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THE PRISM OF BRAZIL: INFORMAL PRACTICES IN
POLITICS AND SOCIETY



Informal practices in politics and society in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In the social sciences, informality is regularly discussed as a territory: 'the informal city'. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, precarious informal workers gained attention as people were targeted for cash transfer policies to increase adherence to and diminish the negative impact of social distancing policies. Focusing on informal workers highlighted new discussions about informality. In this Introduction, I discuss theories of informal practices in Brazil prior and during the pandemic, when this special issue 'The prism of Brazil: informal practices in politics and society' was conceived. This issue combines theory and ethnography to locate informality in time and space. I situate two shifts in the discussion of informality: (1) Prior to 2020, researchers started discussing informality as a practice across different scales of power, moving away from binary conceptions. (2) Informality was discussed as mutual dependency, where autonomy in housebuilding or income generation was framed as possible existence, not freedom. To counter effects of the pandemic in Brazil, targeting and locating people in 'informal' labour became important for conditional cash transfer, though still simplifying complex realities. In turn, disturbed social interactions highly affected co-dependency. In grappling with new scholarship focused on Brazil, I discuss the heterogeneity and dynamics of informality.

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Informal practices in Brazil

This Introduction to the special issue 'The prism of Brazil: informal practices in politics and society' gives practices of informality in Brazil a political and temporal context. The choice of Brazil to bring together articles with a focus on informality did not happen in a social vacuum. As Marks and Abdelhalim (2018, p. 305) put it when reflecting about anthropological writings, 'social science thinking and practice is fundamentally moral (and therefore subjective) because it deals with human beings in all their complexity'. The subjective complexities faced by the authors of this special issue relate to ethnographic and archival research that stretches through different periods of time, mostly in the 2000s (Albert, 2021; Cohen, 2021; Kolling, 2021; Koster & Eiró, 2021; Quintela & Biroli, 2021; Richmond, 2021), but that were written by the authors in 2020, when practices, classifications, and

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theories on informality were changing amid the Covid-19 pandemic. In places such as Brazil, the intellectual efforts to discuss informality prior to 2020 revolved around moving away from binary depictions of formal and informal individuals and spaces (Doherty & Lino e Silva, 2011), which did not capture the regularities of informal housing and income generation and the history of places that are far from being simply improvised and temporary (Fischer, 2021, in this issue). Informality is thus more than simply a 'setting, sector, or outcome' (Banks, Lombard, & Mitlin, 2020, p. 223) and most authors in this series move away from simplifying categories such as formal/informal, and instead discuss power and social hierarchies that define when and which individuals are considered 'formal' and what such dynamic and politicised categories do to people's incomes, homes, and bodies. However, reflections about terminologies such as 'informal', that surely reduce realities, were flying in face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic pressed governments to find informal workers who needed financial support, such as via cash transfer policies. As Millar (2014) put it, having work is not the same as having a job, and those living on precarious forms of income generation faced not only daily uncertainties and debt (Kolling, 2021, in this issue), but also health vulnerability (Li et al., 2021). The Brazil of 2020 thus offers a peculiar prism to discuss informal practices and how this concept of informality gained a utilitarian prism. The Covid-19 pandemic was pervasive in Brazil, with deaths severely affecting those of darker skin, lower educational background, and in vulnerable housing conditions (Li et al., 2021). Cash transfer policies tried to support such vulnerable groups. Despite government efforts to locate and support vulnerable individuals (in informal houses or work), what this special issue shows is that informality is a dynamic concept. This introduction thus presents the state of the art of scholarship on informalities prior to and during the pandemic in Brazil, situating the articles presented for this series in this ongoing and urgent debate.

