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# FROM SECTORS TO CIRCUITS: RE-DESCRIBING SENEGAMBIAN IN/FORMAL PRACTICES IN EUROPE, AND BEYOND

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## ABSTRACT

While earlier accounts approach the informal economy as a sign of underdevelopment, particularly in the Global South, recent studies tend to re-frame informal economic practices by acknowledging how it allows various actors to create spaces to manoeuvre. In this context, scholars emphasise the multiple linkages between formal and informal economic domains. To push this notion of intersected practices further, we move away from the notion of the ‘informal sector’ – as a domain with clear demarcations and introduce the notion of in/formal circuits. The latter highlights the multiple interrelations between activities and fluid geographies involved. From this starting point we analyse the socio-economic activities of Senegalese and Gambian migrants living in Europe. Based on ethnographic fieldwork that started in Barcelona but also involved other places, we illustrate the ways they navigate in/formal circuits and the extent to which these navigations come with mobility within Europe, and beyond.

**Key words:** in/formal circuits; Spain; ethnography; African migrants; urban economy; mobility

## INTRODUCTION

Granted, whatever exists in the city is a manifestation of something, and that something is usually a convergence of multiple forces and backgrounds. But that something also exists in an immeasurable series of relationship with other things ... [T]he interfaces where all of these ‘somethings’ intersect can be the site for re-description (Simone & Pieterse 2017, p. 11).

In their recent book, two progressive urban thinkers writing from the Global South, Simone and Pieterse (2017), challenge their readers to pay better attention to the details of urban life. By looking closer to details, as they argue, we are better equipped to compose knowledge of

what urban life can be as well as of the multiplicity of what urban life actually is. This eventuality of ‘what can be’ does not point to the method of future-oriented forecasting, it rather reflects an aspiration of ‘seeing in what exists something other than what we think we are seeing’ (Simone & Pieterse 2017, p. 11). This is what they call the method of re-description.

This paper embraces this starting point and dives into the details of socio-economic life of Senegambian<sup>1</sup> migrants in, and beyond, the city of Barcelona. Its main aim is to introduce a re-described notion of informality. That is to say that we do not only move away from the notion of an ‘informal sector’ that can be easily distinguished from the formal economic domain – a notion that is refuted already by studies in the 1980s – but we also

seek ways to unpack some of the mundane entanglements of urban life at the margins of European society. With the ‘margins’ we do not mean a social position of structural and fixed precarity, nor a concrete geographical space within a city. The term margins rather points to a position that is characterised by both uncertainty and exclusion as well as manoeuvrability and mobility. This particular double connotation of the margins helps us to better understand the various ways people ‘get by’ (van Nieuwenhuyze 2009) through activities that have both economic and social components. It also articulates how people’s activities in one place relate to other places, how urban practices and rural practices relate to each other, and how these practices constantly lead to configurations of mobility and stasis. To construct this re-description, we coin the notion of ‘in/formal circuits’, which stresses multiple links between the formal and informal and emphasises that much of these practices are on the move. In so doing, we create a conceptual link between urban theory on informality on the one hand and recent developments in transnational migration studies that focus on so-called affective circuits (Cole & Groes 2016), on the other.

The empirical findings of this paper are based on two interrelated ethnographic projects. The first project has a mobile research design and follows the im/mobility practices of West Africans in Europe over time and through space for a period of four years (see Schapendonk 2020). One of the entry points of this mobile project was the city of Barcelona. The second project – which can be considered a sub-project of the former – was designed as a single sited ethnography in the same city. It dived further into the lived realities of SeneGambians in this particular city. The paper starts with a literature review on informality that works towards the main concept of in/formal circuits. After a brief contextualisation of the position of SeneGambian migrants and a methodological note, we dive into two interrelated components of in/formal circuits. The first discusses the multiplicity of socio-economic lives and seeks to understand how different practices of SeneGambians blend into each other and how the same people execute different roles at the same time. The second component

analyses the role of mobility in these in/formal circuits. This mobility is shaping the circuits in the city of Barcelona, but also well beyond this metropolis.

The conclusion of our paper leads to two interrelated arguments. First, in line with Simone and Pieterse (2017) we claim that the in/formal circuits are not purely social-economic phenomena, but also include a political connotation in relation to the everyday production of urban space. Second, the notion of in/formal circuits complicates our understanding of the beginning and end points of economic practices. This leads to a final reflection on ways forward in terms of methodological approaches to study in/formal practices.

