

A Short History of the Informal Economy

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ABSTRACT

When coined about half a century ago, employment in the informal economy was discussed by what it was not: formal. Addressed as a sector of the urban workforce, its definition was a summing up of descriptive traits which made manifest how people in the Global South, deprived of most or all means of production, earned their livelihood by selling their labour power. Investigating their predicament zoomed in on the restructuring of peasant economies and societies to post-peasant ones. The anticipated upward mobility, which was supposed to be boosted by the bargaining power of collective action, did not materialise. Rather than expanding formalisation of labour relations, the reverse took place. The small segment which had been promoted to and protected by regular and regulated employment was subjected to informalisation. In the onslaught of neo-liberal capitalism from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards, labour flexibilisation and casualisation not only intensified in the Global South but also spread to the Global North. The new policies ended the brokerage which the nation–state once developed to mediate between the interests of capital and labour, leading to a worldwide shrinking of public institutions, space and representation. While the debate with regard to informality has remained firmly focused on labour and employment, I argue that corporate capital in collusion with étatist authority has not only effectuated the deregulation of paid work but also abandoned the legal code of formality ending in a state of lawlessness for the people at the bottom of the pile. In the reconfiguration, both politics and governance are next to big business as stakeholders in a regime of informality erosive of equality, democracy, civil rights, solidarity and shared well-being for humankind at large.

KEYWORDS

Capitalism; trade unionism; public sector; welfarism; footloose; self-reliance

Introductory Note

This essay refers mainly to my own writings on informality as reflected and clarified in publications during the period under consideration. My concern with the dispossessed proletariat in casualised employment, and in that dire plight condemned to being perpetually footloose, became a major focus in the course of anthropological fieldwork which I conducted mainly in India and Indonesia. I zoomed in on micro-settings, both rural and urban, which were then contextualised in a mega-frame. On retirement I continued doing this for another one-and-half decades, occasionally going back to my earlier sites of local-level investigations. Once growing age did not allow me to move around the terrains with which I had intimately familiarised myself, I began to give my ongoing research a comparative and reflective twist, taking on board interdisciplinarity as a major feature of my analysis. Having distanced myself from conducting case studies in a set of fieldwork niches, I found fresh sources of inspiration in the modus operandi of labour history. This change of methodological gear provided the opportunity to discuss the intricacies of informality which I might otherwise have left implicit or unexplored. Following this trajectory I became increasingly

preoccupied with the role of capital and capitalism in driving informalisation, substantiated in the final sections of my paper. Thus, the chronological account of my passage through the landscape of informality corresponds with how I came to phrase and rephrase my argumentation during the past six decades.

Coining the Concept

Walking along the streets of Accra, the capital of Ghana, in the late 1960s Keith Hart came in his anthropological investigations across a multitude of workers engaged in economic activity which was not registered in occupational censuses. The parade of wage earners listed in his seminal essay included vendors of food and drink, sellers of cheap wares, parking attendants, shoe polishers, housemaids, newspaper boys, cleaners, waste and scrap collectors, transporters of people and commodities, ambulant artisans, handymen, messengers, porters, construction workers, navvies, etc, etc. It was a broad spectrum of low-class livelihoods, composed of footloose and un-skilled to self-skilled workers, gathering unsteady incomes difficult to fathom. He summed up these workers as newcomers to the urban economy who had their origin in the rural hinterland. The absence of official classification was not only caused by the inability of government agencies to put these unclear and petty trades on record, but also followed from disregard for their low-value output. The living made by this streetwise bunch of operators was outside the frame of legality, opaque as well as shady in character. Hart (1973: 67) had a special slot in his portrait for illicit pursuits, which he split into services and transfers.¹ Under the first heading fell spivery (receiving stolen goods), usury and pawnbroking, drug pushing, prostitution, poncing, smuggling, bribery, fraud and corruption, and protection rackets. Under transfers came pickpockets, burglars, peculation and embezzlement, confidence tricksters and gambling. “Underground economy” was another label that found currency for the motley crowd of workers who were by and large self-employed on the seamy side of life, and who in their intricate and wily existence kept beyond the purview of the state apparatus.

Informal in the sense of unregulated by labour legislation was how Hart had perceived the employment terms and conditions of this workforce. The segment coined as a sector gave rise to the notion that the urban economy was broken up into a duality, of which informal versus formal constituted its binary circuits. Having been conceptualised on the academic platform, the International Labour Organization (ILO) set up a World Employment Programme and sent out teams to examine work and labour arrangements outside the organised, large-scale and capital-intensive branches of the economy. The pilot missions, whose reports were routinely written by economists, investigated such modalities of employment in Kenya (ILO, 1972) and the Philippines (ILO, 1974). Their accounts were followed up by a spate of case studies commissioned to anthropologists, which resulted in an inventory of “the informal sector” in African, Latin American and Asian metropolises. The choice of sites implied that informality was seen as a feature of the urban economies in what were called the developing countries of the world.

Charting the Pathway for Capitalism in a Planetary Economy

Publications on the subject from the early 1970s onwards were inspired by the exodus of labour unable to make a living in agriculture, which was then the prime mode of production for the large

¹ The article was an extract from a paper delivered to a conference on urban unemployment in Africa at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 12–16 September 1971.

majority of households. But the long-awaited transformation from an agrarian–rural to an industrial–urban economy and society failed to materialise. Shorn from sufficient means of production to make a living, the land-poor and the landless in particular were driven out of their village habitat to look for alternative employment away from home. The research on informality in the globalising South was hampered by the absence of comparison with the profound transition to a capitalist modality of work and life that had taken place on both sides of the North Atlantic basin roughly from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The lack of a historical perspective was related to the disciplinary background of many researchers, mainly development economists and policy-makers, who were sceptical if not averse to understanding the concept of informality in a protracted time span. It is striking that the flood of literature on the subject did not originate from the brand of scholars on labour who dealt with formal sector employment. This disregard was a consequence of omission stemming from disinterest on what transpired in the bottom ranks of the economy as well as unfamiliarity with anything other than the conventional methods of data collection. The notion of informal included an ambiguous ragbag of activities for which no numerical information happened to be available and for which standardised measuring and counting techniques turned out to be inappropriate. This is why the terrain of informal employment has initially been mostly charted by researchers versed in qualitative instead of quantitative research and equipped with an appetite for micro-level rather than macro-level investigations. A common denominator, agreed upon at an early stage, argued that the informal should be comprehended as the whole gamut of economic activity consisting of petty business, low capital intensity, low productivity, inferior technology, reliance on family labour and property, skill formation mainly by training-while-doing and finally, a small and poor clientele. It was a catalogue that developed by finding out the contrast to what was understood as formal employment and business.

