New Perspectives on Prehispanic Highland Mesoamerica: A Macroregional Approach

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Many social scientists might question the potential role for archaeology in the study of world systems and macroregional political economies. After all, the principal contributions to this contemporary research domain have come from history and other social sciences (e.g., Braudel 1972; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982). In addition, most of the world systems literature to date has focused on Europe and other regions of the Old World. This paper takes a somewhat novel tack, one that integrates contemporary findings in archaeology and history to expand and contribute to current debates concerning the nature of ancient world systems and interregional relations. Yet, the geographic focus is not Rome or Greece or even the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, but rather prehispanic Mesoamerica, an area that encompasses the southern two-thirds of what is now Mexico, as well as Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

In approaching these issues, the authors recognize that the study of pre-Columbian peoples is not blessed with the extent of historical documentation that is available for some of the Old World regions mentioned above. However, the last several decades have witnessed rather dramatic empirical and theoretical transitions in prehispanic Mesoamerican studies, and a growing minority of archaeologists and ethnohistorians are currently addressing questions phrased in terms of world systems, long-distance exchange, and the spatial division of labor.

At the outset, the two paradigms (diffusionism and developmentalism) that dominated ancient Mesoamerican research into the 1980s are reviewed briefly. Some of the fundamental premises of both approaches are suggested to be inadequate for under-
standing the prehispanic Mesoamerican world. Following this theoretical grounding, a multi-scale approach that considers (and gives interpretive weight to) macroregional relations is argued to be necessary to understand the workings of this ancient world. The macroregional perspective advocated here draws interpretive insight from both prior approaches (diffusionism and developmentalism), although aspects of each framework are rejected or altered. At the same time, based on empirical analysis, significant modifications to several facets of world systems theory are advanced.

Two empirical directions are taken to examine the importance of macroregional relations in prehispanic Mesoamerica. First, the Late Postclassic period is discussed (Figure 1), focusing on the

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Figure 1. Chronological Sequence for the Valley of Oaxaca and Highland Mesoamerica.
Aztec of the Central Highlands of Mexico (Figure 2). Examination of this era allows for the integration of early colonial documentary as well as archaeological information in a manner not possible for most of the rest of prehispanic Mesoamerica. Subsequently, findings from the authors' fieldwork in Mexico's Southern Highlands are used to extend interpretive arguments to earlier times and to illustrate from a diachronic perspective the greater utility of the proposed analytical framework. Through this two-pronged investigation, some of the basic parameters and attributes of the ancient Mesoamerican political economy are illustrated. This consideration of a non-Western, preindustrial macroregional system contributes to the wider debate on world systems and political economies by extending the geographical and temporal setting on which such discussions generally are held.

Theoretical Background

Prior to the 1960s, Mesoamerican archaeologists and art historians endeavored to construct a space-time continuum for the
pre-Columbian past. Excavations at major urban centers helped establish sequences of ceramic and other artifactual change that were used to date sites and define episodes of cultural transition. For the most part, variation and change were judged to be stimulated by either migration or diffusion—the transmission of new ideas and innovations from other regions. In a seminal paper, Paul Kirchhoff (1943) defined Mesoamerica as a multipolity domain that shared certain ideological, social, political, and technological features. This multicultural entity was bound loosely by interregional exchanges of diffused ideas and the adoption of specific cultural traits. Significantly, many of the shared traits enumerated by Kirchhoff were either concepts (like the calendar, writing conventions, pyramid construction, and sacred beliefs) or sumptuary goods (such as cotton textiles, cacao, ear spools, nose plugs, and iron-ore mirrors) that were associated principally with elites and their lifeways, and the ritual knowledge that they controlled.

Although this early era of research was extremely important for the empirical contributions made, many critical questions were left unanswered or even unaddressed. What were the populations of these ancient centers and their hinterlands? What were the social and economic ties that bound commoners to elites and one polity to another? How did these relations change over time and vary across space? Even the construct diffusion has been found to be unsatisfactory, since it is difficult to document archaeologically and conflates such diverse activities as intermarriage, trade, warfare and conquest. Mesoamerica was classified as a culture area, yet the behavioral referents behind these shared concepts and traits largely were unknown (Blanton and Feinman 1984). Diffusionists also tended to look almost exclusively at loosely defined outside influences to account for variation and change.

