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THE INFORMAL ECONOMY AND POST-SOCIALISM: IMBRICATED PERSPECTIVES ON LABOR, THE STATE, AND SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS

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Abstract: This article argues for moving beyond existing conceptualizations of the “informal economy” that construe informality as a distinct phenomenon with more or less clearly defined borders. Instead, it proposes an “imbricated” perspective where informality and informal economic practices closely relate to other forms of informal organization within networks and political and civic structures. Specifically, the article addresses the issue of how to conceptualize and justify such broader understanding of informality. To do so, it develops three interrelated meanings of “imbrication”—relating to labor and economic activities; the “deregulation” or fuzziness of state practices and bureaucratic rule-making; and the complexity of economic and social reasonings by agents themselves—to explain action. In each case, I offer brief empirical examples from my field research in provincial Russia.

The post-socialist region is a fruitful site for research into the informal economy (IE). Recently, research has highlighted the persistence and variety of IE practices, with collections of case studies looking at Eurasian

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contexts as seemingly diverse as China and Slovakia.¹ These studies often “follow” the global logic of IE to contexts beyond post-socialist states. This article takes stock of this body of research, which has expanded from IE to look more broadly at the “informality” that links economic practices to informal organization within networks and political and civic structures.² “Informality” has been criticized for referring too loosely to “highly heterogeneous phenomena.”³ At the same time, however, institutions like the World Bank now use the term to acknowledge work’s heterogeneity. Thus, a challenge to research on “informality” is to find approaches that justify this extended “carrying capacity” beyond the term “IE.”

Moving beyond modernization perspectives that view IE as socialist debris or a by-product of transition (deficient institutionalization), informality research has potential as a holistic concept suited to integrate the study of everyday economic practices with institutionally-focused research. I argue for a holistic informality based on “imbrications”: of economic practices, state processes’ penetration by the informal, and social reasonings about behavior. Despite a dominant view of the autonomy of economic behavior, it is important to restate Granovetter’s “problem of embeddedness”: scholars should neither over- nor undersocialize economic activities. Rarely are social relations an epiphenomenon of the market.⁴ At the same time, the “economic” should be recognized as part of (imbricated with) the social and local logics of everyday practices.

Like Granovetter’s term “embeddedness,” imbrication is a sensitizing and signposting concept rather than a wholly original formulation. Numerous scholars have proposed similar approaches, while falling short of “naming” it. For political scientists, imbrication is implicit in Helmke and Levitsky’s work on informal institutions, where “socially shared rules”

¹ Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese, eds. 2014. *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*. London and New York: Routledge; Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese, eds. 2015. *Informal Economies in Post-Socialist Spaces: Practices, Institutions and Networks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Abel Polese, Jeremy Morris, and Borbala Kovács. 2016. “States’ of Informality in Post-Socialist Europe (and Beyond).” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 24: 3; Abel Polese and Peter Rodgers. 2011. “Surviving Post-Socialism.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 31: 11/12; Peter Rodgers and Colin C. Williams. 2009. “The Informal Economy in the Former Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe.” *International Journal of Sociology* 39: 2; Colin Williams, John Round, and Peter Rodgers. 2013. *The Role of Informal Economies in the Post-Soviet World: The End of Transition?* London and New York: Routledge.

² Huseyn Aliyev. 2015. “Post-Soviet Informality: Towards Theory-Building.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 35: 3/4: 183.

³ Alice Sindzingre. 2006. “The Relevance of the Concepts of Formality and Informality: A Theoretical Appraisal.” In Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, Ravi Kanbur, and Elinor Ostrom, eds. *Linking the Formal and Informal Economy: Concepts and Policies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1.

⁴ Mark Granovetter. 1985. “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 91: 3: 481-510.

help explain incentives and constraints on political behavior.⁵ Their interest is the political life of societies, yet their focus on how state processes may be rule-like and based on shared understandings points to the relevance of “informal institutions” beyond the strictly political sphere. An imbricated perspective would see informal political institutions as just one set of practices in correspondence with the social, cultural, and economic. Imbrication also finds inspiration in the “diverse” economies approach associated with the Community Economies Collective,⁶ while stressing the ongoing relationship between informality and waged formal work. A sustained post-socialist articulation of the “diversity” approach is that of Stenning et al. on the “domestication” of marketized imperatives in Eastern Europe.⁷ “Imbrication” itself can be traced to a reading of economic and social geography research, particularly on Ukraine and Russia,⁸ that first questioned the formal/informal binary⁹ and utilizes an older Total Social Organization of Labor (TSOL) literature.¹⁰

Imbrication therefore refers to the difficulty in disentangling formal and informal economic activities, as well as the social embeddedness of informality. This puts informality in an intimate relationship to the state, along with corruption, patrimonialism, and clientelist practices, which would not exist unless they were imbricated with the workings of both state and market institutions. The capacity for informality to substitute for bureaucratic processes—and even allocate and accumulate state-like resources—in a “deregulated,” but not unregulated fashion is emphasized.¹¹ This requires better integration into analysis of the work of street-level bureaucrats, who often have other affiliations (including

⁵ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky. 2004. “Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda.” *Perspectives on Politics* 2: 725-740.

⁶ J.K. Gibson-Graham. 2008. “Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for “Other Worlds.”” *Progress in Human Geography* 32: 5.

⁷ Alison Stenning, Adrian Smith, Alena Rochovská, and Dariusz Świątek, 2010. *Domesticating Neo-Liberalism Spaces of Economic Practice and Social Reproduction in Post-Socialist Cities*. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

⁸ Jeremy Morris. 2011. “Socially Embedded Workers at the Nexus of Diverse Work in Russia: An Ethnography of Blue-Collar Informalization.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 31: 11/12: 619-631; Anna Danielsson. 2017. “Informal Economies and Scholastic Epistemocentrism: A Reflexive Rethinking.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 37: 13/14.

⁹ Colin C. Williams and John Round. 2008. “Re-Theorizing the Nature of Informal Employment: Some Lessons from Ukraine.” *International Sociology* 23: 3: 367-388; Colin C. Williams, John Round, and Peter Rodgers. 2007. “Beyond the Formal/Informal Economy Binary/ Hierarchy.” *International Journal of Social Economics* 34: 6: 402-414.

¹⁰ Miriam A. Glucksmann. 1995. “Why ‘Work’? Gender and the ‘Total Social Organization of Labour.’” *Gender, Work & Organization* 2.

