relates to the consequences of how urban informality is conceptualised and that, individually, all three approaches find it difficult to challenge the emplacement in urban theory – that informality is predominantly something to understand 'non-western' cities. Undoubtedly, our own categorisation will have its own limitations associated with ordering knowledge.

Informality as condition

The first approach works principally by naming and categorising bounded entities as 'informal' to have powerful political effects. This set of analyses is recognisable in the labelling of spaces, people or organisations as 'informal'; the category of the informal is used as a descriptive qualifier for such 'conditions'. Thinking from informality as condition, policymakers, scholars and people 'living informally' can identify, and importantly describe, a condition of 'informality' according to a particular set of criteria. For example, a seminal ILO report mentions the following criteria to identify informal enterprises: whether they are

registered or not, the number of employees, barriers to entry for that activity, and so on (ILO, 1972; Jhabvala, Sudarshan, & Unni, 2003). Similarly, in this approach it is presumed that settlements can be identified as 'formal' or 'informal' according to criteria such as the nature of property rights, levels of infrastructure and services and planning, or forms of construction and types of construction of dwelling units (UN Habitat, 2003, 2004). Indeed, the problem with these criteria is that they often lead to extended debates about their reliability and precision rather than how and why they apply. When the dichotomy is clearly overstated, which is particularly so when considering tenure security, some variations of this approach do try to introduce notions of a spectrum of informality (GLTN, 2012). These gradations are important and we will return to this issue when discussing common denominators below. For now, we point out that what tends to happen in this approach is that far fewer questions are asked about *why* the label is being applied in the first place.

Informality as condition is perhaps the most common way of thinking about urban informality. To situate this within other classifications in the debate, informality as condition resonates with the first three of the four conceptualisations identified by McFarlane and Waibel (2012b): informality as spatial categorisation, organisational form and governmental tool. Examples abound and we would place most of our own work within this approach (see for example, Boano and Kelling, 2013; Marx, 2003, 2009). Other examples include Bayat's (1997, p. 10) slogan of the "informal people" or expressions such as "the informals" (Rakowski, 1994a, p. 3). Within the policy circuits of institutions focused on housing and land, such as UN Habitat, the categorisation is ubiquitous and has served to inform many interventions by international agencies, NGOs, governments, and movements of residents living in such parts of cities thought of as 'informal'.

Indeed, the strategic element of the labels 'formal'/'informal' for policy interventions is the main focus of the branch of research that McFarlane and Waibel (2012b, p. 4) have called "informal-formal as a *governmental tool*". These analyses focus on the technologies of categorisation, including mapping or statistics, as well as the ways in which they are applied (Elyachar, 2003). Amongst other possible interventions, a key enablement through labelling is seen to lie in that those entities which are tagged as 'informal' can easily be evicted and destroyed (Cabannes, Guimarães Yafai, & Johnson, 2010; Menon-Sen & Bhan, 2008).

Critical analyses of processes of using the label strategically for the purposes of legalisation and criminalisation, have been highly influential in the field of urban and planning studies focused on 'the non-west'. One reason for this is that it allows scholars to understand informality as central to contemporary mechanisms of wealth distribution, and thus as a central means through which inequality is performed. It decouples informality from poverty, and affords an opportunity to recognise how powerful actors can deploy the mechanism of labelling to their advantage (Elyachar, Steinmetz, & Adams, 2005). Whether this is by retrospectively legalising the constructions of wealthy urbanites or state agencies that are/were in breach of the law, or by delaying the moment of criminalisation of the constructs of the poor as long as their presence and proximity is useful (Roy, 2009; Yiftachel, 2009).

