

Call for Papers

M.S. Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies "Metamorphoses of the Political"/
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Between the State and the Site of Production: The Making of Informal Labour Relations

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Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India

'Informal labour' has been a topic of academic as well as political discussion ever since the early 1970s when Keith Hart coined this term in a study for the International Labour Organisation on the labour market in Ghana. As a relative concept, 'informal labour' is usually defined as being the opposite of 'formal labour', or legally regulated employment. Thus the term 'informal labour' typically refers to employment, and labour market dynamics, whereas the site of production tends to be neglected. Moreover, the role of the state in the making of 'informal labour' appears as a 'black box' in many discussions. If state action is considered at all, debates evolve around the question whether politics should promote or abolish these jobs: Whereas representatives of modernisation theory in the 1950s and 1960s have argued that informal labour was a leftover of pre-modern times, bound to disappear on the way to a bright, and modern future, as defined by the contemporary centres of capitalist development, more recent contributions have identified 'informal labour' as a result of current capitalist dynamics. While some argue that informal labour constitutes sub-standard employment, thus resulting in growing insecurity, not only for the workers concerned, but also for the remaining core workforces, others welcome 'informal labour', emphasizing its capacity to provide job options for those (especially women, and migrants) who are precluded from formal employment, and to promote a culture of self-help, in the context of family, ethnic group, or neighbourhood. Consequently, the political solutions proposed vary considerably: If informal labour is on the decline anyway, no state action is required; if it results in the undermining of social standards, political actors must fight informalisation; and if it is celebrated to overcome 'labour market rigidities', the role of the state is to boost informalisation further. The very question how state politics contribute to the making of 'informal labour', however, is hardly addressed. In this workshop, we would like to move beyond these debates, in mainly three respects.

Beyond 'jobs, jobs, jobs': Focussing on informal labour at the site of production. As argued above, many discussions about informal labour focus exclusively on the employment relationship. From this perspective, 'informal labour' is defined by the fact that contracts are not stable, social security schemes and labour law (designed to stabilize formal jobs) do not apply, and, in more general terms, that legal forms of regulation play a less significant role than extra-legal aspects. As early as 1976, Breman (EPW, 27.11.1976, p.1370) has made the point, however, that '(in)formal labour' is not only about the labour contract, but also about the labour process. According to him, formal labour is bound to a specific type of corporate organisation, implying 'a set number of inter-related jobs which are part of a composite, internally well-organised labour structure'. Accordingly, we suggest to broaden our perspective on informal labour, in order to systematically include the labour process at the site of production (or service provision). Among the questions we hope to discuss might be the following: To what extent does the informalised character of employment relationships influence the nature of work? What impact does informality have on cooperation on the shop-floor, between informalised workers, between them and fellow 'formal' labourers, and finally, between workers and managers? Does the informal character of employment translate into specific ways of controlling labour, of organising production, and of designing career tracks and skill development? Are there specific ways in which informal labour relates to industrial conflict, and (collective) interest representation? By way of focussing on the site of production, we also strive to overcome the oft-criticised, but remarkably long-lived, and utterly misleading dichotomy between an informal and a

formal sector of the economy, since on the shop-floors of this world, formal and informal labour work side by side, their working conditions as well as employment status being closely intertwined.

Beyond the ‘invisible hand’: Discussing political regulation and the making of informal labour.

Ever since informal labour has entered the stage of academic as well as political discussions in the 1970s, these have been almost devoid of social actors, with the exception of the workers themselves, who arguably boost informalisation by way of circulating between village and city. Even though most definitions of informal labour emphasise the lack of legal regulation, state action is typically not in the centre of interest, however. In order to fill this gap, we hope to address questions like the following during this workshop: In what ways, and through which measures of political regulation have representatives of different nation states promoted the informalisation of labour during the last decades, and how can we account for current developments? What is the role of privatisation policies, of labour law, and of legal regulation with regard to social security provision in this process of state-led informalisation, in different spatio-temporal contexts? What kinds of interrelation exist between legislation, jurisdiction, and the tacit acceptance of semi-legal or illegal practices in the making of informal labour? Finally, how can we tackle the complex interplay between ‘politics of production’ (in the sphere of political regulation) and ‘politics in production’ that evolve on the shop-floor, according to Burawoy?

Beyond the national ‘container’: Towards a transnational perspective on informal labour.

In current discussions, the increase in informal labour that can be noted around the globe since the 1980s (with the exception of some countries in South America, due to their ‘anticyclical’ policies of actively formalising employment) is often ascribed to processes of ‘globalisation’. Although it is obvious that the latter has never functioned as the ‘great equalizer’, as expected by some, it might still be useful to experiment with transnational perspectives on informal labour, given that certain tendencies of informalisation indeed transcend national borders. Among the questions we would like to tackle in this workshop are the following: If informal labour is on the rise in markedly different world regions, to what extent does the term refer to the same phenomenon, with regard to the character of the jobs under review, but also to their significance for a specific national labour market? How can we analyse interrelations between informal labour in different national contexts, as constituted, for instance, within the framework of global production networks or value chains? Can transnational cycles of political regulation be discerned with respect to informal labour, in different nation states or in the policies of international institutions (like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund) – and how can we account for them analytically?

We invite papers, from the social sciences, economics, and the humanities. These might be based on empirical research, or draw upon more theoretical accounts, with a focus on informal labour, in a particular region of the world as well as between them.

This workshop is convened, in cooperation with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, by the Research Module ‘Labour as a Political Category’ on behalf of the newly established and New-Delhi-based M.S. Merian International Centre of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and Humanities (micas-mp.org). The Research Module is coordinated by Ravi Ahuja (Göttingen), Rana Behal (Delhi), Sharit Bhowmik (Mumbai), Andreas Eckert (Berlin), Chitra Joshi (Delhi), Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (Göttingen), Prabhu Mohapatra (Delhi), Christoph Scherrer (Kassel), Aditya Sarkar (Warwick), Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam) and Willem van Schendel (Amsterdam).

Proposals for papers (including an abstract of maximum 1,000 words) should be emailed to nmayer1@gwdg.de and scherrer@uni-kassel.de by 15 March 2016. The selection will be concluded by 15 April. The papers should be submitted electronically by 15 August.