

Connected informality beyond the state: self-organization within a revolutionary Egypt

Department of Spatial Planning & Environment, University of Groningen, The Netherlands,
mohamed.saleh@rug.nl

Mohamed Saleh, Justin Beaumont and Gert de Roo

Abstract

How can we explain the role of informality in the social, political and spatial transformations of the recent Arab emancipatory movements? Do these instances of informality hold paramount insights and lessons for future planning culture? This paper is an attempt to explore the interdependencies between informality and creativity within collectives of Egypt at a time of revolutionary fervour between 2011 and 2015. We advance a dialogue between theory and praxis in order to unravel the entangled web of interactions between movements of humans, spaces and networks over time. The purpose is to show that self-organization mechanisms of informality and creativity prefigure social movement mobilization and consequent socio-political transformation. We critically embrace and transcend three realms within the literature: (1) self-organization with planning theory (2) geographical dimensions of social movement scholarship and (3) analyses of the Arab Spring. We argue for 'informality' as a collective political platform constituted of a spontaneous coming together at critical thresholds and provide evidence from recent emancipatory movements in Egypt to support our claims. These informal collectives: (1) reflect an interdependent relationship between a physical world represented in symbolic public spaces, and a virtual world represented in the social media and speculate over the potential; and (2) have evolved along several transitional phases thereby forming 'creative' rules of behaviour either to face their common fears in critical moments or to subjectify their new overarching identities in the long run in the form of an institutional capacity.

Keywords: self-organization; social movements; informality; public space