

# Manufacturing informality: Global production networks and the reproduction of informalized labour regimes in Europe's peripheries

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Global Value Chains (GVCs) are today a major driver of employment, and yet GVCs jobs are very often precarious, unstable, and informalized. How can we explain the persistence of such informalization dynamics within modern, globalized, production processes?

If earlier GVC approaches focussed on firm-firm relations overlooking labour and employment, later perspectives showed that asymmetrical governance and peripheral integration are major drivers of employment deterioration. Consistently, critical Global Production Networks (GPNs) approaches showed how the adverse incorporation within global productions, the unequal class relations within firms and regions, and multiple dynamics of uneven development, workforce segmentation and hierarchization crucially shape employment relations. Nonetheless, only a few of these works explicitly problematize the role of informalization dynamics in GPNs, and most of them focus on structural factors of informalization, neglecting the role of actors in actively reproducing informality.

To address such gap, this paper reframes informalization as a tool for labour control, and investigates how informalization - while influenced by structural economic pressures and local socio-institutional contexts - is ultimately shaped by the employer-employee relations at the workplace.

Combining GPNs analysis and Labour Process Theory (LPT), the paper builds a novel *extended structuralist approach* to investigate informalization persistence in the garment-footwear production networks in Italy and Albania.

By analysing the situated bargaining powers of managers and workers within firms embedded in a common GPN but integrated in different institutional contexts, the paper teases out the mechanisms of informality persistence and variegation and explains the emergence of hegemonic and coercive informalization processes. The study captures how the structural pressures deriving from the governance of a globalized production network interact with different institutional contexts. It then shows how the position firms hold in the chains and the uneven patterns of workers' resistance to informalization determine the variegated informalized labour regimes that emerge within the GPN.

Building on a multi-sited qualitative fieldwork involving 118 informants among workers, unionists, managers, labour inspectors, NGO representatives and other stakeholders, I show that informalization dynamics emerge and persist as a response to competitive chains' pressures only as long as workers are unable or unwilling to resist them. Yet, the situated bargaining power relations at each node of the chain - as shaped by chain's pressures and local institutional contexts - crucially determine the predominant forms of informalization leading to either coercive and despotic, or hegemonic and negotiated, informalized labour regimes.

**Primary author:** BAGNARDI, Francesco (European University Institute)

**Presenter:** BAGNARDI, Francesco (European University Institute)

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