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The Governance and Leadership of Prehispanic Mesoamerican Polities: New Perspectives and Comparative Implications

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29w8q73h>

Journal

Cliodynamics, 9(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.21237/C7clio9239449

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The Governance and Leadership of Prehispanic Mesoamerican Polities: New Perspectives and Comparative Implication

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Abstract

The principal conceptual axes for explaining variation in prehispanic Mesoamerican political organization (states and empires) have shifted over time. Current perspectives build on and extend beyond the important dimensions of scale and hierarchical complexity and have begun to probe variation in the nature of leadership and governance, drawing on collective action theory and incorporating recent findings that challenge long-held statist vantages on preindustrial economies. Recent results from and archaeological correlates for the application of this approach are outlined, offering opportunities for more comparative analyses of variation and change in the practice of governance within the prehispanic Mesoamerican world and more globally. Consideration of this variability is critical for understanding change and the sustainability of different governmental formations.

A more mundane explanation of the Classic and pre-Classic states of Mesoamerica shows structural unity between the earliest—the Olmec, and the latest—the Aztec. I do not think that the Aztecs were very different from all the peoples who preceded them (Coe 1965: 122).

The statement above, which most archaeologists would not wholly endorse today, was made more than a half century ago and stands as testament to just how much we have learned about prehispanic Mesoamerican polities and governance during the intervening years. Based mostly on sustained decades of fieldwork, we now know that the political organization of Mesoamerican polities varied markedly along several dimensions, reflective of geography, time, scale, and other factors. Yet conceptual vantages on ancient Mesoamerican governance are still evolving with the recent application of new collective action perspectives that find

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*Citation: Feinman, Gary M. 2018. The Governance and Leadership of Prehispanic Mesoamerican Polities: New Perspectives and Comparative Implications. *Cliodynamics* 9: 1–39.*

fundamental differences in prehispanic polities due to factors that extend beyond geography or cultural affiliation alone.

Following a brief recapitulation of how archaeological interpretations of prehispanic Mesoamerican governance and leadership have evolved over the last half century, I review this current theoretical frame, its genesis, and its application to the premodern world. I also outline the new empirical understandings and revised tenets that underpin the approach and the associated analytical correlates that have been applied to ongoing examinations of ancient Mesoamerican polities. Although in part this review is intended to synthesize and take stock of current research relevant to prehispanic Mesoamerica, it also is aimed to bestir new considerations and comparisons of polity governance, leadership, and political economy in the preindustrial world more broadly and to foment guiding questions for future investigations and analyses. These new approaches not only provide greater insights into the sustainability of prehispanic polities in the Mesoamerican past as well as other global regions, but they open analytical windows to more systematic and quantifiable analyses of diversity and change.

In point of fact, even in 1965, the notion that ancient Mesoamerican polities were structurally similar (politically and economically) across space and time was not universal. Rather, that view was an interpretation more broadly held earlier in the century when scholars relied heavily on the culture area approach (e.g., Kirchhoff 1943). When that largely classificatory conceptual lens was focused on prehispanic Mesoamerica, hypothesized commonalities and traits were emphasized at the expense of temporal and spatial variation. For example, in a text that preceded the work of Coe (1965), Mesoamerica was defined as a delineated “high culture area” in “which the cultural characteristics of the people were similar, forming a cohesive shared whole (Peterson 1959: 27).” This brief review of shifting interpretative frames is not intended as criticism of past researchers but rather as an illustration of the ways that paradigm and practice shaped the investigation of the prehispanic past. It was not until relatively recently that scholars had the data and the tools to move in the directions advocated here.

In a seminal volume that marked the transition to an analytical frame that more explicitly strived to recognize and account for variation, Eric Wolf (1959) drew a generalized contrast between prehispanic Mesoamerican polities during the Classic period (ca. AD 250–900) and those of the Postclassic period (ca. AD 900–1520). Although based on a selective set and knowledge of cases, Wolf (1959) argued that the earlier polities were theocratic in their organization, while the latter were more militaristic. As an overarching temporal generalization, this dichotomous perspective also has not withstood the avalanche of subsequent empirical findings and interpretations that have been made. In Mesoamerica, warfare and militarism were not exclusive to the Postclassic (e.g., Spencer 2003, 2010; Webster 2000). Nevertheless, in a number of Mesoamerican regions,

including Oaxaca (Blanton et al. 1993; Spores 1967, 1984), the Basin of Mexico (e.g., Carrasco 1971), and the Maya area (e.g., Blanton et al. 1993; Demarest 2013; Masson 2012), archaeologists have noted marked shifts in the nature of governance between the Classic and Postclassic periods, although not always in the ways that Wolf (1959) proposed (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica showing sites and places mentioned in the text.

