



Book review: *Zwischenstadtland Schweiz – Zur politischen Steuerung der suburbanen Entwicklung in Schweizer Gemeinden*

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In 2016, the book “Zwischenstadtland Schweiz – Zur politischen Steuerung der suburbanen Entwicklung in Schweizer Gemeinden”, authored by Lineo Umberto Devecchi, was published by the publishing house transcript. It is based on the research of a PhD thesis realised between 2011–2015, conducted under the supervision of Prof. Kuebler, and it discusses planning capacities of smaller municipalities in Switzerland and their spatial consequences. Through the lens of political science and by applying a governance framework, the author illustrates the range and rationale of applied policy tools and how these can be categorised into different municipality types in order to advance our understanding of current socio-economic and spatial changes in the country. Overall, the book is interesting to various audiences (geographers, political scientists, urban planners), well written and structured, and represents a timely contribution (written against the backdrop of the LAT/RPG revision) to a topic that will hopefully attract more research efforts in the near future.

Small and medium-sized towns are little understood and largely under-researched, particularly when considering their importance in ongoing urbanisation trajectories. The reality of such settlements is extremely diverse: they may range from a few hundred habitants to several thousands, be facing socio-economic and spatial decline or experiencing heightened developmental pressure. Little is known about the specific challenges faced by such municipalities, and more im-

portantly, the coping mechanisms used to position themselves within developmental trajectories of the 21st century. The discussed book aims to contribute toward the closing of this knowledge gap for the Swiss context by proposing a thematic and methodologically sound approach.

Venturing into rather unchartered territory and analysing a topic relevant to several disciplines at the same time, its elaboration must have been truly challenging. The author handles the juggling of discourses, the combination of interviews with institutional and spatial analysis, and the smooth connection of theory and empirical findings (and vice versa) with ease. The results are convincing, solid and well represented – nevertheless, the theoretical and empirical impact of Devecchi’s doctoral thesis could have been increased if some discursive angles and additional elements had been covered. Therefore, our comments are best to be understood as searching for a fly in the ointment.

The book consists of a total of 11 chapters (plus bibliography and a methodological annex). In the Introduction, the author establishes the context for the book, starting with general observations of the spatial transformation of the Swiss landscape to highlight, on one hand, the importance of urbanisation in the country and, on the other hand, the importance of growth in the hinterland of core cities. Three research questions are presented in order to answer the role of the political steering of these spatial changes:

1. What are the communalities and differences of different forms of local governance?
2. What are the underlying conditions for the unfolding of local governance?

3. What are the relations between different forms of local governance and qualitative differences in the Swiss suburbanization process (*Siedlungslandschaften in Schweizer Agglomerationsgemeinden*)?

The second and third chapters are the most convincing part of the book and are very sharply written. In order to address different readers, the federal system as well as the local planning tools are explained in chap. 2. It then draws attention to the state of the art on the Swiss local governance and what is actually meant by urban/suburban space. The discussion on the external structure and agency problem is rewarding because it allows local governance to be categorised as a meso-level analysis.

In chap. 3, the author sets out the theoretical framework by explaining the underlying reasoning for using the urban governance literature. Here, it is worthwhile pointing out the excellent quality of the literature review, which should be useful to anyone interested in the topic. In the well-referenced discussion, the author illustrates the differences between neo-Marxist, urban governance and urban regime theory on attributing importance to structural and/or agency conditions. In order to operationalise the concept of governance, a broad understanding (multifaceted relation between government institutions and private actors, p. 64) is paired with a systematic comparison. This is based on two major structural-institutional conditions that influence local forms of governance: the economic condition and the degree of professionalisation of local institutions. The investigation concentrates on the type of applied policy tools and the underlying justification – both aspects are categorised.

