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Studying Policy Through Violence: The social conditions of education reform in Mexico

Abstract

This paper explores current Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's 2013 public education reform through ethnographic engagement, archival research, and interviews in Mexico City and Guerrero, Mexico. By May 2013, the National Coordination of Education Workers' (CNTE)—the primary education reform opposition movement—had gained national traction and more than 40,000 educators from various states indefinitely relocated to Mexico City's zocalo. In this paper, the author presents an account of the social conditions of policy formation and experiences of violence in the lives of teachers, legislators, political advisors, students, and community members, engaged in shaping education and opposing the reform. An anthropological approach to policy and violence embraces the analytical horizons of a world that prompts us to consider such large-scale phenomena as economic crises, neoliberal policies, and forced disappearances. A focus on dispersed communities allowed the author to explore the ways in which people engage, change, and experience the violence of policy across fluid borders, instead of how policy impacts presumably bounded communities.

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Keywords

Violence, Policy, Mexico, Education, Reform

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Author Biography

Ashley E. Sherry is a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, whose research includes interpersonal and institutional forms of violence with a focus on policy. Currently she is researching the social conditions of policy formation within social movements driven by educators and community members in Mexico City and Guerrero, Mexico. Contact her at asherry@anthro.umass.edu.

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Early on the morning of September 13th two Mexican federal police helicopters flew low over the camp dissident teachers had built in Mexico City's Constitution Square to protest education reform. The wind from the blades blew back the tarps that had sheltered thousands of educators for weeks and disrupted the assembly where educators were voting to cease their occupation of the iconic zocalo. Snipers positioned themselves along the roof of the Metropolitan Cathedral and startled teachers abandoned the assembly, grabbed their belongings, and ran, only to be picked up by police on side streets. Some teachers pressed their backs against stone pillars for protection and shouted out, "Cowards, cowards, don't run!" Others huddled closer together, sharpened wooden sticks on the stone plaza, and chanted: "Teachers hold on, the people are rising!" Shopkeepers pulled black and green aluminum shutters down over their shops and secured them with padlocks, before walking idly toward the metro.

The teachers waited long into the evening hours for federal police to launch their attack. With no belongings other than metal poles and sticks used to hold up tarps in the camp, they prepared to confront riot police, helicopters, snipers, water cannons, and tear gas. I stood under a stone awning adjacent to zocalo, watching as teachers ran and shopkeepers walked. A retired teacher and friend from Oaxaca looked toward the sea of riot police lining the streets of the historic center and said, "They're scared too. They don't want to do this." He turned back to me then and gestured to the opposite side of the zocalo with a stick, "Run. Go with the women," he said.ⁱⁱ He pulled a red bandana over his face and pushed deeper into the human wall separating the police from the camp. A crowd of teachers, students, and community members stood their ground. Some stood in silence, while others sang the Mexican National Anthem in unison as a melodic reminder of battles won and lands defended. I joined a group of women as low and steady voices rang out from the crowd behind us: "¡Guerra, guerra! Los patrios pendones en las olas de sangre empapad."

The police advanced on the crowd. The simultaneous pounding of thousands of boots bounced off the historic buildings as they fired the first round of tear gas canisters and sprayed water from armored tanks. As we pushed our way out of the zocalo, my eyes caught the gaze of an older man with a blue bandana tied tightly over his nose and mouth. Within moments a group of at least sixty police officers advanced on him with fire extinguishers and riot shields, while others paused to snap selfies on their smart-phones against the backdrop of the destroyed camp. We ran north toward Tepito—the capital's clearinghouse for narcotics and contraband. When we arrived everyone stood quietly and clung to cell phones

waiting for a whatsapp message or facebook update. I recalled my last memory in the zocalo, a snapshot of a man's face with deep laugh-lines around his dark eyes, wrinkled brow, and a faded blue bandana lost in a mass of black uniforms.



Figure 1. Remnants of the tent city burning in the zocalo. All photos by the author.

