

The political meaning of informal urbanization

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DOI

[10.4324/9781315645544-1](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645544-1)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

Published in

The Routledge Handbook on Informal Urbanization

Citation (APA)

Rocco, R., & Van Ballegooijen, J. (2018). The political meaning of informal urbanization. In R. Rocco, & J. van Ballegooijen (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on Informal Urbanization* Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645544-1>

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Routledge Handbook on Informal Urbanization: The Political Meaning of Informal Urbanization

Roberto Rocco¹ and Jan van Ballegooijen²

[Insert Figure 2.1 here]

Figure 2.1: Inhabitants of Ganesh Murthi Nagar, Mumbai, 2014. Photo: Roberto Rocco.

The winding road to democracy

Many countries in the Global South are relatively young democracies. The resilience and legitimacy of their political systems relies largely on their ability to integrate and represent millions of citizens who are ‘excluded’ from formal social, political, and economic structures. Exclusion from those formal structures has deep-reaching consequences and is reflected in the built environment, as many of the so-called excluded are also excluded from formal housing markets and must ‘help themselves’ in order to inhabit the city. They often build informal settlements, mostly characterized by insecurity of tenure, poor infrastructure, and lack of basic services, though in time, and mostly through public intervention, some of those neighbourhoods might develop into liveable places. We argue that democracy’s success depends not only on the ability of formal institutions to respond to the legitimate demands of its citizens. It also depends on how these citizens are able to enter the political realm in order to claim their rights. The toils of people struggling to inhabit the city have different consequences for their empowerment as citizens in different

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contexts. In this sense, informal urbanization is often a short-term, last-resort solution for the lack of affordable housing in developing countries, and it is simultaneously the mark of non-inclusive political systems and of a deficit of rights.

Alternatively, informal urbanization can be seen as a gateway to the realm of politics, a step towards the formulation of legitimate demands and may lead to the full enactment of citizens' rights. When disenfranchised rural immigrants arrive in the city, they must struggle for a place to live. In doing so, they have the opportunity to formulate legitimate demands and to start the long winding road towards full citizenship. If viewed positively, processes of informal urbanization can lead to an affirmation of civil and social rights, to the reinforcement of the rule of law, to the inclusion of citizens in democratic institutions and processes. But this road is not without accidents. The struggle for rights is often marked by initial exclusion, oppression, and violence.

This book investigates the mutual relationship between the struggle for political inclusion and processes of informal urbanization in different socio-political and cultural settings in 25 cities around the world. It tries to find a middle-ground between two opposing perspectives on the political meaning of urban informality. The first perspective, more critical, sees informality predominantly in terms of political exclusion, inequality and poverty. The second, the 'emancipatory perspective', frames urban informality as a practice that fosters autonomy, entrepreneurship, and social mobility. Should we see urban informality as a fertile breeding ground for bottom-up democracy and more political participation? Or is urban informality indeed merely the result of a democratic deficit caused by governing autocratic elites and ineffective bureaucracies?

Defenders of the emancipatory perspective are often anxious to heroicize the urban poor, because they want to highlight their legitimate struggle, industriousness, and entrepreneurship. In doing so, they expect to convince authorities to let the poor take their housing problems into their own hands and literally 'help themselves'. But by predominantly focusing on the positive aspects of urban informality, they lose their critical stance. Their position easily leads to the romanticization of poverty and to the discredit of governments.

On the other hand, academics, activists, and politicians who qualify urban informality mainly as a grave injustice often neglect the legitimate struggles of informal settlers, their ingenuity and perseverance to build their dwellings with very few resources. Their well-justified indignation can easily lead to paternalism. Over the past decades, the discourse on urban informality has moved between the pitfalls of paternalism on one side of the spectrum, to the romanticization of informality on the other.

