

SPOTLIGHT ON MIGRATION

People's Pantry and creating inclusive spaces for migrants during the pandemic

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for migrants during the pandemic**

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In the realm of informality

Coronavirus, similar to and yet different from other modern shocks, strips individuals, communities and societies of their stability. The shock manifests itself differently on each of these scales and on each individual's intersection of factors. Nevertheless, it always disturbs the sense of predictability.

Certain degrees of stability and repetitiveness are inherent features of social spaces, whether these are conceptualised as a system (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2000; Saunders, 2011), as space produced by social occurrences (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989), spaces of flows (Castells, 2008) or otherwise. From each stance respectively, shocks add new causalities to a system producing new feedback loops; reshape lived spaces questioning the conceived spaces; and redirect the existing flows, often forcing new flows to form, both among the existing and the newly emerged nodes.

This essay aims at showing that despite the systemic macro-scale adjustments (government interventions, new policies, formal economy reconstruction), informality is often the fastest, the 'first to kick-in' mode of upholding resilience in social spaces. At the same time, the current pandemic paves the way for exposing communities in the Global North to some of the conditions mostly attributed to the economies of the Global South, namely the lack of financial capital and the abundance of the labour force, often left idle. That leads to new spaces emerging, such as the Toronto-based self-help organisation, People's Pantry, which skilfully employ the precarious conditions to build resilience while simultaneously (deliberately or not) offering alternatives to the efficiency-focused, market economy of the city. Moreover, such conditions might create new spaces of inclusion for new-coming migrants by 1) increasing the importance of community-focused activities and 2) giving more credit to arrangements based on low- and semi-skilled tasks often attributed to migrants.

The emergence of People's Pantry would not be possible without informality (Rigg, 2007), which is not simply a 'lack of formal arrangements' but an active alternative — a self-organising feature of the social system where potential resilience is the function of the system's complexity. In other words, the more complex and diverse the system, the more ways it can organise itself and react to exogenous shocks (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2000).

In this essay, I argue that such urban informality (in this case, exemplified by self-help groups), reinstalled in the cities of the North during a pandemic, is a possible 'mode of entry' for migrants to join broader communities in their new homeland. I draw that hopeful conclusion from my own observations as a People's Pantry volunteer and also as a recently arrived migrant who landed in Toronto just three weeks before the pandemic.

Informality, meaning what?

Informality is a mode of functioning of social spaces (for example, regarding the labour market, housing, family/ownership/inheritance rules, money lending, supply chains, communal activities, etc.) based on arrangements made by actors (individual, communal, etc.) without formalised, codified structures in a Western sense (Rigg, 2007) and, in most cases, without the recourse to the structures of the state. It does not exclude the existence of the formal sphere in the given space. It often compliments it and functions simultaneously to it. The formal/informal 'yin and yang' permeate social structures fluctuating over time and space. In some cases, informality can 'take over' social arrangements — especially in the aftermath of shocks.

Informality is predominantly attributed to the Global South, and indeed, in the South, it often plays a crucial role when it comes to the everyday economy, transport, housing, labour market and many other spaces (Rigg, 2007; Miller et al., 2009). However, it should not, by any chance, be perceived as inferior to the formal economy. They can function simultaneously, often linked with salient mutual cause and effect relations.

Informality is also a mode of entry into urban reality. Over one hundred thousand rural migrants arrive in cities throughout the Global South every day (UN ESCAP, 2014). Statistical evidence shows clearly that urban-rural movement in the South largely exceeds South-North movement overall (IOM, 2015). My own research in slum areas of Yogyakarta, Indonesia and Accra, Ghana, confirms that for people with limited initial financial and social capital, informal arrangements of urban reality become a chance of getting their foot in the door (2018, 2019). Consequently, if informality re-enters urban spaces of the North, it can facilitate new forms of migrants' participation in the cities of the North.

People's Pantry as an informal response to the crisis

Regarding the occurrences of informality as a community's reaction to a shock in the Global North, namely the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto, People's Pantry is introduced. The anecdotal evidence informing this essay was collected during my daily activities as a People's Pantry volunteer lasting from March to mid-July 2020.

People's Pantry Facebook page describes: "We are a volunteer initiative dedicated to safely providing and delivering cooked meals and grocery packages to folks who have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These communities include low-income and working-class families, QT/BIPOC, precariously-housed folks, those living with illness and disabilities, and the elderly" (People's Pantry, 2020).

There is a group of coordinators who manage the delivery system using online tools (google docs) with names and addresses of people in need, the times of the food pick-ups, and other details. Deliverers - both drivers and cyclists - fill in their data and phone numbers next to the orders they are interested in taking. People's Pantry cooperates with other informal groups such as Toronto Bike Brigade or East York Food Coalition. Each of these has its own list, spread using Facebook pages and newsletters. Facebook posts from various groups estimate that between 100 and 150 families are assisted through the network daily.