Between September-November 2013 and February-April 2014, I conducted ethnographic engagement, archival research, and interviews in Mexico City and Guerrero, Mexico on current President Enrique Peña Nieto's 2013 public education reform.ⁱⁱⁱ I set out to conduct fieldwork in Guerrero where the first protests and deaths occurred after the president announced the reform. After more than seven years building relationships in the state, my fieldwork *had* to change. By May 2013, the National Coordination of Education Workers' (CNTE)^{iv} opposition movement had gained national traction and more than 40,000 educators from various states indefinitely relocated to Mexico City's zocalo. I met my longtime mentor in the capital and she asked if I was leaving for Guerrero, given recent events. I mulled over the inadequacy of saying that it was not part of my research plan. "You have to stay," she said before I could respond. Since that day, I have spent my time in forums, marches, political meetings, congress, and cultural events. In what follows, I present an inescapably partial account of the social conditions of policy formation

and experiences of violence in the lives of teachers, legislators, political advisors, students, and community members, engaged in shaping education.

While I have lived in Mexico at regular intervals since 2002, I only began doing fieldwork there in 2008 at a time when national attention was fixed on former President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's "war on drug-trafficking." Policy was central to the war, yet soaring levels of drug-related violence made it easy for officials to frame policy decisions as singular solutions, while masking the political process. Since returning to Mexico for graduate research, policy and violence have become central to my work. An anthropological approach to policy and violence embraces the analytical horizons of a world that prompts us to consider such large-scale phenomena as economic crises, neoliberal policies, and forced disappearances. While much ethnography focuses on the impact of these developments on bounded communities, some ethnographers have turned their attention to the conditions in which dispersed communities shape our world (Ho 2009; Reinhold 1994; Scheper-Hughes 2013, 2010; Schwegler 2012; Wedel 2009, 2001). A focus on dispersed communities has allowed me to explore the ways in which communities engage, change, and experience the violence of policy across fluid borders, instead of how policy impacts presumably bounded communities. My research is inspired by the unending pursuit of a deeper understanding of the historical, political, and cultural conditions in which policies emerge and are transformed. Such deeper understandings of the conditions of policy formation afford researchers and communities an opportunity to explore policy as a process and transform their social landscape.

Fail by Numbers

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. (David Harvey 2005: 5)

Mexico—the world's fourteenth largest economy^v—is experiencing a crisis of capitalism marked by a history of one-party rule, economic crises, social upheavals, and the expansion of organized crime, which has strained the national economy and prompted Mexican officials to approve a series of structural reforms. In the last 20 years, there have been five deep structural reforms: budget and fiscal responsibility

(2006), public pension system (2004, 1995), the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994), and Bank of Mexico (1994). Economic pressure deepened this year with poor gross domestic product growth^{vi} and likely contributed to the swift approval of five structural reforms aimed at increasing competitiveness: education, energy, political, fiscal, and telecommunications. National and international media applaud President Pena Nieto's agenda as crucial to building a more modern Mexico. Scholars, unions, and social organizations have accused the president's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of returning to its modus operandi, targeting opposition, censoring media, and cutting deals with politicians, businesses, and international organizations to privatize national institutions.

Notwithstanding the strength of the Mexican economy, international think tanks attribute rising economic pressure to a decline in middle class income from 2010-2012 and the 2006-2010 global economic crisis (Wilson and Silva 2013: 4-6). Even in the metropolis of Mexico City, college educated Mexicans struggle to find work and frequently express frustration with the old adage, "he who seeks, finds." Unemployment rates for Mexicans increase with better education, which the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests is reflective of an incongruence of skills with the demands of the labor market (2012: 5). People worldwide are facing the reality that higher education does not equate to economic stability. The price of intellectual pursuits in an advanced capitalist system marked by structural inequalities is often daily survival. Mexican scholars and students with whom I have spoken share the view that the United States influences the range of labor demands and course of development in their country. A salient example of influence is President Pena Nieto's education reform; its major tenets emerged from policy recommendations following a 2008 agreement between the Mexican Ministry of Education and the OECD that called for *quality* education via a standards-based accountability system for teachers, schools, and students; teacher selection and recruitment; and performance based incentives.

Officials, nonprofit organizations, and international and private sector groups identified Mexico's deficient public education system as a key impediment to progress. By December 2012, this global set of actors had publicly framed the education system as a failure and bolstered their argument with evincible data. Mexico's education expenditures are close to the OECD average, yet it falls short in spending per primary and secondary student and scores at the bottom of every international student achievement test. For instance, over 40% of 15-year-olds scored at the lowest level on the Program for International Student Assessment's reading test and 50% scored at the lowest level in math and science (OECD 2010).