We wish to posit here that, very often, there is a fundamental confusion between the right to help oneself (autonomy) and the legitimate claim for one's rights to be assisted by the State (citizenship) and between two types of rights we wish to explore further on: positive and negative rights. The framework of inclusion in the political realm and democratization provides the opportunity to avoid unrealistic stereotypes, such as 'the heroic self-help pioneer' or the 'vulnerable slum dweller' and paves the way to

understanding residents of informal settlements as citizens with rights and duties, struggling to be included in legitimate forms of political representation and participation.

Dressing residents of informal settlements with the cloak of citizenship gives them both the protection and dignity to enter the public realm. It also gives them legal instruments to claim their rights, despite of their poverty. The struggle for better housing could then also lead to political empowerment and integration into formal democratic institutions. This idea has been extensively explored by James Holston (Holston, 2008) and Teresa Caldeira (Caldeira and Holston, 2005, Caldeira, 2000). This book builds up on that theoretical framework.

The different cases studied in this book show that there are no easy answers to the questions we raised. Although access to shelter, sanitation, mobility, public space and healthy living environments is not in itself a benchmark for the success of the democratic experience, the absence of and exclusion from positive rights puts democracy in check.

Informal urbanization and architectural and planning practice

Since the early 2000s, there has been an increasing interest in urban informality in the Global South among Western urban scholars and practitioners. This interest in urban informality is not new; the structuralist planners and architects of the 1960s and 1970s were often interested in the phenomenon. The structuralists saw informal urbanization as a viable alternative to the rigid high-rise social housing blocks they saw emerging everywhere. They believed that the CIAM-inspired planning blueprints were ineffective, financially unsustainable and socially and aesthetically unappealing. These architects, planners, and scholars increasingly appreciated the vernacular qualities of self-constructed housing over post-war modernist housing projects. But after the structuralist movement came to an end, the interest in informal settlements also withered away among architects. Around 2000, 'starchitect' Rem Koolhaas was one of the influential voices to put this topic on the agenda once more. He had studied Lagos for several years and published parts of his fragmented research in his book *Mutations* (Koolhaas et al., 2001). Koolhaas' research was important because it reintroduced urban informality in the discourse of architects and urban designers in the West. What Koolhaas found in the chaotic city of Lagos was an unlikely model for Western cities. To quote Koolhaas (2001, p. 653): "Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we [the Western cities] are catching up with Lagos". Around the same time, in 1998, the Venezuelan architect Alfredo Brillembourg and the Austrian architect Hubert Klumpner founded the partnership Urban Think Tank. Brillembourg and Klumpner became leading figures in the discourse of urban design in regard to informal urbanization. In their work, informality is framed as an interesting "laboratory for the study of adaptation and innovation" where "flexibility is the common ground among these approaches, a model of organic development that challenges the assumption of traditional

Western planning that man controls his surroundings” (Brillembourg et al., 2005). These are only two examples of discourses being developed by architects in the West around the notion that informal urbanization is something we can learn from.

The idea that the informal city is a laboratory for urban development has now become generally accepted. As we have explored elsewhere (Ballegooijen and Rocco, 2013) this rather positive valuation of informal urbanization often comes with a strong distrust of governments and urban planning in general. Robert Neuwirth, an American journalist who lived in informal settlements in four continents, states in his book *Shadow Cities*; “The point is to look at the facts. Not one government in existence is successfully building for the poorest of the poor. So the poorest of the poor are building for themselves. That may not fit into any great ideological category, and it is certainly illegal according to current law. But it is sensible, patriotic, and worthy of a true citizen. (...) The legal instrument is not important” (Neuwirth, 2006, p. 301). In other words, urban planning and the rule of law have become redundant in face of the sheer volume of poor citizens who cannot have their spatial demands satisfied by formal institutions, such as governments or banks.

This critique on the role of governments is often accompanied by a critique on architects and urban planners, who are seen as accessories to the authorities. All this results in a preservationist attitude towards informal settlements. Discussing the Brazilian favela, Professor Paola Bernstein Jacques (2011) argued that architects and urban designers should make “subtle barely visible interventions, without real ‘architectonic works’”. Bernstein believes that it is necessary to “‘urbanize’ the neighborhoods and preserve the favela’s otherness at the same time, through a certain methodology of action (minimum intervention), in projects inspired by the favelas’ own aesthetics”.