The early batch of studies on informal employment suggested that this sector at the bottom of the urban economy functioned as a waiting room for a rapidly increasing influx of migrants from the rural economy who had been made partly or wholly redundant in their former way of life. On becoming street-wise and more skilled, these footloose labourers would slowly qualify for better jobs and higher pay. Piece rates and job work were replaced by a daily or weekly wage. The work contract stipulating these features took shape in a regular employer–employee relationship. In their claim for a better deal, the upgraded workers were going to be backed up by collective action in which they would engage as members of trade unions to press for further progress. The upward trajectory allowed an aspiring avant-garde to cross the gap which had separated them from the formal sector. But the upward mobility surmised in this optimistic scenario turned out in practice to have been only rarely accomplished. The local-level investigations reported time and again that many informal workers were born and raised in the city where they resided, and throughout their labouring lives had failed to progress much further than where they started – at the bottom of the heap (Breman, 1996). It meant that the expected expansion of the formal sector took place only haltingly, and that the informal sector had instead continued to expand with ever more labour drifting out of the village economy.

In my own empirically based appraisal of the concept I concluded that the idea of an informal sector as a separate circuit was misconceived. The practice of outsourcing and subcontracting production or services also led to the recruitment of workers employed on informal conditions within the capitalist enclaves, irrespective of where they happened to be located. I strongly rejected the suggestion that the formal–informal duality was a feature of the urban milieu, pointing out that the informal hire and fire of labour was also of long standing in the countryside. It should therefore be perceived as a trait peculiar to both the urban and rural economies (Breman, 1976).

Finally, I dismissed the idea Hart put forward, that the formal–informal dichotomy coincides

with the distinction between waged labour and self-employment. His assumption is misleading since it does not acknowledge the wide range of dependency relations by which so-called self-employed workers are bound to providers who supply the merchandise, tools or raw material to be processed. This wide range of outsourced business propositions is thoroughly capitalist in nature, run by wholesale traders, owners of vehicles and tools rented out in sharecropping arrangements, or dealers taking back wares they subcontracted for manufacture by home-based workers. Their indebted clientele cannot bargain with their suppliers for the terms of their trade, and are locked in transactions which amount to hidden and exploitative wage employment.

The incorrect impression of self-employment confirms the well-known image of an army of odd jobbers and jacks of all trades roaming around in the open air or surviving on put-out ventures at home. Engaged in full-time or part-time activity, they are supposed to labour on their own account and at their own risk. Such descriptions tend to articulate the resilience, ingenuity and alertness to new opportunities shown by the multitude of “self-reliant” operators and are apt to highlight the pride they take from being their own boss. It explains how these workers have earned their fame as micro-entrepreneurs and why the informal arena is suggested as a breeding ground for the handling of more sophisticated transactions which, since these are on a larger scale and require higher capital intensity, can only reach maturity in the formal economy. Trained in practice and hardened in the tough struggle for daily existence, one can detect in this fabric the portrait of self-made male or female entrepreneurs who start small but, on their way higher up the ladder, are able to profile themselves in a from-rags-to-riches narrative of wholesome and proper capitalist business acumen. The glorification of microfinance and petty business was propagated by Hernando de Soto (1989, 2000) whose publications were heralded by the World Bank as paving the way out of poverty. It is a point of view which I have strongly criticised but not without emphasising that informality should be understood both in terms of employment and as a way of life in which the labouring poor remain embedded. It means that capitalism is made manifest not only as a mode of production but also spills over into class-specific patterns of distribution and consumption (Breman, 2001).

Stuck in Informalised Employment

In the last quarter of the twentieth century public governance, which until then used to operate in a tripartite set-up, was blamed by proponents of neo-liberalism for being party to a national and transnational policy which aimed to raise the price of labour beyond the competitive level of capitalist business. Conceding to this objective would have diminished the rate of profit with which to generate investment required for economic growth. Under the Washington Consensus the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), charged with the spread of multinational capitalism under the aegis of neo-liberalism, started around the 1970s to exercise pressure on national governments to end meddling in the labour–capital relationship and to scale down expenditure on public provisions – housing, health, education and social care benefits. A retinue of market-fundamentalist economists were hired and tasked by these agencies to fully ignore other policy options which would have secured and protected the labouring poor masses against loss of employment and/or existential crises affecting their households. Set free from all outside interference, the policy that should reign was first and foremost the unrestrained latitude of capital not to accept legal restrictions on how to deal with labour. Workers should be willing to go where they were needed and to remain casually employed for as long or short as there was a demand for them. It should be in their enlightened self-interest not to insist on supplementary rights over and above the wage paid for their availability, nor should they engage in collective action to demand

more than was considered their due. “Labour get lost; a late-capitalist manifesto”, was how I summed up the World Bank’s credo (Breman, 1995a). The informalisation of waged work became a major recipe for pushing down the cost of production worldwide; the countries in the Global South were targeted first in an attempt to realise this objective.

So far I had documented informal employment in the rural and urban economies of south Gujarat where I had started my fieldwork in the early 1960s. I decided to shift my next round of anthropological research on the subject to Ahmedabad, which was the biggest city of the state and known as the Manchester of India. Press reports around the turn of the century alerted me to the closing down of most large-scale and composite textile mills and the retrenchment of their massive workforce. This upheaval took place in the context of a government policy introduced in 1985 which gave priority to liberalisation of the economy and flexibilisation of industrial relations. The impact of the loss of formal sector employment on the multitude of mill hands came to be the focal point of my fieldwork, conducted in the industrial districts around the old city centre where they worked and lived. Most of them had been members of a trade union that had been founded by Mahatma Gandhi early in the twentieth century, with the reluctant permission of the captains of industry. How did the loss of steady and decently paid jobs, which were protected by labour regulations that had become statutory, affect their proletarian consciousness and claims?