¹¹ Ilda Lindell. 2010. *Africa’s Informal Workers: Collective Agency, Alliances and Transnational Organizing in Urban Africa*. London and New York: Zed Books, with the Nordic Africa Institute; Ananya Roy. 2009. “Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence and the Idiom of Urbanization.” *Planning Theory* 8: 1: 83.

clientelist credentials). Informality in bureaucracy-society relations traces its micro-origin to Michael Lipsky's original insight about the wide powers of discretion exercised by ordinary state functionaries.¹² While there is a calculating logic to informality related to models of economic rationality, it is one tempered by its social embeddedness and other value-system effects. This foregrounds the "agent" problem within structuralist accounts of informality as well as the socio-cultural background to "economic rationality," a "substantivist" tradition associated with Polanyi. Embeddedness is alert to interpretative reasonings by agents engaged in informality beyond utility maximization. If we take economic reasoning seriously, we should equally take account of "non-economic" rationality. For example, the rejection of the control, surveillance, and subordination involved in formal work may produce important imperatives in seeking informality. Autonomy as a counterpoint to economic reasoning emerges here.

This article is essayistic rather than strictly empirical. Examples of research data and materials are confined to brief illustrative examples. It is structured as follows. First, I outline the compartmentalized approaches to IE and the more integrative structuralism proposed by Castells and Portes.¹³ Next, I discuss three imbrication concepts: formal-informal labor; imbrication of state practices and the informal/illicit; and imbricated multiple logics of agents' reasonings. In each case, I ground these concepts in brief empirical examples from my field research along with significant contributions from the relevant literature. After that, I counter some of the critical objections to a broad definition of informality—namely that it ignores the precarious nature of informal economic activities or is too conceptually loose to be analytically useful. Finally, I conclude that a holistic account of informality is important in countering an "othering" of postsocialism, allowing comparison with similar diversity in economic practices in other places.

Tracing "Informal Economy" from Dualism and Legalism to Structuralism

This section is not a literature review, so much as a conceptual tracing exercise. Furthermore, it cannot do justice to the full breadth of ways IE has been explored. As a result, it mainly focuses on the application of the term within studies devoted to former Communist countries.

It is worth going back to the origins of the term IE as it developed

¹² Michael Lipsky. 1980. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

¹³ Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes. 1989. "World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics, and Effects of the Informal Economy." In Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren A. Benton, eds. *The Informal Economy—Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

in context. Keith Hart popularized the term “informal sector” in the 1970s through his study of (unregistered) self-employment in post-colonial Africa among the urban poor.¹⁴ It became a development term and subsequently the World Bank and the International Labour Office focused on this mainly third-world context to represent IE as both avoidance of government regulations and taxes and as a potential route out of poverty:

A cushion for workers who cannot find a job in the formal sector [...] it entails a loss in budget revenues by reducing taxes and social security contributions paid [...]. It invariably leads to a high tax burden on registered labor. A high level of informality also can undermine the rule of law and governance.¹⁵

For institutions, the negatives outweigh the positives, and formalization, rather than toleration, is optimal. However, this dualist perspective (formal versus informal activities) imputes to IE both cause and effect of poor state functioning, and rests on an ideal vision of the state that the informal proceeds to undermine. In the post-socialist context, informality is also linked to insufficient state capacity or institution-building. Others approach informality (clientelism, personalistic ties) as integral to the systemic functioning of the state,¹⁶ but usually conclude that this retards development. Informality as “systematized” and linked to both state functioning and dysfunction reveals IE to be as much about citizen-state relations in highly developed Global North contexts as it is about development in Global South contexts. It also shows that the values and logics underpinning IE practices go beyond economic rationality.

The informal sector was initially seen as the antithesis of national capitalism: “Most economists saw the idea in quantitative terms as a separate sector of small scale, low-productivity, low-income activities without benefit of advanced machines.”¹⁷ However, Castells and Portes recognized it as an essential part of the structuring of globalized capital: multinational companies use IE in peripheral states as a way of keeping labor costs low through subcontracting and avoiding bureaucratic and tax obstacles.

¹⁴ Keith Hart. 1973. “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana.” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11: 1.

¹⁵ World Bank. 2011. *Policies to Reduce Informal Employment: An International Survey*, At <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/UKRAINE/UKRAINIANEXTN/Resources/455680-1310372404373/PoliciestoReduceInformalEmploymentEng.pdf>, accessed February 10, 2018.

¹⁶ Keith Darden. 2008. “Integrity of Corrupt States: Graft as an Informal State Institution.” *Politics and Society* 36: 1 (March); Alena Ledeneva. 2013. *Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Keith Hart. 2010. “Informal Economy.” In Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville, and Antonio Cattani, eds. *The Human Economy: A Citizen’s Guide*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 146.

A “legalist perspective”¹⁸ is a third category of IE studies, highlighting the frequent division between legal formal and illegal informal activities. Legalistic perspectives, like dualist ones, impute poor state functioning: “cumbersome formal rules and regulations create excessive costs that attract businesses and workers to the informal economy.”¹⁹ Representative of this strand in the post-socialist context is Feige, who contends that incentives for informalization stem from lack of clarity over property rights.²⁰ A deficient or fuzzy legal framework is the driver of informality.

Post-socialist treatments often implicitly reproduce the division between structuralist and dualist approaches. Structuralists do not see the relevance of subsistence, bazaars, or household micro-activities, instead focusing only on employment. Overall, while acknowledging the interdependency of the formal and informal, structuralism presents an ultimately compartmentalized view: for instance, studies informed by anthropology focus narrowly on subsistence and survival activities. A “dualism” can also be observed in economic sociology approaches,²¹ expressed in definitions like “marginal subsistence household” and “mutual aid economy.” These aspects of the unobservable economy are set apart from tax avoidance and corruption, which are termed “shadow economy.”

To further illustrate the problem of compartmentalization, it is worth returning to Castells and Portes.²² Far from being set apart as “survival activities” performed by the most marginal in society, IE was systematically linked to the formal: “Workers may switch between the two sectors even during the same workday.”²³ Similarly, management and payment forms may be the only aspect that defines a work process as informal—autonomist in nature or characterized by limited oversight. Recent treatments explicitly discuss the dualist and structuralist approaches with a view to

¹⁸ Martha Alter Chen. 2005. “Rethinking the Informal Economy: Linkages with the Formal Economy and the Formal Regulatory Environment.” WIDER Research Paper 2005/10, ISBN 9291906891, The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki.

¹⁹ Anna Danielsson. 2017. “Informal Economies and Scholastic Epistemocentrism: A Reflexive Rethinking.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 37: 13/14: 776; See also Hernando De Soto. 1989. *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*. New York: Harper & Row.

²⁰ Edgar L. Feige. 1997. “Underground Activity and Institutional Change: Productive, Protective, and Predatory Behavior in Transition Economies.” In Joan M. Nelson, Charles Tilly, and Lee Walker, eds. *Transforming Post-Communist Political Economies*. Washington D.C. National Academy Press, 21-34, 23.

