

Research Summary “Power and Space in the Drone Age”

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Camera-fitted drones are now easily affordable to the public. In Switzerland, 20,000 drones are currently estimated to be in public and private use. The resulting proliferation of the ‘aerial gaze’ raises a series of critical questions. These range from the changing regimes of visibility across urban and rural space to the novel dynamics of control and resistance implied by current drone developments. In addressing these issues, the project pursues a specifically politico-geographical approach, which starts from the basic assumption that a distinct ‘spatial curiosity’ and ‘power sensitivity’ are required to understand the logics, functioning and implications of drones.

Hereby, three main conceptual literatures are combined. (1) Drawing upon Actor Network Theory, drones are understood as dynamic socio-technical assemblages that result from a wide range of processes, power relationships and mediations. (2) In their acting on the envisioned reality, drones are conceived as aero-visual techniques of power in a Foucauldian sense. And (3) through the adoption of a Lefebvrian understanding of (social) space, combined with a geographical approach to mediation and power as developed by Claude Raffestin, the project investigates and conceptualises the relation between drones and space.

Overall, the analytical ambition of the project is to understand the dynamics underpinning the current proliferation of non-military drones, the modalities of use and thus changing forms and formats of visibility and control from above this implies, and the socio-spatial implications this has. Thus, from a specifically politico-geographical viewpoint, the project sets out to investigate the (1) current developments, the (2) functioning and the (3) implications of non-military drone use in Switzerland (centring hereby on the study of un-armed, camera-fitted aerial vehicles between 0.5-30 kilos). Channelled through these analytical levels, the project aspires to more fully conceptualise the role of the aerial dimension in the projection of power across and within space.

The empirical response to the project’s analytical and conceptual ambitions lies in the detailed study of the planning, development and operation of particular ‘drone assemblages’. This is achieved through the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. More specifically, the project considers three broad fields of drone utilization: (1) Drone uses by public authorities; (2) commercially motivated drone uses; and (3) drone uses by the general public. The first two fields are studied through the investigation of four case studies, relating to the domains of policing, risk management/disaster relief, commercial imaging/filming and mapping. The study of the third field is based on one case study that focusses on the use of drones in the context of recreational drone associations, whilst also involving a quantitative survey that allows the investigation of the practices of drone hobbyists more widely.