Some 90% of expenditures cover salaries, leaving a small percentage for infrastructure, curriculum, and training. The reform is centered on the creation of standards-based accountability systems that do not account for the complexities generated by the structures that support political-economic marginalization, social inequalities, and human suffering. Notwithstanding its narrow focus, dismal statistics made for an almost ironclad case in favor of reform. It made *sense* to want to improve education.

What are you willing to do for policy?

‘Locality’ is not everywhere, nor for every purpose, the same thing; sometimes it is family, sometimes a town, a nation, sometimes a flow or a field, sometimes a continent or even the world; often it lies at the point of articulation among two or more of these things. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 294)

Policies surface in public discourse as legal apparatuses to solve state identified issues, such as substandard education. An anthropological approach to policy takes policy itself as the object of inquiry and looks at the constellation of actors, processes, and influences involved in its production (Wedel, Shore, Feldman, Lathrop 2005: 35). Anthropologist Sue Reinhold (1994) coined the term “studying through,” to denote a methodological approach of analyzing political and social transformation, which debunks the myth of hierarchical and linear policy process. Anthropologists who are “studying through,” explore the social landscape of policy formation among dispersed actors, flows of events, and disputes over legal discourse that ultimately becomes institutionalized (Wright and Reinhold 2011). Experiences of violence are part of the social conditions of policy formation, yet legal jargon often creates “an invisible majority; lives that can seemingly be abstracted by the technical language” (Parr and Evans 2014). Anthropologists are well positioned to break through the reductionist framework and explore policy as a cultural concept and set of processes that “encapsulate the entire history and culture of the society that generated them” (Shore and Wright 1997: 7). Policy acts as a lens through which we can explore processes of political transformation and experiences of violence.

The debates surrounding the Mexican education reform reveal a geographically dispersed set of actors (officials, unions, state and private sector groups), processes (education forums, protests, and political meetings), and influences that shape the conditions of policy formation. Since the reform was proposed in December 2012,

the conservative PRI has censored media and used security forces to silence dissident voice. Despite the threat of physical violence, CNTE educators have reinserted human experience into the national debate through social media, publications, and space claiming. Tracing the flow of events and interactions around education reform brings us closer to evading frameworks (state and private, local and national, global and local, macro and micro, centralized and decentralized), which “not only fail to capture current dynamics in the world but actually obfuscate the understanding of many policy practices” (Wedel et al. 2005: 30). How do we ensure our descriptions remain *thick* when our ethnographies encompass multiple sites, processes, and communities? Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli advocates for an inquiry into the “conditions of formation and movement that allow the visibility and intelligibility of social arrangements” (2014), instead of hyper-focusing on the cultural meaning of practice. Since going into the field no other approach has allowed me to better grasp the unremitting ebb and flow of policy and violence.

“Into the wolf’s mouth:” Tracing the Violence of Policy

It was mid-afternoon when my plane touched down on the tarmac at Mexico City’s Benito Juárez International airport. I had driven and flown through the capital for years, briefly stopping over at small hotels on the outskirts as I made my way back to Guerrero. I collected my luggage at the carrel and instinctively made my way toward the line of taxi stands. Only this time, when the driver asked “¿a dónde la llevo, señorita?” [Where am I taking you, miss?] I responded with my new address in Tlalpan Center—located in the largest of the Federal District’s boroughs. I was awarded a one-year visiting scholarship as part of the visiting student and scholar’s program at the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social*ⁱⁱⁱ (CIESAS) located in the borough. The first few days I attended seminars, met with faculty and students, and honed my research questions with my mentor. Things felt slow. Every minute that passed I knew I was missing major events that I had stayed in Mexico City to observe. With the support of my CIESAS mentor, I moved into the tent city in Mexico City’s zocalo and stayed there for almost two weeks with a group of educators from Oaxaca through the violent removal on September 13th. I brought a small black shoulder bag with toiletries, a change of clothes, an iPhone to record interviews, a local cell phone to communicate, my passport, about one hundred USD, and a palm-sized notebook. The taxi driver stopped two blocks from the zocalo, it was as close as we could get. I handed him the fare and as I climbed out of the back seat he grabbed my left hand, concern plastered across his face, and

said, “usted va directamente a la boca del lobo” [you are going directly into the wolf’s mouth]. I squeezed his hand, got out of the cab, and closed the door.