Roughly a decade after Wolf (1959), another classic work (Sanders and Price 1968) outlined important temporal differences in Mesoamerican polities; however, the distinctions were underpinned solely by variations in scale and complexity rather than time alone. Adopting a cultural evolutionary approach, Sanders and Price (1968:126–128) rightly recognized that as human aggregations and coalitions increased in size, associated social, political, and economic institutions also became more complex. Amplified archaeological knowledge basically has strengthened these observations; larger cities and polities had more diverse monumental structures and diversified offices and roles. Yet such recognitions also opened up new queries concerning how to explain variation in governance between polities and cities of broadly comparable size.

Over the succeeding decades, some Mesoamericanists attributed variation between polities and cities within similar size ranges as largely the consequence of environmental factors (e.g., Sanders et al. 1979; Sanders and Price 1968), while others saw such diversity as a reflection of distinct cultural traditions (e.g., Grove and Gillespie 1992). Yet although both of these suites of factors are relevant, neither can account for the dramatic organizational shifts in the nature of leadership and governance that occurred across time within a region, such as in

the Maya area, the Valley of Oaxaca, as well as other parts of Mesoamerica (e.g., Blanton et al. 1993). In the absence of large-scale population replacements, for which we have no clear, credible evidence, marked organizational variability over time within a given region cannot be accounted for by environmental or cultural factors alone.

To explain variations in governance and political economy, consideration and investigation of social mechanisms and processes—as well as economic and political variables—that have been identified as underpinning institutional variation and change in other preindustrial settings seem like reasonable ways to proceed. Yet until recently, this research path has not been heavily trod. In large part, longstanding adherence to models that presumed all prehispanic Mesoamerican polities (and preindustrial societies in general) were ruled autocratically, with the economy centrally and politically controlled, precluded a directed search for diversity in these realms, especially in the absence of adequate and comparable data. At the same time, the enduring strength of such conceptual approaches, which productively launched the significant theoretical turn away from antiquarianism toward more material analyses that began during the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Carrasco 1971:350; Palerm 2017; Wolf 1994), also steered attention from the definition of (and an emphasis on) important axes of variation in the governance and political economies of prehispanic polities. In the subsequent section, I review and reconsider both long-held perspectives on ancient Mesoamerican polities and more recent empirical and theoretical shifts that are framing new research.

Preindustrial Political Economies and Governance: The Mid-Twentieth Century Frame

Before resuming this brief discussion of shifting approaches to Mesoamerican archaeology and the examination of prehispanic governance, it is important to specify how I am defining a few key terms. I do this because the specific concepts are broadly employed and have a multitude of nuanced meanings. In addition, as this essay is situated in a multidisciplinary journal, it is critical to be clear on how certain concepts are utilized. For example, political economic approaches have different frames of reference for distinct scholars (e.g., Roseberry 1988). Basically, this stream of approaches was introduced to Mesoamerican archaeology through the works of Wolf (1959) and his colleagues (see Palerm 2017; Wolf 1994), and they have been broadly influential ever since. In the broadest sense, political economic approaches examine the interplay between political and economic relations as a basis to probe the interconnections between surplus, inequality, power, and governance (e.g., Brumfiel and Earle 1987; D'Altroy and Earle 1985). This array of approaches recognizes that neither politics nor economics can be

broadly understood without reference to each other (e.g., Monson and Scheidel 2015a:9; North 1990). As outlined below, although the social mechanisms and causal chains were, perhaps, more narrowly construed when first applied to archaeological data decades ago, contemporary political economic approaches in that discipline have broadened significantly over time (e.g. Brumfiel 1992; DeMarrais and Earle. 2017; Hirth 1996).

Governance refers here to the basic institutions, relations, and norms that enable aggregations of people to cooperate and maintain orderly affiliations in large (often sustainable) groups (e.g., Grief and Kingston 2011; Hechter 2018). Institutions are the basis of human cooperation in that they constrain and structure social, economic, and political interaction (Hechter 1990:13–14; North 1991). They are “the rules of the game” in specific interpersonal contexts (North 1990). Governance, which embodies one set of institutions, roughly parallels what might more conventionally be termed political organization in the archaeological literature, although governance explicitly encompasses more than just institutional roles and structures. A key element concerns how power is wielded toward interpersonal coordination and management (Plattner 2013), or the interplay between leaders and followers (Ahlquist and Levi 2011). Governance encompasses ideologies of legitimation, but it is by no means defined or limited by them. For archaeological considerations of governance, analytical assessments of the material residues of behavioral practices are essential.