### **FROM INFORMAL SECTOR TO IN/FORMAL CIRCUITS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The concept of informal economy has developed over time from a static approach with a clear division between informality and formal economies, towards an approach that is sensitive to the multiple linkages between those sectors (see d’Alençon *et al.* 2018 for a discussion on the origins of the term informality). The concept of informal economy is closely related to the work of Keith Hart in the 1970s. It was mainly based on specific modernistic interpretations of how urban economies could or should develop. The informal economy was thereby seen as mode of transition towards a more formal economy. Another important author, being embedded in the dependency tradition, is Birkbeck (1979), who outlines garbage pickers’ activities at Cali’s garbage dump site, to which he metaphorically refers to as the ‘informal factory’ of Cali. In this reading, the garbage pickers are positioned as ‘self-employed proletarians’, as they are not employed by factories, but indirectly do work for them:

They may be in a position to decide when to work and when not to, but the critical factor is control over the prices of recuperated materials, and that control very definitely lies with the industrial consumers. (Birkbeck 1979, p. 1174)

This element of control is what Birkbeck (1979) calls the ‘illusion to be self-employed’, by which he thus bridges informal and formal sectors. While his detailed description of the garbage pickers’ activities, and their unwritten rules, start from a rather different theoretical approach that we advocate here, his work is an early attempt to explicitly link informality with mobility and multi-locality.

The presumed distinction between formal and informal economies has been further criticised in other studies (Tokman 1978; and more recently by Portes & Haller 2010; Koster & Nuijten 2016; Thieme 2018). Already in the 1980s, it has been noted that we cannot speak of *the* informal sector for its spatial and sectoral diversity as well as its multiple linkages with formal activities (van Geuns *et al.* 1987). These insights also help us to move away from the normative discussion whether informality is a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing (Lindell 2010; Neuwirth 2013).

Portes and Haller (2010) perceive formal, informal, and illegal activities as a continuum in which the differences are marked in the process of production instead of in the outcome of a final product. The different steps in a production process (or in doing business) can thus vary in (il)legality and (in)formality. The paradoxical character of informal economic activities is also stressed by Portes and Haller (2010), in which informality undermines the state, while it has significant positive impacts on the state at the same time. Informality could for example contribute to the political stability of a country or a region. Besides, informality creates space for experimenting with creative ideas, which can only be formalised at a later stage. Starting entrepreneurs can kick off directly by keeping activities informal, without the need to wait on necessary paper work (bureaucracy) or costly licences. This space can be beneficial for entrepreneurs, and this flexibility is put under pressure when activities are being formalised. Informality is thus not always related to marginalisation and socio-economic exclusion (Portes & Haller 2010).

However critical their intervention is, Portes and Haller (2010) still portray the informal as a specific economy – a domain with demarcations. Other scholars tend to

move away from this domain perspective and approach informality as a practice (Simone 2004; d’Alençon *et al.* 2018). The notion of in/formal circuits adds to this latter view by stressing the blurry character of presupposed domains. It is thereby important to note that in/formal economic activities are not only being performed in the so-called Global South. Van Geuns *et al.* (1987) describe lively informal economic practices in the Netherlands around construction, car repair, agriculture and do-it-yourself neighbourhood assistance – that without doubt still exists to a large extent today. For the Spanish case, it is documented that informal practices are key to understand the recent economic history of this particular country (Benton 1990; Baldwin-Edwards & Arango 1999). To put it differently, although we are sensitive to the continuity of economic practices of our informants, it would be a simplistic misconception to think that migrants imported the in/formalities at stake. In addition to this historicised acknowledgement of the role of informality in Europe, it is also relevant to note that uncertainty in the labour market is increasingly normalised in this part of the world (Thieme 2018). This uncertainty induces in/formal practices.

Thus, when Thieme (2018) speaks of *hustling* as a collective condition of individual insecurity that is disproportionately distributed among young people, she connects realities of the Global South with that of the Global North. Moreover, besides the issue of increasing uncertainty and the responses that relate to in/formality, recent national and transnational initiatives like online marketplaces or platform economies show that in/formality is also an integral part of important economic developments in the Global North. Informality can be in fact an ultimate match with neoliberal policies and/or policies focusing on the sharing economy, that both take bottom-up processes as a starting point.

