

EDITORIAL

Global Formalities and Informalities: Social, Economic, and Political Transformations

[English Version]

Formalidades e informalidades globales: cambios sociales, económicos y políticos

Formalidades e informalidades globais: transformações sociais, econômicas e políticas

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Abstract

Labor informality in Latin America is neither an institutional anomaly nor a premodern remnant; it is the contemporary mode of economic and social governance in the Global South. This editorial proposes a structural reading of informality as a political device that secures the competitiveness of global capitalism through the externalization of risk and the dispossession of rights. The evidence presented in the dossier shows that the phenomenon takes multiple forms, platformization of domestic work, outsourcing

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of security, rural women's overload, subjectivation of precariousness, and devaluation of health care, but all refer back to the same logic: the erosion of social citizenship and the hollowing out of work as a right. Informality is not the absence of the State, but its selective and functional presence that enables the transfer of value from feminized, rural, and peripheral sectors to economic elites. In this way, the real economy of care, community health, and everyday subsistence sustains what statistics fail to capture. Contemporary struggles over work go beyond the factory and shift toward social reproduction, territories, and daily life, which compels a rethinking of "decent work" as a democratic horizon rather than a contractual residue. Recovering the political centrality of care and social reproduction requires dismantling the fiction of informality as an "exception" and naming it instead as a core structure of peripheral capitalism. Where rights recede, there is no void: there is dispossession.

Keywords: informal economy; labor precarization; reproductive labor; Global South; care; social citizenship.

Resumen

La informalidad laboral en América Latina no es una anomalía institucional ni un residuo premoderno, es la forma contemporánea de gobierno económico y social del Sur Global. Esta editorial propone una lectura estructural de la informalidad como dispositivo político que garantiza la competitividad del capitalismo global mediante la externalización del riesgo y la desposesión de derechos. La evidencia presentada en el dossier muestra que el fenómeno adopta múltiples expresiones —plataformización del trabajo doméstico, tercerización de la seguridad, sobrecarga femenina rural, subjetivación de la precariedad, y desvalorización del cuidado sanitario—, pero todas remiten a una misma lógica: la reducción de la ciudadanía social y el vaciamiento del trabajo como derecho. La informalidad no es ausencia de Estado, sino presencia selectiva y funcional a la transferencia de valor desde los sectores feminizados, rurales y periféricos hacia las élites económicas. De este modo, la economía real del cuidado, la salud comunitaria y la subsistencia cotidiana sostienen lo que las estadísticas no reconocen. Las luchas contemporáneas por el trabajo superan la fábrica y se desplazan hacia la reproducción social, los territorios y la vida cotidiana, lo que obliga a repensar la noción de «trabajo digno» como horizonte democrático y no como residuo contractual. Recuperar la centralidad política del cuidado y la reproducción social implica desmontar la ficción de la informalidad como una «excepción», y nombrarla como una estructura central del capitalismo periférico. Allí donde el derecho retrocede, no hay vacío: hay despojo.

Palabras clave: economía informal; precarización laboral; trabajo reproductivo; Sur Global; cuidados; ciudadanía social.

Resumo

A informalidade laboral na América Latina não é uma anomalia institucional nem um resquício pré-moderno; é a forma contemporânea de governo econômico e social do Sul Global. Esta editorial propõe uma leitura estrutural da informalidade como um dispositivo político que garante a competitividade do capitalismo global mediante a externalização do risco e a despossessão de direitos. As evidências apresentadas no dossiê mostram que o fenômeno assume múltiplas expressões, plataforma do trabalho doméstico, terceirização da segurança, sobrecarga feminina rural, subjetivação da precariedade e desvalorização do cuidado em saúde, mas todas remetem a uma mesma lógica: a redução da cidadania social e o esvaziamento do trabalho como direito. A informalidade não representa ausência do Estado, mas sim sua presença seletiva e funcional à transferência de valor dos setores feminizados, rurais e periféricos para as elites econômicas. Desse modo, a economia real do cuidado, a saúde comunitária e a subsistência cotidiana sustentam aquilo que as estatísticas não reconhecem. As lutas contemporâneas pelo trabalho ultrapassam a fábrica e deslocam-se para a reprodução social, os territórios e a vida cotidiana, o que obriga a repensar a noção de “trabalho digno” como horizonte democrático e não como resíduo contratual. Recuperar a centralidade política do cuidado e da reprodução social implica desmontar a ficção da informalidade como uma “exceção” e nomeá-la como uma estrutura central do capitalismo periférico. Onde o direito recua, não há vazio: há despojo.

