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The Modes of Governance in Informal Trading Management in the Inner City of Johannesburg

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This paper explores the modes of governance in informal trading policy in the inner city of Johannesburg. It is based on a study on the practices and agencies shaping the different, sometimes contradictory, empirical models of informal trading management which result on the ground from the interaction of multiple and plural local actors and the different strategies employed by informal traders in engaging the state.

The argument is that Johannesburg municipal authorities do not govern the complexity of informal trading in the streets of the inner city, following an open and coherent strategy from the prolific production of policy documents. But they exert their power and control over traders, putting forth a contradictory double agenda where the rhetoric of participation contrasts with the repressive enforcement of bylaws and historical continuities of co-optative strategies are reproduced in public policy.

The municipality of Johannesburg presents a complex system of governance of informal trading where multiple actors interact at different scales in different phases of the policy-making process and through different practices. Different layers of relations between actors and interests correspond at each different phase of the process. As corporate and/or political interests at stake rise, so the participation and influence of informal traders decrease and the locus of power recedes from the ground.

The City of Johannesburg is basically trying to implement a management model which differentiates between informal traders and supports the development of only the structured categories of trading – ‘permanent’ and ‘linear’ markets. These deliberately restrictive practices generate a vicious circle of mismanagement that Bénit-Gbaffou (2015) has termed the ‘public production of scarcity’.

The result is an asymmetric governance functional to a neoliberalisation of the urban policies which produces a selective incorporation of informal traders from above and from below. On the one hand, intolerant forms of space control, which can be defined in terms of a ‘neocolonial reordering of space’ (Steck et al., 2013), reproduce historical patterns of repression and co-optation which limit and fragment the informal traders’ agency; on the other hand, variegated interests and actors emerge and organise autonomously on the ground in new entrepreneurial models of informal trading management, within a ‘neoliberal reordering of space’ (Steck et al., 2013). These new models are driven mainly by the private sector, which partially and exclusively integrates a minority of street traders in the city improvement districts (CIDs), while the majority of them are relegated to unmanaged and congested areas of the inner city where they are excluded from full access to social and economic citizenship.

The chaotic mismanagement of the municipal authorities and the emergence of a new entrepreneurialist model of informal trading management is hardly conducive to the agency of traders’ organisations and the creation of social movements. The ability to engage the state does not always foster collective political action because conditions, modalities and the timing of engagement are more often decided by state or private sector actors, particularly in a context of deliberately fragmented and asymmetric urban governance. The more informal traders have restricted access to the state, the less space there is for negotiation and collective representation that can challenge the state and change policies. Nonetheless, informal traders in Johannesburg have been able to open and reconfigure spaces; to combine various strategies in engaging with different levels and authorities of the state in what we can consider a ‘selective incorporation from below’; and to shape new, although embryonic, forms of collective voice in order to claim their rights and to protect their activities.