



Call for papers (deadline 15th May 2025)

Workshop: Individual vs state morality: what if they diverge? Informality as a framework to move beyond the legal-illegal binary

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, 9-10 October 2025

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Rationale

Informality, as “the art of bypassing the state” (Polese 2023), has been often conceived merely in terms of either unregulated forms of labor whose objectives were subsistence and survival in the “underworld”, or actual illegal business spanning from unofficial earning strategies and unregistered activities to smuggling, bribing, and corruption.

Also referred to as informal economies, shadow economies, the informal sector, cognate definitions have been influenced by the prescriptions of the neoliberal orthodoxy, which has interpreted informality as a pathology caused by the state’s excessive involvement in the economy and subsequent inhibition of entrepreneurial initiatives.

However, whilst originally circumscribed to the economic milieu (Boeke 1942; Lewis 1954; Hart 1973), **the field of informality has been grafted with multi-disciplinary contributions as well as gradually overstretched by the manifold usage** practitioners, policy-makers and scholars have made of this term. On the one hand, a sub-stream of economic anthropology and qualitative sociology has studied symbolism and the market (Parry and Bloch 1989; Pardo 1996; Gudeman 2001) to understand the rationale behind informal transactions. On the other, a body of literature has also emerged at the crossroads of legal studies and political science, somehow feeding what has been defined as “terminological chaos”, with **“the informal” seems to be defined as a residual category vis-à-vis “the documented”, “the codified”, and “the certified”, often forgetting that most, not to say all, practices, institutions, and roles are born informally** and only at some stage – when a need or a political will emerges – formalized or institutionalized.

Furthermore, **informality has been conventionally (and wrongly) seen as something transitional, exceptional, or marginal in society**, often overlooking that informal practices can survive for a long time. As popular wisdom puts it “there’s nothing more permanent than a temporary solution” (Helou and Polese 2024)

Recent studies on the interpretations by citizens of their moral behavior in relation to a state (Horodnic et al. 2017; Ledeneva 2013; Morris 2012; Morris and Polese 2015) distinguish between informal practices and actions seen by actors as “positive” or “negative”. Positive practices are not only seen as harmless but also as enabling and even empowering, while negative practices are viewed as harmful or ineffective, at least from the state’s perspective. This moral frame sees citizens articulate justifications and social mores about the justified, legitimate, and illegitimate character of practices and exchanges described as informal.

Indeed, **morality is shaped by the conflict between individual and state values, often revealed through informal practices, a thing that this workshop is intended to explore.** Here attention shifts away from single cases where an individual violates state principles to what Scott defines

“infrapolitics” (2012) that is a random action performed millions of times by people unaware of one another’s actions that ends up becoming part of the political. Informality has been explored from a wide variety of angles (for a discussion, please refer to [What is informality? \(Mapping\) “the art of bypassing the state” in Eurasian spaces - and beyond](#)) and disciplines, from political sciences to economics to urban studies.

Informal practices can also be regarded through the lens of *non-compliance*: even though conceptual distinctions are needed vis-à-vis rebel and insurgent governance (Hanau-Santini, Polese and Kevilhan 2020), **the field of informality is contoured through the negligence, denial, or challenge of a formal source of authority** and rule-making, including the state and its prerogative to regulate a particular aspect of its social or economic life. In that respect, **this workshop also attempts to reflect on how state-society relations are affected by formal-informal interplays and encounters** (Murru and Polese 2020). This questioning has alimented an understanding that informal and illegal practices can be produced, reproduced, and developed “in spite of” and “beyond” the state (Polese, Kovacs, and Jancsics 2017; Polese and Morris 2015). “In spite of” the state refers to the case where state institutions already regulate a given situation, but citizens decide that state governance is insufficient (or not appropriate, effective). “Beyond” the state refers to the case where state institutions do not regulate a particular exchange and interaction so that citizens organize in response to make up for this deficiency.