²¹ e.g. Svetlana Barsukova and Vadim Radaev. 2012. “Informal Economy in Russia: A Brief Overview.” *Economic Sociology: The European Electronic Newsletter* 13: 2, At https://www.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/lib/data/access/ram/ticket/63/1519729717b818409501ac72a019e409e-78c0a0575/econ_soc_13-2.pdf, accessed February 27, 2018.

²² Castells and Portes, “World Underneath.”

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

moving beyond them to a more holistic treatment.²⁴ For example, Anna Danielsson,²⁵ studying NGOs in Kosovo, explores the internally consistent socially driven logics of informality, which rely on “common sense” norms and values that are widely shared, but which are still structured by economic and power hierarchies, or “everyday practices of power.”²⁶

Before presenting the imbrications (formal-informal labor, state-society, multiple rationalities) at the heart of my argument for holistic informality, I briefly discuss my field site as an illustrative case study. It comprises a District containing two former monotowns and a number of villages in central Russia. Since 1999, I have observed the endlessly resourceful ways in which people make ends meet in a small industrial town I call Izluchino and its rural hinterland. One day, people engage in cash-in-hand work, self-provisioning, and reciprocal services. The next day, they are back in regular factory work making plastic pipes and steel structures for the gas industry. On the weekend (or more likely free weekdays due to shift patterns), these factory workers transform into self-employed tradesmen working in homes or even industry. They also use formal enterprise resources such as vehicles, materials, financial services (like loans), and networks to facilitate economic activities beyond their registered jobs: using a flatbed truck that belongs to their place of employment to transport construction materials to a building site, using tools from work to do tradesmen’s work, obtaining small-scale capital from employers, and so on. Leisure—fishing, hunting, gathering, distilling alcohol, gleaning—may also entail an element of informality, which, while in some cases marginal, reduce the family’s reliance on the formal economy, not only the grocery store, but also the furniture shop, the repair garage, and so forth. This is integrated into the shift pattern, network, and material relationships deriving from employment. The meaning of gleaning does not just relate to food; the term relates to the old practice of “obtaining” scrap or surplus materials from work or elsewhere, or making use of other resources (like vehicles and fuel) for private or even mutual and reciprocal use. Care and personal services are also significant. Some of this is unpaid and based on relations of mutuality and reciprocity (such as babysitting for neighbors) and can be considered part of solidarity informality. However, most activities rely on constellations of embedded and imbricated relationships that span and connect work, acquaintance, kinship, and urban/rural spatialities. Importantly, the state is “actively” absent in relation to regulation that would otherwise reduce informality. Without its connivance

²⁴ Chen, “Rethinking the Informal Economy”; Colin C. Williams and John Round, “Re-Theorizing the Nature of Informal Employment”; Williams, Round, and Rodgers, “Beyond the Formal/Informal Economy”; Anna Danielsson. 2019. *Informal Economies and Power*. London and New York: Routledge.

²⁵ Danielsson, *Informal Economies and Power*, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

in turning a blind eye to—and even sometimes encouraging—informal fixes to economic and society problems, the informal would not thrive. Economic precarity is important in producing informal economic activities like taxi-driving, day laboring, and trading, but the state makes these practices licit, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Formal-Informal Work Imbrications

Imbrication proposes that because of the diversity of practices observed in the post-socialist world, IE as embedded in a wider meaning of informality as a whole should be a consideration of research. This is because it is often difficult to untangle the formal from the informal, the illegal from the legal, even in contexts such as traditional factory work and employment. While this owes much to the “diverse economies” in economic geography,²⁷ it differs in that the diverse economy focuses more on hidden and cooperative alternatives to the formal,²⁸ while the imbrication thesis acknowledges the ongoing significance of waged work and the entanglement of informality with it.

Routh gives a broad and inclusive definition of IE as “activities and entrepreneurs that are not registered in accordance with the prescribed laws, are not in compliance with labor legislations, escapes monitoring by the state officials, lacks appropriate conditions at work, and mostly temporary and casual in nature.”²⁹ However, in many post-socialist contexts, practices may be more than “temporary and casual,” making it worth adopting a wider definition: informality signifies commodified and non-commodified work activities that escape accurate or complete quantification by the state, including legal and illegal activities, the licit and the illicit, and the grey area in between.

My fieldwork provides an example of why this breadth is needed: an “underground workshop” making double glazing window units in an informally sublet part of a partially defunct factory in Russia.³⁰ Business sales at another location were registered and paid sales tax, but the production was entirely unregistered and the workers informally employed (paid cash every two weeks). Some workers did this job for three years, challenging the assumption that informal work is only precarious, exploitative, and/or casual or short-term.

We should not confuse such examples with the more widespread

²⁷ Gibson-Graham, “Diverse Economies.”

²⁸ Giorgos Gritzas and Karolos Iosif Kavoulakos. 2016. “Diverse Economies and Alternative Spaces: An Overview of Approaches and Practices.” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23: 4: 917-934.

²⁹ Supriya Routh. 2011. “Building Informal Workers Agenda: Imagining ‘Informal Employment’ in Conceptual Resolution of ‘Informality.’” *Global Labour Journal* 2: 3.

³⁰ Jeremy Morris. 2016. *Everyday Post-Socialism: Working-Class Communities in the Russian Margins*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 87-121.

informal practice of “envelope” wages, paid as a part of the overall remuneration in otherwise formalized enterprises.³¹ Informal employment shows how formal and informal, licit and illicit, legal and illegal aspects of economic life are entangled in a way that makes their disaggregation problematic. They are “imbricated” in the sense that they depend on complex social factors such as particular kinds of trust networks. In addition, subsistence and provisioning activities should remain part of what we think of as informality, given the ongoing marginality and precariousness of many people’s lives in many post-socialist contexts and the need for a portfolio of income sources.³² Even if some practices are not monetarily important, they still occupy a meaningful space in people’s lifeworlds and relate to connections that may yield connections to employment and other more commodified practices (this relates also to the third element of imbrication related to different kinds of rationalities).

Further examples of “informal employment” illustrate this category. A general workman is paid cash for one-off specialist jobs conducting repairs within a gas-powered heating station.³³ His day job is at a metal factory but 25% of the time he is on furlough due to lack of orders. He also works weekends as an unregistered “self-employed” plumber, in turn “employing” others installing heating systems in country houses. Like the aforementioned example, these are relatively enduring examples of informal work. Finally, we have a car welder-mechanic working as a favor. The “workshop” is actually an inspection bay within a fully functioning metal cable factory where the owner of the car works. The latter is a good example of what makes IE difficult to measure or explain: the work is not necessarily commodified (the “favor” of welding the car may never be “called in”) nor “parasitic” on the formal economy, but it is nonetheless imbricated with it—the welding takes place after hours and with the permission of the foreman.

