

Book Review

Zwischenstadtland Schweiz: Zur politischen Steuerung der suburbanen Entwicklung in Schweizer Gemeinden

Devecchi, Lineo Umberto.

Bielefeld, transcript Verlag (2016), 405 p., ISBN 978-3-8376-3594-2

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Published in Swiss Political Science Review, doi: 10.1111/spsr.12253

The problem at the heart of this book – poor planning processes in Swiss suburban municipalities – is vividly illustrated by the cover picture. We can see a somewhat modern housing complex, townhouses in the back, a construction crane and in the very back an office building. All these buildings lack a harmonized architectural style. Lineo Devecchi's book, which is based on his PhD-thesis, studies planning processes in Swiss small-and middle sized towns (SMSTs) that are located in the suburbia. Residents in these SMSTs see their municipality as rural whereas statisticians categorize these settlements as urban (p. 13). The transformation processes of suburban communities within metropolitan regions, also known as urban sprawl, is not a solely Swiss phenomenon but is certainly relevant for other polycentric metropolitan regions such as the Randstad in The Netherlands, the German Rhine-Ruhr region, or The Flemish Diamond in Belgium.

Devecchi studies the puzzling variance of settlement qualities in Swiss SMSTs, whereas the pressures that these municipalities face are similar: such as increased functional integration into metropolitan regions, increased mobility of their residents, and the development from a rural to an urban settlement type not just in their built environment but also in the narratives of these municipalities. Devecchi studies this puzzle by analyzing the variety of governance forms and policy instruments in local planning processes. Chapter 1 and 2 introduce the research question, the objects under investigations, and essential concepts and definitions that help to understand planning processes in Swiss SMSTs. Chapter 3 offers a review of the urban governance literature. This chapter can serve as a primer for urban politics students because of its systematic and comprehensive introduction to the urban governance research. In Chapter 4, he presents the general research design and justifies the interpretative as well as iterative-explorative research strategy. The case studies start with Chapter 5. Devecchi first discusses six municipalities that experience growth issues and then Chapter 6, turns to

three municipalities that experience shrinkage pressures. Chapter 7, 8, and 9 systematically compare the nine cases based on their local governance forms in planning processes, the development that led to these local governance forms and the influence of this local governance forms on the settlement quality. Chapter 10 feeds back his insights into the urban governance literature and takes a deliberatively normative stance in order to further develop urban governance concepts. Chapter 11 helpfully summarizes the book.

The nine case studies are very profound. They are based on interview data and various other primary (such as on-ground inspections with built environment experts) and secondary sources. All case studies start with political, economic, and historical context information. Devecchi then outlines the local political development agendas before he rigorously discusses the different planning policy instruments that the municipalities adopt. Based on the use of policy instruments, he derives three governance forms in local planning processes, namely reactive, passive, and proactive. Three municipalities govern their planning policies in a reactive way (Uster, Wetzikon, Arbon) meaning that they plan their development strategically based on long-term goals. Local planning officials try to steer the settlement quality by supervision rather than by intervention. Two municipalities display a proactive governance form that means the active integration of private interests into the planning process and the preference for feasible development projects (St. Margrethen, Rorschach). Four municipalities appeared to have a passive governance form meaning that local officials do not intervene much in private development projects. The planning officials only try to ensure competitive and fair planning processes (Hedingen, Affoltern am Albis, Visp, Naters).

The analytical power of the book resides in the comparative chapters 7, 8, and 9, in which Devecchi juxtaposes the findings of the within-case analysis with a cross-case comparison. Reactive governance is found in municipalities that feature a professionalized administration and political system and that experience growth pressures. Proactive governance needs the same degree of professionalization but it is found in shrinking municipalities. Devecchi explains that both types of governance need professionalized administrations to have the resources and expertise to sustain in private-public planning conflicts. However, proactive governance forms are only enabled in situations in which the land prices are rather low, i.e. in municipalities that shrink. Passive governance forms can be found in municipalities that do not feature professionalized political and administrative systems. This lack of professionalization may be caused by local financial stress or by deliberate political convictions that a

lean local administration should not intervene in local planning processes. This passive governance form consequentially leads to weak planning capacities of these municipalities.

In a next analytical step (chapter 9), Devecchi links the governance form to the settlement quality. He concludes that only the proactive and reactive governance forms are able to implement public quality standards in development projects. At this stage, implications from the book may be interpreted optimistically: In shrinking as well as growing municipalities, it is possible to uphold a high settlement quality if the municipalities are willing to invest in the professionalization of their administration and their political system. It seems like a political question: If residents opt for a lean local government, they have to deal with its implications, i.e. low settlement quality.

However, as one may guess, the story is not as simple. In chapters 10 and 11, Devecchi points to situations of local financial stress, in which the local professionalization is sacrificed on the altar of being competitive in the Swiss tax competition. The high local tax autonomy of Swiss municipalities leads to an intense tax competition. As a consequence, Swiss municipalities have to operate under a growth rationale that can be particularly well observed in the context of residential development projects. In that sense, Swiss SMSTs are 'growth machines' (p. 330). At this point in the book, Devecchi takes a critical stance on Swiss tax competition that forces municipalities to subordinate themselves under a constant growth agenda, which puts the professionalization of municipalities at stake. This manifests itself in local development agendas that primarily aim at increasing their tax bases (p. 366). Recent political science studies corroborate Devecchi's critical findings. Berli (2016) traces local tax competition not just between neighbor municipalities but within municipalities in the whole Zurich metropolitan area. Kaufmann and Arnold (2017) find that high local tax autonomy explains the obsession of Lucerne's locational policies agenda to maximize tax revenue. These studies echo Devecchi's claims of intensive, and potentially disruptive, municipal competition dynamics in Switzerland fueled by the high local tax autonomy.

Based on this pessimistic interpretation of the Swiss tax competition, Devecchi sketches a scenario in which the Swiss municipality system segregates in rich and poor communes. To offer political antidotes, Devecchi deliberately normatively brainstorms about political instruments to strengthen the local agency of suburban municipalities (pp. 358-361). He identifies political instruments by higher-tier governments to ensure the professionalization of their municipalities as one option that would

help to vitalize the local agency in planning processes (p. 361). Furthermore, political economy instruments could incentivize rich municipalities to invest in social housing and poorer municipalities to cooperate with private actors to realize development projects (p. 360). Lastly, a more programmatic approach would be the alignment of local development agendas to incorporation-orientated agendas such as the “Just City” (Fainstein 2010) or the “Inclusive City” (Hambleton 2014). Devecchis sees such political instruments and political agendas as a third way between neo-Marxist and neo-liberal city politics (p. 368).

The book is a feat with multiple distinguishing marks. It contains 370 pages of text, offers a systematic literature review about urban governance concepts, compares nine deeply investigated cases, takes a deliberately normative stance on urban governance and is furthermore an example of an iterative-explorative research design. Regarding the last mentioned distinguishing mark, the iterative-explorative research approach is not just described but enshrined in the very structure of the book. The book can thus be read as an illustration of iterative and inductive reasoning. Devecchi is very transparent about the complexity of his research process. This is refreshing because most social sciences books are streamlined into an apparent rigid and linear outline that overshadows the very iterative research process that is present in our everyday research projects.

In sum, the book is an important contribution not only to local government studies in Switzerland but as well to the international study of SMSTs. The conclusions raise important practical and political lessons that are hopefully being heard by Swiss policy makers.

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