The moral challenge in this special issue is thus that of discussing a system of power that creates hierarchies of people, place, and practices, and we do so by looking at those who are selectively informal, such as the state. And yet, at the same time, we recognise that 'where the majority holds political, economic, spatial and ecological vulnerabilities' (Bhan, 2019, pp. 642–643), such as in urban peripheries, informal practices of housing and income prevail. Undeniably, 'the informal economy is often a source of income for the poor' (Dell'Anno, 2018, p. 1184), and the study of those in precarious positions remains critical. How individuals 'at risk' or on the margins of formal practices in earnings and dwelling may come together to find political and legal representation is part of this special issue (Quintela & Biroli, 2021).

The dialogues that first informed this special issue took place in February 2020, during the Annual Oxford Brazilian Studies Programme Conference, held in St Antony's College, University of Oxford, where scholars from around the world with a research focus on Brazil discussed informal practices in politics and society across disciplinary fields. The importance of the topic became all the more pressing with the Covid-19 outbreak the following month, leading to the present volume.

Informality: from place to people

When writing about the Delhi slums, Ghertner (2010) described the impossibility of assessing those spaces by relying on maps and statistics. In such places, it is difficult to know

the total number of inhabitants, or even how to locate the residents of houses with no number on streets with no name. The lack of services and infrastructure in these settings make poverty intractable. In Delhi or in Rio, when calculating tools fail to deliver precise indicators, aesthetics determines which places ‘look right’. The formal and informal city are thus not about tenure rights, and illegal wealthy houses in Brazil’s new development areas are not to be confused with self-built shacks in urban peripheries. The term informal is thus reserved for spaces that are aesthetically illegal and unserved; ‘[s]paces that look like slums, that look dirty and overcrowded, are learned to be illegal, despite their far more complex political, residential and legal histories’ (Ghertner, 2010, p. 204). Because of this shared prevalence of a visual aspect in assessing urban rightfulness, informality in Latin American cities has been explored in territories of poverty and precariousness more than in wealthier territories (Fischer, McCann & Auyero, 2014; Banks et al., 2020, p. 223).

Whether the urban form shapes law, politics, and society in Latin American cities (Fischer et al., 2014, p. 1), the danger here is to assume that in changing the form of spaces one can control how society ought to function. When Slater (2013) discussed neighbourhood effect – ‘where you live affects your life chances’ – the central question for him was how people came to live in precarious spaces in the first place – ‘your life chances affect where you live’. There are structural problems that lead to precariousness in living, such as inequality in gender, race, and education, and without tackling such inequities, changing the shape of cities may not directly impact on the poverty of individuals; it may in fact make it worse. Koster and Nuijten (2012) studied a slum upgrading project in the city of Recife and described that when residents received flats to replace their poor *palafitas* houses – ‘a hut on stilts in the water’ (p. 178) – they missed having access to the ground floor. What looked ‘right’ in the eyes of urban developers felt wrong to residents whose income related to donkey-carts to collect garbage and so needed easy access to the street and the animals. The same happened to others whose income depended on sales of various services, such as hairdressers, manicurists, and carpenters, amongst others, who advertise their services and sell them through the window. Pilo’ (2021) discussed that in creating ‘formal’ cities without considering the precariousness of residents in urban peripheries, poverty may further increase if residents are charged for electric and water bills monthly when their income is irregular. When bills pile up, many are disconnected from such essential services. Negotiation in the regularisation of infrastructure provision is thus necessary to make sure that services are offered at affordable costs and that service providers can access the areas when needed for maintenance (Pilo’, 2021). But negotiation between slum dwellers and the state is not easy when political capital (and political language and knowledge of laws) is unfairly distributed. de Souza Santos (2021) described a slum improvement in Mariana, Minas Gerais, where residents negotiated a list of infrastructure improvements hoping that tenure rights would follow when the area finally ‘looked right’. However, when the local government prioritised paving roads with asphalt, housing prices increased, some residents sold their properties, and the community stopped pressing for housing papers given the positive effect of asphalt on the aesthetics of the place and on the cleanliness of people’s homes and shoes. Aesthetic improvement was also part of forced resettlement in Salvador’s urban peripheries. Newly built flats offered small spaces for families that are always growing and changing. The middle-class dreams of a house that ‘looks proper’ conflicted with the function of dwelling as a

process, where the format of houses follows the course of lives and not the other way around (Kolling, 2016).