**In/formal circuits** – The in/formal is not bounded to specific places, it easily moves across and circumvent geographical boundaries (Simone 2004). For this reason, we shift the discussion from in/formality as a specific sector in a particular place to a

more fluid geography of in/formality that includes transnational connectivity and flows of money, goods and information. Some scholars dealing with informality, write about informal circuits – but they never really theorise this notion (Mauri 1987; Lee *et al.* 2008; see for an exception Schmoll & Semi 2013). Other studies in different fields use circuits as a notion that diffuses presumed binaries (see Ateljevic 2000 on production/consumption in the context of tourism, see Hughes 2000 in the context of commodity networks in cut flower trade). The concept of circuits also entered recently the field of transnational migration (Cole & Groes 2016). In this context, the notion of circuits is preferred over the concepts of chains and flows for its emphasis on circulation and deterritorialising dynamics. With an emphasis on social networks, or what Cole and Groes (2016) call ‘affect’, the notion of circuits connects emotional elements to materiality – two elements that shape social relations between migrants and the people in their networks. In their conceptualisation, the term circuits, not only highlights the movements of people, information, goods, money and emotions, it also includes the fact that circuits are monitored and regulated by different actors involved. In so doing, affective circuits can also be characterised by immobility, when specific movements are being blocked, and controlled, when people’s whereabouts are monitored. In sum, various actors can encourage or restrict connections within affective circuits (Cole & Groes 2016).

Based on the work of Cole and Groes (2016), we realise that circuits are characterised by a constant alternation of im/mobility, in which actors interact in complex and shifting geographical formations. We apply the same interpretation of circuits in our discussions on in/formality in order to be sensitive to the multiplicity of activities of actors, and the accompanied mobility in various directions. In this light, economic performances – and doing business in particular – is a process of constant navigation (Vigh 2006, 2009; Schapendonk 2018) through social and economic relations. Social navigation, in that sense, refers to people’s lives in motion but also to the dynamic, uncertain and ‘moving’ institutional and social

settings they relate to. For this reason, Vigh (2009) uses the term ‘motion squared’. Social relations, trust, and verbal promises are key components of these circuits (van Nieuwenhuyze 2009), but they should not be seen as fixed and taken-for-granted.

The circulations of trading activities in the Mediterranean are detailed and captured in the mobile ethnography of Schmoll and Semi (2013). They show how different circuits are historically embedded and are currently characterised by a high notion of invisibility. Schmoll and Semi (2013) refer to this invisibility as ‘shadows’ and propose the term ‘shadow circuits’. Furthermore, they link these circuits to the late and partial recognition of mobility by scholars and politicians, and to the strategic advantage of invisibility for some migrants (see also Chauvin & Garcés-Mascaranes 2014). They rely heavily on the circulatory territory concept of the sociologist Tarrus (1993, 2002)<sup>2</sup> – a concept that stresses a dynamic relation between emplacement and mobility whereby traders make use of local footholds to remain mobile – since they write:

The circulatory territory acts as a boundary, the circuit concerns specific goods and services, communication and transportation are central to understanding its workings, and within the circuit, situated forms of cosmopolitanism emerge which have little interaction with the societies they cross (Schmoll & Semi 2013, p. 380).

We embrace Schmoll and Semi’s (2013) dynamic approach on circuits and recognise the importance of these two processes. However, we move away from the concept ‘shadow economy’ and stress the linkages between informal and formal practices instead. By introducing the term ‘in/formal circuits’, we try to be sensitive to the dynamic cross-overs between formal and informal activities as well as elements of regulation and control.

**A methodological note** – The overall research framework of this paper aims to understand the dynamics of intra-EU mobility of West African migrants. It had three different entry points in the EU (the Netherlands, Spain and Italy) from where cross-border mobility processes of individual migrants were followed

for longer periods of time (2014–2018) (see Schapendonk 2020). Through the ethnographic engagements in different places, we came across a wide variety of mobility processes that all had different, and often multiple, motivations and directions. The in/formal circuits that we concentrate on in this particular paper are deeply entangled with these mobility processes. In this paper, we zoom in on the in/formal circuits that are anchored in Barcelona. However, as we will see, we also travel to other places.

The findings are based on ethnographic engagements with Senegalese and Gambian migrants. Ethnography is seen as a collection of methods to explore people's lifeworlds (Herbert 2000). The methods used include numerous observations and informal conversations in order to understand the life-worlds of our informants. These 'off the record' insights were noted down in comprehensive research diaries. In addition to that, some recorded interviews were used to gain knowledge on the migratory trajectories of the research informants. The second author spent two months in the city of Barcelona for this research, before she actually moved and lived there (September 2018). Her specific objective was to dive into the in/formal circuits of female migrants. The first author relied on a series of relatively brief field visits to Catalonia (April 2015, April 2016, September 2016, July 2017) and the Gambia (September 2017). The fragmented nature of his presence in Spain is partly explained by the fact that he travelled with his informants to other parts of Europe (as we also see below). His focus was mainly on male migrants. With the combined fieldwork, we searched for specific points of intersection between margins, gender, mobility, and informality.