In response to these concerns, as well as larger trends in anthropological archaeology, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a marked shift in prehispanic Mesoamerican research with the growing acceptance of the developmentalist, cultural-ecological paradigm. The reconstruction of past patterns of behavior, especially those with material referents, received greater attention. In addition to the traditional focus (temples and tombs), small villages and agricultural features increasingly were studied. Re-
Regional and urban settlement patterns provided an empirical basis for estimating past populations and demographic change, as well as for evaluating shifting human-resource relations. In Mesoamerican studies over the last four decades, these new research agendas have led to a much better understanding of what people ate, where they lived, and how their lifeways varied in space and time.

Despite notable advances, several shortcomings are evident in the developmentalist approach. Perhaps, partly in response to the outward focus of diffusionism, the developmentalists modeled change in bounded local regions or systems in which long-distance relations often were ignored. The interaction of population and environment was deemed the core from which all other aspects of cultural variability and change were to be explained. Yet in ancient Mesoamerica, as elsewhere, the findings from regional settlement studies illustrate that demographic shifts were not constant or ever increasing, nor did population change precede or coincide with episodes of disequilibrium or transition in any simple, predictable fashion (Feinman et al. 1985; Feinman in press). Thus, population determinism proved to be an inadequate explanation for long-term cultural transitions (Blanton 1983). Likewise, environmental factors are not sufficient to account for the significant complexity of historical variation and change in prehispanic Mesoamerica.

More specifically, the developmentalist paradigm does not explain adequately key differences in the evolutionary histories of two highland cores, the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca (Figure 2) (Blanton 1978; Marcus 1983a). Nor can it account for the massive and complex episodes of transition that crossed regional boundaries and affected almost the entire culture area (such as between A.D. 700-900, when most extant urban centers declined greatly in size and importance while others were founded; see Diehl and Berlo 1989). Also neglected were questions concerning Mesoamerica as an area of intertwined cultural traditions. Why, for example, were luxury goods and symbolically significant items, as opposed to other kinds of materials, generally shared so widely?

Over the last decade, mesoamericanists have given increasing attention to larger-scale phenomena and processes. Yet, for the most part, these studies have not returned to trait-based dif-
fusionism, but have concentrated on the elucidation of long-distance political and economic relations (e.g. Berdan 1980; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Drennan 1984a, 1984b; Hirth 1980; Pailes and Whitecotton 1979; Schortman and Urban 1987; Smith 1986; Spencer 1982). This interpretive shift is both a reaction to the narrow determinism of some cultural ecology positions (e.g. Sanders et al. 1979) and a reflection of larger currents in archaeology (e.g. Trigger 1984) and other fields, including history, political science, sociology, and cultural anthropology (e.g. Braudel 1972; Frank 1966; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982). Yet these new intellectual currents were made possible both by several decades of materially focused archaeological fieldwork, as well as by new economic perspectives that were brought to the interpretation of the historical sources of the 16th century. While the former provided new quantitative findings on production, distribution, and exchange, the latter suggested the complexity of long-distance relations in the Aztec world and the significance that these inter-regional relations could have on the organization of local economies.

The Late Prehispanic Period in Highland Mesoamerica

In descriptions of late prehispanic Mesoamerica (ca. A.D. 1519), one often sees reference (e.g. Coe et al. 1986) to the “Aztec or Triple Alliance empire.” Yet, as Davies (1978:229) has argued, this best documented Mesoamerican “empire” was “hardly an empire in the true sense of the word, but an area loosely dominated for the purpose gathering tribute . . . there is ample evidence of a continual process of conquest, rebellion, and reconquest.” Unlike the Roman and Incan cases, the Aztec sphere had virtually no provincial infrastructure (Smith 1986). Even if one considers this relatively short lived tribute domain to be consolidated politically, a view that glosses over considerable organizational variation in time and space, the maximal extent of the political domination never encompassed even half of Mesoamerica (Hassig 1988). Adjacent parts of the Central Mexican Highlands remained outside Aztec authority (Barlow 1949). Other tributary states, such as that of the Tarascans, co-existed elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Pollard 1987). Thus, during the late prehispanic period, Kirchhoff’s multistate, multicultural domain that shared key ideological,
technical, and social features was not politically dominated by a single administrative entity. Earlier core states appear to have controlled no larger portion of the macroregion than the Aztecs, and as Whitecotton and Pailes (1986:186) have noted, “all mesoamericanists seem to agree that at no point of time was Mesoamerica a single world empire dominated by a single center.”