Colin Williams’ classificatory schema of informality evokes imbrication.³⁴ It shows the gradations of activities from informal to formal and

³¹ Ioana Alexandra Horodnic. 2016. “Cash Wage Payments in Transition Economies: Consequences of Envelope Wages.” *IZA World of Labor* 280, At <https://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/280/pdfs/cash-wage-payments-in-transition-economies-consequences-of-envelope-wages.pdf?v=1>, accessed February 26, 2018; Charles Woolfson. 2007. “Pushing the Envelope: The ‘Informalization’ of Labour in Post-Communist New EU Member States.” *Work, Employment and Society* 21: 3.

³² John Round, Colin C. Williams, and Peter Rodgers. 2010. “The Role of Domestic Food Production in Everyday Life in Post-Soviet Ukraine.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100: 5; Adrian Smith and Alison Stenning. 2006. “Beyond Household Economies: Articulations and Spaces of Economic Practice in Postsocialism.” *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 2.

³³ Jeremy Morris. 2012. “Unruly Entrepreneurs: Russian Worker Responses to Insecure Formal Employment.” *Global Labour Journal* 3.2: 217-36.

³⁴ Colin C. Williams and Olga Onoschenko. 2014. “The Diverse Livelihood Practices of Healthcare Workers in Ukraine: The Case of Sasha and Natasha.” In Jeremy Morris and Abel

their overlapping nature, as well as their potentially enduring social reality. The two axes move from left to right in degrees of informalization, and bottom to top in degrees of marketization (commodification). Activities can be paid or unpaid, employment-like, untaxed or without a contract, gleaning-like, or reciprocal favors. Williams has used this schema to show comparatively the “limited reach of the [formal] market ... as well as a fresh perspective on the nature of work cultures and how they vary spatially.”³⁵ It is also important to underline that “economic” does not always equate to “paid.” Exchanges of favors that provide mutual economic benefit to parties are common not only among the economically marginalized.

Williams’ schema of overlapping and inter-related practice³⁶ is adapted from a TSOL approach based on examples from the Western European context developed from Glucksmann.³⁷ The strength of TSOL lies in its relational approach to labor, “however and wherever it is undertaken, the concept of work as economic activity is recovered, but no longer restricted by the boundaries separating institutional spheres or the constraints demarcating traditional academic disciplines.”³⁸ Scholars working on informality can, by taking note of the TSOL approach, contribute to its critique of the ongoing conceptual division of labor in sociology.³⁹ In the Global North perspective, examples of unpaid formal work are commonly associated with internships or volunteering, which have significant “economic” value but which are often perceived as part of civil society practices, and not conceptualized economically.

In the post-socialist context, unpaid work is more likely to carry the meaning of contributing in some way to household reproduction or having a “moral” value in a more immediate way than does “volunteering” in the Global North context. Examples might include unpaid caring roles, which imply either reciprocal or mutual aid. Equally, one may encounter “below the radar” or less “legitimate” forms of unpaid work. In place of a Global North example such as “unpaid soccer coach,” we may observe unpaid family or friends helping out in a local business. Again, this is informal unpaid labor, yet in a formal setting—underlining the value of TSOL in challenging a division of work. At the formal end of unpaid labor, in place of the Global North example of “internship” we may substitute barely-paid

Polese, eds. *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*. London and New York: Routledge.

³⁵ Colin C. Williams. 2009. “Beyond the Market/Non-Market Divide: A Total Social Organisation of Labour Perspective.” *International Journal of Social Economics* 37: 6: 412.

³⁶ Colin C. Williams. 2011. “Geographical Variations in the Nature of Community Engagement: A Total Social Organization of Labour Approach.” *Community Development Journal* 46: 2.

³⁷ Glucksmann, “Why ‘Work’?”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁹ Miriam A. Glucksmann. 2009. “Formations, Connections and Divisions of Labour.” *Sociology* 43: 5.

roles such as night-watchmen (or more likely women) in a factory. This role is often reserved for disabled or elderly workers. There are numerous similar jobs in post-socialist states which require little to no “presence” and which draw almost no salary, but which entitle the holder to (not yet completely residual) state or enterprise benefits. Thus, the post-socialist experience adds further nuance to the critique of labor division—a night-watchman is paid to labor, but in reality is more like an “unpaid” intern, but with very different perspectives both from the worker and from the employer. This ubiquitous role is both a holdover from the socialist period of full employment, and has the additional meaning today of providing social and psychological worth to “surplus” persons (such as older women) and, for employers, constituting a public performance of welfare provision. This is, ironically, the “informal” aspect of this formal work.

More importantly, the value of near-unpaid formal work is in enabling informality, a less common reality in the Global North. Borbála Kovács’ research on the “nanny’s” portfolio of employment in Romania illustrates this.⁴⁰ As a cleaner in a bank, the nanny qualifies for a pension and other benefits, but most of her time is spent caring (paid, but unregistered) for the bank manager’s children. This is not perceived as exploitative. Additionally, these activities are partially distanced from the state, only to intersect with it later on (pension entitlements).

IE continues to support household reproduction for the poorer deciles of the population in many states. This is why it continues to be a particular focus in recent work on Russian and Ukraine in the context of the global economic crisis. However, TSOL helps avoid seeing it in isolation. In Ukraine, for example, informality practices are “deeply entwined in the location they take place in [and] concerned with far more than just the ‘economic’ as they rely on historical antecedents, cultural knowledge, non-monetized reciprocity and the ability to negotiate power relationships as well as formal exchange.”⁴¹ Russian findings also challenge the so-called “marginality” thesis that represents IE activity as mainly affecting those without access to formal, “normative” employment.⁴²

⁴⁰ Borbála Kovács. 2014. “Nannies and Informality in Romanian Local Childcare Markets.” In Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese, eds. *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*. London and New York: Routledge.

⁴¹ John Round, Colin C. Williams, and Peter Rodgers. 2008. “Everyday Tactics and Spaces of Power: The Role of Informal Economies in Post-Soviet Ukraine.” *Social & Cultural Geography* 9: 2: 183.

⁴² Colin C. Williams and John Round. 2007. “Re-Thinking the Nature of the Informal Economy: Some Lessons from Ukraine.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31: 427.