Altogether, 125 000 regular factory workers in Ahmedabad were dismissed, many of them overnight and without any compensation. Once labelled as the vanguard of the working class in the industrial society to come, the workforce made redundant in the textile mills had no choice but to join the ranks of the fractured and unorganised as well as a thoroughly unrepresented proletariat. My fieldwork zoomed in on the sharp reduction of living standards that was the immediate result of the dramatic turn for the worse. To begin with, incomes dropped to less than half of the wages earned before. To overcome this setback, dependent members of the households, such as school-going children or elderly males and females who had left the labour process, were forced to join the army of casual wage earners. Labour rights fiercely struggled for by past generations of workers had been withdrawn. Terms of employment established for hiring and firing or wage payment modalities were no longer secured by codes binding employers to fair practices. As the years passed and it became clear that the entire branch of corporate textile production was in crisis, the initial fighting spirit of the laid-off employees dissipated and each subsequent closure drew protest only from those directly involved. The victimised workforce blamed the industrialists for their dismal fate. But the mill owners had discovered that it was much cheaper to transfer production to small-scale workshops where they did not have to comply with labour legislation and which set them free from collective action on the part of workers. The Textile Labour Association, which for many decades had been the biggest in the country, reacted by taking membership away from unemployed workers and folded up. Its time-worn secretary-general gave me to understand why: “Without factories there is no need for trade unions” (Breman, 2004: 189).

The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level

A treatise co-authored with Marcel van der Linden reiterated a conclusion I had reached earlier – that the “Rest” will not gradually become like the “West” (Breman and Van der Linden, 2014). The pace of change is actually moving in the opposite direction. This reappraisal of a policy adage which held sway for so long, strongly pushed from the global apex of the political economy and broadcast by the ILO, suggested that latecomers in the business of development were expected and would be supported in due course to follow the frontrunners who had paved the way to progress. As far as labour was concerned, it was concretised in the classical conceptualisation of the working class

teaming up in joint action against capitalist exploitation. The social struggle waged in the ongoing transition from an agrarian–rural to an industrial–urban economy and society in the North Atlantic region (Polanyi, 1944) culminated in the Standard Employment Relationship. A prominent feature of the emerging system of waged labour was regular and regulated employment based on a formal labour contract.

The development was slow and uneven, but the upshot was that the bargaining strength of this privileged segment of the swelling workforce increased – not least because it was complemented by the introduction and implementation of labour legislation. The provisioning of publicly regulated social security benefits for housing, healthcare, schooling and skilling, allowances for out-of-work adversity and non-working household dependents extended to a large part of the workforce in an emancipatory drive made manifest in a rise of living standards of the urban proletariat in particular. In the righteous jargon of politicians, such progress was greeted as care “from the cradle to the grave”. No doubt, the capital–labour balance remained skewed with ongoing accumulation at the top end and no or only shallow ownership of means of production down below. The welfare state which had materialised by the middle of the twentieth century, in what became signalled as the developed part of the world, appeared to have soft-pedalled the distance between the haves and the have-nots, although in relative terms the class structure did not change much (Geiger, 1951). The building up of a public sector expressed a trend of levelling social inequality, reflected in the visual disappearance of extreme poverty and excessive wealth. The flipside of this expanding and substantial circuit was not only high taxation but also a top-down bureaucratisation which stifled rather than conceded and promoted democratic participation.

The contrary opinion put forward by Breman and Van der Linden (2014) in their essay was that this benign conceptualisation of the working-class trajectory, based on collective action, took for granted a projected route to social progress. It has turned out to be a flawed notion and had to be reappraised as a historical intermezzo which pertained to a restricted part of the world and for a relatively short period of time only. Globalising capitalism tends to be encapsulated in insecurity, denying a fair deal to labour. Preoccupied by an obstinate lust for privatised wealth, this mode of production is deeply antagonistic to a public economy and a state jurisdiction willing to and capable of brokering between the rights of capital and labour. The collapse in the early 1970s of the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 signalled the end of the politics of welfarism and phased out full-employment capitalism. Its impact was not immediately detected since it coincided with another crucial turnaround: a sectoral redistribution of economic activity that reshaped Western societies from industrial to post-industrial ones. Since the 1980s flexibilisation also became the organising principle for labour policies in the West. These reforms limited the scope to provide unemployment benefits in case of conjunctural or chronic eviction from the labour market. Both trends – the disappearance of full and sustained employment throughout working life and a rapid growth of the tertiary sector – are labelled as precarious labour arrangements (Standing, 2011). It is the same outcome which, outside the Western economies, is known as the informalisation process and which marked the growing capital intensity of production.

The main features of the new system of labour relations were:

- replacing steady and full-time employment with casualised part-time jobs and occupational multiplicity;
- steeply falling wage levels, no or low compensation for rising costs of living, payment modalities changing from time to piece-rated employment, and loss of fringe benefits;
- outsourcing and subcontracting to cut down the cost of labour;
- substituting waged work with self-employment;

- discretionary lengthening or shortening of the workday, work week and working life as part of the flexibilisation policy;
- phasing out social security and social protection;
- relaxing compliance with proscribed terms of employment and conditions of work, followed by withdrawal of labour laws;
- forfeiting a written and binding labour contract on recruitment; and
- denying the right to representation, collective action and compulsory mediation in case of dispute and conflict.

Does this mean that labour standards prevalent in the advanced economies have become similar to those in the less-developed ones? Drawing a direct parallel is in many ways misconceived. The terms of informality in the world are very diverse instead of uniform across phase and place. Heterogeneity dictated by time-bound and locational specificity prevails. It is highly unlikely that the free-fall that started in 2008 will lead the workforce in the developed part of the world to join the ranks of the masses toiling and sweating at the bottom of the global economy. In the advanced economies the worsening tide of informal employment gave rise to a change in class identity which was described as a precariat (Standing, 2011), a label which I firmly rejected (Bremen, 2013b). After all, the downward slide of the working class in the West European countries in particular was mitigated by a democratic order that had managed to resist the intrusion of a more brutal gestalt of capitalism. The tripartite model, in which the trade union movement and labour parties were major stakeholders, led to a compromise when dealing with claims from both sides in a spirit of give and take. The benefits left from the past social struggle that was waged constitute a safety net of sorts for a growing number of people at the bottom of the heap who, when Tony Judt (2010: 29) wrote his obituary of welfarism, “still have access to free or cheap medical services, exiguous but guaranteed pension, residual unemployment relief and a vestigial system of public education”. In the next decade neo-liberalism marched further ahead to try to demolish the gains made by former generations. One of the changes that came about is the outsourcing of labour by capital in all sectors of the economy and transnationalised by corporate capitalism throughout the world. The ramifications of subcontracting waged work is discussed as a business modality that resembles the return of merchant capital. It used to be commonly understood as the precursor of industrial capital, a putting-out system of employment with entrepreneurship in this reborn gestalt engaged not in looser but tightened control over the chain of production (Van der Linden and Bremen, 2020).