What then linked Late Postclassic Mesoamerica, this multistate, multiethnic domain? As argued elsewhere (Blanton and Feinman 1984), luxury goods and aspects of elite knowledge were shared very widely. The specific mechanisms by which sacred information was transmitted were undoubtedly very important in linking this ancient world; however, these connections are not well understood and so will not be considered in depth here. Rather, the present focus is on the movement of goods, a topic for which one can draw on both tribute records and archaeological data. Nevertheless, as one mesoamericanist (Lee 1978:2) reminded the field a decade ago: “religion and commerce were recognized as interdependent factors of Mesoamerican society as early as the beginnings of the Spanish Conquest.”

Aztec long-distance tribute demands emphasized relatively light weight, precious products, such as cotton suits, feathers, jaguar pelts, cacao, tropical fruits, jewels, and metal ornaments. As with tribute, the pochteca and other long-distance professional merchants and traders generally moved rare resources and highly crafted items rather than staple foods or other bulk goods. Likewise, similar products, as well as highly decorated pottery and obsidian (“volcanic glass”), tend to be found archaeologically at the greatest distances from their sources of origin. In contrast, grain tribute was collected by the Aztecs, but almost exclusively from areas in and adjacent to their Basin of Mexico homeland (Drennan 1984b). Even some of the obligated maize, especially from more distant domains, was not transported back to Aztec Tenochtitlan, but was used at the point of collection to feed armies on the march (Hassig 1988). Interestingly, while cotton was the most frequently demanded tributary good, it was not requested from distant Xoconocho on the Pacific coast of Guatemala. Perhaps even mantas were too heavy to lug to Central Mexico from this distance, and so tribute was paid in lighter and rarer goods, like animal skins, feathers, and gems (Berdan 1987).
The greater importance of precious items, rather than staples, in long-distance exchange is not surprising given the prehispanic absence of beasts of burden and wheeled vehicles. Although significant in the Mesoamerican lowlands, water transportation would not have been a viable option in the highlands, except on the lake system of the Basin of Mexico. As Drennan (1984a) cogently calculated, maize transport by human bearers would have made little sense energetically or economically at distances greater than 275 km. Yet the comparative significance of light weight, high value items in long-distance transactions leaves two important questions unanswered. What was the effect of such goods and their movement on the regional and interregional division of labor? And did these items have a central role in the workings and reproduction of the social systems of which they were part? In other words, were these goods simply elite trappings that lacked broader societal implications, or did the items have critical systemic importance (see Schneider 1977)?

In Aztec times, complex exchange webs interconnected tributary demands for precious goods with expanded market transactions and intensified local production (Berdan 1975, 1980, 1987). For example, Aztec tributary provinces paying in cotton were not necessarily capable of producing the desired quantities of the cloth, and therefore they were forced to obtain some, if not most, of what they had to pay from adjacent, nontributary cotton producing areas (Saindon 1977). In Icpatepeque, tributaries traveled more than 140 km to obtain the green feathers, gold dust, and green stone that they owed Moctezuma in tribute (Berdan 1975, 1980). The inhabitants of Pochutla on the Oaxaca coast acquired the copper for their tribute payment by trading local cotton to long-distance merchants. Some of this cotton was then traded at ports of trade and smaller marketplaces outside the tributary realm (Berdan 1978, 1987). Berdan (1987:258) has noted that some highland towns above the limits of cotton production were supplied with sufficient raw materials to become well known as textile producers. The production of another preciosity, cacao, the beans of which were used as an elite drink as well as for currency, was expanded in the Pacific lowlands late in the pre-conquest period in response to increased highland demand (Bergman 1969).