Besides the complexity of assigning poverty to places and as such changing places without necessarily improving lives, when limiting informality to spaces of poverty and squalor, the informal practices of wealthy areas are not explored, nor are people discussed as central elements of the fabric of the city (Banks et al., 2020). Simone (2004) focused on people rather than places in Johannesburg townships to discuss how people are the infrastructure of places, making living possible in the absence of pipes or tiles. The focus on people, the author says, brings complexity to collective systems in urban spaces that are simultaneously regular and marked by informality. Looking at Delhi's government, Bhan (2019) discussed how the local administration built temporary structures for health clinics, which precisely fits with the concept of squatting. The case made by Bhan swung between a discussion of informal practices in urban inhabitation to one of terminologies, and governments are rarely discussed using terms such as 'illegal', 'informal', 'squatters', 'precarious', 'coping', 'improving'. This special issue adds to the efforts of Bhan (2019) and others (Banks, 2016) that look at the Global South and recognise its 'moving peripheries' by amplifying and contextualising the knowledge produced about such spaces. In addition, by recognising the hierarchies of people and places that define vocabularies such as 'informal', we add a socio-political dynamic to the discussion. We thus look at people and their dynamics of housing, justice, income, and politics to complexify the idea of 'informality' and discuss who creates such concepts, when, and what for. We also look at forms of resistance to and contestation of such categorisations.

In the next section, I discuss informal practices in Brazil between 2010 and 2020. Reflecting on Brazil over the past decade and during the life-changing circumstances of Covid-19 provides a means of thinking through some of the themes of informality and how they have changed. Here I will draw on my previous research in the touristic city of Ouro Preto during the 2010s to reflect on how Brazilians experienced informality in their daily lives, how this informality took a toll on their bodies and how it is expressed in the aesthetics of the worlds they construct and inhabit. After that, I look at Brazil during the pandemic of 2020 to contextualise informality and the socio-political time of this special issue. Then, I will present the articles that delve deeper into the dynamics of informality in Brazil.

Life in a reliable disorder

Silva was a street vendor in Ouro Preto, Brazil. Like many other street vendors in touristic towns, he sold whatever tourists wanted, from precious gems to guided city-tours. Until one day, an Italian couple thought that his gems were of great value and wanted to export them to Europe. Because of that, Silva got a passport and for the first time he travelled to Europe. Consequently, Silva bought a house, a car, and a precious-stone shop. Then in 2008 there was an economic downturn in Europe followed by one in Brazil in 2013–2016. The ups and downs of Silva's life were visible in his large house, bought when his businesses were good, but which always lacked maintenance. He left many tabs across groceries shops in town to be paid 'when things get better'. He pushed his body to the limit to try to make things better, working long hours, travelling here and

there, and scrambling for unpredictable income. Silva did not live long enough to see Covid-19 halting tourism in 2020.

The history of Silva is relatable to many other workers of touristic towns in Brazil. As I have written elsewhere (de Souza Santos, 2019), the combination of formal employment in hotels, shops, and restaurants with private city tours, or by renting out a room in homes to tourists or students, is a common trait of unstable economies such as in Ouro Preto. Ethnography amongst those away from waged employment often shows precariousness beyond the economic condition (de Souza Santos, 2019; Kolling, 2021; Millar, 2014). In the case of Silva, who owned a shop and a house in town, both having 'papers' (being legal), the routine of the business and house maintenance were far from steady and his relationships in town faced similar instabilities. To get clients to visit the shop, Silva often stood in the main town square offering tours to visitors. When tours ended, usually it is time for shopping, and he would lead tourists to his shop. The competition for clients was, however, fierce. Guides disputed who was allowed to offer paid tours and the association of tour guides fought for the right of exclusivity. Tourists did not know of this struggle and would end up being led by anyone, including those who might not have credible information about the city. In addition, there was no guarantee that tourists would visit the shop that tour guides owned or shops where guides earned commission. Other shop owners tried to bring clients to their own stores and fights between local businesses for clients were common. However, while those with similar earnings fought for a limited number of tourists, they also relied on each other for economic favours. The seasonality of earnings in a touristic town means that to make enemies jeopardises needed economic favours in local stores, especially in a city where everyone knows everyone else (de Souza Santos, 2019, pp. 60–62).¹