Informalized, Deregulated State Provision

The imbrication thesis can be further expanded and supported when examining how difficult it can be to separate the economic from the political or social, as well as the micro-level from the meso-level. In the town and District studied, local elite networks fought for control of the rubbish collection business in the town (state provision of services) because it was ripe for siphoning off municipal funds for private gain (corruption as an informal institution). The competition for control by leveraging informal clientelistic ties higher up led to the involvement of District (the Procuracy, allied with the ascendant local elite) and then Regional (Oblast) security services (allied with the challenger local elite and against the procuracy). The “formal” result was the imprisonment of a local politician—for making a private loan to himself from municipal funds to buy an automobile—and the annulment of the existing waste contract. Furthermore, such corruption was only possible because of the blurry line between insufficiently formalized aspects of state procurement and provision: overlapping or obscure delineations of jurisdictions, legally incoherent contracts, opaque “holding companies.” The informal outcome was that corrupt tendering practices in other areas (such as bribes for access to the local retail market and the subletting of public buildings for private gain) were disrupted and renegotiated by new constellations of elites, and a micro-level conflict was elevated to a meso-level informal competition between different *siloviki* organizations.

Another example is local businesses’ “choice” to provide funding for infrastructure in return for preferential treatment in planning and other matters under the purview of the local authorities. This is problematic because the resulting informal activities cannot be easily defined as corruption in the same way as the rubbish collection business or other examples of “kick-back” informality can.⁴³ “Favor projects” such as these were also undertaken because of an internalized and external expectation of political paternalism among local businessmen. The municipality planned to refurbish a leisure center, including two derelict swimming pools. The local town council wished to add a small, specialized third swimming pool for disabled children. This funding was not possible via existing budgets. The owner of a local SME given the main contract—who was also a local elected representative—took this job on “gratis.” The patronage was entangled with political and economic self-interest, but more importantly, the third pool was an informal side project, providing an unregistered “bonus” to a dozen of the businessman’s employees during the summer furlough. Here we have a meeting of the informalization

⁴³ See S. Kordonskii. 2012. “Norma otkata” [Norm of the Kickback]. *Otechestvennye Zapiski* 2: 47. At <http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2012/2/k8.html>, accessed February 27, 2018.

of state procurement/infrastructure, informalized employment, and of course political decision-making, responsibility, and welfare provision. It is partly commodified, but it also contains marks of a “socialist” legacy: of paternalism generally, “*subbotnik*” voluntarism, enterprise-municipal patronage (*shefstvo*),⁴⁴ and local social “entrepreneurship” in the face of the inadequate Russian state.

The way informality meets, or rather percolates into, the state and its limited capacity for provision or oversight is a good example of where research can prompt a wider consideration of issues that are beginning to be aligned under the term “stategraphy.”⁴⁵ Tatjana Thelen and collaborators see an opportunity for anthropology to fill an “analytical gap between state images and practices” through what she calls stategraphy.⁴⁶ Crucially for the relevance of informality research, “stategraphy would then see analysis converge on ‘relational modalities, boundary work, and embeddedness of actors.’”⁴⁷ Thelen critiques the neo-institutionalist frame of analysis and the deficiency theory of post-socialist societies.⁴⁸ Informality contributes to theorizing the association and embeddedness that accompanies economic relations. In turn, this helps overcome normative assumptions around informality that persist beyond the purview of post-socialist scholarship (similarly characterized by a deficiency perspective).

Like Thelen, I argue that informality has the potential to analyze “increasing fluidity and transformation of state structures.”⁴⁹ The meanings of everyday informal practices relate closely to representations of the state—they are not always negative. Indeed, the example of the swimming pool was discursively represented as reducing pressure on the bureaucratic problems of the welfare state, not as correcting a lack of funding itself. Localist self-reliance, the demonstration of solidarity between social estates, and the ongoing justification of enterprise paternalism provide

⁴⁴ On the informal nature of *shefstvo* in contemporary Russia, see Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowska. 2008. “The Inextricable Ties Between Society and the Army in Post-Soviet Russia: The Resurgence of *Shefstvo* Under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin.” *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 8, At <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/1813>, accessed February 10, 2018.

⁴⁵ Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Veters, and Keeba von Benda-Beckmann. 2014. “Introduction to Stategraphy: Toward a Relational Anthropology of the State.” *Social Analysis* 58: 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Tatjana Thelen. 2011. “Shortage, Fuzzy Property and Other Dead Ends in the Anthropological Analysis of (Post)socialism.” *Critique of Anthropology* 31: 1. The “deficiency” debate between Thelen and others can be reduced to an acceptance or rejection of the validity of socialism as an “alternative form of modernity.” Similarly, the justification of the term “post-socialism” is an extension of that debate. As informality persists and is ingrained, embedded, and insinuated in practices, it supports a theorization of social relations as hybridized and therefore post-socialist societies themselves as having ongoing difference from places that did not experience state socialism.

⁴⁹ Thelen, Veters, and von Benda-Beckmann, “Introduction to Stategraphy,” 2.

more nuance than an analysis based solely on the idea of the withdrawal of the state or the residualization of its social role. This illustrates the value of a stategy approach to the study of informality: it is not enough to present a pluralist concept of the state,⁵⁰ nor does a reliance on the cultural representation of the state suffice—e.g. in the all-too-common “abandonment” trope. Similarly, Roy, writing on India, argues that regulatory “ambiguities” and unintentional deregulatory situations “are precisely the basis of state authority and serve as modes of sovereignty and discipline.”⁵¹ Such governmentalizing effects of informality remain underexamined in the post-socialist context.

Practices of informality that intersect with state functions, parallel them, or even seemingly frustrate their operations may still be “integrated” into bureaucratic practice. Three examples loom large in my own field-work experience: the “informal municipal fix” outlined above; informal taxis as a deregulated “public transport” system;⁵² and the quasi-legalization of informal utility installations (water, gas, electricity) and the informal self-employment these installations support. Each case requires the involvement (including by passive acceptance) of local state actors, whether local authority accountants or regulators.

In my field-site, getting a gas connection to a newbuild domestic property requires the local authority’s gas engineer to sign off in person. For a private householder, this might take months, many trips out of town (to the district center), and significant paperwork. However, an “emergent organizational form” of bureaucracy⁵³ streamlines this process by making use of informality. A retired gas engineer who formerly worked for the local authority’s utility office now deals with the paperwork for a small fee, which legally delegates this work to him. The utility office openly advises customers to apply to this neighboring “*kontora*” in order to shorten and simplify the application process. The retiree allocates the installation and inspection to a qualified person, and provides the necessary safety documentation. This processual focus on informality and state brings out the embedded social relations of actors. Plumbers, utility clerks, building inspectors, local authority cadastral officers (gas lines need to be accurately recorded on maps), and heating engineers recreate and change the state through their semi-formal, partly informal relational modalities. This is not “resistance,” but nor is it “corruption” or even clientelism. At the simplest level of analysis, it illustrates the agency of bureaucracy to effect informal,

⁵⁰ Anthony Marcus. 2008. “Interrogating the Neo-Pluralist Orthodoxy in American Anthropology.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 32: 1-2.