Given the large volume of raw materials imported into

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Tenochtitlan through tribute and trade, it is not surprising that the late prehispanic Aztec capital emerged as a center of elite craft production (Berdan 1980; Brumfiel 1987:111). Increases in both raw resource supply and elite demand for precious items undoubtedly made the full time craft manufacture of high status goods a less risky venture (Brumfiel 1987). Yet at the same time, the ready availability of imported, finished goods has been argued to have had a "chilling effect" on the local production of certain other craft goods (Blanton 1985; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Brumfiel 1976, 1980, 1981, 1987). For example, in the Basin of Mexico hinterlands, outside of Tenochtitlan, the ready availability through the market of non-local goods, like obsidian implements and cloth, may have undermined small-scale specialists who had produced those items earlier (Brumfiel 1987:109). Archaeological surveys (Brumfiel 1976, 1986, 1987) in both Xico and Huexotla in the Basin of Mexico found that agricultural implements and exotic goods tended to increase in relative frequency between the Early and Late Aztec periods, while artifacts associated with local craft production declined proportionately. Thus, while small-scale craftwork diminished in the rural portion of this core, maize production intensified in areas that were well positioned to feed the growing capital (Blanton 1985; Brumfiel 1987). Blanton (1985) has argued that the spatial arrangement of powerful highland Mesoamerican states frequently may have conformed to this geographic division of labor; agrarian production was emphasized and intensified near the cores, while certain crafts were pushed toward the peripheries.

In addition, although environmental potentialities influenced the aforementioned labor and production divisions and exchange patterns, tribute demands, trade interdependencies, and marketing specialties often were not simple consequences of ecological parameters or resource availability. Rather these late prehispanic interconnections were reflective of a complex web of political and economic decisions. The remainder of this section briefly examines the second question—the role of luxury goods in Aztec society. Such sumptuary goods circulated through the Basin of Mexico via many mechanisms (long-distance trade, tribute, gift exchange, and the market), and, as already discussed, these channels often were intertwined.

Most of the elite craft goods were articles of apparel (pelts or
cotton cloth) or personal adornment (nose plugs, lip plugs, necklaces, earrings, armbands, pectorals, or hair combs) (Brumfiel 1987:111). They served as key markers of social identity that distinguished nobles from commoners, rulers from vassals, military champions from basic soldiers, and one deity from another (Anawalt 1980). Such goods were used as a principal form of patronage by the Aztec state, whose aims included the co-option of local lords and the encouragement of fealty from nobles and soldiers (Brumfiel 1987; Smith 1986). Sumptuary items were awarded to the military for battlefield successes (Blanton and Feinman 1984). Wearing such regalia in the field was a symbol of prowess in battle.

Yet, such precious goods also circulated and were exchanged during other activities that were partially or entirely autonomous of the central state. These included religious ceremonies, life cycle rituals, alliance compacts, hospitality rites, competitive feasts, and certain patron-client relations (Brumfiel 1987; Carrasco 1971). Many changes in status (life crises) and succession required specific costumes, props, or ritual items. Often these rites were validated by the exchange of precious goods. At contact, the Spanish observed that precious goods were plentiful at Tlatelolco, central Mexico’s largest market, and that some craftsmen produced high status goods almost entirely for private consumers (Sahagún 1950-69: Bk. 9, Ch. 20). Thus, the cycling of these goods was neither simply redistributive nor was it entirely controlled by the Tenochtitlan state. Furthermore, for the Aztec and their neighbors, sumptuary items were not epiphenomenal. Rather the circulation of these nonutilitarian goods affected energy flows (through altered patterns of exchange and the intensification of production), while they concurrently served key social and symbolic roles in some of the basic rites and processes of societal reproduction (Brumfiel 1987).