In the following two sections, we combine the different insights gained. In the presentation of the findings we distinguish two main components of the circuits under study. First, and in line with other scholars (Kea 2013; Thieme 2018), we outline the multiplicity of economic activities that shapes in/formal circuits. Second, and also in line with existing literature (Simone 2004; Schmoll & Semi 2013), we highlight the mobility processes that are attached to these in/formal circuits.

For each dimension we take into account the life-world of one female and one male migrant in Catalonia.

## MULTIPLICITY

In a global economy where situations of 'crises' are no longer exceptional, many people need to deal with uncertainty and cope with periods without former employment. One way of dealing with these uncertainties is the act of hustling (Thieme 2018). Hustling refers to a multiplicity of activities and a diversification of livelihood strategies that seem to be always on 'the go'. The hustler is a common figure in West African urban economies. In some occasions, *hustling* refers to all kinds of off-farm work in SeneGambia (Gaibazzi 2015). A common practice of Senegalese and Gambian families is to generate income through a wide variety of activities, responding to constantly changing opportunities at the horizon (van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). Men and women that are daily active at the 'Serekunda market' in the Gambia or the 'Sandaga market' in Dakar are not just 'vendors' as they also execute other economic activities. This was also found by Kea (2013) when she focused on the act of farming in the Gambia. The farmers she spoke to were also 'taxi drivers, traders, mechanics, shop-keepers, fishermen, marabouts, moneylenders, businessmen, factory workers, diamond miners in Sierra Leona, carpenters, metal workers, corporate farm employees, and agrarian daily wage labourers' (Kea 2013, p. 107). In the SeneGambian setting, it is barely possible to reduce someone's economic profile to just one sector or profession – which is a continuity when we focus on the life-worlds of our informants in Barcelona.

One of the entry points in this paper is the circuit of street vending in and beyond Barcelona (Brugman 2016). In her study on the same practice in this particular city, Kothari (2008) rightly frames the act of street vending as a cosmopolitan practice, transgressing the local and reflecting the worlding views of the actors involved. The default policy situation in Spain, however, is that the same practice is increasingly criminalised, and openly opposed by shop owners and other

public actors – a trend that is also visible elsewhere in the world (e.g. Steel 2012). In the case of Barcelona, however, the election of mayor Ada Colau in 2015 opened up a space for a constructive dialogue between street vendors and the City Council. Some years earlier, a collective of vendors established the *Sindicato Popular de Venederos Ambulantes de Barcelona* (Popular Syndicate of Itinerant Vendors of Barcelona) to challenge public perception and address issues of prejudice and racism through educational workshops, manifestations, social media and the launch of their own clothing brand *Top Manta*. Since 2016, the City Council has supported undocumented street vendors to obtain residence papers, by giving one-year job contracts (an important requirement to obtain residency) to a number of selected vendors (El Diario 2018) – which can be related to the politics of formalisation addressed above. At the same time, and unsurprisingly so, the daily prosecution of street vendors by police officers continues, and the public resistance of *el Sindicato* remains. Just before the elections in April 2019, the City Council launched a new plan, involving three different police organisations (Catalan, Spanish, and port police), to prevent street vendors from selling in the port area (Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals [CCMA] 2019). This specific area was known under street vendors as more calm, since the police did not expel the vendors on a daily basis. These increased control measurements might indicate more repressive policies to come, that have proven to be only temporary acts of expulsion. In other words, it does not stop street vendors from selling, but rather increases their mobility (El Diario 2018). These realities – as we will see below – not only affect the street vendors, but also a web of practices that are entangled with them.

**Awa's catering** – Awa invited me [Marieke] several times to visit her during her work as a street vendor in Barcelona. Although street vending is often considered a male business, women also partake in this circuit. Awa mainly sold magnets to tourists, although this was certainly not her only means of income. Like some other female street vendors I met in Barcelona, she received

some 'clients' (often acquaintances) at home and braided their hair. This was especially a good practice on rainy days – when tourists do not fill the streets of the city.

