

Call for Papers: Capitalism and Informality

Submission deadline: 15 September 2022

Conference dates: 14–15 April 2023

The Menard Family George Washington Forum (GWF), which has its home at Ohio University, invites paper proposals for a conference and subsequent special journal issue on the capitalism and informality. The conference will be held at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, on 14 and 15 April 2022. Plenary lectures will be delivered by Kellee Tsai (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), Frederike Welter (Institut für Mittelstandsforschung (IfM) Bonn) and Justin Webb (University of North Carolina at Charlotte).

More than a half-century of developmental discourse has portrayed informality as a signal of economic “backwardness”. From the writings of Max Weber to those of Clifford Geertz, Keith Hart, and Alfred Chandler, social scientific theories have suggested that as economies modernize, hierarchical and rationalized forms of economic organization will displace the “unorganized, unincorporated enterprises” and anomic agents of the informal economy. However, contrary to such predictions, informality remains the global norm. The informal economy continues to comprise at least half of all enterprises, a sizable majority of all jobs, and as much as 20 percent of gross domestic product in developed economies and 60 percent in emerging markets.

A recent generation of scholarship has begun to challenge the idea of the informal economy as a “little people’s alternative” — a static realm of simple, disorganized activity that exists outside of history. Studies have shown that, across different societal contexts, participation in the informal economy is driven by opportunity as well as by necessity, informal organizations can also be structured and hierarchical, and informal entrepreneurship can play a powerful role in the reshaping of institutions. Scholars have also highlighted the interdependency of formal and informal economies. Informal enterprises and workers continue to supply critical labor, goods, and services that are used across the formal economy

and most are intrinsically linked to formal firms. The informal economy is even facilitating the rise of new industries and new economic forms: artificial intelligence systems depend on “ghost laborers” to code the big data from which AI learns; offshore financial centers rely upon informal networks to arrive at understandings of acceptable practices; and sharing economies operate efficiently because of the services of informal middlemen. The informal thus remains inextricably interwoven with even the most modern elements of economies.

This conference will examine the persistence of informal economies and their relationship with economic transformation. It will explore how informal economies have developed complex organizational structures, have co-evolved in tandem with new industries and modes of production, and have shaped the broader economic and social contexts in which they are embedded.

The conference explicitly aims to bring together a diverse group of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds who work on a range of societal contexts. We especially welcome contributions from anthropological, sociological, historical, and managerial perspectives. Examples of relevant topics include:

- The socio-cultural construction of formal/informal boundaries and their evolution over time
- The structure of organizations and enterprises in the informal economy, both contemporary and historical
- Processes of informal economic organization
- Informal innovation (i.e. the novel recombination of labor, capital, and knowledge in the informal economy)
- Interactions between informal enterprises and the formal economy
- Informal economies in post-socialist and post-colonial contexts and their relationship to economic transition
- The role informal organizations play in the rise of new industries and sectors (e.g. digital economy) as well as the functioning of old ones (e.g. finance, real estate, manufacturing)
- Governance and policymaking related to informal economy

Limited funds will be made available to participants to offset the costs of travel and lodgings.

Expectations

The purpose of the conference is to collect and workshop a series of papers that will potentially contribute to a future special issue. The special issue call will be open and competitive.

To apply, please send an abstract (no more than 500 words) of your prospective paper to the conference organizer, Adam Frost (af.mpp@cbs.dk), and to Robert G. Ingram (ingramr@ohio.edu) by 15 September 2022.

Participants will be expected to produce a full draft of the article to be disseminated to all other participants one month prior to the conference (15 March 2023).