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Conceptualizing Informity

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## Conceptualizing Informity

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### Abstract

This paper is intended to be an introduction for a series of investigations of *Informality* in the Egyptian socio-political context. I argue that such investigations require a conceptualization of informality that goes beyond a simple negation of Formality. Conceptualizing Informality in its own right is blocked by limiting its scope, the blindness created by the negativity and dependence of its definitions, and its exclusion from the conceptual space. On the other hand the significance of informality in the Egyptian social context, proved by the extents of its main and most visible manifestations, i.e. informal economy, and informal housing, means that the better we understand informality in its own right, the better understanding we might obtain of the contemporary Egyptian society. For conceptualizing informality in its own right, I argue that we need to think of it as a subterranean mode of living underneath modernity. Starting from there this paper outlines the theoretical problematic of *Informality*. I first start with explaining my understanding of both *Modernity*, and *mode of living*. The way I use both concepts is crucial for setting up the theoretical space within which the conceptualization of *Informality* takes place. Next I take up the main characteristics of Modernity as a mode or living, investigating through them the ever moving frontier lines, both separating, and linking *Formality*, and *Informality*. I conclude with explaining how this process of conceptualizing Informality can help obtain both a better understanding of the contemporary Egyptian society, and a practical approach to a political praxis that exploits the opportunities Informality offers for social and political change, while alleviating the impact of the resistance to change potentially embedded in some institutions, structures, and power practices of the informal social space. These concluding remarks will form the framework for further investigations of which the last section will also provide a suggested outline.

### Introduction

This paper is intended to be an introduction for a series of investigations of *Informality* in the Egyptian socio-political context. The project of these investigations has grown out of a simple-looking suggestion of a paper dealing with informal housing, resistance, and alternative survival strategies. Exploring the literature on informal housing whether on a global scale, in specific regions and



July 10, 2019

countries, and in Egypt, I came to realize that though rich and diversified only a very small proportion of that literature has studied informal housing within a more comprehensive conception of *Informality* as a mode of social, economic, and political practices. It occurred to me that lacking such context, a study of informal housing in Egypt that tries to link it to social/political resistance or to strategies of survival will be limited to repeating the findings of many studies before. It is not however just a quest for novelty that motivates me here. Besides being dispersed and isolated, studies of the different manifestations of informality tend to portray them as different social responses to the failure of formal institutions, thus they are deviations from what is supposed to be if these institutions did their jobs well. If any concept of *Informality* can be deduced from this prevalent view it will be nothing more than an attribute characterizing disparate phenomena with no content in itself. I however believe that there is much more to Informality than just that.

First, there is the scope of informal practices. Given the prevalent definition of the informal as that which do not comply with state laws and regulations, there escapes from observance a large number of relations and practices that the state simply does not care to regulate, and by lacking such regulation still qualify as informal. For example Jacques Charmes counts besides informal economic activities “the role of social capital in societies where public social transfers are lacking and the hidden contribution of women to the household well- being through their unpaid care work.” (Charmes, 2019, p.3) Neither social capital based transactions nor women unpaid care work has ever been on the State’s agenda, and consequently they were ignored by most informal economy studies. The State however is not the only source of formalization in a modern society. A great number of actors: institutions, groups, and even individuals with some sort of authority or influence in their fields, practice formalization expanding the space of formality and accordingly rendering more practices outside that space as informal.

Second, there is the blindness created by the inevitable negativity; hence, the dependence of the definitions of the informal. The informal is always defined in terms of the regulations it fails to comply with. Hidden from sight remains any aspect, attribute, or characteristic of the informal that can’t be recognized as the opposite, or absence of a counterpart that belong to the formal. However, if we think of the informal as that which needs to perpetuate itself in absence of the guarantees and protection of an enforceable regulation, we can imagine that it will develop a number of attributes, and characteristics that help fulfill that need. Some of these attributes may have counterparts

July 10, 2019

belonging to the formal, but they won't be in an opposite or absence relations to them, besides some will sure have no counterparts belonging to the formal.