As noted in the introduction, Mesoamerican archaeology underwent a crucial and enduring transition in the years following the Second World War (e.g., Wolf 1959). Earlier foci on objects, particularism, and chronology building were shouldered aside by a new comparative, materially oriented framework that owed much directly and indirectly to Marxist thought and its focus on political and economic relations (Palerm 2017). A cadre of outstanding scholars, including Eric Wolf, Pedro Armillas, Angel Palerm, and William Sanders, posed new cross-cultural questions (e.g., Palerm and Wolf 1957; Sanders and Price 1968) regarding the causes and consequences of shifts in Mesoamerican political economies and governance. This approach was underpinned by a firm material focus guided by tenets of empirical evidence, which directly prompted and fostered many decades of significant and systematic fieldwork, thereby establishing a significantly firmer observational foundation for the discipline (Feinman 2012a; Wolf 1994).

Heavily influenced by the works of Karl Marx (e.g., 1971), Karl Wittfogel (1957), and Karl Polanyi (e.g., Polanyi et al. 1957), and initially absent detailed information on the nature of production, distribution, or governance in ancient Mesoamerica, theoretically driven presumptions regarding prehispanic political organizations and economies became entrenched (see Isaac 1993). Basically, in accord with views that draw stark contrasts between the Euro-American West and the rest (cf. Blanton and Fargher 2008; 2016:151–158), it was assumed that prehispanic

Mesoamerican polities, and preindustrial polities in general (Moseley and Wallerstein 1978), were despotically ruled and had redistributive economies that were centrally and politically controlled (e.g., Carrasco 1978, 1982, 1983, 2001; cf. Feinman and Garraty 2010; Feinman and Nicholas 2012a). Production and distribution were seen as basically under governmental command. This perspective on premodern political economies, underpinned by Polanyi's (1957) theoretical views, largely tended to focus the search for explanations of variation and change in prehispanic Mesoamerica away from in-depth dialectic interplays between agents and actors in these historical contexts (and the consequent resultant social mechanisms and processes) toward more idiosyncratic culture historical factors and local environmental parameters.

Over the last decades, challenges to this entrenched perspective came from both the bottom-up and the top-down. Perhaps ironically, markedly enriched empirical findings, drawn largely from studies spawned by mid-twentieth-century theoretical queries (Wolf 1994), yielded dirt-derived archaeological evidence that was at odds with the models of preindustrial society underpinned by that (despotic, state-controlled) conceptual frame. The empirical findings from prehispanic house excavations (e.g., Carballo 2011; Flannery 1976; Feinman 1999; Hirth 2009) and the results from systematic regional surveys (e.g., Balkansky 2006; Feinman and Nicholas 2017a; Kowalewski et al. 1989; Sanders et al. 1979) were fundamental. Both cast doubt on generalized scenarios in which economic production and exchange were centrally managed by political authorities (Feinman and Nicholas 2012a, 2017b; Hirth 1996, 2009). Most production (craft and agrarian) in prehispanic Mesoamerica (e.g., Baker 1998; Feinman 2006; Flannery 1983; Offner 1981a, 1981b; Spores 1969) was entered in domestic contexts and, hence, difficult to control centrally or directly by political authorities. Although palatial estates and attached specialization (Costin 1991) under elite auspices did exist in certain historical contexts, most ancient Mesoamerican production was small scale and enacted in non-elite contexts. Furthermore, there is minimal evidence for large-scale redistribution or massive state storage, even at the heart of the Aztec Empire (Hassig 1981). Empirical challenges to traditional modeling of ancient Mesoamerican economies as top-down, governmentally controlled and the recognition of spatiotemporal diversity across the macroregion laid the foundation for questioning extant perspectives on prehispanic Mesoamerican governance and political economy.

Empirical Challenges from the Bottom-Up

By the 1990s, the findings from systematic archaeological fieldwork began to cast serious doubts on the principal comparative political economic paradigm that had been in place for roughly a half century (e.g., Blanton et al. 1996; Brumfiel 1992; Hirth 1996). No longer could societal scale and political complexity be looked on

as the unitary explanatory axis of variation between different preindustrial polities, whether in prehispanic Mesoamerica (Blanton et al. 1996) or beyond (e.g., Blanton 1998; Crumley 1995). Likewise, residual politico-economic variability, that is, the variation not aligned directly with scale and complexity, could not be ascribed simply to discrete cultural affiliations or geographic locations. Rather, other cross-cultural axes and dimensions of variation in governance and political economy were noted that were in a sense orthogonal to (or that crosscut) scale and complexity (e.g., D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Feinman 2001).