Circulation in Casual and Footloose Existence

There is another contrast between then and now which needs to be taken into consideration. Labour which had become redundant in the peasant economies of the northern hemisphere in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries left Europe to colonise other continents. They settled down as colonists, and brought to these “empty” territories the labour power required to take new tracts of cultivable land and mineral resources into production. But emigration to foreign countries in search of waged work, especially when situated in the developed parts of the world, has become very cumbersome when seen from the perspective of the southern hemisphere. This is especially the case for job seekers without assets, skills and other physical or social capital, who are in today’s jargon stigmatised as economic refugees. This means that the majority of the people pushed out for lack of work and income have to be absorbed within the same country somewhere and somehow. To the outside world, infrastructural connectivity – road construction and mechanised

transport – has played a major role in making labour mobile over vast distances and in a shorter time – a sojourn held attractive when it can be made at low cost. An underrated though sizable part of the workforce that fails to be registered in official estimates does not even leave the countryside but drifts around sites of temporary employment. To the extent that their mobility remains intra-rural, it is usually for a season and they go back to their places of origin when their presence is no longer required. The much larger trek to urban destinations tends to be of a similar nature in many countries: going off but coming back again after shorter or longer bouts of absence which may last for months, a couple of years or even for the duration of a working life.

Cut loose from their social moorings in the countryside, Mike Davis (2006) portrayed such people as the inhabitants of the vast shanty colonies ringing the city outskirts across the Global South. According to him, the current epoch is witnessing a world-historic shift in human habitat. For the first time, more than half the global population will soon be city dwellers, in one form or another. The small-scale settlements that have been the cradle of peasant civilisations for thousands of years – the myriad villages, compact or dispersed, spread out across the countryside – are no longer home to the majority of the human species. Urban researchers have focused in their discussions on either questions of space and land use in the slum habitat or on the size and scope of their informal economies; Davis's *Planet of Slums* commands our attention as a broader historical synthesis of both. But the “Big Bang” of urban poverty came after 1975, with Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, which devastated rural smallholders by eliminating subsidies and pushing them to sink or float around, exposed in their dismal plight to global commodity markets dominated by heavily subsidised First World agribusiness.

The relentless and desperate waves of newcomers pouring into the cities are far in excess of the demand for their labour. The combination of lack of work plus ultra-low wages leaves this foot-slogging infantry of the global economy deprived of the basic means of human subsistence. One cannot enter the neighbourhoods populated by these people in Latin America, Africa and Asia without being struck by the dire poverty that prevails. Increasingly, today's slums are not to be found in the inner cities, as used to be the case in the West, but are situated on their outskirts, in an extensive belt where urban zones gradually give way to the surrounding countryside. This in-between landscape can also be found in Eastern Europe, where the Second World has been dissolved within the Third, with the proviso that the eclipse of these socialist countries has, by definition, also pre-empted the notion of a Third World. One consequence of this is the urgent need to revise the developmentalist jargon that was *en vogue* during the second half of the twentieth century. That short time span has disappeared all of a sudden, without leaving a lasting imprint behind.

Davis does not elaborate on the crisis of the countryside and the reasons why increasing numbers of people are unable to sustain an agrarian–rural way of life. Arguably, the fortunate contingent which manages to find a fixed abode and regular, long-term work are genuinely better off in the city's mega-slums. The lot of the millions roaming in the twilight zone where the countryside ends and the city begins is more debatable. In addition to these drifters of the extended urban periphery, tenaciously trying to settle down, there are those who leave home to sojourn. They cannot be defined as one-way migrants, a term which suggests at least an extended departure from the countryside. Doing fieldwork both in Indonesia (mainly Java) and in India (mainly Gujarat), I was struck by the phenomenon of ongoing labour circulation, which pulls people out of their rural habitat for part of the year but pushes them back again when their temporary and casual employment comes to an end. This pattern of footloose movement to and fro has become an important feature of the informal economy (Breman, 1995b; Breman and Wiradi, 2002).

Circulation is work-related. Dependent members of the household, women and children can

come along or are even required to join in order to take part in the labour process. Those who are not fit to work, because they are too young or too old to earn at least their own keep, are discouraged from accompanying members of the household who move off. It means that labour power, not the primary unit of cohabitation of which it is part, is made mobile. Once started, recruitment is both locality-based and community-based. The segmentation of the labour market rather haphazardly tends to become reiterative over time in the sense that other factors than a particular aptitude seem to be the main trigger and driving force. Labour nomadism has a chain effect and cannot be explained in terms of the supply/demand mechanism operating in the formal labour market. Jobbers, engaged by employers, form another link in the chain of circulation for the workforce kept footloose. These mediators see to it that their catch seldom has access to other jobs. Opting out of the circuit with the aim of staying on and settling down at the new worksite is next to impossible. Drifting in and out is not necessarily caused by a local shortage, a lack of available hands or an unwillingness to work on the terms offered. The preference for outsiders is part of a strategy resorted to by employers and their agents to command pliable and vulnerable labour contingents which, by their status as aliens and transients, have forfeited their bargaining power. With the influx of migrants, local labour becomes superfluous to demand and has to go out in search of alternative employment. They fall victim to the same process of failing to get access to steady work and, in turn, are made to join the reserve army of labour. Thus, influx and exodus are intricately related to each other in a perpetual pattern of mobility. The upshot is that between urban and rural a nowhere landscape is populated with nowhere people who are absorbed and expelled over and over again according to the need of the moment. A further development has been the rapid rise in village slums, inhabited by a dispossessed underclass that has become redundant in the agricultural economy but lacks the cash and the contacts to permanently settle down outside its own and segregated rural habitat.