⁵¹ Roy, “Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities,” 83.

⁵² Cf. Rekhviashvili and Sbignev on “informal social regulation” among minibuses in Central Asia. Lela Rekhviashvili and Wladimir Sbignev. 2018. “Uber, Marshrutkas and Socially (Dis-)Embedded Mobilities.” *The Journal of Transport History*, online first.

⁵³ Thelen, Vetter, and von Benda-Beckmann, “Introduction to Stategy,” 6.

deregulated solutions that become semi-formalized practices through time and are cemented through recurrent encounters with street-level bureaucrats. More broadly, we observe the many “amnesties” and unresolved legal ambiguities (relating to property ownership and capital) that affect both rich and poor.⁵⁴ We should view them not as processes of permanent formalization but as lacking finality—as examples of deregulation. The state here explicitly addresses itself to informal formations and negotiates with them, which Roy calls “law as social process.”⁵⁵

Imbricated Rationalities: Exploring Agents’ Values and Reasonings

The third sense of imbrication acknowledges the complexity of agents’ reasonings about practices and behavior. Why not explain informality as an overlap of utility-maximizing and culturally- or socially-predicated provisioning? Para-economic value dispositions underlying informal practices are capacious enough to connect market to mutuality. This is necessary if “embeddedness” is not to become a black box term that ultimately says nothing.⁵⁶ In some research, “autonomy” emerges to offer conceptual depth to informality.⁵⁷ Autonomy here does not refer to informality as separated from markets or the functions of capital, but indicates that understanding it requires agent-focused meanings for participation.⁵⁸

An example of this approach would be “autonomy” as a value-orientation of actors that sustains engagement with informality, combining structural aspects of informal labor and its intersubjective interpretation,

⁵⁴ L.E. Limonov and K.V. Vakhrusheva. 2011. “Land Market and Urban Development in Russia: Problems of Nonspecified Property Rights and the State Quasimonopoly on Land.” *Regional Research of Russia* 1: 3.

⁵⁵ Roy, “Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities,” 80.

⁵⁶ Lela Rekhviashvili. 2016. “Reviews: Postsocialism and Informal Economics.” *International Sociology* 31: 5.

⁵⁷ Vittorio Capecchi. 1989. “The Informal Economy and the Development of Flexible Specialization.” In Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren A. Benton, eds. *The Informal Economy—Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press; Klarita Gërkhani. 2004. “The Informal Sector in Developed and Less Developed Countries: A Literature Survey.” *Public Choice* 120: 3-4; Aili Mari Tripp. 1997. *Changing the Rules: The Politics of Liberalization and the Urban Informal Economy in Tanzania*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 106-7; Colin C. Williams and Janice Windebank. 1998. *Informal Employment in the Advanced Economies: Implications for Work and Welfare*. London and New York, Routledge, 32-3. “Autonomy” here is differentiated from the dualist notion of informal activities as constituting an autonomous sphere of economic activity, particularly in the Third World (see Victor E. Tokman. 1979. “An Exploration into the Nature of Informal—Formal Sector Relationships.” In Ray Bromley, ed. *The Urban Informal Sector*. Oxford: Pergamon.

⁵⁸ Ilda Lindell. 2010. “Informality and Collective Organising: Identities, Alliances and Transnational Activism in Africa.” *Third World Quarterly* 31: 2.

as well as the local negotiation of power relationships.⁵⁹ In this sense, informality may address the problem within “diverse economies” or autonomous geographies approaches that posit it as emergent only through the promotion of alternative non-capitalist space.⁶⁰ In such spaces, autonomous practices tend to be “fractured, incomplete and transitory.”⁶¹ Informality may entail capital-intensive, or self-exploitative, market-orientated activities as much as non-market and mutual ones, from which individuals or groups may derive a sense of autonomy or power. More specifically, autonomy may refer to labor that lacks general intermediary control by management; autonomism may relate to a sense of control over work processes/times/places. The agency of informal workers may be “trapped” in place and limited to local contexts, but equally may be scalable through political organization.⁶² These may be relevant perspectives on informality, even in contexts that to the outside seem like desperation, exploitation, and precarity—in informal care work, construction work, and petty trade, for example.⁶³

People who negotiate constant movement between formal and informal labor status often interpret aspects of control, surveillance, and subordination in formal work as important imperatives in seeking informality—for example, the factory worker who gains a majority of his income from weekend own-account plumbing work. In addition, tradespeople and other workers may perceive the attainment of social and personal satisfaction from such informal work, especially when connected to a reciprocal social network of others. The “symbolic interactionist” significance of informality should not be underplayed,⁶⁴ particularly as this has economic implications. Negotiations of social stratification and value emerge from informal payments in higher education and healthcare contexts—both staples of research in post-socialist contexts.⁶⁵ This moves

⁵⁹ Risa Whitson. 2007. “Hidden Struggles: Spaces of Power and Resistance in Informal Work in Urban Argentina.” *Environment and Planning A* 39.

⁶⁰ Autonomous geographies are framed as developing practices outside and as alternatives to the capitalist economic logics of the market. See, for example, Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton. 2006. “Notes towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self-Management as Survival Tactics.” *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 743.

⁶² Lindell, “Informality and Collective Organising,” 215.

⁶³ Morris and Polese, *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy*.

⁶⁴ Barbara Misztal. 2000. *Informality: Social Theory and Contemporary Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.

⁶⁵ Maryna Y. Bazylevych. 2015. “Ukrainian Physicians Reinterpret the Hippocratic Oath: Significance of Remuneration and Class in Bioethics.” *Human Organization* 74: 3; Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese. 2016. “Informal Health and Education Sector Payments in Russian and Ukrainian Cities: Structuring Welfare from Below.” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23: 3; Ararat L. Osipian. 2009. “Corruption Hierarchies in Higher Education in the Former Soviet Bloc.” *International Journal of Educational Development* 29; Jennifer Patico. 2002. “Chocolate and Cognac: Gifts and the Recognition of Social Worlds in Post-Soviet

a network approach beyond a sterile interactionist account. Nonetheless, such approaches should always be attuned to how agents' dispositions to engage in informality, while motivated by "practical sense,"⁶⁶ may ultimately exacerbate marginality and precarity, or corruption and inequality—as in the healthcare and education contexts. Danielsson argues that agent-centered informality is important in allowing analysis to move beyond structuralist or network perspectives, which reduce informality to an effect of defective economic transition.⁶⁷ At the same time, she cautions that we should be wary of reduc[ing] "informal economic practices only to tangible social structures in the form of networks, the explanation omits wider structural dynamics, positions and power relations that may (or may not) come into play through network-based interactions."⁶⁸ "Values" and subjective reasoning alone are therefore not enough.