This story allows for the discussion of the centrality of a 'friendship currency', and the simultaneous competition that informality brings to the fore. Friends are essential in a context where bank credit is not always offered for intermittent incomes. In addition, shopping with 'one's name' (*ter um nome*) means avoiding high interest rates that are applied when using credit lines from a bank. The same people who compete in a variety of ways in town also depend on each other for references to gain an employment position, for a tab in the grocery store, or for a hand in house construction or childcare, what Banks (2016) calls a 'survival network', or 'communities and ties of mutual dependence' (Graeber, 2009, p. 266). A relationship of cooperation and competition is indeed complex. Competition for poorly paid and temporary vacancies is intense between many residents, but their interest in making friends rather than enemies is high given the strong dependency that comes with short-lived economic cycles.

When people rely on each other in a variety of ways to get by, the success of one person may also disrupt a chain of dependency. This speaks to a relationship that also includes coveting:

The pressure to cooperate is, at the same time, an expectation for reciprocity. When someone changes in socio-economic status, the life of others does not necessarily improve (even perhaps the opposite), and the investment made in every-day relationship is lost. Thus, envy is a strong mark of such tight social networks with strong economic dependency (de Souza Santos, 2019, pp. 61–62).

The concept of envy is a deviance from social norms that individuals are expected to empathise with the pain or happiness of others (Smith, 2013, p. 29). Envy, however, is

also a rational response to everyday interactions and competition for limited resources, ‘see [ing] the good fortune of another as an unacceptable threat to one’s own situation’ (Rebhun, 1999, p. 365). There is an unavoidable duality between empathising with others while being concerned for oneself. Cooperation and competition mark social relationships in Ouro Preto as well as in many other places with unsteady income and limited resources. Looking at redistributive policies in Latin America, Holland (2018) discussed how individuals may compete not only for private but also for public resources and, as such, the poor may not support redistributive policies if they do not expect to benefit from them. The removal of access barriers is key for the poor to trust anti-poverty support policies (p. 557). If benefits might skip some households, distrust will prevent unanimous support for policies amongst those who could potentially benefit from them.

What can be concluded from these combined approaches of interpersonal relationships and relationships with the state is that when benefitting some but not others, increased income may disrupt a chain of dependency and predictability. Predictability in social interactions matters as it generates rules of conduct (Illouz, 2019, p. 35). A seismic shift in day-by-day informal practices in Brazil happened with the Covid-19 pandemic. Tourists could not travel, shops could not open, and street vendors lost sales, amongst other services that could not fully work. The ‘art of living through the precarious present’ (Millar, 2014, p. 48) relying on relationships that share similar experiences was disrupted by the onset of the pandemic, as I will show.

The situation, however, was not the same across the country. Brazil did not have a nationally coordinated response to the pandemic (de Souza Santos et al., 2021). Instead, each municipality implemented its own mitigating policies, which could follow or compete with regional decrees and vary in time and strength. Meanwhile nationally, President Bolsonaro belittled the impact of the virus and boycotted policies such as mandatory mask use and social distancing (Lotta, Wenham, Nunes, & Pimenta, 2020). Within cities, such as Salvador, social-distancing policies also varied across different places (open or enclosed spaces), and while beach vendors had their activities disrupted – as beaches were surprisingly one of the last areas to re-open in Brazil, taking longer than malls (Decree 32.326 and Decree 32.768 passed on August 28, 2020) – other informal services in non-public areas, such as services offered door-to-door, continued, though often illegally. The unavoidable loss of some, the continuous gains of others, and the arrival of a cash transfer policy (detailed below), made a friendship economy arduous when it was also most needed. In his ongoing research, Marcelo Cortes Neri (2021) describes how most Brazilians used friends and family for credit during the pandemic. However, the unpredictability of the pandemic itself made lending a wary matter. On the borrowing side, potential creditors were not easily identifiable because knowing who would receive government benefits or would be able to work were not easily foreseeable. Differently from ‘friendship credit’ in touristic towns such as Ouro Preto, where many residents are aware of the touristic cycles, in Brazil in 2020, the duration of the pandemic, different policies across cities, and the possibility of income generation were unknown.