Classes of Labour

The informal economy falls apart in a diversity of employment relations, a fragmentation of labour across a huge spectrum of makeshift occupations and forms of casual-contractual engagement, which frustrates the formation of a social consciousness based on class unity and solidarity. Explosions of dissatisfaction do occur – for example, when the price of bread or bus fares is raised – but these strikes are generally quite spontaneous, short-lived and localised rather than organised and sustainable, banking on primordial loyalties rather than class-based solidarity. It is a fractured existence which crystallises into a highly differential absorption in the labour process – own-account workers versus waged labourers, regular or casual employment, search for full-time versus part-time earnings, replacement of sedentary recruitment to paid work by footloose mobility. All of this culminates in divergent patterns of livelihood and lifestyles. It means that rather than juxtaposing the working class as an amalgamated lot, there are indeed different classes of labour with separate identities. The way in which these distinctions result in contrasts of well-being against destitution cannot merely be comprehended in terms of alignments due to economic diversification, but also owes much to an already existing axis of steep and lasting inequality. While the Marxist concept of class articulates the proletarianised engagement in the labour process, a broader definition of social class focuses on another feature as well – the mode of existence or life standard which divides the workforce into multiple formations (Breman, 1999: 408; Bernstein, 2007: 6–7).

Time and again attempts are made to mobilise the proletarian masses who are refused access to the citadel of labour in the formal economy. This valiant effort to bring about bargaining power

where it is missing often ends in failure, either blocked or sabotaged by both capital and government. In contrast to the labouring poor, prone to exploit their kindred as well as themselves in order to cope with bare survival and to avoid sinking further down, those fortunate enough to be equipped with at least some means of production exert themselves to move up in the class hierarchy; they aspire to move out of the proletariat altogether. Diverging in upward or downward mobility, these opposite routes climax in accumulation versus dispossession – on the higher end striving for embourgeoisement in middle-class contentment, against warding off pauperism at the lower end. Large contingents of waged labourers can be found hovering somewhere between these adverse poles of engagement. My objective for bringing up this multi-level differentiation is to argue that labour is not segmented in a two-class dichotomy – formal against informal – but spreads out over a wider range of employment-cum-livelihood modalities.

Loss of control over one's own labour power at the final stage in the process of proletarianisation often remains unnoticed. It is a form of immiseration which denies the freedom to decide when, where and how to seek waged work. I have referred to such slaving for livelihood, locked up in debt, as neo-bondage, which implies selling off labour power in advance for less than the market rate and being forced to wait for back pay until dismissal (Breman, 1996, 2010, 2023). It is an argument which contends that the vast landscape of labour should not be imagined as an uninterrupted and levelled plain, but as a slope broken up by stepping stones which turn out to be stumbling blocks difficult to climb over (Breman, 2021a). What are the “classes of labour”, distinct from each other in different modes of employment as well as in ways of life? I am still inclined to subscribe to a fourfold division which I drew up in my first round of research on the informal economy (Breman, 1976). It is a classification that pertains to densely populated economies characterised by progressive polarisation of ownership and management of capital.

At the small top end is a labour aristocracy which enjoys the comforts of formally regulated employment, backed up by social security benefits and a modicum of protection against adversity. The broad middle range is occupied by self-skilled and not yet fully dispossessed own-account workers, together with labourers in steady waged employ. This contingent, even though remote by far from the privileged treatment “the salariat” enjoys within the citadel, tends to lead a relatively stable life. Their income stretches over a longer period and allows them to spend it in accordant rhythm with earnings regularly received. It is a disposition which, if not afflicted by failing health or addiction to drink or drugs, enables them either to borrow or to delay payment of whatever they want or are obliged to settle within their modest means. With such make-do behaviour, provided it remains spared from misfortune, they demonstrate their greater reliability, credibility and higher social status. The same holds true for self-employed workers who operate petty means of production (a booth or stall, some tools, a vehicle), which enables them to secure their meagre livelihood. This class also is fortunate enough to continue living in conjugal togetherness and congeniality.

The labourers dependent on casual employ, hired and fired off and on, have to scratch around for whatever chores come their way; they constitute a reserve army. Shorter or longer bouts of unemployment together with the lack of steady income, and their consequences for gathering the cost of reproduction, have remained understated in analyses of the informal economy. In these more precarious households, members of working age need to search wide and far for work. It forces them to hive off in multi-locality which may last for a few weeks, a season, a couple of years or an entire working life. Irregularity instead of regularity of engagement in the labour process culminates in uneven life chances and lifestyles of this very substantial third class. Instead of elaborating on the extreme vulnerability of the last one at the residual bottom, which demarcates the rift between poverty and ultra-precarity, I refer to the monograph in which I have dealt in more detail with this destitute segment sunk into a pauperised existence (see Breman, 2016).

Redundant to Economic Demand and Denial of Citizenship Rights

The village economy in the Global South is no longer capable of accommodating households deprived of means of livelihood other than the sum total of their labour power. Neither has the urban economy the elasticity to offer a berth for all those eager to drift into it. Nor can cross-sectoral mobility take care of people accidentally pushed out of higher-paid jobs by moving on to casual jobs which enable them to hold out until the conjunctural tide would swing back in their favour. I have never found any evidence that such a horizontal drift has taken place. When faced with dire straits, street vendors do not become rickshaw riders, domestic servants, construction workers or vice-versa. The labour market of the informal economy is highly fragmented, with identity fences built around the conquered niches to ward off uninvited outsiders. Those who are made surplus to demand in their branch of activity usually have no alternative but to go back where they came from, since staying on in the city without income is next to impossible (see also Boo, 2014). But returning to the place of origin is a reluctant and last-resort option, given the lack of livelihood at home which was a prime reason to go off.

Whenever bouts of employability occur at the broad bottom of the globalised economy, the price of labour still remains scaled down to sheer survival level. Fragmentation keeps the scores of underemployed people tied up in separated niches. They compete with each other in a labour market of which the supply side is much larger than the constantly fluctuating demand for labour power. Reacting to this disequilibrium, they try to strengthen bonds along lines of family, clan, ethnicity, region, creed or other primordial identities which preclude collective bargaining on the basis of work status, occupation, acquired skill and class. Their vulnerability is exacerbated by an enforced rootlessness, being pushed out of their habitat but pushed back again, roaming around hunting and gathering wages in an endless search for work. From the perspective of the world's underclasses, what may look like a time-bound crisis is actually a structural one, caused by the absence of regular, fair and decent employment. A swelling army of reserve labour at the floor of the informal economy is firmly entrapped in a state of footlooseness which will not be lifted when the Dow Jones index goes up again.