Palavras-chave: economia informal; precarização laboral; trabalho reproductivo; Sul Global; cuidados; cidadania social.

Informality can no longer be understood or defined as a distortion of the labor market or as a simple “regulatory deficit”, but rather as a complex and deliberate architecture of global capitalism that produces and reproduces social, economic, geographic, and epistemic hierarchies between the North and the South (Rojas, 2022). Within this framework, the informal is not the pathological counterpart of the formal; it is its structural condition of possibility, revealing the decline of North-Global capitalism and the fact that its “legality” and “stability” rest systematically on *chupacabras* logics, those based on precarization, outsourcing, and the erosion of the rights of subjects from peripheral countries. The dominant economic narrative has attempted to reduce this discussion to a matter of institutional design or State insufficiency, yet such a depoliticized reading conceals the central fact: informality is a device for the global management of inequality (Rojas, 2022). What is usually presented as a deficiency is, in fact, a political strategy.

A report issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) indicates that 93% of informal employment is concentrated in developing countries, and Latin America, once the laboratory of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) for *justicialista* elites, and later the neoliberal laboratory of liberal elites (ECLAC, 2022; ILO, 2024; Luque *et al.*, 2025), has become today the structural laboratory of post-neoliberal precarization. This economic articulation is inseparable from a political shift: the management of the labor force is reorganized not around full employment but around the methodical dispossession of rights, time, and social recognition. The boundary between formal and informal is no longer juridical but geopolitical: subjects in the Global South are born closer to the abandonment enacted by their *chupacabras* democracies than to the legal protection of their human rights. For this reason, it is essential to recognize that the framework shaping this dossier, coordinated in its call by PhD Candidate Moisés Rojas, is not merely academic, but also historical and civilizational. It is not a collection of sectoral labor studies, but a critical cartography of informality as the contemporary governing regime of the South. Neoliberalism does not “tolerate” informality: it needs it, produces it, designs it, reproduces it, administers it, and then normalizes it through discourses that individualize labor responsibility and moralize survival (Rojas, 2022).

Latin America has been constructed as a functional periphery, but today it is also an epistemic and political periphery: what is experienced here as labor precariousness is, in reality, the “undeclared mode” of global capitalism. Stable contractual forms are the historical exception, not the rule; the liberal myth of wage-based citizenship does not correspond to the life trajectories of the vast majority of the world’s population. Thus, informality is not a labor issue but a democratic one: where there are no minimum guarantees of subsistence, full

citizenship cannot exist. Precarization also functions as a method of political silencing. The region operates as a triple laboratory: economic (dispossession), juridical (semi-legalized deregulation), and subjective (moral normalization of scarcity). Informality not only privatizes risk, shifting it from the State to the individual, but also privatizes guilt: it transforms survival into a “personal” problem rather than the result of a structural order of domination. This mechanism explains why meritocratic rhetoric coexists without contradiction with pauperization: precariousness becomes naturalized. This dossier departs from this stark evidence: informality is not an accidental flaw of the system; it is its contemporary mode of governance (Rojas, 2022). Work has become a territory of silent colonization, where platforms, outsourcing, care economies, rurality, and dispossession converge in a single pattern of rights degradation. The central question organizing the contributions gathered here is not “how to correct” informality, but “what form of domination sustains it and against whom it operates.”

The genealogy of this phenomenon cannot be explained solely by macro-economic transformations, but by a long political process. The fragmentation of the working class is not a spontaneous effect, but the result of dispersal policies: subjective, territorial, juridical, and relational. Precarization occurs by dismantling bonds: the collective is atomized, the communal liquefied, the legal bureaucratized, and subsistence turned into an individual itinerary. The Global North continues to function as a center of calculation that externalizes the costs of social reproduction onto the feminized bodies of the South, impoverished territories, and invisibilized rural economies. The platform is the new name of the colony: an interface that organizes work without face, without history, without rights, and without citizenship. What is decisive is that this labor coloniality does not present itself as oppression but as “innovation,” “flexibility,” or “modernization”.