Informal practices during a pandemic

Cooperation, which has long been examined in political science, anthropology, sociology, and behavioural psychology, has been typified in various ways ranging from altruism and

trust – on an individual level – to policy strategies – on a collective level (Keith & de Souza Santos, 2020, p. 2). In the case of Covid-19, economic strategies on an individual level, such as reciprocity in economic favours or trust that loans will be paid back, were sorely missing, as discussed above. A stimulus package voted in the Congress aimed to encourage individuals to adhere to social distancing policies by correcting unequal losses, reimbursing those who had lost income (Barbosa & Prates, 2020; Cardoso, 2020; Carvalho, 2021; Trovão, 2020). However, such policies only existed in informal ways.

On 22 March 2020, while several Brazilian cities adopted social distancing measures (closing schools, bars, gyms, and churches), the government announced that companies could reduce salaries based on a reduction in working hours for up to three months (MP 236/2020). Workers could remain employed but with a salary that could be 25%, 50%, or 70% lower; employees could also have their salaries entirely suspended, with the government offering a complementary benefit based on unemployment benefit calculations (Barbosa & Prates, 2020). Of the more than 8 million employer-employee agreements, more than half of them were to have salaries completely suspended (Barbosa & Prates, 2020). This law, which affected those in formal employment, reduced income, a situation which in other contexts would increase informality, but the informal sector had even more serious problems.

While formal workers saw their habitual income reduced, others saw themselves nearly without any income (especially in the case of teachers and professors in private institutions, who already had flexible – zero-hour – contracts and saw their working hours severely reduced) without being classed as precarious workers or unemployed. The calculated loss was, however, still greater amongst those self-employed (Carvalho, 2021). Self-employed habitual income diminished during the pandemic, especially amongst those in the service industry, which has a high degree of informality and relies on the circulation of people. Amongst these workers, many survived only with the Emergency Cash Transfer Policy (*Auxílio Emergencial*), described below.

On 2 April 2020, the Congress approved a large cash transfer policy on a national level, initially transferring three monthly payments of R\$600,00 (or £84.00) (Trovão, 2020) to the most vulnerable, which included those already in Brazil's *Bolsa Família* – the largest social assistance programme in the country – informal and autonomous workers, as well as microentrepreneurs (Cardoso, 2020). This was a sizeable cash transfer policy. According to Barbosa and Prates (2020), in June 2020, 61 million people benefitted; as a means of comparison, the *Bolsa Família* programme supported in April 2020 a total of 14.4 million families (p. 66). In addition to the scope of the programme, the value paid was also higher than the average income of the poorest, thus *Auxílio Emergencial* not only replaced income potentially lost amid lockdown policies, but it also provided additional money. However, the programme only worked for a limited defined period, initially three months (April, May, and June 2020), which was followed by another two months (July and August), and subsequently, after uncertainty and discussion on its extension and new value, the benefit was paid for another four months (September, October, November, and December 2020). The value paid to families in the additional four months diminished to half of the initial value, making it R\$300,00 (or £42.00) (SAGI, 2020). In addition to uncertainties around its length and value, the programme did not reach its target beneficiaries simultaneously, but paid them according to their day of birth. Finally, families that

received the benefit were not always entitled to the same benefit in the following month (Carvalho, 2021, p. 9).