What makes People's Pantry unique is the role of mutual trust, which simplifies the structure to the minimum and allows it to expand rapidly. The donors do not know whom exactly they support; the chefs often do not know the people providing the inflow of orders; and the deliverers' knowledge is limited to google maps, addresses, and phone numbers. Recipients receive food according to previously provided instructions (allergies, vegetarianism, etc.), but they do not have any recourse to any entity if the food does not meet the criteria. These unknowns not only do not seem to bother the members of the structure, but the rapid growth of the network indirectly provides the necessary reassurance to the group members, along with the feeling of pride, belonging or sometimes even adventure.

It is a well-documented fact that a certain degree of informality, so often attributed to the Global South's economy, has always had its place in industrial and post-industrial economies of the North ((Jacobs, 1961; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918; Sounders, 2011)). Nevertheless, what seems to require some attention is why, at first glance, there is so little space for informal relations in the everyday economy of the North nowadays.

'Efficiency, stupid!' – South in the North

In industrial and post-industrial, neoliberal economies, the efficiency of the economic processes, from the production of goods to distribution and delivery, is crucial to maximising profit and rendering the process economically viable in the first place. That can be, among others, attributed to the large share of low labour-intensive but high capital-intensive sectors of the economy. With more skilled industries having a more significant share in growth, it is typical to attribute relatively high resources to a smaller number of people to maximise the profit yielding on their skills. Even if to conceptualise these processes according to the dual

segment economy (Miller et al., 2009), at least the top segment could be characterised in that way. Albeit, even the lower segment with basic services such as cleaning, cooking, and delivering is, to a large extent, taken over by actors with relatively high capital thus, automatizing the process and focusing on its efficiency.

This capital-intensive feature of the economy is even more salient compared to precarious and often *ad hoc*-invented jobs in the Global South - jobs closely linked to the informal economy, observed in densely populated areas, often inhabited by migrants such as urban slum areas. In such circumstances, people's most significant resource seems to be their time. In other words, there is not enough capital available to 'upgrade' the economy, but many people can perform low-skilled jobs. Labour efficiency is not the primary issue – because of too little capital to invest in optimisation and abundant reservoir of workers forced to perform tasks for low wages, otherwise unemployed.

The coronavirus pandemic seems to have recreated a similar environment in the efficiency-oriented North, at least when it comes to self-help and community organising. Suddenly, the amount of capital in the community dropped. On the other hand, social distancing, loss of jobs and working from homes made a large group of people idle.

With the sudden occurrence of low-capital/high labour availability, there comes room for the model which has emerged locally in Toronto and can be described by some daily examples: many people cooking relatively small amounts of food, individually arranged, often with specific diet requirements, highly non-repetitive. Another crowd of individuals picking up these portions on bicycles and delivering them cross town with no central coordination between routes.

Many of these activities, from the efficiency point of view, would be simply a waste of time. However, the list of people willing to participate in such an economy grows daily. The structure expands week by week with little room for optimisation towards 'industrial' or 'free market' efficiency. I would argue that *it is as efficient as it can be as is*. This alternative economy is valuable *per se* because in current macro-circumstances, in an eye-opening revelation, many people discover that their time does not mean a lot – their time is not 'money' anymore. In a work culture that forces individuals to perceive themselves through the value they bring to the market, such a discovery might be disturbing. In this context, People's Pantry upholds the dignity and value of people's time by employing it for the greater good of the community.

What is more, socio-economic arrangements based on a sudden abundance of time and temporary de-prioritisation of 'skilled work,' might bring more space for migrants to build their sense of belonging. For migrants, often struggling with acknowledgement of their competences and with finding skilled work matching their education levels (Saunders, 2011, 2017), such revaluation of priorities in urban space might come as levelling the field – perhaps not in economic terms but surely in terms of participation. Secondly, the informality of People Pantry's arrangements often sounds familiar to migrants, especially those, such as me, born and raised outside of the Global North. Research in Germany conducted around communal participation in urban agriculture shows that migrants' particular skills and being accustomed to informal solutions come handy in such an environment, allowing them to strengthen their feeling of belonging and thrive (Moulin-Doos, 2014). In other words, migrants who are raised in a certain degree of informality in their countries of origin might feel empowered and invited to participate when informal arrangements re-enter usually more formalised urban space of the North.

In my research in slum areas of Yogyakarta (Formanowicz, 2018), I mentioned the importance of *gotong royong*, collective, free work for the community, as an important mode of creating a sense of belonging. Such observations were also made in Malaysia by Thompson (2003, 2004) and reflected by Rigg (2007). People's Pantry follows the same pattern of free work for the community, even if navigated through different spaces (large

spatial dispersion and internet communication without actual face-to-face contact). In that vein, it is unsurprising that many chefs and some of the delivery people in People's Pantry are first-generation migrants in Toronto. I base this observation on personal conversations with chefs and indirectly on the abundance of accents and cuisines (i.e. West African, Middle Eastern, South Asian) I noticed in daily routines as a delivery person.