Informal economy has become the real matrix of employment, yet it continues to be labeled as an “exception”; meanwhile, stable employment has become the exception but is still named as the “norm.” This deliberate mismatch produces an ideological effect: it erases structural violence and portrays precarization as mere conjuncture. Informality is therefore not a residue of the past but the economic organization of the present. It is an accumulation regime that operates through diffuse extraction of value: it extracts time, care, emotional availability, mobility, forced flexibility, and fragments of life. Unlike Fordism, it no longer concentrates workers, it disperses them. It no longer regulates, it outsources. It no longer promises stability, it manages uncertainty as a structural condition. There lies its political efficacy (Rojas, 2022).

This framework explains why most Latin American countries do not “move out” of informality despite numerous reforms: because the issue is not public policy but geopolitical position within the international division of labor. While

the North externalizes social costs to maintain its fiscal and symbolic stability, the South internalizes adjustment, flexibilization, and the transfer of unpaid value. The minimum wage in the South is the invisible counterpart of consumption in the North. Without exported precariousness, there would be no imported abundance. Neoliberal globalization did not homogenize the world; it hierarchized it, and did so through labor. There is no informality without coloniality, just as there is no “competitive” market without differential regimes of dispossession. Global economic governance has been relentlessly asymmetric, and these imbalances are not institutional accidents but the structural expression of a world-economy in which exploitation travels not upward but always downward and outward. The South pays the bill of global capitalism: it pays with deferred rights, absorbed life-time, and fractured trajectories.

This dossier does not merely measure informality; it categorizes it as a social system. Informality is an order, a grammar, a technique of government, a way of distributing suffering and uncertainty, and above all a moral frontier: it defines who deserves protection and who may be discarded without social scandal. When the majority of the population belongs to that margin, we are no longer dealing with an “alternative economy”, but with the structural norm of late capitalism. From this point, it becomes essential to examine how informality reorganizes the social in every dimension: gender, territory, health, care, rurality, migration, security, community labor, and emotional labor. If formal employment is no longer the center of social reproduction, then the unit of analysis is not the factory, it is life itself. Precariousness shifts from the workplace to everyday existence.

This epistemic turn also reconfigures social conflict. The struggle for rights is no longer waged solely within classic union frameworks, because the working class, dispersed, outsourced, indebted, and feminized, no longer recognizes itself only in factories or industrial production centers. It is now deployed in street markets, households, fields, digital mediation, hospitals, urban mobility, and the care practices that sustain the common but remain unnamed. Fragmentation has not eliminated conflict, but it has dispersed it politically. For this reason, this editorial situates itself in a horizon that requires rethinking the question: What counts as work today, and who is socially recognized as a worker? This question can no longer be answered through formal legal definitions, because material reality exceeds the law. Labor norms remain anchored in stable wages, but societies no longer are. The law protects what no longer exists and neglects what sustains life. The contradiction is stark.

The Global South does not face only economic gaps; it faces gaps of recognition. The issue is not the lack of formal jobs, but the surplus of unrecognized work. The boundary between employment and work becomes political: there is work without employment, effort without wages, production without rights,

responsibility without protection. One can work without fitting any juridical category, but one cannot live without bodies that sustain social reproduction. Productive labor is recognized; reproductive labor is invisibilized. This fracture produces structural inequality. Informality operates as political pedagogy: it teaches subjects to naturalize that their time does not belong to them, that their care has no value, and that their agency is not a right but a favor. This silent disciplining prevents precarization from generating immediate rupture; instead, it produces administered resignation (Segato, 2016). Neoliberalism does not triumph because it persuades, it triumphs because it exhausts.

At this point, it becomes clear why informality is directly tied to citizenship: precariousness not only deteriorates material conditions but also horizons of recognition. A subject without stable rights can scarcely contest the public sphere; they are confined to mere survival. Informality is, at its core, a policy of social depoliticization (Rojas, 2022). When survival occupies the place of deliberation, democracy is emptied of substance and of hope.

This diagnosis prepares the entry point for the contributions gathered in this dossier, which do not merely describe labor phenomena, but allow a reading of the political map of precarization in contemporary Latin America. From the technological mediation of domestic work to impoverished rurality; from the privatization of security to the contradiction between perception and reality in employment quality; from mental health sustained by students in clinical training to the social reconfiguration of care in nursing, the articles included here constitute empirical evidence of a single global architecture: the organized dispossession of everyday life. The structural architecture of informality acquires a human face when observed in the concrete sectors where it materializes, the bodies upon which it is imposed, and the forms of time, mobility, and vulnerability it captures. The first level of reading in the dossier shows that informality is not homogeneous: it adopts different logics depending on the social space where it operates, yet it always preserves the same underlying traits, lack of protection, deregulation, transfer of risk, and devaluation of labor. The articles in this issue demonstrate empirically that informality is a system, not merely an economic condition.