Indeed, it is here that the famous phrase of Roy finds its meaning: "If formality operates through the fixing of value, including the mapping of spatial value, then informality operates through the constant negotiability of value" (AlSayyad & Roy, 2004, p. 5). In this sense, it is

an 'organising logic' of governance, as referred to above in our initial definition. However, the view of informality as a mode of governance operates with a labelling logic itself. This is not only insofar as modes of governance are identified as either 'formal'/'informal' but also insofar as the condition of settlements as 'formal'/'informal' is conceptually accepted, even if it is understood as a category usually applied by the state. As a result, such critical analyses remain within the broader approach of informality as condition.

Despite its common-sense nature, it is interesting to reflect on what it means to work with informality as condition. That is, to be able to speak with, for, or about, people living or working in this assumed condition. The first reflection is that 'informality' becomes a state of being that has already been achieved. And, if the condition that is labelled informal is the result of prior social processes, they may no longer exist in the ever-changing space-times of cities and towns. Here, the emergence of informality can easily be reified and is read off from the current condition, creating the potential to misconstrue the dynamics of how the activities and spatial forms in question initially came into being.

We hazard a guess that for most scholars and practitioners the motivation for working with informality as a condition is captured within an impulse of a strand of subaltern studies. That is, to make 'visible and sayable' the conditions of life that obtain in such resource poor urban environments (Roy, 2011). In a sense, it is to counteract the dominant tendency to consider what is conceptualised as 'informal economies' and/or 'informal settlements' as invisible. Naming a condition allows activist-scholars to shed light on what this condition implies for those living 'in it', and in the best cases, to empower them (Peattie, 1987). Thus, informality as condition offers a powerful way to make informality visible. It must do so in

terms of formality but maybe that is not always a problem. There might be times when talking back to formality offers opportunities for meaningful change. In other instances, as Roy (2011) argues, there are limits to this strategy: thinking of informal settlements or economies as that which must be spoken for, we lose a sense in which that which is labelled informal cannot be understood through only what we know about it. For example, we lose an ability to know how it is constituted by relationality, processes, and practices.

If urban informality is a (descriptive) condition then a key issue is: how and why do in/formality distinctions emerge? In our view, informality as condition must seek the emergence and origin of the condition elsewhere – typically in the practices of categorising by the state and/or planning, and, for some, there within neoliberalism. Thus, while often powerful in locating informality (of all types) in a universal logic of neoliberalism and in identifying the mechanisms of this labelling, this approach is less useful in analysing the actual social processes that context-specifically make up what comes to be identified – and identifiable – as 'urban informality'.

Informality as laws

A second dominant way, in which urban in/formality in 'non-western' cities is known, draws on legal scholarship, particularly that strand associated with legal pluralism. From this perspective, urban informality in 'the non-west' is strongly related to laws and norms and is often finely nuanced (Merry, 1988; de Sousa Santos, 1977). In such situations, legal pluralism offers its own view on some of the mechanisms through which, for example, contested claims on urban property rights, and with it in/formality, are negotiated (Azuela

de la Cueva, 1987; Fernandes & Varley, 1998). In short, legal pluralism holds that a plurality

of legal systems co-exists. In this work, it is recognised that there are many different

'sources' of law – including state law, religious law, indigenous laws, customary laws and

local conventions and norms that function as 'laws' (Benda-Beckman, 2002). In such a legal

pluralist view, state law is not necessarily always the dominant referent in the activities of

people, and indeed, the state may not have the capacity to enforce state law (McAuslan,

2005). Moreover, such views also break an automatic link between state law and formality.

From this perspective, customary law can be just as 'formal' as state law and state law can

operate 'informally' (Benton, 1994, p. 225). They also break any automatic links between

formality and regulation so that what counts as 'informal' in a given context can be just as

regulated as that which counts as 'formal'.