Hence, using the conceptualisation of space delivered by Henry Lefebvre (1991), I argue that with the sudden change of people's lived space (daily experiences), a gap opened in the conceived space of dominant paradigms, giving more room for informal community building. Such a shift followed by changes in daily routines and activities (spatial practices), consequently, created more room for participation of migrants – often resembling the inclination towards community responsibilities in countries of origin and creating additional space for expanding their social capital.

Producing food and spaces

People's Pantry's role in space production can be understood using Lefebvre's theory of space (1991). Lefebvre (1991) describes three modes of space. *Conceived space* (representations of space; Lefebvre, 1991) is the space of planners and designers, often technocratic and bureaucratized (Rigg, 2007). It is the area where space is imagined and enforced. According to Lefebvre, this space is the dominant 'mode of production' (p. 39). It is also the active one, actively striving to fulfil the 'objectives' of the society (Rigg, 2007, p. 16) with systems of symbols and codifications, abstract representations (Watkins, 2005, p. 29).

Spatial practices are another mode of production of space. This is the tangible, most 'physical' manifestation of space, its 'infrastructure.' Lefebvre calls it the sphere of 'production and reproduction' (1991, p. 33), which mediates between the conceived, the imagined, and the lived. It assures the "cohesion through space (...) in connection with social practice and the relating of individuals to that space" which results in "a certain level of spatial "competence" and a distinct type of "spatial performance" (Shields, 1999, p. 162, in Watkins, 2005). In the case of People's Pantry, conceived space would be the online tools used, the communication channels activated, the bike and car routes, and the daily supply chain.

The *perceived space* (representational space) "is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel (*noyau*) or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action, of lived situations, and this immediately implies time" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42). The perceived space is also called the 'lived space.' As a lived space, it develops and plays out over time. It is the only mode of Lefebvre's triad where time is an active ingredient of the experience. Time is spent *living* – producing one's space.

From Lefebvre's production of space perspective, people's *lived space* changes due to the pandemic, influencing the *conceived space* in which new values (new economics) gain importance, eventually reshaping the *perceived space* of daily routines, communication and transportation trajectories. Conditions described above enable the transition (at least temporarily) from the market-oriented activities towards community-oriented ones.

The political/economic conceived space calls this new balance of pandemic merely an 'aberration' – an 'irregularity' – and mobilises around forcing its way back to 'normality' and business as usual. However, in the lived space reacts 'now,' focusing on the shorter perspective by its nature. I would argue that this is precisely why, with the lower performance of the conceived space in the times of crisis, informality overtakes the lived space and paves the way for solutions and, perhaps, for alternative conceived spaces. This allowed initiatives such as People's Pantry to appear and fill the space with menial, inefficient jobs such as cooking, doing groceries and biking – inferior from the point of view of the highly-skilled economy but crucial and even dignifying during a crisis. What is more, such a shift of daily

priorities allowed migrants from outside of the North's bubble to claim more space for themselves in the new urban landscape.

Ideas lying around

Ideas previously 'lying around' – a concept mentioned by Naomi Klein in a recent interview with Mehdi Hasan (The Intercept, 2020), and in this case exemplified by self-help, self-organisation, and the right to the city – took over some of the void in the conceived space (void created by a recurring question: "What now?"). New conceived space emerged, temporarily bringing ideas of resilience, livelihood sustainability and solidarity to the fore, allowing to 'take time' and 'take pride' in small-scale actions. The best example of this change is the ubiquity of positive reinforcements, such as expressions of gratitude and general kindness observed in the social media associated with communal activities. These acts of kindness and openness should not be overlooked as secondary importance since internet communication is a substantial part of shaping social narratives. Such positive reinforcements probably largely influence the enthusiasm and growth of the mutual-aid initiatives. Feelings of belonging and hope (or a lack of these) might influence which socio-economic paradigm to follow in the aftermath of the crisis.

For migrants such as myself, being completely new to Toronto and to North America in general, the pandemic became much more than just an obvious obstacle in reaching my goals. In a strange way, it levelled the playing field. The city-forced-to-slow-down allowed me to catch up with it, to get on the train of urban reality suddenly forced to stop. This slowed-down reality gave me the time to find People's Pantry and make it my temporary priority. The pandemic transformed my self-imposed perceived space of building social networks by skilled work into randomly meeting people during low-skilled, essential activities. My spatial practices shifted from public transport and campus corridors to a dense network of bike routes anywhere from Roncesvalles in the West, St. Clair in the North to Coxwell in the East. My lived space of meeting the chefs and recipients allowed me to quickly replace my pandemic-newcomer anxiety with curiosity and a feeling of being useful, if not, at times, 'essential.'

The pandemic is undoubtedly an economic disaster for many inhabitants of Toronto, including its constantly renewed population of migrants. Definitely, there is no room for romanticising this grand disruption in people's struggle for a stable and predictable reality in a new country. At the same time, as exemplified by People's Pantry and other self-help groups, the pandemic created new spaces for people's agency, including migrants who are often disadvantaged in business as usual socio-economic relations. In that context, the informality of *ad hoc* solutions pays a crucial role, being a discovery for some city dwellers and a reassuring touch of familiarity for others.

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