Third, there is the exclusion from what we might call the conceptual space. While both formality and the processes of formalization have attracted much theoretical attention, little was directed to informality, especially in its own right, i.e. as more than a space where the deviant from the formal resides. Still, formality studies are essential as a departure point. They help situate informality within the conceptual space, providing pointers to the main concepts that a conceptualization of informality can be outlined by investigating its relations to them. These concepts are the ones that formality is usually conceptualized in their contexts, such as Modernity, Rationality, and rationalization, the State, institutionality and institutionalization, etc.

How beneficial a conceptualization of Informality might be in the Egyptian context? The answer should depend on the significance of informality in the Egyptian social life. There is a wealth of academic studies, institutional reports, media features, etc. that deal with informality in Egypt. Most of these are contextual, i.e. they deal with formality almost exclusively in the context of either the economy or the urban environment. The focus on these two areas is justifiable by the extent, the visibility, and the tangible impact of informality in each of them. It is both beneficial, and justifiable to use them for a preliminary assessment of the significance of informality in the Egyptian social life. In the following I only extract numbers indicating the lower and upper limits of the estimated sizes of informality in both urban and economic environments.

In 2016, it was estimated that 70% of Egypt's households live in In- formal Settlements, based on the fact of having insecure tenure of their dwellings.(Tooba, [2016](#)) As per the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, informal settlements are "residential areas where in- habitants have no formal ownership or lease agreement vis-à-vis the land and/or dwellings they inhabit."(UN-SRH, [2018](#), p.1) Using these estimates the report concludes that about 58.8 million Egyptians live in informal settlements. However, using the figures of the Ministry of Local Development, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) reports that 15 million people live in 1,171 informal areas.(UN-Habitat, [2016](#), p.4) The two different figures reflect different purposes for defining informality in the urban context. However, both figures are huge enough to prove urban informality to be a significant phenomenon in Egyptian cities, especially in Greater Cairo.

July 10, 2019

The figures for the informal economy might be less disparate. In a report for the World Bank it was estimated that 'Shadow Economy' represented 33.5% of Egypt's GDP in 2009.(Schneider, Buehn, and Montenegro, [2010](#), p.19) However, by the end of last year (2018) Egypt's central bank's deputy governor Gamal Negm has reportedly told a financial technology conference in Abu Dhabi that the informal sector accounted for 40 to 50 percent of GDP.(Reuters, [2018](#)) Once again these two different figures might simply be the result of the decade separating them, or they may also reflect different approaches for defining informality in the context of the economy. However, what matters for now is the weight of these figures and their significance.

It is by no means an exaggeration to say that economic activities together with the built and social environments of residence encompass almost the entirety of most people lives, other aspects of such lives being almost all the time mediated through either one, or both. So it is justifiable to say that the figures we mentioned earlier indicate a significant weight of informality in the Egyptian social life. However, it is my contention that the significance of informality in Egyptian society goes far beyond its manifestations in the economy and the urban environments. I mean to argue that informality is a subterranean mode of living that is shaping the contemporary Egyptian culture and society. By mode of living I mean a mode of conducting social practices of oneself and/or others. The overall globally prevalent mode of living in the present is what we may call Modernity. The main characteristics of Modernity as a mode of living are state enacted or mediated rationality and institutionality; law-based and contractual normativity and legality; and individuating, population-oriented disciplinary, and bio-power practices. These characteristics form, through acts of formalization, the milieu in which human beings in the modern era practice their social existence, thus requiring them to fill in the gaps which these acts of formalization have left either through disinterest, or failure to attain sustainability. Informality is both structured by, and structuring the social practices filling in these gaps.

As an introduction this paper outlines the theoretical problematic of Informality. I first start with explaining my understanding of both Modernity, and mode of living. The way I use both concepts is crucial for setting up the theoretical space within which the conceptualization of Informality takes place. Next I take up the main characteristics of Modernity as a mode of living, investigating through them the ever moving frontier lines, both separating, and linking Formality, and Informality. I conclude with explaining how this process of conceptualizing Informality can help obtain both a better understanding of the contemporary Egyptian society, and a practical approach to a political praxis

July 10, 2019

that exploits the opportunities Informality offers for social and political change, while alleviating the impact of the resistance to change potentially embedded in some institutions, structures, and power practices of the informal social space. These concluding remarks will form the framework for further investigations of which the last section will also provide a suggested outline.

