

Interactions between formality and informality in urban contexts: Insights from the margins

13. – 15. 10. 2021

The conference takes place at Zoom. To get the link for the event, please register (for free) here:

<https://forms.gle/BeW8s3qtwWS2KSu17>

The conference seeks to advance scholarship on urban informality that is manifested in negotiations, improvisations and co-production of practices and services, including those generated at the intersection of formality and informality, such as water management, transport and parking, housing, food provisioning and open markets. While focused on Central and East European (CEE) urban informality, the conference draws more widely on comparisons and debates across various geographical and cultural contexts, both urban and rural. The objective of the conference is to enhance the potential of scholarship on CEE informality both to subvert and extend more general systems of knowledge on a range of topics. These include the transformations and adaptations of formal policies, top-down institutions and infrastructures in response to challenges of everyday practices and non-consumption lifestyles.

Schedule

	Wed 13. 10.	Thu 14. 10.	Fri 15. 10.
14:00	Nicolette Makovicky	Anja Decker	Liviu Chelcea
14:45	Tauri Tuvikene	Agnes Gagyi András Vigvári	Slavomíra Ferenčuhová
15:25	10 minutes break		
15:35	Petr Jehlička	Hanna Hilbrandt	Francisco Martínéz Keiti Kljavin
Moderator	<i>Terezie Lokšová</i>	<i>Petr Jehlička</i>	<i>Anja Decker</i>

All times are GMT+2 (Prague time).

Each presentation should take up no more than 25 minutes; then, it will be followed by a discussion (up to 15 minutes). There will be a possibility to continue with the discussion(s) every day after the presentations.

The list of abstracts according to the schedule is [below](#).

Wednesday 13. 10.

14:00: Vocabularies of Informality: From languages of interest to languages of affect

Nicolette Makovicky (School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford) (in collaboration with David Henig, University of Utrecht).

People do things with words. Metaphors, jokes, idioms and vernaculars are the building blocks of how people communicate, create their communities and organisations, and make sense of the world they inhabit (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Consider for example these ways of talking about drinking, eating, and cooking in Kenya, someone might ask you to *toa chai*, or buy them a cup of tea; in Morocco they might ask for a *kahwa*, or coffee; and in Lebanon you might be surprised to be offered *helwayneh* (sweets) when dealing with an official. These requests and invitations, when uttered in the context of commensality, can create a sense of friendship or family belonging. When uttered in other contexts, however, such idioms act as 'codes' referring informal economic activities – in this case, petty bribery and corruption.

Recent scholarship from the economic and social sciences has provided ample evidence that informal economic activities come in many culturally diverse guises which reflect local histories, moral economies, and socio-economic contexts. While documenting such empirical diversity, however, few have given any consideration to their discursive and linguistic aspects. Rather, references to vernacular expressions for unofficial (and/or illegal) economic activity have been used mainly to add ethnographic 'colour' to academic writing on the subject. In this paper, I advocate taking local vocabularies of informality seriously, arguing that language is a constitutive part of all semi-and illegal economic practices, as well as the models of corruption and informality through which scholars have studied them. Focusing on forms of communication provides a methodologically innovative approach to the empirical study of informal economic practices, as well as a novel avenue for the development of contextually sensitive, reflexive analytical frameworks for their analysis.

14:45: "In-legality" of urban transport in Tallinn, Estonia

Tauri Tuvikene (School of Humanities, Tallinn University)

Working on informality beyond global South, the paper draws attention to the intersection of informality and legality. The notion "in-legality" is introduced here in order to avoid the persistent tendency to conflate informality with illegality. Instead, "in-legality" refers to the intersection and co-production of (il)legality and (in)formality: both as embeddedness of informalities within the legal order and informal processes as inherent elements of how laws work. Building partly from Kusiak (2019) discussion on judicial informalities, the paper highlights the process of legitimization of informality that allows such forms of organising to exist even if they are illegal and informal in many ways, though not necessarily defined as such by state or other actors. The paper discusses two transport-related in-legality. Firstly, using an example of informal-looking but formally provided private parking facilities in Tallinn, the paper shows that even if the activity is aesthetically something that could be named "informal", it can escape this designation for the way the practice works through the loops and inconsistencies of the state. The second example highlights the way in which an activity that might in other circumstances be illegal, receives formalised status for the way it aligns with the state ambitions. Ridehailing formalisation in Estonia owed to the elite informality posited in the established discursive framings of the digital future. Thus, while similar frames could be used for different illegal businesses (such as selling and trafficking drugs), it is significant that the novelty of platform economies, as well as their future promises and use of digitality justified for Estonian regulators the positive approach in the face of apparent illegality. Finally, the paper investigates the potential value in invoking the notion of "post-socialism" here to understand the particular workings of "in-legality".