Instead of embodying the counter-image of modernity as many have claimed in the past, the favela is now increasingly presented as an improbable future model for the modern metropolis. In short, favelas, barriadas, shanty towns or slums are being increasingly mystified as an ideal image of an anti-authoritarian, flexible, aesthetically desirable and perhaps unavoidable form of urbanization.

Although we do not disagree with some of these propositions, there are quite a few problems we wish to highlight. Ananya Roy, for instance, describes this phenomenon as ‘the aestheticization of poverty’ (2004, p. 302). This means that urban informality is understood disconnectedly from its political and economic circuits and is merely viewed as an aesthetic phenomenon. Urban informality is then framed as ‘vernacular’, ‘innocent’ and ‘authentic’. The problem with the aestheticization of urban informality is that housing problems are being depoliticized, and the injustice, hardship and political exclusion the urban poor face every day are being ignored. The mystification and romanticisation of informal urbanization needs a more critical approach. Understanding why slums and other kinds of informal urbanization emerge and what are their role and connections with the political realm in which they are inserted, seems crucial to us. This far exceeds the seemingly purely formal interest that many western architects and urban designers currently seem to have.

The role of informal settlements as a gateway to the city has been exhaustively discussed, notable in the book *Arrival City* by Doug Sanders (2011). There is little doubt that informal settlements are, in the absence of affordable housing, a solution for those who are coming to the city from impoverished or conflicted rural areas and need to set foot in the city and to start the long winding road towards civil rights. However, the fact that citizens must 'help themselves' indicates a democratic deficit in the first place. The problem becomes really acute when this precarious foothold in the city becomes a protracted and, in many cases, a permanent solution and citizens are trapped in cycles of poverty. The venerable Janice Perlman wrote one of the first in-depth account of life in Rio favelas in the 1960s and has recently revisited many of the people she originally interviewed to discover that, while the material lives of favelados had undoubtedly improved, marginalization endures (Perlman, 2010).

Consequences of illegality

It is fair to say that informal urbanization is, at some point in its inception, to a greater or lesser degree, illegal, at least viewed from the perspective of those in power. Insecurity of tenure not only makes informal homeowners vulnerable to forced evictions, it often makes it difficult to access resources, since local governments don't have the legal ground to invest in these neighborhoods.

More recently, the legal standing of informal settlers has improved in cities around the world, with the recognition of their rights as citizens. But the law in itself is not enough to ensure inclusion as the law is very often only selectively and sparsely applied. Illegality has serious consequences for the ability of citizens to claim their rights, and it also affects the conception of citizenship among illegal settlers themselves.

These civil and political consequences of illegality have been studied extensively by James Holston. Holston argues that the illegal status of people's dwellings subverted their civil rights in two ways. First, because the illegal status places residents "at the other side of the law", meaning that it "alienated citizens from law generally, diminishing their access to its rights and justice, undermining it [the law] as an institution of and for citizenship" (Holston, 2008, p. 113). As illegality becomes the norm—as is the case in many cities analyzed here—the law becomes merely an instrument to suppress instead of securing the liberties of residents. It is remarkable, however, that in places like São Paulo, Johannesburg, Quito and to a certain extent Medellín, Ankara, and Mashhad, citizens are able to use the law to force the authorities to comply and grant them rights. On the other hand, this book contains accounts of extreme examples where the law is explicitly used to suppress people's rights, such as Jerusalem and Ahmedabad.

The second reason Holston gives for why illegality subverts citizenship is that it "denied them [informal settlers] the civil standing that legitimate property ownership is conventionally understood to create" (Holston, 2008, p. 113). Despite the hard labor connected to self-constructed dwellings, informal settlers are often stigmatized as pirates

or criminals, partly because it is presumed that they have taken land unlawfully, do not pay taxes or because they are associated with crime and poverty.