One day Awa invited me to learn how to cook Senegalese food. She told me that there was a specific event, but the details stayed unclear to me. We went to a house and entered a room full of stuff, which created a colourful atmosphere. Clothes and papers littered the wooden floor and other clothes hung on the ceiling; this was the place where we would cook today. Two improvised cookers – iron frames supported by bricks and connected to huge gas bottles were placed on the ground. I introduced myself to the three men in the room: Mamadou, Ibrahim, and Musa – who stood behind a table scattered with vegetables. Awa showed me how to cut the carrots, and I joined Musa with cutting the vegetables. Hours later I discovered that we worked on an external catering order related to *el Sindicato*, the collective of street vendors that we discussed above. I learned quickly about the networked reality of the in/formal street vending circuits, where many vendors buy their merchandise through official channels in the outskirts of Barcelona (Brugman 2016), indicating inherent linkages between the formal and informal as the literature suggests (e.g. Lindell 2010). However, I had never expected to come across a catering service that serves this in/formal organisation in Barcelona.

Awa expressed, however, a strong ambition to find a job with a formal contract and was rather ambivalent about her position as a street vendor. She shared her aspiration with me to work as a hairdresser and explained how she wanted to reach her goal step by step. During my fieldwork, she actively searched for a job as a waitress, for instance by giving her CV to several restaurants. In addition, Awa followed an official six months training and obtained a certificate as a waitress. However, since Awa did not have a working permit, a formal job was difficult to find – and without a formal job it was difficult to get regularised. In February 2019, there was a major breakthrough when Awa told me she finally received her residence permit. Within a month she acquired a job at the City Council, where she worked two days per week cleaning streets of Barcelona. The other days she continued her activities as a street vendor. Navigation of in/formal

circuits is in that sense a continuous practice for her, even at a time her socio-economic position in the city started to look brighter.

**Ebou's collection of stuff** – In the worlding neighbourhood of Raval, I [Joris] usually started my fieldwork practices in a laundry. In this place I always found Ebou, a Gambian man who passed the age of forty, doing his daily job – washing, drying, ironing and folding clothes, mattress covers, tablecloths and other textiles coming from individuals, families or neighbouring restaurants. From this particular place, the world was in motion (Gielis 2009; Schapendonk 2020) through Ebou's stories about his life in the Gambia and about his journey to Europe that brought him all the way to Syria and Turkey from where he reached Greece and later Italy – the country where he had spent some seven years of his life. This working place was also a meeting place giving him space for sociability. Senegalese, Gambian and Nigerian friends came to visit him, they gave Ebou a hand with his daily work, and watched football matches on the small TV screen. When we 'chopped food', we intermingled discussions on his ongoing struggle of extending his residence permit through his labour contract with everyday chitchats about football, tourism, the Gambia and politics. Thus, Ebou was incorporated by the so-called formal economy. However, like Awa above, Ebou continuously diversified his economic practices.

From his former working place, I saw 'the stuff' (see Simone 2014 for an eloquent account on 'stuff') Ebou was buying from waste collectors who wander through the streets of Barcelona, day in day out, to look for some value in the things that people throw away. I observed his harsh negotiation strategies with those waste collectors that visibly struggled to make ends meet. Some of the waste they collect are brought to scrap metal collection points, where they can sell these material leftovers (Brugman 2016). Other stuff they found are sold to people like Ebou.

Ebou stored, among other things, bicycle lights, shoes, heads, music boxes, shavers and belts underneath the dinner table. For him, urban life in Barcelona materialised through this stuff. He made some profit out of things

that were generally seen as waste. Many of these materials were repaired by him or one of his friends. Some of the 'stuff' was marketed again in the urban economy of Barcelona, sometimes also to the customers of the laundry. Other stuff was gathered by Ebou to be put in a container in order to be shipped to the harbour of Banjul, the capital of his country of origin. During this research project, I saw how other Senegambian migrants in Europe fill containers with a melange of goods to sell and goods to give away to the people they feel connected with. In that sense, the laundry of Ebou is not only a place where the formal and informal mingle, it is also an anchor point for transnational interconnectivity.

## MOBILITY

Mobility is key to the notion of circuits (Cole & Groes 2016). With the exchange of goods and money comes the mobility of people, and vice versa. The intertwined character of mobilities (in plural) is clearly articulated by literature that engages with the mobility turn (e.g. Sheller and Urry 2006; Ernste *et al.* 2012). Circuits are in fact not *based* on forms of mobility. The term *based on* wrongfully suggests that there is an underlying structure of senders and receivers of movement. It is not the beginning and ending points of mobility that defines circuits, it is the mobility itself. Tarrius's (1993) notion of circulatory territories is therefore an insightful starting point to think about circuits (see Schmoll & Semi 2013). In addition to that, West Africa is often framed as the mobile continent, where lifestyles on the move are rather the norm than the exception (de Bruijn *et al.* 2001; Bolay 2017). Thus, if we aim to unpack the dynamics of in/formal circuits, we should zoom in to the mobile.