## Modernity as a Mode of Living

### 1- Foucault, and the conduct of conducts

In the introduction I offered a rather cryptic explanation of what I mean by a *mode of living*, that is 'a mode of *conducting* social practices of oneself and/or others.' By using the term *conducting* here I refer to the way Michel Foucault used it. (Foucault, [2009](#), p. 193) In his lengthy discussion of the term Foucault defines it as follows:

Conduct is the activity of conducting (*conduire*), of conduction (*la con- duction*) if you like, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (*se conduit*), lets oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*), and finally, in which one behaves (*se comporter*) under the influence of a conduct as the action of conducting or of conduction (*conduction*).

This "equivocal nature of the term *conduct*," Foucault argues several years later, "is one of the best aids for coming to terms with the specificity of power relations. To *conduct* is at the same time to *lead* others (according to mechanisms of coercion that are, to varying degrees, strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power is a *conduct of conducts* and a management of possibilities." (Foucault, [1997](#), p. 341)

Foucault goes on to argue that power is "a question of *government*," in the broad sense the term used to have in the seventeenth century, i.e. as designating "the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed— the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It covered not only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people." ([ibid.](#), p. 341)

So to develop what I mean by a *mode of living* a step further, as far as I follow Foucault in the above mentioned insights; it is a mode of both con- ducting oneself (i.e. behaving) within a field of

July 10, 2019

possibilities structured partly by others' practices of power, and conducting others' conduct by practicing power, i.e. by acting on this same field of possibilities.

What characterizes Modernity on the side of the exercise of power, according to Foucault, is the prevalence of two of what he calls *technologies of power*. The first, i.e. Disciplinary power, is characteristic of early Modernity, and acts mainly on individuals, and their bodies in particular. It works by articulating space and time, organizing activities, subjecting bodies to observation, monitoring, and surveillance, categorizing, and ordering individuals through testing, examination, and setting a normal as a scale of measure. Discipline is more visible in institutions like the army, the school, the factory, and the prison, however, Foucault argues that "one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social 'quarantine', to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of *panopticism*." (Foucault, [1995](#), p. 216)

The second technology of power, i.e. bio-power, is characteristic of late Modernity. By the term bio-power, Foucault explains, he meant "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species." (Foucault, [2009](#), p. 1) Rather than working on individuals, bio-power mechanisms work on *populations*, represented by statistical data that reflect different social phenomena. The mechanisms of bio-power set up policies aimed at maximizing what is deemed favorable and minimizing what is deemed harmful of these phenomena, measuring the success of these policies by achieving as much of their objectives in a cost effective manner.

There is of course much more to be said of the Foucauldian concept of conduct and mentioned technologies of power, but for the purposes of this discussion there are only two points to be mentioned here: the coupling of power/knowledge manifested in both disciplinary power and bio-power, and the concept of counter-conduct.

In coupling power/knowledge, Foucault has envisaged a mutual relation in which "[t]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power." (Foucault, [1997](#), p. xvi) According to Foucault this mutual relation of power/knowledge is not in itself an innovation of Modernity, though indeed through technologies of power like discipline



July 10, 2019

and bio-power, it has been greatly intensified, and thus has more pronounced effects. More importantly, the new technologies of power, through practices of methodical observation, monitoring, surveillance, and keeping records, was contributing to the creation of the kind of knowledge we call *scientific*. On the other hand this involvement of technologies of power with the systematic production of knowledge had the effect of creating a feeling of an ongoing process of rationalization of power practices and, through them, of social life in general. We may here take the famous statement of Max Weber, "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the *disenchantment of the world*," (Weber et al., [2004](#), p. 30) as reflecting how a man of the modern times thinks of his time rather than as a diagnosis of a sociologist.