This approach is rich in local empirical detail as it sets out to analyse how 'laws' or 'legal

orders' – understood more capaciously – emerge, operate, are transformed, and change

from being considered 'formal' to 'informal' and *vice versa*. Such work starts out from what

is conventionally taken as 'formal' or 'informal', with their respective bases in or outside of

state law, but tries not to work with these as predetermined categorisations. Instead, it

analyses how different legal systems co-exist and how this relates to the constitution of

political authority. A key theme within such work focuses on tenure and property rights and

how different tenures offer different levels of security for their users and holders – as well

as expressing a range of other processes such as citizenship and economic development

(McAuslan, 2003). The power relations between different legal systems is always central as

each provides its particular set of rights and obligations (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2014). The

informalisation of a specific 'legal order' of regulating property relations, for instance, usually means a significant shift in peoples' access to and control over resources.

This approach shows how taken-for-granted assumptions between laws, formality, and regulation are flawed. Moreover, it highlights the link between informality, power, and injustices. The focus on property rights is rarely picked up in other approaches with notable exceptions being Roy (2003), Krueckeberg (1995, 2004) and Porter et al (2011). What it is less useful at doing is transcending the 'local' of the 'non-west' and thus contributing to broader urban theory. In its rich specificity of the 'local', there are echoes of labelling (and the associated issues) discussed above in relation to informality as condition. This is because it tends to work on the inherited positivist categorical assumption that the different legal systems that operate in a specific context are internally coherent and separate from each other (Melissaris, 2004). It is entire legal systems that are thought of as formal or informal.

Informality as currency

This approach primarily refers to contexts that might ordinarily be described as 'informal'. However, the research interest is not on that in/formality but on the activities of residents of cities that are essential for the way in which the cities work, and on an understanding of why they follow these activities (Guyer, 2011). In short, it is an interest in the social and spatial organisation of how people make the city (de Boeck & Plissart, 2004). We call this way of knowing 'informality as currency' because it acknowledges that actors in the field consider some activities, people, or spaces as 'informal', and that this consideration has a meaningful social effect – it has a socio-political 'currency' that can be mobilised. Thus,

informality as currency approaches the topic with sufficient nuance to understand the social

effect of how we (as in, everyone) recognise and interpret our practices and those of others

– without buying into these interpretations (Guibrunet, 2017).

In contrast to the approach of informality as condition which works with 'informal-formal as

a governmental tool', the label is understood as more than a tool of the state for enabling

desired interventions; it is understood as one of multiple factors structuring the social and

spatial organisation of the city (Meagher, 2010). In informality as currency, the term has

currency for/in how residents, other scholars, and policymakers know a given city and cities

in general and is not taken as a reason to define these or any other activities, people or

spaces as essentially informal.

This way of knowing informality, and indeed of doing urban research more generally,

presents a rich analysis of the construction of social relations and their spatiality, and offers

a complementary perspective to the previous two approaches. Informality as currency

suggests that many other issues are more relevant to people's lives than state law and

policy categorisations. Even if the categories of formality and informality have spread wide

and gained a firm foothold in the reflexive understanding of the world of many people in

the 'non-west', it is not the only framing through which people understand their lives, and

may indeed often be of peripheral importance (Chattopadhyay, 2012b). Here, we are firmly

into a relational perspective that emphasises flux and changes, while still recognising

regularity.

The basis for this view is drawn from long standing sociological insights and is usefully captured by Tonkiss (2013, p. 93): "…informality is something of a non-concept. A lack of legal 'formality' does not mean either an absence of form or a lack of organization." In contrast to informality as laws, this perspective acknowledges that practices are socially organised – whether by formal or informal norms/rules/routines. The idea of organisation is different from the broad conception of 'laws' of informality as laws, which, even if extending beyond state law, still refers to codified sets of legal rules, whether set by a religious, customary, or any other authority. Instead of seeing one legal system as informal and the other as formal, informality as currency is able to recognise that some ways of doing things have been codified into a legal rule with formal status, and others not – within the same context of social organisation. Indeed, the crucial novelty of informality as currency is its implicit ability to see the element of active social organisation in those practices and activities that are ordinarily understood as 'informal', but that within the other perspectives are conventionally and more passively considered as spontaneous and unorganised.