**Fatima's moving business** – Fatima has a long history in street vending practices in Spain. Some years ago, she used to travel together with a female friend to places like Pamplona and Bilbao to try their luck and sell on local markets. After being chased by the police, having slept some nights in the streets of unfamiliar places, Fatima decided to restrict her activities to the city of

Barcelona. Yet, mobility remained central to her activities.

While Fatima walks across the streets in Barcelona, she pushes a heavy suitcase filled with juice to sell to co-vendors, of which a majority is from Senegal. During my fieldwork, Fatima often invited me to accompany her, which gave me the opportunity to get a better understanding of her navigation process. In the street vending circuit, Fatima was mainly concerned with finding clients. Fatima told me how tired she was from running for the police during her time that she was selling small jewellery to tourists from a *manta*, the blanket that many vendors use. She developed the tactic to dress up like a tourist during her work. As soon as the police would come, she could merge into the crowd without being noticed. This is a crucial act of camouflage – making yourself invisible through visibility (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascaranes 2014). It also indicates that those who surveil and control the city – the watchers – are themselves being watched and surveilled by the vendors. For that reason, urban police forces create their own acts of camouflage and disguise as citizens or tourists to repress the street vendors' activities.

At some point in time, Fatima followed the suggestion of a friend to no longer sell goods to tourists, but to start selling juice to street vendors. Fatima explained that she faced less risk now to be caught by the police because her act of camouflage was now not an instant tactic but an inherent part of her economic activity. While wearing sunglasses, she rolled large suitcases through the streets of Barcelona. With her suitcase she was constantly on the move, allowing her to avoid controls.

Every working day, Fatima explores different sites of Barcelona to search for vending opportunities. She travels from one area in the city to another. She knows the key spots where street vendors are active, but because of the mobility – and expulsion – of street vendors, she needs to constantly navigate their whereabouts. Her telephone calls and brief in situ chitchats with vendors constantly keep her up to date about the latest movements of her clients. Sometimes, however, she needs to deal with contrasting

information and rumours (Harney 2006). One day I accompanied her and she felt irritated by the different directions she received from her contacts. One 'brother' insisted that many vendors were at that time at Plaza de Catalunya, while she heard from others that there was actually nobody there. Her customers form a circulatory territory that can only be captured through mobility, but even then it remains a constant challenge to be in the right place at the right time.

Fatima's vending business is characterised by verbal premises and building trust. Fatima goes to several local shops in her neighbourhood for grocery shopping, where she buys ingredients to prepare juice and snacks. She usually goes to two shops run by migrants from Pakistan and China, where she knows the owners. On days that Fatima does not have enough money to pay, she still manages to take the necessary ingredients home; the shop owner usually agrees to postpone the payment. Fatima shapes her socio-economic connections by building trust in these formal spaces.

**Babacar's mobile life-world** – The first time I met Babacar (a friend of Ebou) he seemed to live a relatively grounded life in Lleida – a city not far from Barcelona. In this period (April 2015), he shared an apartment with two other Gambian men, he had a proper job in the Catalan agriculture sector and he held a renewable residence permit. Lleida was a place where he felt comfortable. However, his grounded life in Lleida only formed a fraction of a rather mobile livelihood. When the 'frutta season' closed in September, it was his time to move to the Gambia to spend time with his family. Like Ebou, and many other informants, Babacar had to anticipate his episodes of being absent in the Gambia with return visits to meet family obligations and expectations. Next to this social dimension, he also worked on his agricultural land and he bought a car that he transformed into a taxi. He returned to Spain in February 2016. At that time, he had contact with his employer for whom he had worked for several years. His employer told Babacar that there was no work for him yet. This period of joblessness was not unproductive as it gave Babacar the opportunity to move out again.

He went to Milan (Italy) to visit his good friend Doudou.