Drawing on similar contrastive axes noted by researchers working in (and comparing) an array of global regions (across time and space), my colleagues and I (Blanton et al. 1996) recognized organizational patterns that appeared to co-occur along a continuous axis termed corporate–network (exclusionary). Basically, the network or exclusionary pattern (at one pole) defines a mode of leadership that aligns with long-standing conceptions of preindustrial societies. We noted that in these cases rulers tended to be flamboyant, bedecked by elaborate trappings. Inequality was expressed and exaggerated, while power largely was unchecked. Leadership roles and power tended to be inherited, often through linear descent. Patrimonial rhetoric was a basis for the legitimation of the powerful. In these cases, we found that long-distance exchange networks, focused on precious goods that often were produced by attached craft specialists, were key elements undergirding political economy.

Alternatively, at the other end of the continuous axis we noted politico-economic formations that did not exhibit ostentatious displays of wealth, despotic power, or highly personalized rule. Yet in these cases, which we referred to as corporate, there were offices and edifices linked to ruling authorities. We observed indicators in these contexts that wealth and welfare were dispersed more evenly. There seemed to be greater opportunities for citizen voice to be expressed in public spaces, and the power of principals was seemingly more distributed, checked, and to a degree balanced. Succession to office was less linearly determined, and patrimonial rhetoric was not as central an element of legitimacy. We observed that the economic base in these instances was more likely to be agrarian production with fiscal financing achieved through relatively more progressive means.

Although the organizational variation empirically defined between the exclusionary and corporate modes was widely applied and broadly cited in comparative analyses (Blanton et al. 1996: tab. 2; Feinman 1995, 2012b) of past political economies (an indication that the defined patterns of variation seemed relevant to actual contexts), several key issues remained unresolved in this early research stream. The organizational attributes associated with each mode often were found to co-occur, yet the causal threads that linked or underpinned the characteristics of each means of integration were not fully explored or defined. The question as to why governance in some historical contexts, such as at Teotihuacan

during its apogee, seem to fit the corporate mode, while the contemporaneous Classic Maya of the Petén heartland appear more exclusionary largely remained unaddressed (Figure 1). Likewise, left unaccounted for were proposed explanations (e.g., Brumfiel 1996: 48) for Classic–Postclassic organizational shifts from corporate to exclusionary (for example, in the Valley of Oaxaca) and exclusionary to corporate (in sectors of the Maya region). A final concern, as with most conceptual models of that time, was that the focus and considerations of agency in the formation of cooperative arrangements was left squarely on the small elite or powerful segments of populations. In the subsequent decades, theoretical advances principally associated with cooperation, collective action, and their fiscal foundations (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016) yielded avenues to address these aforementioned issues.

Variability in Governance and Leadership: Conceptual Reflections from the Top Down

As noted above, the findings from household archaeological excavations across Mesoamerica served as empirical grist to undermine earlier models that postulated the despotic nature of preindustrial polities undergirded by monopoly control of economic production and distribution. It should be noted that the validity of the Asiatic mode of production has been challenged for preindustrial regions in that part of the world (Brook and Blue 1999; Morrison 1994), while the notion that ancient economies generally were command economies, directly managed by central political authorities, has been challenged for many global regions (e.g., Blanton and Fargher 2008; Parkinson et al. 2013; Smith 2004), including ancient Mesoamerica (Feinman and Nicholas 2017b). If economies were not under centralized political control, then the links between empowerment, polity, and economic practices required further exploration, and the variation in these realms provide a basis to explore the variability in preindustrial political economies that were characterized by the exclusionary–corporate continuum.