On the first axis is the study by Niño and Viana (2026) on domestic work mediated by digital platforms. This is a clear example of the “new frontier” of precarization: the home transformed into a productive space without legal recognition. The so-called “technological intermediation” does not modernize labor relations, it externalizes them: the algorithm replaces the contractual link, transforming employment into an automated and faceless service. Here we observe how neoliberalism operates not only at the material level but also at the symbolic one: it calls “independence” what is isolation, “flexibility” what is vulnerability,

and “opportunity” what is mere survival. Digital mediation thus becomes a device that erases the employer and liquefies all social obligation of recognition.

A second axis is Jasso’s (2026) study of labor informality among private security forces in Mexico. This case is particularly illustrative because it dismantles the myth that informality is concentrated only in “low-skilled” sectors: here we see how a sector that, due to its nature as public security, should be heavily regulated, ends up operating under conditions of extreme vulnerability. Security, an essential function of the State, is outsourced, but upon outsourcing it becomes precarious, and when precarious, the rule of law freezes. Informality thus produces a double asymmetry: it dispossesses subjects and weakens the very notion of social citizenship. The implicit message is devastating: not even “strategic” work guarantees rights. Precarity is no longer an accident, it is the rule.

The third article in the dossier, by Cazares-Palacios *et al.* (2026), reveals something even deeper: informality is not only a labor condition but a dispossession of life itself. In rural territories, informality manifests as triple exclusion, economic, territorial, and in terms of care. There, women’s labor sustains households and food economies, yet remains invisible because it does not enter State measurement frameworks. The pandemic did not create vulnerability; it exposed it. What broke was not the social fabric, but the thin layer of illusion that covered it. This text confirms that contemporary capitalism does not extract only labor power: it extracts life-time, emotional availability, and the energy of community reproduction. What is expropriated in the countryside is not only income; it is agency.

While these first three articles describe informality as extraction, the work of Ríos, Aristizábal, and Bermúdez (2026) shows the epistemological fissure of the model: “subjective employment quality” appears high while objective quality is low. This mismatch confirms the ideological core of neoliberalism: the substitution of rights with expectations and citizenship with self-perception. If material reality does not improve but perception does, then control no longer operates through the disciplining of bodies but through the shaping of subjectivities. The precarized worker learns to consider survival as “luck” and exploitation as “merit.” The contrast between subjective perception and material reality, demonstrated by Ríos, Aristizábal, and Bermúdez (2026), confirms that informality now operates not only as an economic regime but as an affective and symbolic one: it captures not only labor power but imaginaries. Hegemony ceases to rely exclusively on wage regulation and begins to rely on the administration of expectations. Where social justice is absent, symbolic satisfaction is manufactured. Dignity is replaced by endurance.

The final two contributions in the dossier reveal the deepest core: the struggle over the social value of care and living labor. Echeverry *et al.* (2026) demonstrate

that even in university contexts, supposedly protected, institutionalized, and formative, the emotional and health support provided rests on highly feminized and undervalued practices (Fraser, 2013; Federici, 2018). The “teaching-service” model functions because there are students who sustain the mental health of others without equivalent recognition. Care appears as “learning”, even though it is in fact labor: affective, clinical, and social labor. The case of post-pandemic nursing reinforces this line: society discovered the centrality of care but did not modify its structure of recognition. It applauded publicly but did not dignify materially. This is the most brutal paradox of contemporary capitalism: what sustains life is the least remunerated, the least protected, and the most feminized. Nurses and caregivers, like rural vendors, domestic workers, and outsourced guards, are not informal because law is lacking, but because inequality abounds.

What unites all these manuscripts is not the labor theme, but political unveiling: informality functions as the moral boundary of recognition. It determines who counts as a citizen and who as disposable labor; who deserves security and who must provide it without receiving it; who may be a rights-bearing subject and who is reduced to an invisible social support. This dossier demonstrates that precariousness is the new grammar of governance in the Global South (Luque *et al.*, 2025).

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