I went to Milan in May that same year. Babacar told me that he earned a living in the city by selling bags on the streets. He showed me the place where he goes to every morning to market the bags he sells. He also guided me to the Chinese import/export shops where he buys the same bags. He carefully compared different bags, and anticipated the latest trends in street life. In a period of few weeks, Babacar adapted to an urban economy that was initially strange to him. I wondered why Babacar decided to get involved in street vending in Milan. He could have joined the *top manta* of Barcelona rather easily. During peaks of tourism seasons or during city festivals, many newcomers join the groups of vendors that are more permanently present in this Catalan city. Since Lleida – Babacar’s place of residence – is only a short distance away from Barcelona, this could be a productive economic strategy. It is also known among street vendors that there are periods where police control is less harsh.<sup>3</sup> When he reflected upon his choice, Babacar first referred to the fact that getting involved in the *top manta* in Barcelona might create a risk for his residence permit. If he were caught, he feared that the authorities would take away the residence rights from him. Babacar’s ‘rational navigation’ of Europe struck me. But he quickly added that he did not *plan* beforehand to become economically active in Milan. It was just because Doudou explained to him that this business may gain considerable profits. Doudou even gave him five bags as a form of starting capital to try his luck. Babacar embraced this opportunity. With his activity, a brief visit of one or two weeks changed into a longer sojourn. Babacar stayed in Milan until the moment his ‘patron’ needed him again in the fruit sector of Lleida in July 2016.

### SYNTHESIS: RE-DESCRIBED INFORMALITY

The different cases above provide some detailed insights into how SeneGambians navigate opportunities and try to improve their way of living by working in in/formal circuits.

They underline that the process of navigation and hustling is not a straight-line process, but comes with many everyday challenges. In terms of mobility, the ability to adapt to new situations and to stay mobile are key to cope with the constantly changing circumstances. In these situations, different locality-mobility configurations unfold (e.g. Dahinden 2010). While some migrants are mobile within Spain, Europe, or beyond, others emphasise the high costs of travelling or the fact that they lack the right travel papers, which forms a stringent barrier to their mobility. Some informants, like Fatima, stayed in Barcelona out of choice since they wanted to search for better job opportunities in their current living place.

These im/mobility configurations often unfold in gendered ways (Reeves 2011). In the transnational context, for example, West African women are often considered the ‘stayers’ for their role as household caretakers (e.g. Bolay 2017; Gaibazzi 2015). To some extent, this observation can be related to the city space of Barcelona as the small number of Senegalese female street vendors can be partly explained by similar gendered notion of mobility, in particular, and economic activities in general. Although Awa and Fatima mentioned they were in good terms with their male co-workers, some male street vendors expressed they found it inappropriate for women to work in the streets. This helps to explain that many female in/formal activities took place within the private domains, like babysitting and braiding hair, and are therefore less visible in public space. At the same time, these social positions are actively and continuously contested through processes of social navigation by the same women in question. The act of camouflage (in Fatima’s case) is thereby a powerful illustration that challenges the deeply entrenched notion that people active in in/formal circuits lack a sense of agency (Lindell 2010; Franck 2019).

In line with the former, the notion of re-description challenges us to look for interrelations and interfaces that help us to de-essentialise the marginal spaces of urban economies (Simone & Pieterse 2017). Each case is directly or indirectly related to the prototypical informal activity – street vending. A re-described version of each case, however, allows us to go

beyond the boundedness of that same activity and point to wider webs of transactions (e.g. Fatima's grocery shops, Ebou's waste collectors), services (Awa's catering, Fatima's mobile juice station, Ebou's Laundry), activities (Babacar's agricultural activities) and localities (Babacar's stay in Milan, Ebou's connection with the Gambia). At times, the money gained with street vending in Europe is invested in formalised taxi services in the Gambia, like in the case of Babacar. Many other SeneGambian men buy cars in Europe and ship them to Senegal or the Gambia (Brugman & Schapendonk 2017). The activities of street vendors are thus multiple and clearly go beyond their vending activities on the streets. They hook up with transnational networks between Africa and Europe in which the multiple is connected to mobility. These entanglements question the policy efforts to formalise and erase informality – which is seen as an urban development project of spatial purification. Informality is not second to the formal. Informality and formality are not separate domains, it is a non-dichotomous conceptualisation (Koster & Nuijten 2016). Furthermore, given the spatial dynamics involved, one act of formalisation 'here' may create other informalities elsewhere.