It is important to emphasize that the illegal character of land ownership creates an unbalanced and unhealthy relationship between the authorities and informal settlers. This does not mean that governments are absent from some of these neighborhoods: sometimes local governments provide piped water, pave streets or even build schools. However, because people are illegally occupying land they have no legal rights to, they are hostages of the state, rather than rightful citizens, and must rely on the goodwill of politicians to continue to inhabit the places they have fought for. In short, they are effectively politically disempowered despite their endless struggles. This hostage situation has far-reaching consequences for the types of relationships established between the state and informal settlers. These relationships range from clientelism to oppression and disenfranchisement.

Another issue is that legality and illegality are often expressed in gradients. Many informal settlers obtain land through semi-fraudulent developers or swindlers with various degrees of legitimacy and must fight for legalization. The state not only determines what is legal and what's illegal: it also determines who gets punished for what, and overlooking illegality is one of the currencies used by the state to buy people's obedience. As long as they remain silent, informal settlers will be left alone, but they shouldn't dare complain about the poor infrastructure or the lack of basic services. Their illegal status de facto means that the state has the upper hand from the beginning. In most cases, it will 'tolerate' illegal settlements, but when wealthy developers come by and offer good money for the land, eviction, often violent and without compensation, will ensue, as the case of Fortaleza so patently illustrates.

The issue of legality is a central theme among informal settlers themselves. Informal settlers understand all too well that land and housing rights give them not only protection against forced evictions, they also provide them with social status (Holston, 2008, p. 174). One of the main consequences of illegality is the lack of access to formal mortgages and feasible ways to acquire a formal dwelling in the market, or the lack of access to alternative forms of landholding, such as community land trusts.

But the point we wish to make here is that, although we have naturalized the relationship between economic stand and access to housing, nothing in our systems of laws or in political theory says that the poor are lesser citizens, although this is certainly what they are in practice. In modern states, even in less democratic ones, once someone is recognized as a citizen, that person is under the same obligations and has the same rights as all other citizens. And yet, over and over again, states fail to grant the same land and housing rights to citizens because of their lack of economic capacity to acquire a mortgage, for example, or because of their lack of knowledge about the law and the lack of alternative ways of landholding. We know that the road to economic development is long and sinuous and it is maybe true that states lack the necessary wealth to grant inclusion to all, but at least in the Latin American case, this is not always the case. Following this idea, we emphasize human and civil rights as key concepts to understand and deal with informal urbanization.

Why rights?

What we need is a discourse that redefines in broadly accepted terms the relationship between informal settlers and the state, and we believe that the discourse of human rights does exactly that. Both instinctively and rationally, we understand that the language of rights is far superior to the language of needs, and to the idea of the state as a provider of services, because it recognizes citizens as active political actors, rather than passive recipients of services.

The discourse of rights brings dignity, self-awareness and justice into the debate. It could bring a new identity to informal settlers who, by the language of rights, are no longer mere victims of unpredictable economic forces or oppressive governments, but can also self-identify as bearers of rights.

Despite the fact that rights are always held individually, the notion of rights also brings the notion of being part of humanity, which in turn brings an aspect of fundamental dignity. “The basis for self-respect in a just society is not one’s income share, but the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties”, stated John Rawls in his seminal work *A theory of justice* (1971, p. 477). Effectuated human rights have the capacity to transform relationships between individuals, social groups, and the authorities in power. In the words of Iris Marion Young: “Rights are relationships, not things; they are institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to each other (1990, p. 25). Human rights theory could also be instrumental in redefining the role of those in power. In short, human rights can be used as a legal tool to enforce or to restrict certain action by those in power, such as examples in Brazil and South Africa suggest.

In order to discuss the roles of governments in relation to informal urbanization we find it useful to use Karel Vašák’s ideas. Vašák, a Czech-French jurist and the first Secretary-General of the International Institute of Human Rights, made a useful distinction positive and negative rights.

