

## Destabilizing Participation Exercises of Power in Swiss River Management

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The Swiss national government has recently promoted and incentivized regional and local authorities to implement stakeholder participation in river management with the goal of avoiding costly conflicts for controversial river revitalization projects. And while participation is often viewed in the current academic debate as mobilizing an abstracted institutional apparatus of experts in order to prevent the political from taking place by using participatory processes for conflict avoidance, this work argues instead that we need a better understanding of participation in its individual practices as it has the potential to go beyond these limits to become a resource that promotes social transformation. Based on extensive fieldwork including a Swiss-wide survey of cantonal officers and qualitative interviews conducted for two specific case studies in the Canton of Ticino, this thesis examines stakeholder participation within this new paradigm of river revitalization. It contributes to the current debate by performing a governmentality analysis of how individuals activate geographically specific practices in the domain of river management projects and identifying concrete examples of exercises of power as both mechanisms of governance *and* strategies of struggle in river management.

This work first shows how the Swiss government's instrumental approach to participation and its reproduction in the local context of one of the two case studies is a stabilizing mechanism activated by individuals to conduct citizens' behavior towards acceptance of the project, affirming the imbalance in power relations between experts and citizens and contributing to a depoliticization of the latter. By examining these results in the light of a second case study where stakeholder participation was refused, my research reveals other exercises of power between local authorities, experts, and citizens in river revitalization that are less effective in guiding the behavior of citizens. However, in both case studies, the priorities of experts to exercise their function and maintain authority reinforce sclerotic organizational structures, resulting in the restriction of potential counter conducts. Based on this study's understanding of exercises of power in their geographical specificities, the work also opens up a perspective for experimental practices that disarticulate static mechanisms of governance within river management in order to revitalize the political potential of river spaces.

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