The impacts of *Auxílio Emergencial* are still being discussed (for example: Barberia & Piazza, 2021). Whether the benefit could keep the most vulnerable at home is being assessed amid a cascade of obstacles, given that payments did not reach beneficiaries at the same time and started being paid when some municipalities began to ease lockdown policies (de Souza Santos et al., 2021). In addition, due to the delay in starting the national cash transfer policy, some cities had developed their own programmes prior to the national policy. Despite such evaluation drawbacks and findings that mobility did not in fact reduce because of the new cash transfer policy (Barberia & Piazza, 2021), it is possible to say that the programme economically benefitted an enormous contingent of Brazilians, which at once shows the scope of informality as well as the improvisation of the government to reach out. Nearly half of all beneficiaries (49.7%) were not previously part of the *CadÚnico*, which collects information on individuals who receive social benefits such as *Bolsa Família* (Cardoso, 2020). New beneficiaries registered digitally for the benefit as quickly as just five days after the law passed (Cardoso, 2020). However, digital inclusion in urban and rural areas is precarious in Brazil and a large number of potential beneficiaries had to wait for in-person registration.

Brazil's *Auxílio Emergencial* was a measure limited in time, inconsistent in the amount paid, episodic to certain families while reliable to others, and started asynchronously. This policy of emergency was nonetheless moral as the programme was aimed at families who were most vulnerable. The fact that it included those who needed it most ethically compensated for its hurried and uncertain implementation. The terminologies used for temporary structures that are at once legally disputed and morally defensible are usually related to the improvising of daily measures that the urban poor use when squatting, borrowing, repairing, and 'informally' coping. But those terminologies are not commonly used to describe the state (Bhan, 2019). The year of 2020 in Brazil is thus an ideal place and time to rethink informal practices.

On one hand, workers in formal employment who lost income during the pandemic had their 'vulnerable' status questioned, even though formal employment is concentrated in city centres (Celidonio de Campos, 2019), and workers fully employed without the option of working from home navigated the city, often in shared transportation, without necessarily being considered 'at risk'. On the other hand, those considered 'informal' and 'at risk' could apply for an emergency benefit. This use of terminologies such as 'informal' for inclusion and 'formal' for exclusion was an unrehearsed exercise. Because informality is heterogeneous and dynamic, the precariousness of those who received government benefits was questioned, when people who were extremely vulnerable could not sign up for cash transfer policies due to lack of papers or internet access or because they had 'formal jobs', which in some cases did not translate into reliable income.

Covid-19 economic policies that aimed at mitigating the unintended consequences of reduced mobility are important for the debates of this special issue. What I have showed above is that the definition of informality remained with state authorities. This exercise had until the pandemic led to stigma, relocation, and prohibition (in this issue: Albert, 2021; Fischer, 2021; Richmond, 2021), but in the case of cash transfer policies, 'informal' led to financial benefits. How people approached the state to declare their vulnerable status for their own immediate benefit still needs further ethnographic analysis (in this

issue: Kolling, 2021). What I have demonstrated here is that the Brazilian state itself designed and implemented the policy in informal ways, and this exercise of assessing informality across different scales and power dynamics is what we do throughout this special issue (Cohen, 2021; Fischer, 2021; Quintela & Biroli, 2021). The lesson to be learned from Brazil is that in a world with a growing difference between work and employment, and where ‘insecure employment [is] increasingly a shared condition’ (Millar, 2014, p. 35), vulnerability and precariousness may exist despite stable employment (which may not equal stable or sufficient income). In places like Brazil, employed workers constantly shift to informal jobs exactly because their employment has not led to sufficient income (Millar, 2014). Informal labour which can give a sense of autonomy, aspiration, and prosperity, as we saw in the case of Silva, also creates relational dependencies in moments of loss or economic instability. The pandemic certainly altered the value of autonomy, relationships of co-dependency, and reliability on the state or friends, and perceptions of precariousness and security are still unfolding. What this introduction shows is that engaging with informal practices is thus to situate people in time, power dynamics, and places, as is done by each contributing article for this special issue.