In the struggle for human and civil rights, negative rights are usually the first rights people strive for, according to Vašák. Some rights are negative because they offer groups or individuals the rights *not to be acted upon in a certain manner*. The right to freedom of speech is an example of a negative right. Or the right not ‘to be subjected to arbitrary interference with [one’s] privacy, family, home (...)’ as stated in article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights are negative “in the sense that their respect requires that the state *does nothing to interfere* with individual liberties” (Vašák, 1977, p. 29). Other examples of negative rights are the rights not to be tortured or subjected to arbitrary arrest. It is evident how this restriction on the power of the state is important in order to guarantee a certain amount of liberty and security for those living in informal settlements. Claiming negative rights of informal settlers could mean respect for their domestic realm; not to be subjected to police raids or forced evictions. Safeguarding the negative rights of inhabitants of informal settlements also means that we foster their much-praised autonomy, self-determination, free movement, and entrepreneurialism, however

difficult this may be in face of another right guaranteed in liberal democracies: property rights. It is in fact the friction between the negative rights of informal settlers and someone else's property rights that engenders most instances of illegality.

But equally important are 'second generation' rights: also called 'positive rights'. Contrary to negative rights, positive rights *require positive action* by the State (Vašak, 1977). Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is particularly important with regard to informal urbanization because it states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services (...)". This has obvious consequences for the roles that governments assign themselves and how citizens think about the role of governments, especially when it comes to urban planning, because of the obvious need to mediate conflict and rationally organize the use of space and resources that governments are thought to have, at least in theory. Different human rights documents do not explicitly state that the provision of housing is the sole responsibility of governments and many societies have a healthy mix of both free market and state sponsored housing provision, but the role of governments in regulating and facilitating access to dignified housing must be reasserted because of their monopoly over justice and juridical systems.

The hostility towards authorities is justifiably omnipresent in the discourse about urban informality, especially in face of inaction or inefficiency of governments to provide viable solutions. Informal settlers are often confronted with interference by authorities in the form of forced evictions, police violence, and corruption. We argue that the discourse of human rights – and also civil rights – could create new relations based on trust between inhabitants of informal settlements and governments. In order to improve those relationships a discourse of human rights would provide the legal framework that keeps authorities at a healthy distance in order to preserve the liberties and self-determination of citizens. But this can never be separated from a more engaged and proactive role of governments when it comes to the effectuation of positive rights.

The right to the city

It must be said that our take on rights is somewhat different from the much-praised concept of 'Right to the City', as first defined by Henri Lefèbvre in the 1960s and later revisited and popularized by David Harvey (2008). One possible interpretation sees the Right to the City as a concept aimed at restricting institutionalized planning, which is seen as nothing more than an instrument that guarantees the continuation of the naturalized oppression of the poor, by giving the power over the production of space 'back to the people'. Lefèbvre saw the city as an *oeuvre* in which citizens in their plurality ought to produce their own spaces as a collective. "The right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: rights to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participate and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city" (1996 [1968], p. 174).

Harvey's understanding of the Right to the City is comparable and derived from Lefèbvre: "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization" (Harvey, 2008, p.23). In the sense of 'collective power', the Right to the City has renewed and underscored a revolution in planning theory, in which communication and participation take center stage, while recognizing the protagonist role of collective action. In this sense, spatial planning becomes an enabling tool, rather than an instrument of oppression, albeit seldom applied.

