Preface

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Preface

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This book invites you on a voyage of discovery, to explore society’s open secrets, to comprehend unwritten rules and to uncover informal practices. Broadly defined as ‘ways of getting things done’, these informal yet powerful practices tend to escape articulation in official discourse. We have identified unique research into such practices across area and across discipline, which charts the grey zones and blurred boundaries, and distinguished types of ambivalence and contexts of complexity. Our Global Informality Project database is searchable by region, keyword or type of practice. Do explore what works and how, where and why!

The informal practices revealed in this book include emotion-driven exchanges (from gifts or favours to tribute for services), values-based practices of solidarity and belonging enacting multiple identities, interest-driven know-how (from informal welfare to informal employment and entrepreneurship, often not seen or appreciated as expertise), and power-driven forms of co-optation and control. The paradox – or not – of the invisibility of these informal practices is their ubiquity. Expertly practised by insiders but often hidden from outsiders, informal practices are, as this book shows, deeply rooted all over the world.

Fostering informal ties with ‘godfathers’ in Montenegro, ‘dear brothers’ in Finland and ‘little cousins’ in Switzerland – known locally as kumstvo, Hyvä veli, and Vetterliwirtschaft – as well as Klungel (solidarity) in Cologne, Germany, compadrazgo (reciprocity) in Chile, or blat (networks of favours) in Russia, can make a world of difference to your well-being. Yet just like family relations, social ties not only enable but also limit individual decisions, behaviour and rights, as is revealed in the entries on janteloven (aversion to individuality) in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, or krugovaia poruka (joint responsibility) in Russia and Europe.

The Global Informality Project (GIP) assembles pioneering research into the grey areas of informality, known yet unarticulated, enabling yet constraining, moral to ‘us’ yet immoral to ‘them’, divisive and hard to measure or integrate into policy. While typically unmentioned in official
discourse, these practices are deeply woven into the fabric of society and are as pervasive as the usage of the terms, or language games, associated with them: pulling strings in the UK, red envelopes in China, l’argent du carburant paid to customs officials in sub-Saharan Africa, coffee money (duit kopi) paid to traffic policemen in Malaysia, and many others (Blundo, Olivier de Sardan, 2007: 132). While they may be taken for granted and familiar, such practices can also be uncomfortable to discuss and difficult to study.

Entries from all five continents presented in these volumes are samples of the truly global and ever-growing collection online (www.informality.com). Practices are captured in the language of participants, local jargons that we interpret as ‘language games’, shared, understood and played, to follow Ludwig Wittgenstein’s take on practices. Based on vernacular knowledge and assembled locally, our global collection of case studies allows us to view practices in a comparative context, without diminishing their diversity.

A unique feature of this book is that it includes material that previously has not been seen together. Each entry in this collection, describing the nitty-gritty of getting things done in a specific context, is fascinating in its own right. However, when these practices are clustered into a wider ‘family’ and looked at as constellations, new patterns of regularity emerge. Such patterns, shared by some entries but lacking in others, tie entries together in a way that is best grasped by the notion of ‘family likeness’ or ‘family resemblance’ originally enunciated by Wittgenstein (1969: 75, 118). Hereby we discover a complicated network of similarities and relationships, overlapping and criss-crossing (Wittgenstein 1969: 75, 118, sections 66–7). In such conceptualisation of family resemblance, its ambivalent nature – being similar and yet different, whereby similarities ‘crop up and disappear’ – is central (Wittgenstein 1953). Our dataset of practices, in all its richness and complexity, enables us to identify such ‘differing similarities’ in the four modes of human interaction – re-distribution, solidarity, market and domination – and to establish patterns of ambivalence in the workings of doublethink, double standards, double deed and double incentives.

This encyclopaedia is a path-breaking collection of informal practices that reveals a number of discoveries:

• The bottom-up comparative analysis of practices from all over the world questions common assumptions on informality and reframes its links to corruption, poverty and development, morality and oppressive regimes.
• The book highlights the role of ambivalence and complexity in the workings of human societies. Neither hidden nor fully articulated, neither particular nor universal, the patterns of ambivalence – substantive, normative, functional or motivational – prove essential for our understanding of fringes, grey zones and blurred boundaries, which are themselves central for the world to go round.

• It opens up new policy dimensions regarding such issues as corruption, social capital, trust, risk, mobility and migration, consumption, shortages, barter, survival strategies, resistance capacity, alternative currencies, informal economies, remittance economies, labour markets, entrepreneurship and democracy.

• It illustrates the potential of ‘network expertise’, that is, cross-disciplinary and cross-area inquiry enabled by the network of researchers. Where the disciplinary methods tend to focus selectively on political, economic, or social aspects, the ‘networked’ perspective provides insights into the complexity of the forces at play.

• Although informal patterns, identified in these volumes, do not admit to quantitative analysis as readily as other phenomena, they have potential to become an explanatory tool for understanding social and cultural complexity and a basis for crowdsourcing in further data collection.

Pavel Filonov’s *Formula of Spring* (on the cover) is an inspiration for these volumes. It tackles the paradox of the abstract and the natural, it formalises what is impossible to formalise, and it visualises the invisible, hidden or taken-for-granted. Filonov’s personal story points to the importance of formal constraints for generating unintended consequence: his ‘anatomic’ artistic style was driven by his repeated failure to pass anatomy at art school and his unique, after years of study, knowledge of the subject. Filonov’s canvas is the best proxy to the social and cultural complexity we aim to capture.

What is achieved in these volumes has been possible thanks to a remarkable collaboration of scholars across disciplines and area studies: sociologists, anthropologists, economists, historians and political scientists. Without their combined scholarly commitment, the ambition to portray at least a fragment of the world’s social and cultural complexity would never have materialised. The majority of entries are based on original ethnographic research and materials collected through fieldwork conducted worldwide, as well as secondary data analysis, investigative
journalism and media research through computer-aided technologies and human-assisted analysis. Collectively, it has taken the authors of these volumes more than a thousand years of research to build up this ‘informal view of the world’, itself only a beginning to our understanding of the ambivalent patterns of social and cultural complexity, and only a dot on the canvas by Pavel Filonov.