The distinction between employment and unemployment is grounded in an analysis which has no validity beyond the formal economy. Within the setting of informality, reality is far too complex to be considered in simple duality. The suggestion from the commanding heights that informalisation would generate more employment is in conflict with the perception of the large majority of low-class wage earners, based on their daily experience, that the income gained is not enough to make a decent living. Engaging in occupational multiplicity does not solve the problem. We seem to have reached a stage where there is a dire lack of employment for the large reserve army in the globalised workforce. A striking feature of jobless growth is capital's substitution of labour not only due to technological change in all sectors of economic activity but also to the outcome of altered employment modalities to increase productivity of labour in order to raise higher profits. A large but uncounted number of households at the bottom of the urban and rural heap are split up in multi-locality. This falling apart, of varying frequency and duration, cannot be avoided since those who go off in search of work are not allowed the company of dependents who are too young or too old to work. Not being able to at least reproduce the cost of their maintenance, they have to be left behind. The impossibility of staying together as a nuclear or joint family continues for many years until health handicaps or physical wear and tear mean that the labour power in the household has been depleted. The idea that only males are likely to depart in search of waged work requires correction. Most of them are men of the younger age cohorts, but a considerable though heavily underestimated portion happen to be women and children, brought

along in order to be put to work as unpaid helpers.

The ceaseless coming and going of both adults and minors in short or long intervals not only increases the fragility of this primary unit of cohabitation but also undermines social cohesion and solidarity within it. The stereotyped opinion is that migrants save and transmit a third to a half of their incomes to the maintenance of dependent members of their households. No doubt, the majority loyally tries to cater to the livelihood needs of their dependents. Yet I encountered in the course of my fieldwork manifold exceptions to this obligation to support close family members left behind. A difficult-to-gratify relish for consumerism is driven by surrender to a capitalist dictum of conduct that pervades even the milieu of the last and the least. Male providers in particular tend to put their own needs before those of dependent members of the family. Especially in case of prolonged absence, the kinship bonds keeping the household fabric together tend to weaken. Long-term migrants also have to face erosion of their social weight in the community on their return. Marginality at “home” is the price paid for not being there. Also not taken into consideration is that many wage hunters and gatherers are forced to leave home in debt. Arranging for loans from usurious moneylenders to pay for their cost of travel, and enough wherewithal for those dependents staying at home to last at least a couple of weeks, means that when coming back, redemption from their staggering debt is the first priority of these footloose workers. The need to toil in a relationship of indebted dependency, which I have labelled as neo-bondage, is the predicament of a rapidly growing army of labour occasionally hired to be fired again when no longer needed (Breman, Guérin and Prakash, 2009; Breman, 2023).

The State Machinery Bending to Collusion with Capitalism

States are crucial co-determiners of labour rights and social security. Neo-liberalism as propagated by the propositions Friedrich Hayek (1944) made in *The Road to Serfdom* denies the economic, political and social space which is required to raise and solve *the social question*. Its anti-labour credo insists on a shrinking of the public sector which is, under this myopic lens, seen as hostile to freedom and individual well-being (Breman et. al., 2019: 1–22). Self-interest, rivalry and competition are the driving forces of privatisation, and do not tolerate cohesive action other than by the owners, managers and agents of capital. The state has continued to play a crucial role in economic policy but now in a partisan way, serving the interests of capital. On the one hand, the machinery of the state defends property rights, howsoever gained, and fervently pushes free enterprise in a spirit of competition. But on the other hand, it withholds and withdraws rights that were gained by the workforce mobilised to solidarity in collective struggle against capitalist agency. Would such a hegemonic domain, preoccupied with the accumulation of ever more wealth, be able to cater to the welfare of all and sundry?

In *Beyond the Welfare State*, Gunnar Myrdal (1958: 45) surmised that the rich countries in the Western world had achieved the broad goals of economic development: full employment, equality of opportunity, social security and protected minimum standards regarding income, as well as nutrition, housing, health and education would forthwith be shared by all classes of the population. He was sceptical, however, whether they were willing to apply these values of liberty, equality and solidarity in their foreign policy. A credo of economic nationalism would prevent the decolonised regions of the world from joining them in this frame of public welfarism Richard Titmuss (1964) was more critical, and pointed out that “Welfare Statism” did not spread across the board in the industrialised zones of the West and that poverty, social deprivation and exploitation had not faded away in these economies. It ignores, he argued, the trend towards monopolistic concentration of economic power, the growing impact of automation and new techniques of production and

distribution in economically advanced societies, and increasing social inequality as exemplified both in the United States and Britain. At this early stage Ernest Mandel (1968) was already much more pessimistic. He warned that public welfarism in combination with mass consumption was going to be a short-term reprieve limited to a minority of humanity. He pointed out that the demand for ever more would exclude “three-quarters of the countries of the world from all chance of success in such experiments” (Mandel, 1968: 21). A good case can be made for arguing that the workforce residing in the West has contributed to the exploitation of the labouring poor in the Global South. Their slaving for a pittance has helped to keep down the real wages of workers in the advanced economies. They don’t have to spend much to buy garments, household wares, gadgets and other consumer durables at rock-bottom prices. Still, the differentiation in living standards notwithstanding, it is clear that the boisterous regime of informality has hit the West with full force, driving many working-class men and women out of regular and secure jobs to flexible forms of employment.

The emergence of the welfare state where and when it materialised owed much to democratisation of the political arena and the backing of claims it implied for emancipation, spearheaded by collective action organised in trade unionism. Union leadership became a major stakeholder in the institutionalisation of public welfarism. Collective action did not merely focus on labour rights but also on the provision of social security and a guaranteed protection of the workforce and their households. The decline which set in became manifest when the public sector started to shrink. Public housing, healthcare and education have been sold off, and are now run at much higher cost for the consumer and maximal profit for private companies. Likewise, the once-public corporations charged with a range of utilities – transport, communication, sanitation, safety and security – were bargained away. The managers who took charge of these commercial agencies included trade union leaders, top-ranking officials and politicians whose departure from the public realm helps to explain the swing to populist and anti-democratic politics. What should be equally worrisome as a major loss of faith and trust in the establishment of political democracy is the highly uneven class impact of the neo-liberal policies. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2008, 2011) reported that the welfare gap between rich and poor in its thirty member countries has widened continuously over the three decades to 2008 and even more so in the subsequent three years.