15:35: Rendering the actually existing sharing economy visible: social networks, non-market exchanges and mutual help in Central and Eastern Europe

Petr Jehlička (CESCAME, Institute of Sociology and Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences)

Petr Daněk (Institute of Geography, Masaryk University)

While the processes of marketisation and privatisation in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe were initially externally driven by international institutions, domestically the market also enjoyed an elevated symbolic status as part of 'civilising mechanisms' destroyed under socialism. With the focus of much of the post-socialist scholarship on the process of 'transition' to the market economy, it has been largely overlooked that these societies harbour localised, informal and nonmarket practices such as mutual help, household food production and surplus distribution that defy the dominant neoliberal trends. This paper argues that despite their outward appearance as manifestations of an individualised agency and responsabilisation, these practices constitute an alternative, sharing economy. While not necessarily perceived as sites of resistance to market capitalism, these spaces are viewed by practitioners as constituting valuable domains of culturally motivated human interactions. The paper shows that these spaces nurture – through enjoyment – trust, cooperation, mutual help and efficient use of resources and hence, by extension, greater personal and local resilience.

Thursday 14. 10.

14:00: Alternative food networks, precarity and agency in rural peripheries

Anja Decker (CESCAME, Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences)

Food-self provisioning, on-farm shops and farmer's markets are but a few examples of the broad repertoire of short or "alternative" food supply chains. Constituting marginalized modes of provisioning in many societies of the Global North, alternative food networks are increasingly interpreted as drivers of social change that foster, amongst others, sustainable consumption and resilience/resistance to various forms of precarization. Notably, the debate on the agency that emerges within and through non-industrial food networks tends to rely rather strongly on data from urban sites and agents.

Against this backdrop, my presentation moves the focus to rural peripheries. Drawing from ethnographic research on figurations of precarity and agency in Czechia, I explore how rural dwellers experience and organize their engagement in various forms of alternative food networks. I show, how the entanglements of formal and informal economy that occur within the non-industrial food supply chains my interlocutors are involved in, create spheres of continuity, aspiration, recognition and autonomy. At the same time, the agency enfolding around participation in non-industrial food networks is fragile. Integrating practices such as food self-provisioning and the (informal) sale of farm products into the diverse economies of rural dwellers can also increase vulnerability and reproduce social hierarchies.

14:45: Dynamics of housing and labor: Semi-informal dwelling in peri-urban Budapest

Agnes Gagyí (Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg)

András Vigvári (Centre for Economic and Regional Studies)

In our paper we address historical dynamics of semi-informal settlements in peri urban area of Budapest, showing how spatial hierarchies and formal/informal labor portfolios within households intersect to supplement reproductive costs of urban workers before and after 1989. In terms of capital-labor relations, we analyse this dynamic in terms of reproductive costs being outsourced to free reproductive labor and informal ownership/building/infrastructure solutions tied to peri-urban spaces, a model that is not "outside" formal capital relations, but is constituted by them as a mode of rendering reproduction cheaper. We define the informal/formal division as one produced by state regulation, a political process which creates the legal categories for a hierarchy of value (in real estate,

in infrastructure, in types of work) which households navigate when trying to create their own dwelling. We define households' efforts as an active element of housing relations within capital-labor relations. Instead of just marking informal dwelling as a position of deprivation, or celebrating it as a proof of autonomy, we consider households' agency as a formative factor in negotiating relations of social reproduction in changing contexts of labor's bargaining power. We discuss the wave of self-building in the 1970's and 1980's as part of socialist "second economy", and the post-socialist boom of informal housing, within that framework. Throughout this broader historical period, we follow how forms of informal peri-urban dwelling have integrated within changes in macroeconomic conditions, state regulation, and labor's bargaining power.

