

FORUM



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: [overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/](http://overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/).

---

## Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

Edited by

**Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI**

Contributions of

**Cris SHORE & Susan WRIGHT, Vintilă MIHĂILESCU, Sarah GREEN, Gabriela VARGAS-CETINA & Steffan Igor AYORA-DIAZ, Tracey HEATHERINGTON, Dimitris DALAKOGLU, Noelle MOLÉ LISTON, Susana NAROTZKY, Jaro STACUL, Meredith WELCH-DEVINE, Jon P. MITCHELL.**

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © TRACEY HEATHERINGTON, FILIPPO M. ZERILLI (EDS)

*Anthropologists in/of the Neoliberal Academy*

2016 | ANUAC. VOL. 5, N° 1, GIUGNO 2016: 41-90.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2437



---

## Education and neoliberalism in Yucatan, Mexico

**Gabriela VARGAS-CETINA**

Autonomous University of Yucatan, Mexico

**Steffan Igor AYORA-DIAZ**

Autonomous University of Yucatan, Mexico

---

**ABSTRACT:** Under neoliberalism, at least in Mexico, education has been recast as a service that is to be sold for money, and not as a right of all Mexicans. The economy itself is now seen as a services economy, where everything is expected to make money. Here we reflect on some of the implications of current education reforms on our work at the Autonomous University of Yucatan.

---

On June 19 of 2016 in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, armed soldiers fired their weapons against a group of teachers who were protesting against the “education reform” ordered by Mexico’s national government. According to CNN and other international agencies, eight persons died, while 53 civilians and 55 policemen were injured<sup>1</sup>. In the aftermath, officials from Mexico’s National Security Commission said that the police had not fired because they were not carrying guns, and all the videos and photos published by the international press were doctored. Only after the national and international press distributed widely their videos of the shootings did the authorities finally accepted that the Mexican police had fired and caused fatalities<sup>2</sup>.

The teachers were striking against the so-called “education reform”, which is in fact an administrative reform of the National System of Education. Until 2011, elementary school teachers attended Escuelas Normales (School for Teachers) for four years after High School in order to become eligible to compete for jobs in the National System of Education schools. These are public elementary schools, and teachers are usually free to develop their own take on the national curriculum, as long as they also teach the basic contents required by the Secretary of Education. Escuelas Normales are known for being politically combative, since the teachers at elementary schools generally work closely with parents and families, and are aware of local problems and needs. Also, in Indigenous areas, the teachers use the local language to teach children until grade four, switching their students’ language requirement to Spanish in grades five and six.

Upon becoming President of Mexico, in December of 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto announced an Education Reform that, according to his government, would make Mexican education internationally competitive, by increasing the international standing of

---

1. [edition.cnn.com/2016/06/20/americas/oaxaca-mexico-clashes/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/20/americas/oaxaca-mexico-clashes/index.html) (accessed on 15 July 2016).

2. [www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36572423](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36572423) (accessed on 15 July 2016).

Mexico on international indexes such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This was to be done through a major overhaul of the national education system. In practice, judging from what the teachers have publically declared during the protests, and from what we know from teachers in Yucatan, this meant that all teachers would take an exam, and if they failed it, they would lose their jobs. The requirement of graduating from an Escuela Normal (Teaching School) was removed; according to the new regulations anyone can take the exam and, if they pass it, become a teacher at an elementary school of the National System of Education. The main target seems to be the teachers' national trade union, one of the strongest in the country because it has members in all Mexican states. Judging from the news, and also from the comments of teachers on posts to news about the protests, many teachers in Mexico seem to have signed these documents and then taken the exam, even if they saw this as signing away their job security and their workers' rights and giving up on their union. In states like Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guerrero, three of the poorest states of Mexico, teachers have been publicly protesting against this reform, not only because it takes away their job security but also because the authorities may use the exam to censure politically-engaged teachers by firing them immediately. In the aftermath of the killings of teachers and bystanders in Oaxaca, protests are now taking place in all of Mexico.