Although the observations in this paper highlight that formal and informal practices are related, we do not ignore that some informants had explicit aspirations to leave behind their unprotected and unacknowledged economic position. In fact, many informants shared a desire to leave the street vending circuit and prefer to practice another profession. This desire to leave the informal practices of street vending can be interpreted as an escape route towards better institutional protection and acknowledgement. At the same time, we found that those actors with a formal position in the Spanish economy, including Ebou, Awa and Babacar, may still have 'side projects' that link these formal economic roles again to the margins of urban economies. These continuous trajectories in Europe (and beyond) are characterised by, on the one hand, plans, anticipated careers and aspired-to futures, while at the same time, defined by improvisation and tactical moves to deal with unexpected situations. As Koster and Nuijten (2016) underscore, through navigation people in the

margins creatively combine a De Certeauian notion of strategies (structures and pre-set plans) and tactics (the everyday, the ad hoc, the fluid).

## CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the dynamic and mobile life-worlds of several SeneGambian migrants in Europe, this paper provides insights into the socio-economic opportunities of in/formal circuits. SeneGambian migrants make a living by combining various economic practices; some are formalised through contracts, others lack such formalisation. Through the method of re-description, and with the notion of in/formal circuits, we unfolded some of the interconnections and interfaces of the formal and informal. Through these interconnections, we move beyond the notion that informality is a parallel world to the formal economies. This main argument leads to two conclusions. The first creates a link between economic activities and the everyday production of urban space. The second reflects on methodological approaches that study informality.

If we start from the notion of in/formal circuits, informal economic activities do not form an independent 'shadow economy'. Through everyday practices, aspirations and transactions, they interweave and intersect and become inherent elements of formal economic activities. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Roy (2005) frames informality as an opportunity to re-think urban planning – it is a planning epistemology in itself. With this, she claims that informal spaces can be strategically mitigated by urban planners in such a way that it reduces vulnerabilities of people living in the margins. Informality, by definition, goes beyond notions of property and ownership while it still gives people the right to be in the city. In that sense, in/formal circuits are not merely economic circuits, they are sites for political action as well. They give people in the margins the right to coproduce urban spaces (Koster & Nuijten 2016). The latter is not only highlighted in the city of Barcelona through the syndicate of street vendors, but also through individual acts of transgression and camouflage in the everyday making and re-making of

the city. These everyday actions are the 'street politics' (Franck 2019, building on the work of Bayat 2010) that allow people to express discontent through their everyday performances.

The concept of in/formal circuits and the illustrations in this paper also raises a methodological question: If formal/informal practices intersect, if circuits are constantly on the move and form circulatory territories (Tarrus 1993), and if circuits make sectors blend into each other, what methodological instruments do we need to capture them? After all, the question of where do circuits begin and end becomes extremely difficult to answer. This question of beginnings and endings is carefully addressed by Lepawsky and Mather (2011, p. 244) in a rather different context – the economy of e-waste. They claim that production networks and value chains are characterised by 'circuits, networks and meshworks of economic activity'. They build on the substantiated critique in economic geography regarding simplistic and linear approaches to value chains and production processes. They claim, however, that even more embedded approaches to economic processes start from an architecture of beginnings and endings:

Despite the efforts to move beyond linearity, commodity/value chain analyses remain wedded to an analysis of economic activity that has defined beginning and end points (Lepawsky & Mather 2011, p. 244).

Evidently, this paper is not a paper on value chains and production networks. Nevertheless, Lepawsky and Mather's critique is of vital importance to unpack further the interwoven character of in/formality. They suggest moving from 'beginnings and endings' to 'boundaries and edges'. Boundaries and edges can be sites of transformation (e.g. where the formal product is marketed in informal ways), but also sites of encounter (between formal and informal practices). This conceptual grounding requires some methodological openness in the sense that the researcher might follow practices and actors without knowing in advance where the boundaries and edges are located. It is an approach that offer ways 'to keep going, to keep following the action without presupposing inherent directionality' (Lepawsky & Mather 2011, p. 248).

Such an approach may lead to new sites and new insights that help us to re-describe (Simone & Pieterse 2017) taken-for-granted realities.

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#### Notes

1. SeneGambia refers to a postcolonial geography that includes the Senegalese and Gambian nation states. It acknowledges that both countries share a cultural and economic past that was disrupted by colonial powers. During the colonial era, Senegal fell under French rule, while the Gambia was occupied by the British.
2. Interestingly, long before the so-called mobilities paradigm has emerged in social science as a new interdisciplinary field, Tarrus already wrote in 1993 about a mobility paradigm (*La paradigme de la mobilité*).
3. During one of the bigger street festivals in the city of Barcelona – La Merce (end of September) – we noticed, for instance, that police controls and repression were less present. In fact, in 2016, the police force stood peacefully next to African street vendors in the Barceloneta area. According to our informants, the police were more relaxed during these festival days.

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