A Diachronic Perspective from the Southern Highlands of Oaxaca

In the following discussion, late prehispanic Mesoamerica is conceptualized as a kind of world economy, albeit one linked largely by the flow of goods other than food and fuel (see Blanton and Feinman 1984; cf. Wallerstein 1974). The world economy
construct is particularly appropriate if one does not assume that such systems must be dominated by a single core state (see Abu-Lughod 1989). In the subsequent section, a narrower and more diachronic perspective that relies heavily on settlement pattern research in the Valleys of Oaxaca and Ejutla in Mexico’s Southern Highlands is presented (Figure 2) (Blanton et al. 1982; Feinman and Nicholas 1988; Kowalewski et al. 1989). In reviewing this long temporal sequence, it is important to remember that the ancient polity centered at Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca was just one of a large number of interacting and competing contemporaneous centers that coexisted in the prehispanic Mesoamerican world.

Through this brief synthesis of prehispanic change in the adjoining Oaxaca and Ejutla Valleys (see Feinman and Nicholas 1988, 1990, 1991, in press), three basic points are made. First, the long-term interrelationship and the observed differences and similarities between the two valleys are not easily accountable by the diffusionist or developmentalist frameworks. Second, a multi-scale approach that incorporates macroregional considerations provides a more explanatory perspective on the noted transitions, which were by no means simple nor linear. And third, when the Ejutla region was incorporated politically into the Monte Albán state, the most important considerations appear not to have been the production of maize, but access to rarer, exotic goods, like shell and cloth, as well as defensive concerns. It is the interregional importance of high status goods and the complexity of links that intertwined trade in these goods with the production and movement of essentials like food that thematically binds this section with the prior more general discussion.

The Ejutla Valley and the Valley of Oaxaca: Introduction

Before proceeding to a discussion of prehispanic change, a short introduction to the Valleys of Oaxaca and Ejutla is in order. The larger Oaxaca Valley is the broadest expanse of flat land in Mexico’s Southern Highlands. It has long been recognized as a key region of prehispanic political and demographic development (Palerm and Wolf 1957). Adjacent Ejutla, roughly one-quarter the size, is generally drier and more rolling.

Systematic regional-scale fieldwork in the Valley of Oaxaca
began roughly two decades ago with Richard Blanton (1978), who mapped the ancient city of Monte Albán. Subsequent projects extended full field-by-field pedestrian coverage to a more than 2,600 km² contiguous area that encompasses the Oaxaca and Ejutla Valleys (Blanton et al. 1982; Feinman and Nicholas 1988; Kowalewski et al. 1989). These regional surveys have collected basic information on changing settlement patterns, land use, demographic profiles, and sociopolitical organization for the last 3,000 years of the prehispanic era. As noted previously, such projects are essential if archaeologists are to expand their vantage to material concerns that extend beyond a single excavation trench or site. Although the difficulties of translating sherd scatter to population estimates and mound complexes to civic-ceremonial behavior are obvious and severe, the data collected by these regional projects are the closest an archaeologist can get to a diachronic census, illustrating prehispanic settlement patterns at broad spatial and temporal scales. Elsewhere in discussions of these two adjacent valleys (Feinman and Nicholas 1990, in press), excavation findings and the interpretation of ethnohistoric accounts are incorporated with the interpretation of survey results.

Long-Term Change in Ejutla and Oaxaca: Expectations and Results

What might the diffusionists and the developmentalists predict for the long-term interaction between central Oaxaca and smaller Ejutla? The former might expect the pace of change in Ejutla to lag behind, yet closely reflect, that in the Valley of Oaxaca. Status items and cultural features would be received from (and hence simply mimic) those in Oaxaca, but appear later in the sequence or be present to a lesser degree. In other words, Ejutla would be a microcosm of Oaxaca. Some developmentalists might envision a similar scenario, in which the prehispanic populations of Ejutla would exhibit lesser degrees of public construction and craft specialization than found in Oaxaca, but otherwise be similar. Alternatively, other developmentalists might retrodict the increasing—albeit “inevitable”—incorporation of the Ejutla region into an ever expanding polity centered in Oaxaca.