We may here make our first trial of defining Modernity as a mode of living based on the above discussion. We might say then that Modernity, as a mode of living, is the mode of both conducting oneself within a field of possibilities structured partly by rational and rationalizing, disciplinary and life oriented practices of power, and conducting the conducts of others through using the same rational and rationalizing disciplinary and life oriented practices of power.

We may also begin establishing a connection between Modernity as a mode of living as above defined and *Formality*. But first we need a working definition of *Formality*, and for this purpose we may begin by saying that *Formality of a structure, a procedure, or a relation, is the state of being regular, regulative and impersonal*. It is obvious that both disciplinary power and bio-power require regularity of structures, procedures and relations. Such structures, procedures, and relations are in turn regulative of the conduct of subjects caught in them. Moreover, while discipline works on individuals and their bodies, it is clearly an impersonalizing power. The case for the impersonality of bio-power is even more obvious. If we accept that Modernity as a mode of living is dependent on disciplinary power and biopower practices, it might even be justifiable to say that "the persistence of modern societies depends on a great variety of formal structures such as formal organizations and formal rules, which organize collective life and guide individual actions." (Mica, Winczorek, and Wiśniewski, [2015](#), p. 9)

There is still something that needs to be emphasized here. For a structure, a procedure, or a relation to be regular, it has to be applied regularly; to be regulative, compliance to its regulation must be enforced; and finally to be impersonal it has to be applied universally. There is nothing about a structure, a procedure, or a relation that is intrinsically formal. They are formalized, by regulation,



July 10, 2019

enforcement, and impersonalization. If formality characterizes Modernity it is because as mode of living, its prevalent technologies of power structuring its field of possibilities are formalizing ones.

## 2- Bourdieu, the habitus and social fields

In the preface to *Practical Reason*, Bourdieu sums up what he believes to be most essential about his work, in being both a relational philosophy of science, and a philosophy of action that is "condensed in a small number of fundamental concepts - habitus, field, capital - and its cornerstone is the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (that of the habitus)." (Bourdieu, [1998](#), p. viii)

Being relational, the concepts of Bourdieu's "philosophy of action" can't be grasped separately, as each of them is defined in terms of the others. This is why it was important to start with the above summary introduced by Bourdieu himself as for what his work is all about. As cryptic as this summary might seem now it will help connect the different parts of the social world as defined by his concepts as we introduce them one by one.

Let's start with the concept of *capital*. For Bourdieu "Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its *incorporated*, embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor." (Bourdieu, [2002](#), p. 15) This doesn't seem different from a Marxian or to be precise a Ricardian definition of capital. Still Bourdieu goes on to say "It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory." ([ibid.](#), p.15) It sure seems contradictory that Bourdieu offers a definition of capital that seems identical to that offered by economic theory only to claim a few paragraphs later that the one form of capital recognized by this theory can't be the only one. This apparent contradiction can be resolved if we recall the fact that not all labor is rewarded with economic capital, or at least not fully or directly rewarded with economic capital; the labor of an artist, academic researcher, or an environmental activist. Such labor is then either not fully rewarded at all, or it is rewarded in some other form of capital. It is Bourdieu's argument that while it is the first answer that most practitioners of what we call *cultural activities* along with other activities claiming disinterestedness, cling to, the second answer is actually the right one. To fully understand this argument we need to think of forms of capital as similar to the points scored in a game. Such

July 10, 2019

points are by no means economic currency, however; players immersed in the game fight fiercely to collect them. It is justifiable to say that the players have game specific *interest* in accumulating these points. As Bourdieu defines it "interest is to *be there*, to participate, to admit that the game is worth playing and that the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognize the game and to recognize its stakes." (Bourdieu, [1998](#), p. 77)