The widely held assumption that the majoritarian wave of latecomers in the process of transformation would follow in the footsteps of the frontrunners has proven to be futile. Several critical conditions can be identified that strongly contrast with the setting of the political economy in the Global North during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To begin with, the man/land ratio was less favourable in late-colonial Asia than in Europe when the urbanisation–industrialisation nexus started to take place. This resulted in a much lower redundancy of labour that had to exit from the countryside. In addition, emigration to erstwhile underpopulated regions in the world is no longer an option for the land-poor and landless masses driven out from their habitat by a halting pace of development. The flight away from lack of employment and income going on in Asia, Africa and Latin America has produced huge and desperate swarms no longer addressed as colonists but as “economic refugees”. These hapless migrants are refused legal entry on better-off shores and, at high cost and risk, set out to try to cross borders *sans papiers*. Finally, during the high tide of industrialisation in Europe and North America, the technology applied and the organisation of the labour process were still not capital-intensive. Even the large reserve army of the “undeserving” poor at the residual bottom could ultimately become absorbed in regular and regulated employment (Stedman Jones, 2013). This is no longer the case, since technological advances have made not only industrial production but also all other branches of waged work – transport, construction and a wide range of services in the tertiary branch of the economy – much

less labour-intensive than they were before (Breman, 2021c). And last but not least, while the early industrialising state was eager to settle conflicts of interest between capital and labour, as Bismarck did to prevent the outbreak of social unrest, today the large majority of non-Western states, and many of the Western ones as well, act in collusion with what national or expatriate capital wants and does: to withdraw social security and legalised rights from the working classes.

More crucial than such differences in initial conditions is the changing face of capitalism itself. When countries were clubbed together under the banner of a Third World in frantic search for the developmentalism pledged by their benign sponsors, there were already those who drew attention to the dynamics on the completion of this blissful mission. As one of these critics predicted: “These theories say to Asians, Africans or Latin Americans: what you are today, we have been in the past; you may become what we are today, but by that time we, of course, will be something else because we will have gone on” (Cohn, 1980: 212). Even that incisive comment still maintained the axiom that the North–South dichotomy would remain intact along national lines of demarcation in a domination–subordination juxtaposition. Rather than adhering to this received wisdom, I have argued together with several other authors that the canvas of inequality has shifted from external to internal (Therborn, 2012; Breman et.al., 2019). The polarity which can be observed is nowadays more astute *within* than *between* nation–states. All said and done, the main burden of the informal economy falls on the masses deprived of adequate means of livelihood, who happen to live and toil in the Global South. While the distance separating the poor from the non-poor has accelerated worldwide, the divide between societies – large as it may be – is less unequal than the divide between social classes in each country. Nowhere is this polarity more stark than in what are persistently called the developing or catching-up economies. The trend is, in the case of India, exemplified by the news that 40 per cent of the national wealth is owned by just 1 per cent of the country’s population, while the bottom 50 per cent has to survive or starve on 3 per cent of her produced treasure (Oxfam, 2023).

A Comprehensive Regime of Informality

Informality as discussed both in the realm of research and policy is mainly if not exclusively understood with reference to labour, work and employment – for no good reason at all, as I found in the course of my empirical investigations from the early 1960s onwards, covering a period of over half a century. The incessant focus is a reduction to absurdity since only one factor of production is singled out. This completely overlooks how informality pervades the working of capital and vice versa. The supposition that capital belongs to the domain of formality can be questioned on many counts. To begin with, capital owners or managers often resort to the informalisation of their businesses to evade appropriation through state-levied taxation of the surplus value created by labour. Accumulation of capital takes the shape of reducing labour costs and, to make that happen, the writ of the state needs to be circumvented. This argument boils down to saying that if the informal–formal dichotomy makes any sense at all, there is ample reason to explore and document the contrast for both factors of production and their entanglement (Breman, 2021b: 33–34).

Why is it that the circulation and accumulation of capital beyond the reach of the state is a question much less raised and investigated than the origin, composition, flow and control of labour under the label of informality? The opaqueness of capital in the informal economy, the way it is accrued, collected, spent, saved and above all drained off, needs to be unveiled. This has turned out to be much more difficult than tracing labour wherever it goes and whatever it does. It is actually one of the reasons why it makes sense to talk of informality instead of precarity, a term

which has come to dominate the discussion on these issues as waged in the Global North. There is nothing precarious about the role of capital in the economy, and the way it is kept informalised as the black circuit should be a subject of urgent research. Studies which focus on the role of intermediaries (moneylenders, sub-contractors, jobbers, touts and other agents) are of crucial importance to highlight the way labour is linked to capital. The pivotal role of capital in the informal economy needs to be placed high on the agenda in the quest for alternative policies. I have argued that unregulated informality does not only embrace the economy at large but also extends to politics and governance. The rampant practices of extortion, corruption and other forms of malfeasance to which urban as well as rural slum-dwellers, no less than all other ranks of citizens, fall prey are committed by officials and politicians who from top to bottom privatise their public authority. They exemplify what I have called the informalisation of formal power and registration.

Of Humankind but beyond Visibility and Care

The Unemployed of Marienthal, first published in 1933, described the impact of long-term unemployment due to the economic recession raging worldwide in those years (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisl, [1933] 1973). In the vicinity of Vienna, the capital of Austria, a textile mill which had been the main activity in this industrial township closed down. It meant that three-quarters of all households in the locality faced deep and lasting poverty. The study became a classic in the social science literature. It narrated the phases through which the sacked workforce subsequently proceeded – from initial resolve to helpless resignation, sinking down into despair and finally sullen apathy. People lost their sense of time and the daily routine, so important for a steady rhythm, was eroded. Interaction outside the household contracted, and growing marginality and alienation gave rise to loss of social cohesion. Instead of mutual help, symptoms of envy and suspicion destroyed the shared fabric which had existed. How did the community cope with the loss of waged work? By a partial retreat into self-reliance. But much more important than the sparse yield of enforced autarky was the provision of an unemployment benefit. It was a paltry sum financed from contributions made by employers, workers and the local authority of the state. The built-up fund that had accumulated in the years before the mill closure was enough for a fortnightly pay-out lasting for about half a year. After that the workers were eligible for a still lower benefit of a government dole to which the municipality and charity organisations added food packages. In the early 1930s the European welfare state was still under construction, but its foundations had already been laid in the first half of the twentieth century. When the economic crisis struck in the early 1930s, the industrialised countries in the Global North responded to the onset of massive unemployment and impoverishment with relief programmes. George Orwell (1962: 70–78) commented in *The Road to Wigan Pier* how the dole paid out to laid-off mineworkers and their dependents in England at least enabled them to cope and to keep their household ties of cohesive mutuality intact.