Where the state regulates most of the relationships with and among its citizens, most exceptions to state rule – ‘in spite of’ the state – are illegal by force of law, i.e. from the perspective of the state. There are, of course, several kinds of illegality, as seen in the examples above, and different societal perceptions of what is illegal, so that not all situations or practices are equally illegal or illegal in similar ways. On the other hand, beyond-the-state informality refers to an economic sector or activity, policy domain, or region that the state does not effectively regulate for whatever reasons. This could be because the social problem or social need has not been identified or there is insufficient political interest in addressing the issue. In these circumstances, it might be more accurate to say that instead of the state not regulating (not being there), the state might be trying to get there, but it is unclear when or whether it will.

The approach of the workshop

Located in the above debates, and giving continuity to the project “Governance Beyond the Law: The Immoral, The Illegal, The Criminal” (Polese, Russo, Strazzari 2019) and wishing to bring the debate further (possibly through a special issue or an edited book compiled with some of the papers presented), **this workshop explores what we see as the continuous line going from the sphere of the informal and the unrecorded up to criminal practices, performed and reproduced by both individuals and organizations**. By doing this, we shed light on the significance, of informal, illegal dynamics **beyond the binary opposition legal-illegal**. In particular, by inquiring about the ways informal and illegal practices can be understood beyond a “survival strategies” framework, we propose to classify them as alternative, subversive forms of governance.

We emphasize the significance of positionality in the agency-structure debate to identify the relationship between the actor or possibly actors engaging in informality and the informal practice itself leading towards the distinction, or the conceptual unpacking, of the multiple actors along the governance continuum. **This suggests a deeper exploration of decision-making processes and the multitude of actors contributing to those decisions, thus rendering governance more inclusive of the actors impacting operations in a sector.**

Contributors are encouraged to conceive governance not in terms of a single actor or multiple actors, but in terms of a circuit of agents and overlapping interests in order to unpack implicit and explicit relationships imbedded in the informality debate. More in general, **we welcome empirically-based accounts that confirm, debate, or reject current conceptualizations of informality as well as evidence-based recommendations that can be shared with policy and decision-makers for better management of informal, precarious, vulnerable strata of the population**. Contributions are welcome on the following issues but please do not feel constrained by our limited imagination. We welcome proposals going well beyond the directions below as long as they engage consistently with informality debates.

1. Everyday governance and everyday informality and non-compliance with state rules such as tax morale, shadow economy, smuggling, engagement with illegal markets
2. Moral economies, Invisible labour and invisible economic actors, unrecorded, unregistered labour
3. War economies, surviving sanctions (both for political actors and everyday survival)
4. Gender, racial/ethnic as well as borderland perspectives on informality and vulnerability
5. Formal vs informal entrepreneurship including solidarity network (i.e. ethnic entrepreneurs, political protection of some environments, people, business)
6. Boundary of legal-illegal, taking into account that what is legal in one environment may be illegal in another and vice versa (i.e. alcohol, marijuana, sex industries)
7. Political informality: how power relations within a party, a state, a government are built and enacted
8. State-citizen relationship and everyday governance at the city or community (mahalle, neighbourhood) level
9. Radical political ecology and ecological activism that reclaims territories and spaces from the state or private groups for a more “human” management

Logistic arrangements

There is no workshop fee, all meals will be provided for selected participants. Accommodation may be provided for those who have no institutional support (if you can secure institutional support or have someone who can host you in Bangkok, that would help the organizers support some other scholars with no funding)

We are unable to cover international travel but **we can offer 150 euro contribution for travel**. While not sufficient to cover travel from other continents, this should be enough for those coming from nearby countries (low cost planes, trains, buses). **Please make it clear in the submission if you need some kind of support in case your paper is selected.**

Submission

Submissions should include a 300-400 word abstract and a short (2-3 sentences) biographical statement (longer will be disregarded and automatically rejected)

Send a single Word file to elio.dellamonica2@mail.dcu.ie and cc to abel.polese@dcu.ie and Jirayudh.S@chula.ac.th by 15 May 2025. We expect to send acceptance notices by May 25th.

Publication plans

Depending on the quality and focus of the papers, we plan to launch a call for a special issue of a journal or an edited book. Publication plans will be discussed at the wrap-up session in Bangkok.

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