It is only within a specific *game* that the accumulation of a specific *species* of capital can be of interest for *players* immersed in that game. It is not by chance that Bourdieu often uses the analogy the game to express how he understands a *field* which another central concepts of his work. Examples of social fields are: the economic field, the political field, the bureaucratic field, the religious field, and the academic field. In Bourdieu's words, "a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)." (Bourdieu and Wacquant, [1992](#), p.97) Let's try to unfold this rather convoluted definition from the inside out. It is around a number of species of capital that a field is first defined and constructed (theoretically, let's never forget that). The accumulation of these species of capital allows access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field; e.g. number of papers an academic researcher has published in recognized journals allows him access to professorship position in a university, which in turn adds to his accumulated capital of academic status. The distribution among agents and institutions of such species of capital of interest within a field has a structure combining with different weights these different species of capital. How much funds a university can depend on receiving, how it ranked in such and such recognized list, how many of its graduates hold positions of power within the government, business, or industry. Weights of different species of capital within this structure might differ from time to time, thus it is their combination that allocates an agent or an institution to a specific position within the field. These positions are *objectively* defined, i.e. independent of the agent or institution that happens to occupy any of them. They relate to, or oppose each other in objective relations whose network defines a social space, or a field. It is important to notice that according to Bourdieu "what exist in the social world are relations— not interactions between agents or

July 10, 2019

intersubjective ties between individuals, but objective relations which exist *independently of individual consciousness and will*, as Marx said." (Bourdieu and Wacquant, [1992](#), p.97)

We may now turn our attention to the third main concept in Bourdieu's work, the habitus. Habitus are systems of *dispositions*, produced by "a particular class of conditions of existence." they function "as principles which generate and organize practices and representations," with the effect that these practices and representations "can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them." Moreover, these practices and representations being "objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor." (Bourdieu, [1990](#), p. 53) Rather than trying to unfold this definition in the way we did with Bourdieu's definition of the field, I will venture here into translating it into the language I used to define the mode of living in the previous section. Besides, hopefully making the definition of habitus more accessible this may also provide us with a start of combining the insights of both Foucault and Bourdieu into a more satisfactory definition of Modernity as a mode of living. We may justifiably say that a habitus is a mode (constituted of "durable and transposable dispositions") of conducting oneself (practices and representations), within a space of possibilities (a social space defined by a particular class of conditions of existence). The habitus, being a product of the "particular class of conditions of existence", generates and organizes practices and representations adapted to their outcomes, as these outcomes belong to the space of possibilities that is defined by the same class of conditions of existence.

Conducting others takes place within specific fields, and ultimately in the field of power (the overarching field where agents and institutions dominant in their respective fields vie for dominating the whole social space through dominating the state (Bourdieu, [1996](#), p. 264). There an agent occupies a position that places him in objective relations (that is relations of power) allowing him to act on the space of possibilities through changing the class of the conditions of existence defining it. The mode of this conduction of others is the same as the mode of conducting oneself, as practicing power is just another practice, generated and organized by the habitus.

According to Bourdieu, modern societies are characterized by the differentiation and autonomization of social fields. As fields are defined by objective relations, their differentiation implies a process of objectification of what used to be subjective relations and the creation of other objective ones, thus

July 10, 2019

impersonalizing positions occupied by agents and institutions. Moreover, Bourdieu states that "a field . . . follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified." (Bourdieu and Wacquant, [1992](#), p.97) We may say then that a field is formed of a network of impersonal (objective) relations among impersonal (objective) positions governed by regularities. Thus, both a field's formation (differentiation) and workings imply continuous processes of formalization. If Modernity is indeed characterized by the differentiation of fields it follows that it is characterized by the generation of Formality.

## Conclusion

In this first part of the paper, I started developing the theoretical framework for conceptualizing informality. The purpose here was to locate Formality within a space of concepts and examining how it fits within it. I used the concept of *mode of living* as a descriptive template for combining the different concepts. Two approaches were used for defining Modernity as a mode of living, using first Foucault's concepts of conduct, disciplinary power, and bio- power, then secondly using Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, and habitus. Both groups of concepts were merged through the template of *mode of living* concept.

In the second part, I will further develop this theoretical framework by establishing the conditions of generation of *Informality* within Modernity as a mode of living. I will conclude the paper with a conceptualization of Informality as a subterranean mode of living in its own, thus outlining a theoretical framework for further investigation of informality in the Egyptian social space, which will be carried out in coming papers.

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July 10, 2019

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July 10, 2019

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