Although aspects of these scenarios cannot be dismissed entirely, a brief review of the prehispanic sequence reveals a more
complex trajectory of transition than might be foreseen by either traditional framework (see Feinman et al. 1985; Kowalewski et al. 1989 for more complete accounts). By necessity, this abbreviated discussion focuses on empirical findings that relate to the above expectations. In conjunction with these retrodictions, survey findings indicate that the Ejutla region was occupied prehistorically at lower densities than the Valley of Oaxaca (Feinman and Nicholas 1988). The colonization of the former region also occurred at a slower pace than the larger region to the north. In the Valley of Oaxaca, a major episode of demographic growth coincided with the foundation of the large site of Monte Albán (circa 500 B.C.) at the region's hub. The most rapid rate of population expansion in Ejutla occurred in the subsequent phase (300-200 B.C.). Sometime between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D., the Ejutla region appears to have been absorbed into the Monte Albán state. The incorporation lasted until roughly 450 A.D., when the Monte Albán state weakened, precipitating major shifts in regional settlement patterns and political organization. Yet, in contrast to certain developmentalist interpretations, a single polity never again dominated the entire study region. That is, at the scale of the entire study region, there is no indication that the prehispanic polity expanded continuously through time. At conquest, political units in the Valleys of Oaxaca and Ejutla were smaller in area than the Monte Albán polity had been a millennium earlier.

To consider the Ejutla region as a simple microcosm of the Valley of Oaxaca also would be a mistake. At certain times, the population density of the Valley of Oaxaca was roughly twice that of Ejutla, while in other phases, it was many times greater. The relationship between the two regions also was far from constant through time. For centuries following the advent of sedentary villages in the Southern Highlands, Ejutla was a sparsely settled frontier of neighboring Oaxaca, but as noted above, it became an incorporated periphery between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. Late in the prehispanic sequence, Ejutla was linked economically to Oaxaca, but it was not part of a unified political entity. In fact, the Valley of Oaxaca was not consolidated administratively at contact, and political decentralization was the rule for most of, if not the entire, period following the collapse of Monte Albán (ca. 650 A.D.).

Monumental construction was indeed less evident overall (and
even per capita) in the Ejutla region compared to Oaxaca. The specialized manufacture of utilitarian products, like pottery and chipped stone, also was less common in the smaller valley. However, this expected pattern was not found for the specialized production of rarer goods, such as exotic marine shell ornaments or cloth. Although these labor intensive crafts were rare in both Ejutla and Oaxaca, they were considerably more abundant per capita in the smaller region. And in a pattern similar to the Basin of Mexico in Aztec times, shell working (a high status craft) was entirely absent in Monte Albán's immediate hinterland in the Valley of Oaxaca. Shell artifacts and debris also were proportionally more common at Ejutla sites than at Oaxaca settlements. While Ejutla does lie slightly closer to the Pacific Coast than does much of Oaxaca, both regions are at least several days walk over high mountains to the ocean. The relative frequencies of exotic ceramics and different obsidian varieties also signal that the Ejutla and Oaxaca regions had distinctive linkages with areas outside the Southern Highlands (see Feinman and Nicholas 1990, in press). Furthermore, these connections do not appear to have been immutable through time.

Thus, these findings suggest that Ejutla was not a microcosm of Oaxaca, that the relationship between these neighboring regions shifted over time, as did their connections to other parts of Mesoamerica. In other words, to understand the long-term trajectory of prehispanic change, one cannot look exclusively at the Valley of Oaxaca core, smaller Ejutla, or their larger context in the ancient Mesoamerican world, but at the interplay between all three (see Hall 1986).

What can be said about Monte Albán's interest in Ejutla and the nature of the first millennium A.D. linkage between the two regions? The results of a series of analyses, in which the relationship between demography and agricultural resources was examined (Feinman and Nicholas 1991), indicate that the Ejutla region, due to its relatively low population, could not have furnished large maize surpluses to Monte Albán at the time of its incorporation. In fact, even during the subsequent Early Classic (200-450 A.D.), when Ejutla's population was larger, the potential agrarian exports were fairly low (compared to other parts of the region), and the necessary transport costs would have been high. These analyses also indicate that most of the agrarian surplus required
by Monte Albán was produced in the core of the valley, within a one day’s round trip of the site. The greater than expected presence of cloth working and shell ornament production in Ejutla suggests that access to these lighter weight, higher value goods may have been of more interest (than potential maize production in Ejutla) to Monte Albán’s elite. During the Early Classic period, the Ejutla region, along with the southern and eastern arms of the Valley of Oaxaca, was surrounded by a network of hilltop terrace sites. The distribution of these defendable, ridgetop sites indicates that Ejutla’s incorporation may have had a defensive/military rationale as well.