There are however three reasons why we think the concept of the Right to the City needs to be revisited and reworked in the context of cities in the Global South. First, because it was conceived against the backdrop of increasing institutionalization and bureaucratization of planning systems in the West, in fact precisely the opposite of what we see in most cases studied in this book, where the problem is the near absence of rational planning. This brings us back to the friction between the role of planning as an instrument of oppression, largely documented in this book, and the role of planning and enabler of participation and instrument of redistribution. Secondly, the fact that the concept of the Right to the City is rather unknown outside the discourse of urban planning is also a weakness. The issues around urban informality touch upon a wide variety of problems, some related to planning, others to the rule of law, others to the political realm. The frame of human rights is therefore more likely to enable a multi-disciplinary approach. A third limitation lies in the fact that the Right to the City bears no legal status. Citizens cannot go to the courts and claim their Rights to the City, despite the inclusion of concepts inspired by, or derived from the Right to the City in some legal documents. The Brazilian Statute of the City (2001), for instance, puts forward the "right to sustainable cities, understood as the right to urban land, to housing, to sanitation, to urban infrastructure, to transport and to public services, to work and to leisure, for present and future generation" (Brazil, 2001, article 2, paragraph 1), but this bill is one of the few examples that translates the Right to the City into tangible instruments. The Right to the City in the work of Lefebvre and Harvey is a more political-philosophical than a legal tool that can directly impact the legal system in most countries (Fernandes, 2007, p. 208).

It would be mistaken to argue that the positive rights of informal settlers are completely overlooked in discourses about urban informality today. However, we signalize an overemphasis on negative rights, meaning an undervaluation or even rejection of the active role the state and of planning institutions. This undervaluation of the role of the state often has its origins in former violations of negative rights of squatters, such as forced evictions, and in the perception that governments are acutely inefficient in delivering or facilitating access to dignified housing. But part of this argumentation of the political left is now taken over by the liberal right, who also wishes to reduce the influence of the state in order to increase free market policy. Urban scientists and informal settlers themselves have ample reason to doubt the active participation of the state in urban planning and slum upgrading. But we wonder whether this is a reason to dismiss state planning and coordinated societal action entirely. Most importantly, if bad governments are notoriously inefficient in

providing adequate housing to their populations, does that mean that good government would be equally inefficient? This is not what we have observed in post war Europe and several examples in the East, such as the case of Seoul analyzed here.

If citizens want to benefit fully from their citizenship rights—including the right to adequate housing, a healthy environment, and basic infrastructure—a significant increase in state action is necessary in order to realize the positive rights for informal settlers. Positive rights—social, economic and cultural—can only happen following coordinated collective action, which means that the role of the state is still crucial, especially in its role as coordinator and facilitator of a myriad of actors working simultaneously.

In summary, the distinction between positive and negative rights helps us define the role of the state and institutions with regard to the accomplishment of citizenship rights. This role should be passive when it comes to the respect for the negative rights of citizens, and active when it comes to the execution of the citizens' positive rights.

In this way, do the struggles of citizens who resource to 'self-help' point towards the quest for negative rights? Do citizens want to be 'left alone' to fend for themselves the best they can in the absence of effective governments? Or do they yearn for state action? What special circumstances make it possible for inhabitants to ascend socially and to organize themselves in order to achieve some sort of inclusion? These questions triggered this investigation and this book, in which we attempt to address the political meaning of informal urbanization.

Despite the unequal distribution of access to funding and basic infrastructure, one should not overlook positive aspects of the process of auto-construction or self-help, namely that the economically disenfranchised are able to acquire physical possessions in the form of a dwelling. Dwellings are far more than a necessity of life, or a roof over one's head; they are also a representation of people's social and economic emancipation. By overcoming difficulties people face in everyday life, they are capable of building entire neighborhoods outside the legal and relatively well-equipped city centers of their cities. Homeownership or other forms of landholding and dignified housing increases their self-confidence and become also a symbol of their social status.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the quests and demands of informal dwellers are the same everywhere. In the Brazilian case, for instance, the rhetoric of the 'right to rights' movement was, according to Holston (2009), extremely successful because of two factors. In the first place, the discourse included issues of illegality and marginalization within a discourse of dignity and the rule of law. Members of social movements were participating in the public sphere as "legitimate bearers of rights". Secondly, and more importantly, Holston points out that the whole perception on Brazilian citizenship rights shifted. In the past, full citizenship rights had always been a privilege of the elites. From the 1970s on, rights were necessarily rights for all, at least in theory, and despite the fact that this had not been accomplished in practice.