The onus on the poor masses in large parts of the Global South is not only the casual use made of their labour power and the extremely low pay they receive for it. Indigence is aggravated by the near total lack of social security and protection against adversity. Trade unions are extremely difficult to establish in the fractured landscape of the informal economy which implies occupational multiplicity, constant rotation around worksites and the need of many workers to keep a low profile because of indebtedness. Overcoming these obstructions is a challenging task which requires dedicated leadership in a sphere of camaraderie. The hurdles thrown up by both capital and governance add to the hardship experienced. In view of the exceptionality of solidarity-based collective action, it is all the more remarkable that Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing

and Organizing (WIEGO), founded as a federated trade union in 1997, has been astoundingly successful in its endeavours at the transnational level. It was a major feat which soon became recognised and appreciated in the tripartite discussion on Decent Work and Informal Employment at the 2002 International Labour Conference (ILO, 2002). Of course, such brave attempts to get organised against the grain are just a drop in the ocean.

In many countries acts of resistance combating the depressive condition of the labouring poor, either resorted to en masse or individualised, are routinely dealt with as a law-and-order problem. A dramatic instance was the Tunisian street vendor who, in early 2011, committed suicide by self-immolation. The Arab Spring which prompted this incident was ruthlessly suppressed (Porta, 2016). The standard response to such protests, if acknowledged at all, has been that their plight is due to the faint and feckless efforts of the victims themselves. It is a claim which disregards the absence of official benevolence to moderate the suffering of workers at the tail end of the informal economy. A recent Working Paper on the economic downturn which followed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, produced by WIEGO (2022), highlights the paltry efforts authorities have made to alleviate the scale of impoverishment that has taken place. The report contains the findings from a longitudinal study of nearly 2 000 informal workers, male and female, in eleven cities around the world. Surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted with domestic servants, home-based workers, street vendors, market traders, and waste pickers in mid-2020 and then again in mid-2021. The dataset reveals the differentiated impact and at best partial recovery for different categories of informal workers approximately a year and a half into the pandemic. Next to the collapse of work and income, a telling finding is that in many cities public relief in kind or cash, if authorized at all, did not reach the targeted contingents, or only once in a while. Coping with the crisis meant seeking refuge in survival strategies damaging the household. The study shows that the economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis remains deep and persistent for workers bereft of decent work and life.

The statistical fabrication of big data torn loose from its socio-economic and political context runs the risk of becoming flawed and prone to big errors and, framed in preconceived and wilful expedience, is bound to result in big lies. A World Bank (2022) report – *Poverty and Shared Prosperity. Correcting Course* – amended its earlier success story on the proportion of humankind alleviated from indigence during the last two decades. COVID-19 is held accountable for the impoverishment of 700 million people worldwide in 2020. This setback is described as an unfortunate interruption of the trend resulting from anti-poverty policies announced with the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals. The pandemic has indeed hit the people already short of employment and income more than the better-off social classes. Landing in extreme poverty – that is, destitution – means that they have to make do with less than US\$2.15 per day. The paucity of reliable and verifiable data on the staggering unemployment and the excessive income deprivation is not the consequence of administrative oversight or sloppiness in measurement. It is intentional and designed to distract attention away from the dwindling scope of livelihood at the broad underside of society. The magnitude of destitution is not investigated, and immiseration remains covered up. Haunted by jobless growth, self-reliance is professed by the powers that be as the prescribed remedy to get out of poverty. Self-employment does not express a preference for petty entrepreneurship, but is a fall-back option from the inability to access a steady and waged job. Certainly, it can be successful if backed up by sufficient means of production to allow for upward mobility instead of hovering around the poverty line. But the residual class, deprived of ownership of assets and skills on which to capitalise, stands accused of chronic failure to make both ends meet. Blamed for their inability to cope with adversity and bereft of all credibility, these pauperised people are written off as “the undeserving poor”. They do not qualify for public relief to lift them out of destitution, and in a further route of dispossession are also under threat of getting blocked from inclusion in the ranks of citizenship (Breman and Shah, 2022: 350—353).

In the political economy that has come to dominate all around, they are the surplus people, as Tania Li (2010) has observed. It is a label that brings back with a vengeance the ferocious ideology of Social Darwinism. As I concluded two decades ago, the fight against poverty has spiralled down to a fight against the poor. “A point of no return is reached when a reserve army waiting to be incorporated into the labour process becomes stigmatized as a permanently redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot be included now and in future in economy and society” (Breman, 2003: 13). Ten years later I reiterated this verdict, pointing out that the inimical presence of the poor is considered to be injurious to the welfare of the better-off classes of humanity (Breman, 2013a: 142). In the wake of the recent global pandemic my alarming assessment seems to have gained rather than lost in relevance. This metamorphosis was and still is the real crisis of world capitalism.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JAN BREMAN: Born in the mid-1930s, growing up in a milieu of poverty which marked our working-class neighbourhood and household left a lasting impact on my social identity. Subjection of my country to German occupation during the Second World War was another distinct feature of my childhood which impinged on my awakening worldview. Having been exposed to alien rule in those formative years aroused, at a young age, my interest in the struggle for freedom and emancipation raging during the late 1940s in the former Netherlands Indies as well as in the British and French colonial domains in South and Southeast Asia. The need to reflect on what I experienced in boyhood explains how labour, work and employment became the focus of the empirical research which I have conducted in my academic career, and why I have located my fieldwork-based investigations mainly in India and Indonesia. This mindset has kept me engrossed and committed throughout my scholarly lifetime, impelled by my subjective perception and perspective. [Email: j.c.breman@uva.nl]