15:35: Housing in the Margins: Negotiating Urban Formalities in Berlin's Allotment Gardens

Hanna Hilbrandt (Department of Geography, University of Zurich)

Critical shortages of affordable housing force people into housing precarity across the globe. Drawing from my book, *Housing in the Margins* (Hilbrandt 2021), this presentation explores unruly housing practices and their regulation in the context of the German housing crisis. Through ethnographic research on the ways in which Berliners dwell in allotment gardens despite a law that prohibits housing at these sites, it illustrates how these gardeners negotiate the possibilities of residency with the local bureaucracy, gardening associations and amongst themselves. I pursue this project with empirical and theoretical objectives: studying empirically how people negotiate ways of staying put in allotment gardens and how boundaries around their dwelling practices are drawn, I aim at understanding the production and governance of housing precarity in a relatively rich European city. In theorizing these processes of governance, I seek to unveil the possibilities of conceptualizing informal housing in the context of bureaucracies that are commonly understood to regulate thoroughly, coherently, and according to fixed rules. This analysis highlights the contested terrain of enacting regulations and the exclusions that these negotiations entail. Building on postcolonial theory, anthropology of the state and critical legal geography, the presentation draws attention to the power of negotiations in the governance of urban space.

Friday 15. 10.

14:00: Water infrastructures and informality: Domestic water filters in New York City

Liviu Chelcea (Department of Sociology, University of Bucharest)

"The characteristics of infrastructure emerge out of ... interactions [between] .. multiple agents with competing interests and capacities ..., making it exceedingly unlikely that they will function according to the plans of anyone in particular" write anthropologists Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita. That is certainly the case with the use of pitcher water filters in New York City apartments. Despite the fact that seven out of the New Yorkers believe that tap water in their city is better than those of other cities, about half of city residents use water filters at home. That turns filters into an unplanned, mass, capillary accretion on the city's water infrastructure. Drawing on fieldwork on tap water consumption in New York City carried out in 2018, I describe how residents use and misuse filters in city's apartments. While the production and distribution of city water in the city's water mains, prior to entering buildings and apartments, is monitored by water experts, both the state of service (building) pipes in rentals and the way residents use pitcher filters are unregulated and hypogoverned. Filters manufacturers make plural promises to a plurality of infrastructural publics who experience unease about tap water, primarily, but not exclusively, regarding pipe decay. Moreover, filters attract users with diverse technical competences and widely variable ways of using them, rather technologically savvy users. Most filter producers are not certified, and even if certified, the meaning, usage, and associations made possible by filters cannot be reduced to, or scripted by, their vision, thus opening up a rich field of diverse ethnohydrological practices. Analyzing such practices formed around filters may enable a broader methodological inquiry into how to engage ethnographically with tap water.

14:45: Inconspicuous adaptations to climate change as households' informal innovations?

Slavomíra Ferenčuhová (CESCAME, Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences)

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defines adaptation to climate change as a wide range of practices, from individual and private to institutional and public, that prevent negative impacts of climate change. However, in expert discourses, adaptation to climate change is often associated rather with top-down approaches and policies or with developing and adopting expert technological solutions. In wealthy countries, on household level, these include, for example, installing insulation or air-conditioning in response to heat, or professional water retention systems in response to drought. Simple, non-expert strategies and everyday behaviours that respond to local phenomena associated with climate change, are often overlooked as simple 'coping responses' rather than adaptations (e.g., Porter et al. 2014). In this presentation, I will focus on such practices that I have elsewhere called 'inconspicuous adaptations' to climate change (Ferenčuhová, 2021) as observed in the context of Czech cities and towns. I will specifically observe how these everyday strategies intersect with top-down (and formal) policies and programmes supporting individual adaptation to drought and heat, and I will discuss their character of 'informal innovations' in response to climate change.

15:35: Making Room for the Future? Urban Experimentation, Endurance and Demolition of Soviet Housing in Eastern Estonia

Francisco Martínez (School of Humanities, Studies of Cultures, Tallinn University)

Keiti Kljavin (Estonian Academy of Arts)

In this paper, we critically discuss the pilot project initiated by the Estonian state to scale down the infrastructures and real estate of Kohtla-Järve, a town developed in relation to intensive mining and industrial activity in the Soviet time. The pilot project assumes that the sacrifice of half-empty apartment buildings may positively transform the urban built environment and increase the value of what is left standing, thus changing how the town is represented and the dwellers' everyday lives. Here, demolition is presented as an experimental modality of urban planning and as political action, prototyping policy models geared towards endurance. Planning and financial efforts are, therefore, no longer oriented towards expanding the town, but rather to reach socio-material stability in a context of negative capability. We also investigate the epistemic dimensions of the half-empty phenomenon and how it affects the perception of this town (including fears of a potential loss of urbanity), as well as how the demolition plans are received by the local population (presenting Kohtla-Järve as an urban living lab). The demolition of housing infrastructure materializes the aspiration of a better future and makes governance tangible in an area affected by a demographic decrease and postsocialist abandonment.