Chapter 4 sets out to clarify the specifics of the research design, its ontological basis and applied methods. The realist approach is iterative-explorative and combines several qualitative tools: semi-structured interviews, institutional analysis and spatial mapping. The selection of the case studies is explained. Based on purposive sampling, the chosen municipalities can be found at extreme points of the economic prosperity scale (which is equated with growth/shrinkage pressure). While well justified for the scope of a doctoral thesis and a new thematic exploration, we would like to point out that this choice has consequences on the possible scope of conclusions. The middle of the scale, where municipalities manage to balance budgets, efforts and demographics might point to other kinds of local governance that do not fully subject themselves to the intercommunal competitive landscape and might break with the growth machine paradigm mentioned throughout the book.

Chapters 5 and 6 constitute the third part of the book and provide a detailed discussion of the case studies. In total, nine municipalities have been selected to illustrate two fundamental structural conditions. Uster, Wetzikon, Hedingen, Affoltern am Albis, Visp and Naters are cases of local governments under growth pressure. Arbon, Rorschach, and St. Margrethen are examples of municipalities under pres-

sure from shrinkage. In both categories, different degrees of professionalisation of the political-administrative institutions can be observed.

Each case study is discussed by addressing its geographic conditions, institutional configuration, broad historic development path, and the applied agenda and policy tools.

Writing the book must not have been very easy as the amount of case studies and detailed descriptions of comparable processes generate a great risk of repetitive arguments. The author is quite skilled to be able to provide an interesting outline of a total of nine municipalities within the same analytical framework and keep the readers engaged. This is also the part of the book where the limits of interdisciplinary study are most visible: the geographers might have preferred more detailed maps and spatial/morphological analysis, the political scientists may have liked more details on the policy texts and the scalar translations of goals and directives, and the historian may have wanted more structured engagement with historic developments and institutional changes (based on interviews but also using the historical maps of Google Earth™).

Chapter 7 compares the forms of local governance taking place in the case studies. The author proposes three types that differ on the level of policy tools and the level of professionalism of their political administrative institutions. Passive governance positions itself in the minimal state paradigm that largely relies on the local zoning ordinance but leave urban development largely to private actors. By contrast, the reactive governance forms utilise a greater range of policy tools such as special use planning to negotiate outcomes. These municipalities are not afraid of conflict and possess the capacity to solve problems and establish cooperation in order to pursue public goals. The proactive municipalities deploy networks to co-create spaces but also establish a territorial strategy with an enlarged scope (in time and in space).

In chap. 8, the author proposes explanations as to why these differences in the forms of local governance developed. Using his rich and coded interview data, Devecchi illustrates the stated correlation between local capacity, economic situation and the applied governance form. Chapter 9 focuses on the outcomes (largely understood as planning processes), based again on the interview data. This part of the book represents a missed opportunity to connect to the urban fabric/architectural discourse on governance which is focused on spatial built-up fragmentation. As the cover of the book illustrates, an important question is, “What kind of spatial developments (in aggregate, not in terms of projects) are taking place under different governance forms?” That very question is at the core of the most recent Swiss debates on urban sprawl and sustainable urbanisation.

Chapter 10 links empirical findings to theoretical outline and relates typology to discourse on urban governance, while chap. 11 wraps up the research findings and gives closure to the book by providing a synthesis, the author’s viewpoint and outlook for future research.

On a more technical but nevertheless important note, we would have preferred two clarifications to properly address all parts of research ethics. As part of a larger project (NFP65 “New Urban Quality”), a paragraph could have been used to state how this PhD fits into the bigger picture and what forms of exchange, mutual support and academic synergies have been established.

Secondly and in a similarly short manner, the author could have clarified that all interview parties gave their consent for the publication – given the very limited human resources of the discussed municipalities, it is possible to connect stated positions of interviewees to actual persons.

To summarise, we are grateful to Lineo Umberto Devecchi. His book is a major contribution to contemporary urban planning issues and we recommend it to everyone who wants to deepen his/her knowledge of the institutional complexity of territorial planning in Switzerland.