Dodging rope and wire holding up tarps, I made my way into the tent city calling out “Compañeros de Guerrero” [Comrades from Guerrero]. My mentor had suggested I find a group from that state, because I knew it well and would likely have friends or acquaintances from education circles in common. Instead, I met a group of women from Oaxaca who, before and after September 13th, asked me to go with them to more than 24 forums, cultural events, marches, and conferences, where the faces of political prisoners and assassinated teachers turned revolutionaries were pictured on flags and protest banners. Amidst widespread concern about police infiltration amongst the educators, my CIESAS affiliation, my long working relationships with educators from the Autonomous University of Guerrero, and my newly struck friendship with the educators from Oaxaca gave me a reason to be there. I am indebted to all the educators, community members, and friends who paused to share their experiences of policy with me under impossible living conditions rife with state brutality and indifference from passersby.

* * *

“Just imagine Guerrero, Oaxaca, Michoacán, and Chiapas on national strike in Mexico at the same time. With that we will bring down the education reform,” said the Guerrero public school director as he leaned over the small table that separated us in the cyber-café. He was a founding member of the CNTE and had been working in public schools for more than 36 years. We were on the outskirts of Acapulco surrounded by used car lots, auto parts shops, and bulldozers clearing the mountainside to expand the road connecting the port to the Costa Grande. Without the breeze off the bay it was impossibly hot, but the director looked at ease in a blue plaid button up shirt, black dress slacks, and his dark hair neatly combed to the side. He had just come from school where one of his teachers was holding class under the shade of a tree. Was the fan not working in her classroom? I asked. He looked amusedly at me and said, “That is her classroom. It’s not far, do you want to see it?” We made our way to his school in a blue and white Volkswagen Beetle taxi with a torn out passenger seat. The director stretched his legs out into the empty space and spoke quietly, “I say this with the fear of being mistaken, but I believe there will be a national strike, maybe in six months. Imagine the four vanguards of the movement together with other states. We know it’s possible. We remember the 20th of November, day of the Mexican Revolution. The government has to think carefully. Good, we’re here.” He pulled his legs under him and climbed easily out of the taxi.

Studying Policy Through Violence

Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois conceptualize violence as operating along a continuum where the categories of structural violence, symbolic violence, and everyday violence overlap (2004). Bourgois emphasizes that the categories “are meant to be starting points for approaching violence in a way that facilitates recognizing the roots, links, tentacles, diversity and pervasiveness of violence’s multiple forms and effects” (2007). On the afternoon I accompanied the director to his school, we sat in the makeshift classroom below the tree with a mid-twenties civics and ethics teacher and I asked her, how are you able to give class without desks, materials, or a board to write on? “There’s no money,” she replied, “It’s okay. We do what we can. At least we have a school, children in the mountain region have to walk for hours to reach a school.” The state had fallen short in one of its most basic tasks—to provide a classroom for educators and students—and its failure had been normalized.

Structural violence, formally coined by Johan Galtung (1969), exists when advantages, such as access to resources and opportunities, are disproportionately afforded to some individuals and are built into the social, political, and economic systems that organize society. The violence that surfaces within social, political, and economic structures, led Bourgois to declare, “I did not realize that every day is a state of emergency for the structurally vulnerable” (2007). The unequal distribution of resources in the classroom below the tree is the physical manifestation of systemic inequalities rather than the result of any action taken by a single person. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence (1977; 2004) draws attention to the means by which subjugated individuals see their dominance as normal, and in so doing they legitimize the status-quo. “We do what we can,” is the line that stands out most in my fieldnotes from the classroom under the tree. The civics and ethics teacher had seemingly taken responsibility for and adapted to the deficient school conditions, while contrasting her environment with one that is arguably much worse, a region without a school.

A local legislator from the PRI in Guerrero is well known for his immediate actions: rebuilding homes after floods, securing micro-loans to grow small businesses, and constructing staircases, concrete lunch tables, and roofs for schools. His focus on attending to immediate needs reflects a broader trend in the state, which prompts officials to apply stopgap measures to the social conditions that fuel everyday violence. Everyday violence, first coined by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, refers to the production of apathy and suffering through institutional processes and

discourses (2004). Instead of extraordinary acts of violence, such as the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, everyday violence is the unrelenting struggle to survive that erodes peoples' ability to transform their lives. Scheper-Hughes identifies infant mortality, disease, despair, and humiliation as forms of everyday violence, which "destroy socially marginalized humans with even greater frequency" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 2) than catastrophic instances of violence. When asked why the state didn't appear to be working toward a long-term vision to reduce the conditions that fuel the everyday violence experienced by educators and students across the state the PRI legislator reluctantly said, "No se puede" [It's not possible]. Taking immediate and visible action in marginalized communities is necessary, but not without consequence. State officials often take up pressing issues at the expense of developing long-term plans to tackle underlying social conditions.