This special issue

Informal practices in politics, such as a hurried and unpredictable cash transfer policy like *Auxílio Emergencial*, are not confined to pandemic times only. During election campaigns, clientelism can commonly be found in Brazil (Hunter & Power, 2007; Zucco, 2013). For this special issue, Koster and Eiró (2021) added to this literature by looking at clientelism also outside of campaign periods. However, in their article, the authors showed a temporal continuum, and by doing so they demonstrated how this informal practice orders social interactions. Koster and Eiró discussed the interactions of people with public officials to distribute resources, emphasising how such practices have endowed neighbourhoods in Recife with feasible local projects when leaders have *costas quentes* (powerful contacts in the government). At the same time, the authors discussed historical aspects of clientelist practices which date back to colonial Brazil. Giving clientelist practices a history, the article complexifies problem-solving aspects of this system while also addressing the perpetuation of patronage and inequality in Brazil.

Also giving informality a history, Fischer (2021) added to this special issue by looking at the heterogeneity of informal practices in Brazil. While the author contemplated the regularity of informal ways of building and being in a Brazilian city – ‘Informal city-building is a norm rather than an exception’ (p. 2) – she also noted how informal practices, when visible amongst the poorest, face ‘denunciation, alarmism, and prescription’ (p. 2). The article thus situated itself in this disjunction where scholars see and describe informal practices in politics, society, and cities, while politically, informality remains criminalised when situated in poor areas. This disjuncture, Fischer added, is related to racism and classism that have attributed to black and poor marginalised communities the aberration of informality. Changing this has included giving informality agency, creativity, solidarity, and autonomy. But this is not enough when it naturalises unequal power dynamics. The vocabulary of ‘informal’ when used to refer to dwelling and earning amongst the poorest shows how political authorities define the rules of public and private conduct, which also defines the limits and rightfulness of public resources. As Fischer put it:

informality – as a form of legal othering – endures as a problem, the remedy to which lies not in new laws but rather in the dismantling of a system of governance that relies on the perpetuation of legality as a form of private privilege. (2021, p. 13)

Cohen (2021) also discussed legal and political systems but in this case analysing hierarchies of power within the periphery. The article relied on ethnography and discussed how the Primeiro Comando da Capital's (PCC's) justice system works. Just looking at the justice system of a criminal organisation is often enough to call it 'informal' given its operation outside the legal system. However, the informality that Cohen described here relates to the discretion and subjectivities within the PCC in the resolution process, also called a 'popular tribunal'. This form of self-governance in the margins shows how peripheral communities cannot access legal systems in Brazil and appeal to the PCC's tribunals to solve their disputes. In addition, Cohen's research also showed that although this tribunal fills a gap in unequal justice systems in Brazil, it is itself 'unjust', and access to the debate is selective, depending on personal connections and territorial access. Informality and inequality thus mark the exclusion of Brazilians from (il)legal systems.

Also writing about informal processes at the margins, Richmond's (2021) article discussed the relationship between urbanisation and order-making. The author calls 'pacification' the act of negotiation between state and criminal actors in the making of neighbourhoods. He described the act of squatting, which is often followed by informal practices in infrastructure provision and the politics of patronage that exist in communities that lack basic services. The author contended that generating 'order' in these places may be in itself an act of disorder (legally and politically). Living conditions in these spaces are for Richmond dynamic and constantly negotiated, thus being called 'pacified' when functional.

Marginality and vulnerability are present in Kolling's (2021) article. The author described women in Salvador's periphery who navigate different forms of informal practices to earn money and pay for daily bills. The circumstances Kolling noted in her ethnography are gendered, and women get into debt because they have greater responsibilities in maintaining the household. To provide for families, women sell products to their network. Equally in debt, women who aspire for a better and proper house buy products from other women but often don't pay them back, making it a circle of poverty, cooperation, and let-down. Marginality in spatial and economic terms generates vulnerability, which has been accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Quintela and Biroli (2021) also discussed a system of networks of women. The authors look at the intersection between poverty, gender, race, and violence to describe the politicisation of caring. Mothers looking for justice for their sons navigate a system of laws, politics, and protests through love, pain, and grief. This article thus discussed the state as a perpetrator of violence and women as agents of justice. Motherhood, which has led women in Brazil to tiresome routines of caring in the domestic space, is in this context what led women to take to the public sphere in search of their rights. Care as political resistance does not overcome aspects of racism and exclusion; on the contrary, the authors demonstrate that because of racism and unequal access to justice these women take to the political stage. Resistance and political action, despite not necessarily being a choice, carve out new 'informal' spaces for these women to collectively fight for justice.