Informed by the view that, by nature, humans need some form of regularity and stability in their social fields of interaction, Simone (2012), for instance, argues for a need to move away from searching for large institutional sedimentations, based on bounded categories that are characteristic to the era of nation-states. Instead, in precarious living situations people find regularity in provisionality through an open attitude toward collaborative practice with others, through the ability to become easily familiar with new arrangements (Simone, 2001). In this approach, the focus falls on analysing the dynamics that are active in assumedly formal and predictable institutions (Kudva, 2009), and to recognise the

regularities in that which scholars have come to know as informal – and which we concomitantly think as rather fluid and volatile.

Informality as currency is useful for showing how informality is constituted from a range of practices, categorisations, and places. It starts to demonstrate how many of the informal activities are composed of relations that extend well beyond the 'local' and ties places together in ways that are not anticipated by urban theory (Simone, 2003). While the focus remains on the 'local' it is powerful at detailing how cross-scalar relations emerge and constitute the local. Through this, it offers more purchase on, and substance to, local dynamics rather than just assuming that these relations are those of neoliberal impulses. Overall, informality as currency is closer to contemporary urban theory and folds the notion of the informal into it. However, it still remains within the regional dualism of 'the west' and 'the non-west' currently due its choice of case studies, and its (legitimate) priority of conceptualising 'the urban' rather than informality itself.

Discussion

In this section, we reach toward a different understanding to address the double bind of the concept of urban informality lacking precision and contributing to broader urban theory in circumscribed ways. That is, separately, all of the three approaches offer specific insights on the 'local' that, we go on to argue, are constrained by the emplacement of the concept as referring to 'the non-west' and, through this, in contributing to broader urban theory. None of the three approaches really challenge this emplacement of urban informality although they all, in one way or another, seek to do so. We suggest that working with common

denominators of urban informality it is possible to simultaneously do (at least) two things in order to start disentangling the double-bind: 1) provide a more precise grasp of what is going on locally, and 2) address the structural inequalities in urban theories. In doing this, scholars may finally come up with an understanding of urban informality that can 'trouble the rich'.

We propose a way of addressing this double bind that may animate Ann Varley's (2013b) advice to work with 'difference in practice rather than in principle'. This means that instead of sustaining an initial assumption that a bounded entity like a settlement is informal or formal, we should focus on a more relational approach (Boudreau & Davis, 2017) and *the practices* that make it possible to think these bounded entities in terms of being in/formal. This, we argue, offers the possibilities to be attentive to a wider set of power relations and to escape the double bind that besets the current usage of the concept. *In principle*, many of these *practices* are well documented by well-established critiques of binary thinking – that binaries rely on singularities, are mutually exclusive and hierarchical – and these critiques are well-rehearsed in the urban informality debate and across our three approaches. *In practice*, however, we have identified through the review that the distinction between the formal and the informal as a binary is sustained by implicit common assumptions that hold the pair together. We call this a common denominator.

Common denominators are specific registers or mechanisms which, without being addressed explicitly, allows scholars or policymakers to name two entities as a coherent binary pair that 'makes sense'. For example, 'informal settlement' makes sense in opposition to 'formal settlement' because it is held together by assumptions about, for

instance, property rights. It makes little sense as an opposition to 'refugee settlement', for example. In the following, we illustrate this idea by elaborating on two common denominators – property rights systems and urban aesthetics. These examples are indicative and suggestive. Others are likely to exist and wait to be explored. Before illustrating these two, though, we make a few more general statements about common denominators and how they work to suppress latent power inequalities.

