Abstract for the 18th Swiss Geoscience Meeting – Panel: urban planning and policy-making with/without/against national states

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Policies in and of the urban everyday

In this paper, we examine housing policies situated in and directed towards the urban everyday. We understand them as an urban form of policy building and contrast them to state form of policy making. This requires a fundamental shift in understandings of the agents, processes and institutional processes through which policy is made, even if the substantive objectives of these two policy types might be the same. Rather than focusing on governments and formal institutions we turn to activists (housing cooperative movements, squatters and insurgent planners) in European and US cities. What these activists do is an attempt to re-shape urban space and processes. These practices, we contend, share the generic features of a policy: intervention in socio-spatial practices, collective actions containing explicit goals and the means to achieve them. Through a close reading of urban housing policies we will delineate a particularly urban way of making policies. First, state and governmental actors and institutions (on different levels) do not lie at the center of these policy actions. Rather urban policy making often takes place in an “institutional void” (Hajer 2003) where the polity is emergent rather than fixed in advance. Second, the knowledge produced and used in these policies and the rules through which knowledge turns into action is grounded in the urban everyday and not based on scientific and/or political expertise. This means that knowledge and rules are developed in a circuit of formal and informal negotiations encompassing different actors and actions rather than implemented as a result of expert/political recommendations. Third, the interventions of urban policies target processes and outcomes of urbanization and not (parts of the) society as such. Urban policies, conceived here are socio-spatial and have a -radical – democratic intent to make urbanization self-governable. We conclude by discussing the scope and range of this understanding of urban policy in both practical and analytical terms.