Recent anthropological research on quiet violence (Pérez and Sherry 2013) draws attention to less observable conditions, such as extreme poverty, neglect, and abuse, which fuel everyday violence and require enduring resolutions. Strong currents of structural violence give rise to the negation and de-emphasis of social inequalities by those who benefit from the advantages that reinforce everyday and quiet violence. I am reminded of the shopkeepers, who walked idly by the teachers in the zocalo and signaled indifference to human suffering and state-sponsored repression with every footstep. Violence is rooted in and reinforced by structures and cultural conditions that can be changed, which "requires researchers to understand the transformative powers of its use in social relations and cultural practices" (Pérez 2010). Would it have made a difference if the shopkeepers, taxi drivers, store employees, and tourists stood with the teachers that day? The Guerrero public school director recalled the country's revolutionary history and potential to enact change in the midst of violence when he spoke of a national strike, "We know it's possible. We remember the 20th of November, the day of the Mexican Revolution. The government has to think carefully."

* * *

"What happens in congress, in this legislature, is that it's a federation of lobbyists," said a leftist Citizen Movement political advisor when I asked him about the legal ruling to reform the General Education Act. "You have a congress that gives itself the luxury of bringing in representatives from banks and the media as legislators. It's no longer necessary to send a lobbyist, because you already have him as a federal legislator," he said between sips of water. "That is what is happening in congress." He paused and I asked him to tell me about the negotiations with CNTE teachers leading up to the passage of the reforms to the

General Education Act. "Dialogue at the negotiating table with the teachers was a joke, because the period of regular sessions, which is from February to April, had already ended. In an atypical act, congress voted like they had never voted before and the teachers did what few had done; they broke through security at the Congress and made it into the building. I was leaving when I saw all the teachers coming in and I ran," he laughed lightly and added, "because they were breaking things. I understood why they were doing it. Obviously, they wanted to hit the legislative base so they made the decision to take the chamber and that's when the strongest protests started."

The Judicial Route

President Peña Nieto signed education reform into law on February 26, 2013, after deputies and senators in the General Congress of the United Mexican States approved and declared it constitutional.^{viii} The president was later granted approval for three related initiatives: reforms to the General Education Act, National Institute of Education Evaluation law, and the Professional Teaching Service law. The centerpiece of the reform is an evaluation of Mexican public and private school teachers by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE), which was raised to the constitutional level and given autonomy in August 2013. Since the president announced the reform in December 2012, the National Education Workers Union (SNTE) swiftly endorsed it and discarded the concerns expressed by educators, community members, researchers, and unions. In the months that followed, it became gradually more apparent that the SNTE's actions supported the PRI's political aspirations, rather than the needs of the educators it was tasked to represent. The national union's stance reinforced the message conveyed in the OECD policy recommendations and the documentary film *De Panzazo*^{ix}: Mexican public education is a disaster and Mexican teachers are undereducated, lazy, and are making it *by the skin of their teeth*. The OECD proposed a value-added model of teacher evaluation to account for the country's socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic differences (2011), while the documentary's producers, *Mexicanos Primeros*, similarly called for teacher evaluations and for the government to wrest control of education from the national union. This global set of actors deemphasized the socioeconomic differences that are the true challenge to free and secular public education guaranteed in the Mexican Constitution, while offering no viable alternatives to improve education.

CNTE educators simultaneously fortified and expanded their resistance efforts throughout the country with mass protests, space claiming, and education forums. Mexican anthropologist Rosalva Hernández Castillo views such opposition efforts as coexisting demands for political power and a questioning of the “civilizing projects of the Mexican state” (2011). As part of a negotiation with Secretary of Government Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong and state officials, CNTE educators engaged in eleven regional and one national education forum. These forums gave educators, researchers, and community members the opportunity to oppose the reform and put forward alternatives. In July 2013, CNTE representatives presented Osorio Chong with a document that contained the counter proposals generated in the forums.^x If officials received the document, its contents were ignored as the reform and all of its subsidiary legislation passed into law last September. CNTE educators and their legal advisor, Eduardo Pérez Saucedo, submitted at least 400,000 appeals against the modifications to articles 3 and 73 in the Mexican Constitution. These modifications expand federal authority over teacher placement and permanence, introduce mechanisms for evaluating teacher performance, decrease federal spending on education, and place the onus of maintaining *quality* school conditions on local authorities, teachers, parents, and private organizations, which threaten to further normalize deplorable conditions and secure a central role for the private sector in public schools.