We identify three aspects to how common denominators practically facilitate the construction of the binary formal/informal. The first aspect to note – drawing from informality as currency – is that people actively construct the binary oppositions of in/formality. However, there are two points to make about these constructions. First, if these constructions are to 'make sense' they must tend towards the well-worn tracks of existing constructions. Second, although people are in multiple relationships with others, these multiple relations present different affordances to exercise (naming) agency around informality. Both the existing constructions and the differing abilities to escape the existing constructions are already the result of unequal power relations. Therefore, analysing how people are constructing binary oppositions to 'make sense' and who is able to do/contest this should provide insights into what contexts, activities, and understandings support current (unequal) framings of urban informality.

The second aspect to note about how common denominators work is that they conceal latent power relations by appearing so obvious. The calibrations within the common denominator dovetail with existing binary distinctions making the binaries seem natural. What is key here is that the 'fit' between common denominators and binary distinctions is

only 'natural' because the common denominator is itself already reflective of binary

distinctions and gradations between these. This makes it extremely difficult to challenge the

binary distinctions and also to challenge how the common denominator is operating. This

observation is even more troubling when accounting for the ways that common

denominators tend to be expressions of (existing) power relations.

The third aspect is that common denominators must appear to be kept stable and coherent

to allow movement within the binary pairing. That is, either granting interventions the

potential of 'closing the gap' between the opposites (through mixing or hybridising) or

through promoting the transformation of one into the other (typically converting the

'informal' into the 'formal') – for better or worse. These movements cannot be promoted

and measured if the yard stick represented in the common denominator is itself moving.

This means that scholars and policymakers aiming for such transformation are implicitly

encouraged to accept the (predetermined) coherence of common denominators with their

already existing power relations at play. Seen in combination, these three aspects are

suggestive of the latent power of common denominators at work.

We demonstrate the latent working of common denominators with the example of property

rights. These are frequently used as a common denominator in analyses of in/formal

settlements within cities in 'the non-west'. One of the most common associations with

property rights is land values. This particular association is made in practice despite the

multiple options that exist to relate property rights to different legal systems, histories,

gender relations and so on. It is also evident that gradations of security of tenure

correspond in predetermined ways to the binary distinctions between in/formality (GLTN,

2010) that serve to 'naturally' reinforce the self-evident nature of the binaries. Urban

property rights (and their associated markets, see for example Wallace and Williamson

(2006)) are also generally considered to be evolving through specific gradations towards

clearer forms of private property (Fitzpatrick, 2006). In this techno-market understanding,

deviations from this evolution (such as persistent informality) are considered anomalies that

need to be corrected but the gradations themselves are rarely questioned.

Thus, using this view of property rights as a common denominator unintentionally already

locks in assumptions about where on the spectrum an asset or practice fits, what value it

has and which registers of value count, how they should change, and who can legitimately

participate in naming any changes. More importantly, these assumptions remain

unexamined because the focus of debate falls on challenging the power relations that are

associated with binaries themselves. In effect, such debates about informality are rarely a

'threat to the rich' insofar as the unquestioned common denominator confirms that the

assets of the rich are on the 'safe' (i.e. formal) side of the binary.

In a similar way, we now explore how theorisations of informality in cities in 'the non-west'

rarely trouble the formulation of broader urban theory emerging from cities in 'the west'.

Here we take another example of a frequently used common denominator – that of urban

aesthetics. Ghertner (2015) has deployed the concept to great effect within Delhi to reveal

how power relations inhere in an aesthetic register of urban governance. Now, we

demonstrate how this might apply across a 'west – non-west' binary within urban theory. At

a very obvious level, the point is often made that analyses of informality have little

relevance for 'western' cities because we just do not see it in the urban form and quality of

urban spaces produced in these cities. The debate begins and ends on the presence of urban spaces of informality in 'non-western' cities, and their absence or at best marginal and exceptional presence in 'western' cities.

