

What do classes look like in so-called 'informal' or 'regional' economies?

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If current social theory is anything to go by, today there is virtually no realm of the social world where class is pertinent, but even at a time when social enquiry was much more sympathetic to the notion, the informal economy seemed to provide a challenge. Everything seemed just too messy, too impermanent, too volatile. Yet there is another way of looking at this. Following Keith Hart's initial use of the term, the "informal economy" was mostly the concern of practitioners and academics working on development. As such understandings of the informal economy were closely wrapped up with assessments of its worth as a good soldier on the march toward higher levels of development. There are two overlapping meanings for the term economy: one is 'efficient use, to achieve maximum effect for minimum effort', and the other is, 'the production distribution and consumption of goods and services'. Fixation on 'development' meant that the differentiations inherent in the latter were treated as externalities in the frenetic pursuit of the former.

Portes et al define the informal economy as a kind of economy that is "unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated." But "unregulated" is a problem here. Economy is achieved through an endless dialectic between the pursuit of energy (broadly defined) and its harnessing or regulation (of river flows, of fertility, of labour etc) – extremes of creativity and of discipline. Most, though by no means all, informal economies are found in settings of large pools of labour and small pools of capital. With irregular, unstable and uneven means for expanding productivity through capital, the production of surpluses relies on the particular ways of working out the tension between the regulation and the creativity above all *of labour*. Both the emergence and the incoherence of class can be explored through this frame. I do this here through the use of material from the Vega Baja del Segura, in Spain.