Mexican officials, nonprofit organizations, and international and private sector groups carefully crafted the sociopolitical conditions for education reform in Mexico. CNTE educators, despite recurring to the proper legal channels, were repeatedly denied a formal role in the policy process. It is in this context that officials passed the reform and its subsidiary legislation, without evaluating public education independently of the OECD or consulting with the broader community. When I asked the Citizen Movement political advisor about the August 2013 reforms to the General Education Act he said, “We never had a draft, because here congress doesn’t decide with an initiative in hand. Everything is already processed in a political negotiation. The dictum and its subsidiary legislation arrive perfectly elaborated, and you vote.” More than a year after President Peña Nieto signed the reform into law, officials have yet to detail the specifics of evaluation and the ways in which it will improve education *quality*. Given the lack of details, the political advisor’s comments, and the political marginalization of CNTE educators, it seems the reform was never up for meaningful debate and the forums served only as a way for officials to placate dissident teachers, while forging ahead with the reform.

Robots and Reforms



Figure 2. The road to Iztapalapa. All photos by the author.

“They want to make robots of our students and teachers. An education reform should focus on pedagogy and didactic materials. This is a labor reform,” a Mexico City public school teacher said, as she glanced over her shoulder at the large crowd still lingering in the park. It was one of the first community education forums I had attended and her words captured the very real stakes for public education. At least ten people crowded around her after she denounced the Mexican Government’s treatment of teachers and the future outcomes of the constitutional modifications made under the reform. She raised her left fist high in the air and sang: “Desde el hondo crisol de la Patria se levanta el clamor popular, ya se anuncia la nueva alborada, todo el pueblo comienza a cantar.” Others joined her in singing “venceremos,” a hymn adopted by the Mexican teachers’ movement from *Popular Unity*—a 1970s Chilean coalition of left-wing socialist and communist political parties. The group dispersed and I introduced myself. “You speak Spanish well,” she smiled, and then asked, “Where are you from?” We stood on a makeshift stage in the park while we broke down tables from the forum and I told her how I had spent some of high school and college in Mexico. “Then you get it,” she said, “why I can’t retire even after thirty years.” I nodded. “Did you hear the children?” she asked and

gestured to a small group of elementary school boys playing soccer in the concrete park. I shook my head and explained how it had taken me almost two hours and a very patient taxi driver to find the small park located far from government offices, where forums ran less risk of police intervention.

“We asked them what they want to be when they grow up,” she said, “and they shouted out police officers, military, and one student, he said he wanted to be a doctor. Finally, a child that doesn’t want to work for the state, but then he thought for a moment and said, ‘a military doctor.’ The last student we asked said he wanted to be a narco. Our children know who has the power, money and they know it’s not their teachers. The state treats us worse than narcos. This is a neoliberal reform. These events are key. Hope is key. It’s the other side of the violence and the way we can change education in Mexico.”