In order to address this marginality in 'western' cities, scholars have pointed to informalities of different kinds, for example, the "informality of the rich" (Tonkiss, 2013, pp. 94–95), the association of migrants with informality, that is, informality being brought to 'the west' from elsewhere (see the discussion of Durst and Wegmann (2017)), or the phenomenon of 'pop-up urbanism' and 'do-it-yourself urbanism' (Tonkiss, 2013), which have little to do with the severity of inadequate provisioning of urban goods. As before, attending to the operation of the common denominators reveals a series of power relations that inhere in common assumptions, and that have the effect of making it difficult to question the emplacement of 'non-western' ways of knowing informality in broader urban theory. Associated with aesthetics are assumptions about scale, poverty and modernity and the role they play in constituting urban theory.

One aspect is how informality is associated with a particular scale of agglomeration so that the (relatively) dispersed backyard sheds offering accommodation in London cannot be related to the backyard shacks offering accommodation in cities like Johannesburg. A second is how poverty is assumed to be part of informality so that poverty and informality work together. But, only certain types of poverty – the kind that is found in non-western cities. 'Western' cities with extensive poverty, such as London (CPAG, 2017), are not considered to relate to informality. A third aspect is that the dominant aesthetic conceptions of the city already lock in place, what looks valuable, pleasing, 'modern' and

what is not – the lower value messiness of informality so that the discussions of informality in 'non-western' cities already have a common-sensical location in an aesthetic common denominator.

Thus, discussions about scale, poverty and the constitution of aesthetic registers and the power relations that already inhere in them are not for discussion in relation to urban theory. Across cities, it invites questions about why scale, poverty and modernity make a difference to how we think about urban informality and what relaxing some of our assumptions about these interlocking phenomena might do to how we understand how cities are produced and how inequalities are understood.

Conclusion

We have argued that two of the enduring critiques of urban informality, that it lacks enough precision in studying events, relations and processes in place and that it is circumscribed in contributing to broader urban theory, are two aspects of the same problem – an inability to recognise and account for the effects of common denominators. It is only by working across the three approaches that we can show how the common denominators emerge in the practices of constituting urban informality.

In relation to improving the analytical precision at a city level, we drew on the example of property rights as a common denominator. We showed that if the common denominator is questioned, then scholars gain an ability to question an important aspect of the power relations that hold binaries together. For example, we gain an ability to question why it is

that distinctions between in/formal property rights are automatically discussed in terms of land values. We are afforded an opportunity to question how calibrated distinctions in property rights already incorporate binary distinctions between in/formality. And, we gain an ability to question why challenging calibrations of property rights must be thought through the stages identified in evolutionary theories of property rights (which themselves reinforce specific notions of land value). Overall, we gain an ability to identify the latent power relations that already inhere in these specific understandings of land value, predetermined calibrations and changes that are already set out as logical. Attending to the practices, spaces, processes and agents and the inequalities that inhere or which are performed through them offers the potential to be more analytically precise about what constitutes urban informality and how such understandings are sustained. It helps us analyse the ways that urban informality emerges, is sustained and the effects it has.

With respect to the emplacement of urban informality in contributing to broader urban theory, the common denominator of urban aesthetics affords possibilities to question why it is that scholars are actively only able to discuss urban informality in cities in 'the west' in terms of the lack of scale of the phenomena. It offers the chance to question how understandings of poverty already dovetail with notions of urban informality. And, it affords questions about the fixed distinctions between what is aesthetically modern and pleasing and what is aesthetically unappealing about urban informality. Attending to these questions enables us to question the processes and assumptions that currently emplace urban informality as primarily a non-western city phenomena.

The examples of common denominators explored here are indicative and suggestive. It is clear that there will be many more to identify and challenge and that we could think how an aesthetic common denominator could be operating within cities and a common denominator of property rights could be operating between cities in relation to urban theory. What they draw our attention to is their necessarily relational character and ways in which they must continually be achieved in practice. Herein lies the potential to hold open the possibilities to develop notions of urban informality that can more precisely identify and challenge the latent power relations that remain unquestioned in analysing urban inequalities within cities and distinctions across urban theories.

Acknowledgements

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