Nonetheless, some activities—although they can be interpreted as being due to economic necessity (home DIY)—are valued and performed just as much for intangible reasons. I have approached this by engaging with the philosopher of social science Alasdair MacIntyre to discuss domestic decorative DIY (which also has economic value) as an "internal good"⁶⁹—a practice done for its own sake.⁷⁰ MacIntyre's virtue ethics are concerned with maximizing the "good life" through practices that transcend economism. Similarly, Harding and Jenkins sought to challenge what they called the myth of the hidden economy, arguing for the need to take seriously actors' perceptions and accounts of what they themselves are doing—a substantivist perspective—and to offer an alternative framework to the dualist or "separate" economic model.⁷¹ They explored the meaning of household activities like social solidarity work as informality that had an economic value (however difficult to define), such as ironing a garment for a sick neighbor. For Harding and Jenkins, even in the West, the formal is not the actual economy, which is simply one element of the social construction of organizational life; the term "formal economy" is part of the reification of the formal nature of a bureaucratic, metric society.

Russia." *Ethnos* 67: 3; Jennifer Patino. 2005. "To Be Happy in a Mercedes: Tropes of Value and Ambivalent Visions of Marketization." *American Ethnologist* 32: 3.

⁶⁶ Danielsson, "Informal Economies and Scholastic Epistemocentrism," 782.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* Note the link here to Thelen's critique (Thelen, "Shortage, Fuzzy Property").

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 779.

⁶⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre. 1981. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

⁷⁰ Jeremy Morris. 2012 "Beyond Coping? Alternatives to Consumption within Russian Worker Networks." *Ethnography* 13: 4: 85-103

⁷¹ Philip Harding and Richard Jenkins. 1989. *The Myth of the Hidden Economy: Towards a New Understanding of Informal Economic Activity*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Critiques and Challenges

In this final section, I summarize two related critiques of informality and suggest some solutions. The first is the “myopia” position; the second is the conceptual looseness of “embeddedness.”

Samers argues that some research on informality (in diverse economies) overstates its “progressive” potential, placing undue emphasis on marginal practices that are not scalable.⁷² More specifically, Samers argues that research should distinguish between a) informality as non-capitalist practices of mutual aid or cooperative economic actions; and b) informal employment. The argument alleges “myopia” about the exploitative nature of most informal employment. Portes and Haller also caution against “celebratory” approaches to informal economic practices that see them as illustrating the “true market” in action.⁷³ They indicate the potentially negative implications of embeddedness. The pimp (their example), loan shark, or agricultural labor gang-master are usually socially embedded actors.

In post-socialist contexts, these cautions have plenty of relevance, not least in the notorious area of construction work and the coercive conditions under which Central Asian migrants labor in Russia, for example.⁷⁴ Similarly, informalized employment is associated with the most “abusive” labor practices, even within the new states of the EU.⁷⁵ However, if the post-socialist context tells us anything, it is that informal employment, whether exploitative/precarious or not, is difficult to separate from other practices (including the economy of prestige in Central Asia). Equally, there are many contexts where informality is not a coercive phenomenon, nor is it always sufficiently commodified to make this likely—as indeed the heterodox reading of “the economic” in geography proposes.⁷⁶ The problem of the conscious or unconscious idealization of informality⁷⁷ should not prevent researchers from considering informality to help

⁷² Michael Samers. 2005. “The Myopia of ‘Diverse Economies,’ or, A Critique of the ‘Informal Economy.’” *Antipode* 37: 5.

⁷³ Alejandro Portes and William Haller. 2005. “The Informal Economy.” In Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg, eds. *The Handbook of Economic Sociology: Second Edition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁷⁴ Rustamjon Urinboyev and Abel Polese. 2016. “Informality Currencies: A Tale of Misha, His Brigada and Informal Practices among Uzbek Labour Migrants in Russia.” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 24: 3: 191-206.

⁷⁵ Woolfson, “Pushing the Envelope,” 561.

⁷⁶ Richard J. White and Colin C. Williams. 2012. “The Pervasive Nature of Heterodox Economic Spaces at a Time of Neoliberal Crisis: Towards a ‘Postneoliberal’ Anarchist Future.” *Antipode* 44: 5.

⁷⁷ Christoph Stefes. 2017. “Review: Limits of a Post-Soviet State: How Informality Replaces, Renegotiates, and Reshapes Governance in Contemporary Ukraine. By Abel Polese. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag. 2016. 245 pp. Bibliography. Photographs. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$39.00, paper.” *Slavic Review* 76: 3.

“theorize the proliferative nature of economic life”⁷⁸ in ways that point to socially embedded practices as contributing to a solution to the current crisis in governance and legitimacy.

The charge of conceptual looseness is a stronger one than that of myopia. Numerous scholars question the utility of an overly broad conceptualization of informality.⁷⁹ Steenberg also criticizes informality research for its “inherent state-centric perspective [that] naturalise[s] bureaucratic organisation as legitimate organisation per se and conceptually relegates non-state, non-bureaucratic organisation.”⁸⁰ The frame of research reduces the diverse informality encountered to “subdued, reactive, resilient or resistant practices.”⁸¹ Furthermore, the grouping of diverse practices into one category has the potential danger of rendering societies in which they occur “other” and marked with the “lack” that informality may imply.⁸² In contrast to the “lack” model, it is more fruitful to see informality as part of the adaptive transformations of social institutions and practices. Informality contains structured and enduring social meanings: “residues of formerly existing institutions” rather than “byproducts” of the formal economy or deriving from its shortcomings.⁸³ While this is particularly obvious in societies such as those in Central Asia, where Steenberg’s research takes place and where formal structures and informal institutions cannot be easily untangled, this is the case even in seemingly “firewalled” formal bureaucratic states.

Steenberg here also points to the problem of defining embeddedness, an issue taken up in more detail by Rekhviashvili.⁸⁴ If economic practices are embedded only in the sense of networks of interpersonal relations, then informality lacks purchase as an analytic concept. A Polanyian framing requires research to contrast the embedded nature of informal practices with the disembedding character of similar practices in formal markets.⁸⁵ While this is observed in some of the empirical material, a more sober assessment may recognize that the “dialectical connection” of market and mutuality⁸⁶ invariably applies to informality as well. We return to the

⁷⁸ Andrew Leyshon. 2005. “Diverse Economies.” *Antipode* 37: 5: 860.