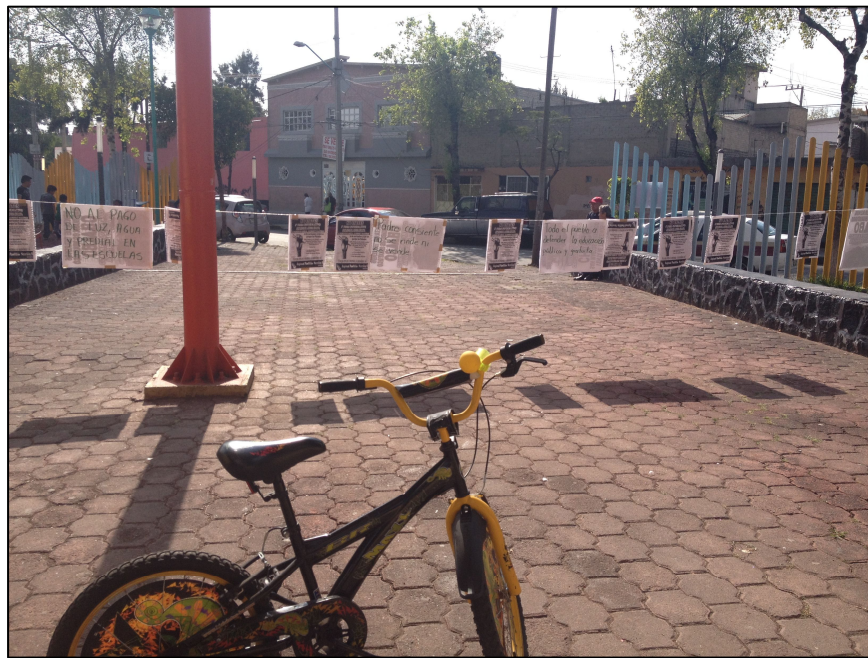


Figure 3. Community Education Forum in Iztapalapa. All photos by the author.

In the months since, I realized that experiences of violence are part of the conditions of policy formation that brought the current CNTE movement into being. Structural disadvantages, political marginalization, despair, extreme poverty, and physical violence are part of the Mexico City teacher’s experience. Along that continuum of violence, she came to believe that an entirely different education

model was possible. It is from spaces of action, such as the education forum, that engagement with the violence that marks society generates the possibility for change. Violence and transformation can be studied and engaged with critically as people respond from their distinctive spaces of struggle. This move toward understanding violence necessitates the willingness of ethnographers to “move with events as people reframe them over time and in their everyday lives” (Makley 2012). In addition to diffuse sites for participant-observation and extended case studies, an anthropological approach to policy and violence calls for an analysis of newspapers, archives, government documents, and project reports; these resources are central, rather than secondary, to our understanding of the cultural conditions of policy formation.

Conditions for Change

CNTE teachers have been demonized in Mexican media outlets. Televisa, Milenio, Reforma, and Universal tell the story of disruptive, violent, and pointless protests. They tell the stories of struggling businesses and taxi operators around Constitution Square and Revolution Monument, where teachers have occupied space over ten months. In a conversation with a Reforma editor, she opined that CNTE teachers simply did not want to be evaluated and that she was tired of covering the group. National media outlets never told the story of the man with deep laugh-lines around his dark eyes, wrinkled brow, and a faded blue bandana lost in a mass of black uniforms. Following the violent removal of teachers from Constitution Square, most media boasted no injuries or reported fewer than eleven, while CNTE counts totaled more than one hundred. Universal published a multi-page article on two officers who were wounded, without mentioning the injured teachers. This strategic focus on physical violence demonizes teachers and ignores the complexity of the social conditions of policy formation that pitted them against police that day. Since that time, I began to consider the relationship between direct violent repression and the quiet violence of education reform and what it would take for a social movement to change the conditions of policy formation. I asked a Citizen Movement political advisor what he would recommend to CNTE organizers, and he responded:

“The social route is what is important. I compare them to the SME [The Mexican Electrical Workers Union]. The SME took a political route, a judicial route with appeals, but they didn’t want to connect to the people in the streets. The teachers are repeating the same mistake as the Mexican Electrical Workers Union. They have to seek out the housewife, the student, and the

laborer. They have to raise people's awareness. Movements grow when there is a social route. They need to identify similarities with other movements without losing their autonomy, that is the goal of the social route."

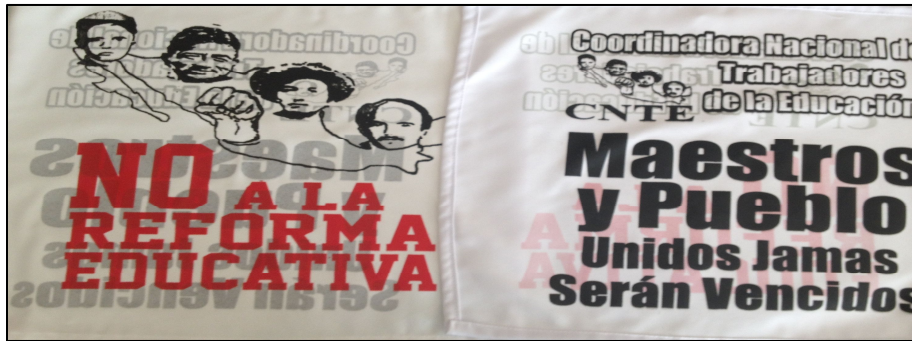


Figure 4. CNTE Flag Lucio Cabanas, Genaro Vásquez, Arturo Gámiz, and Misael Nunez. All photos by the author.