Finally as discussed in more detail elsewhere (Feinman and Nicholas in press), the settlement arrangements in the highland Valleys of Oaxaca and Ejutla seem to conform preliminarily to several of Blanton’s (1985) expectations concerning the spatial division of labor. For example, for more than 1000 years following the establishment (ca. 500 B.C.) of the early city of Monte Albán at the hub of the Valley of Oaxaca, agrarian production was apparently emphasized immediately around the site. This surrounding area was not particularly fertile nor well watered, rather it was proximate to the regional center, where transport costs could be minimized. Meanwhile, labor intensive high status craft activities, like cloth production and shell working, were much more prevalent than expected (per capita) at the margins of the study region. At present, these patterns suggest that spatial divisions in the deployment of labor in ancient Mesoamerica were neither restricted to central Mexico nor solely constrained to the Late Aztec period. Furthermore, as in the world of the Aztecs, the articulations between polities and regions also were complex and nested during the earlier Classic period (A.D. 200-700). For example, while Monte Albán was involved in a diplomatic, and perhaps economic, long-distance relationship with central Mexican Teotihuacan (Marcus 1983b), both centers were more closely interlinked economically and politically with smaller, less distant polities.

Conclusion

In summation, neither the developmentalist nor diffusionist positions can account adequately for the economic and political
relations evident in the late prehispanic period in Mesoamerica nor for the trajectory of long-term change in the Valleys of Oaxaca and Ejutla. Rather, an approach that is more sensitive to questions of scale is required. Such a framework must consider macroregional processes; however, it also should examine smaller-scale relations, such as the interplay between humans and their lands. Whereas the developmentalists tend to focus on valleys and regions as autonomous, closed entities, the diffusionists often look to poorly defined outside influences to explain episodes of cultural transition. Clearly, an approach that embodies a more flexible view of spatial relations is necessary. Ancient Mesoamerica was the complex product of both short-range movements of maize that were necessary to support centers, like Tenochtitlan and Monte Albán, and long-distance exchanges of symbolically imbued goods, like ornaments and cloth, that linked local regions to the rest of Mesoamerica.

As seen for the Late Postclassic period, the exchange of so-called non-essential, sumptuary items was not systematically insignificant in ancient Mesoamerica. Such items played a key role in societal production and reproduction. Likewise, access to such items may have provided a critical rationale for political expansion (in the case of Monte Albán) and long-distance exchange. In fact, in this ancient world where military and transport technologies were relatively minimal, the web of interregional and interpersonal connections may have been so intertwined that access to and manipulation of highly created, exotic goods provided an important mechanism for attracting labor, thereby stimulating production and securing the control of seemingly more basic items, like food. At certain times, the crafting of such high status goods also was part of complex and spatial segregated divisions of labor.

If a world systems or macroregional approach is to have utility beyond discussions of the capitalist world, modifications to Wallerstein's (1974) conception are necessary. As illustrated above, relatively light weight, high value items appear to have played a much more fundamental role in the central workings of prehispanic Mesoamerica. Hence, it would be arbitrary and hasty to ignore such items in conceptualizing the structure of ancient world systems and how these macroregions changed thorough time. Yet, the relative importance of low volume, high value ex-
change goods in ancient Mesoamerica may have given that world
system less stability in its specific structural (e.g. core-periphery)
relations than noted in other macroregional systems in which the
long-distance movement of food and fuel have had a more central
role. For those interested in the comparative study of civilizations,
cross-cultural analyses of variation and change in world systems
should form the grist for much future research.

Notes

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