Also on networks, Albert (2021) discussed everyday contestations of spaces considered ‘informal’ for housing, and as such spaces for eviction. Looking at three distinct cities in Brazil – Uberlândia, Porto Alegre, and São Paulo – Albert discussed how networks of individuals may be strategic to negotiate displacements. Practices of occupation are analysed in terms of scale and forms of attachment. Albert brings to the issue an important element that further cements what is discussed in this Introduction, that when networks are used to contest eviction, often people are the infrastructure that grants a place its rightfulness.

Conclusion

This Introduction, which opens the special issue ‘The prism of Brazil: informal practices in politics and society’, contributes to recent literature that intersects urban, political, and economic analysis of informality (Banks et al., 2020; Bhan, 2019) by moving across interpersonal and governmental practices. This paper began by critically engaging with the idea of ‘informal places’, which connects poverty and squalor to informality, while often leaving wealthy areas and individuals unscrutinised. It is true, however, that the poor often rely on informality as a coping mechanism. Informal housing and the informal economy are examples of this. However, tagging people and places as ‘informal’ can criminalise ‘informality’ or naturalise inequality (Fischer, 2021, in this issue). Moreover, the place of precariousness amongst formal workers may go unattended, along with the informality and illegality of powerful individuals. Looking at informality across different scales of power and assessing who defines legality and deservedness became essential during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2020, when most articles for this issue were written, Brazil’s government launched an emergency cash transfer policy which included informal workers amongst the beneficiaries. This was problematic in different ways. Not only was the policy itself ‘informal’ – a hurried intervention, unpredictable in income creation, and unreliable to families – but also, those on the receiving end were not necessarily those ‘at risk’, as the most vulnerable may well lack papers and internet access to subscribe to a new policy in a timely manner amid a pandemic. In addition, formal workers may have a job title but faced severe income loss. Finally, as discussed above, individuals compete not only for private but also for public resources, and redistributive policies need reliability and broad access for support (Holland, 2018).

In a moment when informality gains political importance, it is chief to critically engage with how this terminology is used and by whom. This special issue analyses what is a heavily charged term, often stigmatising when directed at the poor, in a time when classifications matter. The potential inclusion that ‘informal’ workers can have when recognised by the state needs to be counter-balanced with the existence of workers that though ‘formal’ are precarious, and with the fact that until recently ‘informality’ was related to prohibition, illegality, and eviction. In addition, policies, well-intended as they might be, can create unpredictability and distort chains of ‘survival networks’ when unreliable in duration, scope, and financial value.

Informality is heterogeneous and dynamic as a concept and not everyone has the right to ‘formality’. For this special issue, then, informal practices need to be read and written with attention to privilege and inequality. Methodologically, our exercise to bring

together socio-economic, racial, gender, political, legal, and spatial dimensions to discuss informal practices in Brazil can expand to discuss and inform other current debates. Like 'informality', other terminologies such as 'family' also morally hierarchise and create a privilege of legality. We need to pay far more attention to the mechanisms of power and inequality that include and exclude people, practices, and territories.

Note

1. Ouro Preto has 74,824 (IBGE, 2010) inhabitants. Nearly one third of Ouro Preto's residents are students coming from other cities to be part of its sizeable university (de Souza Santos, 2019), making those who are permanent residents not only a much smaller group than the total number of residents, but also one that knows each other well in a variety of everyday interactions, as briefly described.

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