The CNTE movement has relied heavily on traditional models of social change, such as counter-proposals, government negotiations, electoral politics, and labor unions. Courts have unceremoniously denied their appeals, underscoring the challenges the policy process poses to those who seek to amend the structures that reinforce everyday and quiet violence. The groups' legal arguments have necessarily focused on labor rights, but this approach has resulted in limited community support. "It's good to evaluate them" is a recurrent sentiment expressed by business owners and parents. The evaluation, however, does not in itself ensure *quality* education. Officials from the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education revealed that the evaluation would unearth the extent of the country's education problems, but would not produce an improvement in itself or tackle the underlying challenges to education (Montalvo 2013). Over the last twelve months, CNTE educators have increasingly sought to bring attention to these limitations through forums, cultural events, marches, and conferences. The events, according to organizers, generate community support, situate local experiences in the national debate, and delegitimize the dominant rhetoric, which has painted teachers as an impediment to progress. With the reform looming over the current school year, CNTE educators are struggling to convey the improbability that the reform will ensure *quality* education when the particulars are still being negotiated outside of communities. Through the education reform, many community members believe the Mexican government seeks only to control the rights and obligations of educators, while simultaneously constraining and controlling the futures of students. The swift

blows of direct violent repression coupled with the slow and meticulous progress of quiet and everyday violence are manifest in the reform, which germinates despair and acceptance of ostensibly inevitable inequalities across the education sector. A deeper understanding of the social conditions of policy formation illuminates opportunities to transform the social landscape, end violent repression, uncover the people behind structural inequalities, and lead community members away from accepting violence as an inherent part of life.

Note

ⁱ Author's translations are provided in English and Spanish throughout the text.

ⁱⁱ All places, except prominent public spaces associated with widely reported events, and personal names have been omitted from this article. The author included specific references to Constitution Square and Revolution Monument in Mexico City.

ⁱⁱⁱ This research complies with AAA ethics guidelines and was approved by the sponsoring university's Research Ethics Board.

^{iv} The National Coordination of Education Workers is a dissident union that was formed in 1979 as an alternative to the National Education Workers Union. Since its inception the group has lobbied for the democratization of the national union.

^v Mexico is the world's 14th largest economy and the second largest in Latin America, according to the World Bank Group and Oppenheimer Asset Management Investment Strategy. Nevertheless, from 2010-2012 the population increased from 114.5 to 117.3 and those living in poverty increased from 52.8 million to 53.3 in a country of 120.8 million people (Wilson and Silva 2013: 1).

^{vi} Mexico's gross domestic product grew only 1.2%, down from 3.7% a year ago (International Monetary Fund 2014: 2)

^{vii} The *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* [the Center for Research and Graduate Studies in Social Anthropology] was founded in 1973. It serves as an educational institution for M.A. and Ph.D. students with seven campuses throughout México. Additionally, The center has 160 researchers working on more than 250 projects spanning topics such as education, religion, violence, natural resources, gender and Indigenous groups.

^{viii} The education reform is the most aggressive in a series of reforms aimed at improving education through increased accountability and control over educators, which include the Alliance for Quality Education (2008), the recently discontinued nationwide student standardized test (2006), and reforms to privatize and reduce benefits available to teachers through the Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers (2004).

^{ix} The documentary film "De Panzazo" was produced by Mexicanos Primeros and launched in February 2012 in Cinopolis and had 240,000 viewers on opening

weekend, according to the *Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica y del Videograma*. An exploration of the interconnections between national and international actors reveals the complex set of influences around education reform in Mexico. Mexicanos Primeros is presided over by Claudio X González Guajardo, the cofounder and ex-president of the Televisa Foundation. The founder and vice president of Mexicanos Primeros, Alejandro Ramírez Magaña, was the alternate representative of Mexico to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The current president of the National Institute for Education Evaluation, Sylvia Schmelkes, was previously consultant for the OECD and Mexicanos Primeros.

^x The document prepared by the National Coordination of Education Workers is titled, “*Análisis y perspectivas de la reforma educativa. Memorias y resoluciones, julio 2013.*” It can be accessed online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/docs/171157.pdf>

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