

Call for Papers

International Centre for Advanced Studies "Metamorphoses of the Political" /
Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-University, Göttingen /
Soziologisches Forschungsinstitut (SOFI), Göttingen

Formalisation, Informalisation and the Labour Process: Comparative Perspectives

International Workshop, 20 – 22 November 2019, Georg-August-University, Göttingen

Since the 1970s, a rich and growing academic literature has focused on the formation of divisions between the “formal” and “informal” sectors in industrial economies across the world at different scales of operation. There is a general consensus that, beginning in the 1970s, the hegemonic model of employment was transformed globally, as organized workforces, state-guaranteed workers’ rights and immunities, consolidated and large workplaces and robust systems of national protection gave way to the rolling back of state sectors, diminished state protection, dispersion of industrial units and the break-up of large workplaces and trade union movements. There is, thus, a tacit or open consensus that expansive drives towards the “formalization” of labour relations have been reversed in the last four decades, and that this has produced widespread labour precarity and “informality”.

A persistent lacuna in research on these dynamics has been the sphere of work and production itself. Put telegraphically, the field of study which focuses on the divisions between “formal” and “informal” labour tends to highlight the recruitment and the terms of employment of labour – the conditions governing the entry and exit of workers in regard to industrial employment occupies the lion’s share of scholarly attention. *This workshop seeks, instead, to turn the lens on the actual dynamics of historical and contemporary processes of formalization and informalization in relation to the organization of work, workplaces, and capital-labour relations at the site of production itself.* Its starting point is that the processes which have created and reproduced the division between formal and informal “sectors” of the economy can be usefully comprehended within the domain, the dynamics and tensions of work relations themselves.

Four sets of themes may be suggested:

- 1 The Transformation of Production:** Industrial output has been modified, across modern forms of society, by a variety of production strategies. Processes of standardisation of production, and of diversification of commodities shaped the development of labour processes in correspondence with the processes of formalisation and informalisation of labour relations. The global extension of supply chains is often linked to a splitting of production process across different work sites, and, thus, seems to impinge on the process of informalisation that we seek to analyse. Meanwhile, advances in technological changes, the re-scaling of industries and of workforces, can be considered in this context as well. All these changes have left their imprint upon the process of production – making work more or less intensive, more or less integrated. They have changed the elaboration and distribution of tasks at the workplace, they have minimized or intensified the risks to health and life at the point of production. How might we formulate this link, across a multiplication of case studies, at the level of the historical rhythms and sequences of formalisation and informalisation?
- 2 The Workplace and its Routines:** The organisation of work at the shop-floor often rests on practices that do not neatly fit in the categories of formal and informal labour relations. Managerial forms of labour control and workers’ appropriation of the workplace shape the

every-day rhythms of work, and its routines. Interruptions due to accidents, diseases, or more material concerns such as the break-down of machinery, are often part of these complex routines.

How have drives towards formalisation and informalisation, at different socio-spatial scales, been historically associated with changes in the every-day routines of work? How have these drives impacted on the spatial layout of workplaces and their surroundings? Similarly, how have the spatial features of workplaces impinged upon the possibilities of formalisation and informalisation of labour relations?

- 3 The Politics of the Labour Process:** How have workers' modes and practices of workplace, community, neighbourhood, representative and movement organisation been articulated in relation to the prevailing weight of informalization and formalization processes in different modern contexts? This has generally, and not without reason, been described at the level of the rise and fall of labour movements in conjunction with the rhythms of Fordism or Post-Fordism, socialism and capitalism, Keynesianism and neoliberalism, workplace consolidation and flexibilization, employment stability of precarity. It is worthwhile, though, to intensify attention to something rather different – the overlapping of specific modes of political practice by workers (trade unionism, wildcat strike action, formulation of demands, choice of organizing principles, conditions of success or failure) with the context of long-term or conjunctural processes of formalisation and informalisation.
- 4 Social Reproduction and Household Strategies:** Workers enter the workplace and labour market in different forms: as single male migrants, as wives and mothers and daughters, as fathers and sons, as adults and children, as members of distinct ascriptive communities as newly skilled workers, as members of settled working-class localities and established traditions. In all these ways, discrete workforces are always shaped by multiple historical, cultural, gendered and generational layers. How have processes of formalisation and informalisation socially reproduced these patterns and structures at the point of production? How do shifts from one kind of “formal” or “informal” regime of work affect these coordinates of working life, and how, in turn, do these coordinates set limits to these shifts? Conversely, long-term elaborations of “formality” and “informality” in labour relations can produce their own stability and self-reproduction. Elements of labour history such as the rhythms of migration, male breadwinner norms, feminizations of workplaces, logics of skill, training and education, or patterns of housing provision can be investigated in the light of specific formalization and informalization processes.

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

This workshop is convened by the Thematic Module “Labour as a Political Category” on behalf of the New Delhi-based M.S. Merian – R. Tagore International Centre of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and Humanities (<https://micasmp.hypotheses.org/>). The Thematic Module is coordinated by Ravi Ahuja (Göttingen), Rana Behal (Delhi), Andreas Eckert (Berlin), Chitra Joshi (Delhi), Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (Göttingen), Prabhu Mohapatra (Delhi), Anna Sailer (Göttingen), Aditya Sarkar (Warwick), Samita Sen (Cambridge), Christoph Scherrer (Kassel), Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam), Willem van Schendel (Amsterdam), Awadhendra Sharan (Delhi) and Aardra Surendran (Mumbai).

Proposals for papers (including an abstract of maximum 1,000 words) should be emailed to camille.buat@cemis.uni-goettingen.de by 23 June 2019. The selection will be concluded by 7 July 2019. The papers should be submitted electronically by 15 October 2019.