Yucatan is relatively far away from Oaxaca (1160 Km) and it takes 18 hours and 39 minutes to travel between Merida and the City of Oaxaca by bus. At the Autonomous University of Yucatan (UADY) each year we get only a few students who graduated from Oaxacan high schools, but we do share many of the problems now affecting Oaxacan elementary school teachers and Oaxacan universities, because of the larger context of neoliberal economics, Mexican-style. UADY is known for its high quality programs. Between 2000 and 2011 it used to be among the five top public universities of the Mexican Republic. At this point, however, our University is in the process of becoming an institution less attuned to international research and more attuned to the requirements of a general workforce in a service economy. The neoliberal doctrine of education as a service to potential industry and service workers has affected UADY in at least the following ways:

1. The drive toward professors' demonstrable productivity. Since the 1990s, professors in all public and many private universities across Mexico have been asked to document every single activity they perform. Paper certificates are issued for each single activity. Organizing a seminar, putting together a syllabus, giving a paper, and even having been an employee of the University all need to be certified by an actual document, which at UADY used to be submitted to a committee at the end of each year as a pile of papers, and since 2014 have to be scanned and uploaded to a platform into the appropriate slots, according to UADY's program of Professor productivity. While in the past professors' productivity used to be tied mainly to money incentives, now we are increasingly moving toward a punitive regime, where everyone has to report to an ever-increasing number of accounting agencies and their respective platforms, lest we lose

employment-related rights. We have been advised that in a not-so-far-away future tenure will disappear, because it is too costly, and most teaching will be compensated according to professors' productivity indexes.

2. The exponential growth of administrative positions, relative to professors. In 2015 our incoming Rector (the highest authority in Mexican universities) calculated that we were reaching a proportion of 3 administration positions per each tenured academic. He saw this as a positive development.

3. The transformation of our programs from research-driven speciality programs (anthropology, archaeology, history, Latin American literature, social communications and tourism, which are all part of the Anthropological Sciences Faculty) into general education programs that will help our graduates find a job not necessarily related to a university education. Until 2010, our graduates were expected to have mastered at least some research methods and techniques that would help them to get a job as research assistants, or in places where first-hand knowledge of local problems was needed, or would make it possible for them to pursue postgraduate degrees. For several years now, however, students who passed the university's entry exam but did not make it into the sciences, engineering, medical or accounting careers, which are the ones most in demand, are transferred to those programs that did not fill up their maximum quota of entry students. At this point, in the social sciences and humanities we have to teach many students who are not interested in what we are teaching nor do they want to finish an anthropology degree; the only reason they come to our classes is to have the right to take the entry exam again each year and try to enter the other Faculties. We are babysitting an increasing number of disgruntled and disinterested students. In the meantime, the social sciences and the humanities are regularly derided as bad career options and economic cul-de-sacs by the parents of our students and by the general public.

4. We are now considered a public service university and not a research university. International agencies, including the World Bank, advised the Mexican government that public universities, especially outside central Mexico, should not dedicate their resources to research but rather to general education. While in the recent past in Yucatan the public university was only the top among a possible number of institutions students could attend, according to their scores on the national post-high school exam, our university is in the process of becoming a general studies institution. As we are asked to increase the number of our students and decrease the complexity of our courses, at UADY's Faculty of Anthropological Sciences we are finding it harder to compete with other study options for the incoming student generations. In the meantime, UADY does not have the installations nor the personnel to admit more hundreds of students. It is a no-win situation for the professors: We have to make our courses easier to follow and become a general studies option, we still do not fill the student entry quotas expected by authorities, and we are still expected to carry out a regular research and teaching load because of the increased requirements in "professor productivity".

5. It is increasingly difficult to teach the incoming students because they are so poorly prepared. This relates to the teachers' protests in Oaxaca and elsewhere, as education has been the political target of successive Mexican governments: world history, Greek and Latin etymology, general philosophy and other subjects important for an education in the social sciences have been either reduced or completely removed from the pre-university curriculum. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we could expect students to have some notions of the social sciences and to be able to understand some concepts from grammar or linguistics, so that they could be taught how to write essays in our disciplines. Today, their reading and writing skills are very poor. We are in the process of revising the requirements of our courses, because they seem unable to cope with the previous amount of written papers.

We feel that the quality of the education we can offer is suffering, and have no way of making things improve. Neoliberalism, unfortunately, has resulted in similar developments in many countries where education is suffering under the new creed of wholesale commodification. It does not need to be so: Estonia is one example of a nation committed to making education its main asset in the world's capitalist economy. There could be other ways and other models for economic advancement in the current world market. Mexico, however, has chosen the path of turning education into a market-driven commodity.