⁷⁹ Ravi Kanbur. 2009. “Conceptualising Informality: Regulation and Enforcement.” V.V. Giri Memorial Lecture, delivered at Lucknow on December 13, 2008, to the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics, At <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iza/izadps/dp4186.html>, accessed February 27, 2018; Rune Steenberg. 2016. “The Art of Not Seeing Like a State: On the Ideology of “Informality.”” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 24: 3; Stefes, “Review.”

⁸⁰ Steenberg, “The Art of Not Seeing Like a State,” 294.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁸⁴ Rekhviashvili, “Reviews,” 577.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Stephen Gudeman. 2009. “Necessity or Contingency: Mutuality and Market.” In Chris M. Hann and Keith Hart, eds. *Market and Society: The Great Transformation Today*. Cambridge:

need to bring out and account for “imbrication” to avoid the twin pitfalls of uncritical “myopia” and “embeddedness.” Then research could provide insight into whether “informal practices are more embedded compared to formal economic transactions and labor relations, and what role informality plays inside the dialectic connection of market and mutuality.”⁸⁷

Conclusions

Structural and modernization perspectives considered informality to be socialist debris or a byproduct of transition, predicting its decline as a market economy became established and the state consolidated power. As elsewhere, these positions see informality as largely negative, hindering development.⁸⁸ However, much research in the post-socialist world has shown this perspective to be Western-centric and empirically unsubstantiated. It reproduces a hierarchical ordering of societies and contributes to the othering of the post-socialist world.⁸⁹ However, informality research has potential as a bridge-building concept suited to reconciling the study of non-state institutions and practices with research focused on institutions. “It makes practices visible that have previously had no notice in these analytical traditions.”⁹⁰

As argued with reference to Thelen’s critique of the “deficiency model” of (post)socialism, informality, along with corruption, patrimonialism, and clientelistic practices, would not exist unless they were imbricated with the workings of both state and market institutions. In particular, street-level bureaucrats should really take center stage in future informality research. So far, “their presence [in such research] is generally discrete and equivocal, because more often than not they are introduced into the story by other participants.”⁹¹ Incorporating these actors into research and therefore integrating an organizational focus with researchers penetrating “state agencies and public services, such as tax offices, police precincts, hospitals, schools, welfare agencies, custom authorities and local authorities” is a tall order, but is necessary to further informality studies.⁹²

Cambridge University Press.

⁸⁷ Rekhviashvili, “Reviews,” 577.

⁸⁸ Marius Wamsiedel. 2015. “Review: *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*. Eds. Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. xix, 188 pp. Index. \$155, hard bound.” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 33: 2: 94.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Steenberg, “The Art of Not Seeing Like a State,” 303.

⁹¹ Marius Wamsiedel. 2017. “Approaching Informality: Rear-Mirror Methodology and Ethnographic Inquiry.” In Abel Polese, Colin C. Williams, Ioana A. Horodnic, and Predrag Bejakovic, eds. *The Informal Economy in Global Perspective: Varieties of Governance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 111.

⁹² Wamsiedel, “Approaching Informality.”

Thirty years out from communism, informality remains a systemic,⁹³ sometimes systematized form of deregulation, with links to livelihood practices and ethical dispositions. Is it an oxymoron to speak of informality as a system? This article has argued that remaining sensitive to conceptual framings of embeddedness, imbrication, and deregulation reveals the self-sustaining, rhizomatic model of informality, which encompasses economic, political, socio-cultural and ethical perspectives. The critical TSOL perspective only aids this framing. It allows for the integration of a “full-spectrum” focus on “interactions between labour and work activities across boundaries between socio-economic modes. These boundaries have always been permeable, the same work activity crossing between domains.”⁹⁴

Finally, we should interrogate our prefacing of informality with the adjective “post-socialist.” A recent political economy overview on global informality concedes, rather begrudgingly, that many may “participate in the informal economy because there is more autonomy, flexibility and freedom in this sector than in the formal one.”⁹⁵ It may be that the post-socialist case is just one of the most readily researchable, most widespread examples of informality, and that we can find such examples in most societies if we look harder and make fewer assumptions. Demystifying the post-socialist case may prompt others to think harder about the diversity of so-called “more developed,” “less corrupt” societies and economies and the relatively “hollow” conceptualization of formal institutions.⁹⁶ Organizational ethnographies of street-level bureaucrats and institutional actors’ responses to and negotiations with informality are key to this aim.⁹⁷

The study of IE has led critical scholars to posit “diverse, multiple and heterogenic modes of economic conceptualization.”⁹⁸ This in turn has resulted in far “richer contemporary economic landscapes emerging, within which the capitalist mode of production is seen to be highly uneven.”⁹⁹ The persistence, and in some cases expansion, of informal labor and its networks is related to questions of precarity, autonomy, types of social trust, mutuality, and state regulations and deregulation. However, the quantifiably economic part of the formality-informality equation may be less significant in the future, as commodified labor actually decreases as a proportion of time spent “working,” and not just among poorer people. For example, what does the statistic that 35% of working-age Italians are

⁹³ Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise?*

⁹⁴ Glucksmann, “Formations, Connections and Divisions of Labour,” 886.

⁹⁵ Gërkhani, “The Informal Sector,” 274.

⁹⁶ Ian Bruff and Matthias Ebenau. 2014. “Critical Political Economy and the Critique of Comparative Capitalisms Scholarship on Capitalist Diversity.” *Capital and Class* 38: 1.

⁹⁷ Wamsiedel, “Review,” 95.

⁹⁸ White and Williams, “The Pervasive Nature of Heterodox Economic Spaces,” 1626.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1626.

“economically inactive”¹⁰⁰ express, other than conceptual failure to integrate informal practices? While precarious economic times are important to the picture, bringing in informality is an opportunity to reimagine alternative “noncapitalist forms of economy (including ones we might value and desire) as both existing and emerging, and as possible to create.”¹⁰¹ This is part of “normal” livelihoods in postsocialism, where the imbrication of the formal and the informal is taken as a given and incorporated into everyday life.

¹⁰⁰ Eurostat. 2017. *Economically Inactive People in the EU: Who are They?* At <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20170705-1?inheritRedirect=true>, accessed February 17, 2018.

¹⁰¹ The Community Collective. 2001. *Imagining and Enacting Non-Capitalist Futures*, At <http://www.communityeconomies.org/site/assets/media/old%20website%20pdfs/Papers/on%20rethinking%20the%20economy/Imagining%20and%20Enacting.pdf>, accessed February 9, 2018, p. 4.