These arguments bring us back to our original plea: informal urbanization cannot be a model for urbanization and citizenship in modern democracies, because there the rule of law must encompass all. Although the plea of the dispossessed offers ample motive to

suspend the rule of law in exceptional cases in order to allow informal settlers to achieve some dignity, it is impossible to live in a society where the rule of law is indefinitely applied in a selective way, because of the erosion in democratic institutions this state of affairs would inevitably bring. By discussing the trajectory of struggle for rights in connection to informal urbanization, we expect to demystify informal urbanization as something to be emulated. We understand that Western designers and planners are fascinated by ideas of self-determination, entrepreneurialism, and formal freedom, but their fascination leaves out the political and economic drivers of informal urbanization. Their enchantment with the communal life they see in informal settlements is partly justified, but we wonder whether their dissatisfaction with the modern planned city has other roots.

This brings us back to the never-ending debate on what urban informality actually is, and the issue of how informal urbanization is part of how societies organize their political economies. Informal urbanization, in this book, is the spatial expression of exclusion from citizenship, but it is not necessarily exclusion from the main modes of production of urban space.

Final Remarks

In most cases analyzed in the 24 cities presented in this book, citizens choose a tactical approach to citizenship and rights, preferring to negotiate with the state through a game of political trade-offs, rather than open confrontation. Rather than achieving widespread societal change, social movements often demobilize or disband once their immediate needs are satisfied. As several authors have asserted, it is rather through their presence in the city that citizens achieve some sort of inclusion, despite the actions of the state to exclude, delegitimize and render them invisible. This presence is rooted in the houses and shacks that they so laboriously build, and which, given the opportunity and security of tenure, they will improve over time. In some cases, informal settlers are openly instrumentalized for their political support, often treated as clients of the state, with whom the state must make trade-offs rather than grant rights. In any case, there are very few exceptions where citizens were able to influence the state, through the writing of new laws, for example. As a rule of thumb, informal settlers have continued to be clients or dependents of the state, if not victims of it, because the structural conditions that created informality in the first place persist. The case of Korea stands out because structural change meant that informal urbanization subsided and there was a substantial gain in terms of rights.

One policy maker cited in this book asks, perhaps not entirely rhetorically, “where do all these people come from?” pointing at governments’ sheer unpreparedness to face the challenges of rapid urbanization in the Global South. In fact, this is an argument often made: governments in the Global South are not able or capacitated to provide housing for the sheer number of people migrating from rural areas to cities. We are sure there is a good measure of truth in this assertion, but nothing really explains the surprise and disinformation that characterizes governments all over the world in regard to explosive

urban growth and ensuing informal urbanization. Governments lack planning capacity, funds, political will, and insight. Scarcity of resources seems to be only one of the factors leading to housing deficits and self-reliance in housing provision. We have come to the conclusion that the question opening this paragraph was not rhetorical: policymakers all over the world are truly unprepared to understand and deal with the dramatic demographic transition that characterizes our times. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, for instance, recognizes that “these informal settlements are caused by low income, unrealistic urban planning, lack of serviced land, lack of social housing, and a dysfunctional legal system” (Fernandes, 2011).

In summary, we believe that a dangerous combination of unpreparedness, denial, ignorance and a strong ideological component, related to how political elites see the role of the state as a provider of public goods and positive rights, is at play. Other issues, such as racism, bias, and prejudice cannot be discounted, but we have little empirical evidence to support these claims. In short, the collection of articles in this book seems to point to a much complex reality, in which the state selectively includes or excludes groups of people depending on the power they yield in the political process and the local societal model being adopted.

In order to explore these issues, this book displays a wide variety of political practices and narratives around these positions. The following chapters investigate how processes of urbanization are politicized in countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southern Europe. Through accounts on 24 cities in the Global South written by scholars familiar with the cases (often local scholars working in the cities analyzed), we have access to unique insight on how informal urbanization can be interpreted in different contexts. The extreme urban environments under scrutiny are likely to be the new laboratories of 21st century democracy.

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