Based on the mapping of prehispanic Mesoamerican regions and their central cities, archaeologists documented that Mesoamerican cities (as well as the polities they centered) were highly variable (Blanton 2012; Feinman 2012a). Some urban settlements had wide thoroughfares and large open plazas, while others were focused on more restricted spaces and elite compounds. Clearly, governance in prehispanic Mesoamerica was not uniformly dominated by despots, as elaborate palaces and ornate tombs characterized some polities but were hard to define in others (e.g., Feinman and Carballo 2018). Autocratic rule, enacted by individualizing elite who inherited royal thrones, was typical for most Classic Maya polities, especially along the Usumacinta River (Feinman 2017), but it was not the norm across the macroregion. If ancient Mesoamerican rule was always despotic,

exploitative, and based on stark inequalities, why in many cases was the rise of powerful polities in the macroregion so often marked by rapid demographic growth and in-migration (Blanton et al. 1993; Feinman 1998)? If prehispanic governance was uniformly despotic, why was a city like Teotihuacan so large, dense, lacking evidence for flamboyant and highly centralized rulers, and yet relatively long-lived, seemingly sustainable (e.g., Cowgill 2015)?

From a more general perspective, the challenges to the model of preindustrial societies as uniformly despotic fostered theoretical rethinking of the bases for cooperation (e.g., Carballo ed. 2013; Feinman 2013a). Traditionally, models of governance were grounded either on volunteerism or coercion (Carneiro 1970), with the former basically underpinning functionalist explanations, while the latter were associated with more Marxian or Marxist-influenced frames. As Carneiro (1970) persuasively argued, volunteerism is a rather unconvincing tenet for enduring political affiliations as people generally do not acquiesce to giving up their political and economic autonomy without reason or return (see also Haas 1982). Purely functionalist perspectives on political evolution are even more weakly grounded empirically than they were decades ago since identities are constructed (Blanton 2015; Jones 2008; Nagel 1994) and past gene flows were significant (e.g., Kristiansen 2014). Consequently, long-standing, concretized group affiliations, ensconced in defined territories (e.g., Smith 2005), were, in reality, much rarer than once was presumed and likely not a convincing rationale for enduring altruism or individual actions directed repeatedly toward the good of the whole (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003). Degrees of cooperation are situational and so require explanation.

Unquestionably, conflict and coercion can serve as a foundation for the emergence of socioeconomic inequality and the rise of leaders in certain historical contexts (e.g., Carneiro 1970; Haas 1982; Spencer 2010), yet such processes are not a universal fit or foundation for all cases of political development or cooperation. Furthermore, subalterns in the past were not dupes or dopes, perpetually charmed by false consciousness (e.g., Robin 2016). In point of fact, Carneiro's binary choice leaves out compliance, coalition, and covenant as significant processes and dynamics essential to certain cases of state formation (e.g., Levi 1988; Sitarman 2017), an alternative process and path to leadership recognized by Thomas Hobbes (1996). Leaders wield power over others as a result of an array of factors, but the legitimation and implementation of their roles is reliant on interaction with followers (Ahlquist and Levi 2011). In other words, leadership depends on those who follow. There is a definitional interdependence. Some leaders tightly constrain the behavior of followers; others impose lesser demands. But in general, leadership implies a social context in which a population responds to a principal's actions, which invokes different measures of coercion or evocation (Coleman 1980). A purely top-down theory of governance can neither

explain this variation nor adequately account for endogenous sources of change (Levi 2006).

In recent years, considerations of householder quasi-voluntary compliance and social contracts have been employed in discussions of historical Euro-American cases of state formation (e.g., Levi 1988; Moore 2004; Stasavage 2016). This stream of comparative research, focused mostly on historical Europe, has been particularly effective in tying certain qualities and attributes of governance to variation in the fiscal foundations (resources) that fund government. But there is no longer an empirical rationale for such Eurocentric exceptionalism, presuming that the key role and voice that followers have in these processes is strictly limited to Western cases (Blanton and Fargher 2008; Mann 2016). Although generally not quantitatively assessed, comparative studies of Mesoamerica (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 2001) and beyond (e.g., Birch and Hart 2018; Feinman et al. 2000; Monroe 2012) now have shown that non-Western polity building often also involved coalition, consensus, coalescence, and cooperation.

Building in part on theoretical constructs outlined by Levi (1988), Blanton and Fargher (2008, 2016) undertook a systematic, in-depth, global investigation of 30 premodern states. Their collective action perspective, which ultimately built on the research of Mancur Olson (1965) as amplified by Levi's historical analysis (1988), proposes a theoretical model of governance that ties different means of fiscal financing to variation in the practice of governance. When the financial underpinnings are easy for the powerful to monopolize or control, then checks and balances and the voice of subalterns is minimized. Alternatively, when the economic resources necessary to finance governance are derived broadly from the bulk of the populace, then limitations on power and its expression should be expected (Table 1). As discussed more fully below, Blanton and Fargher (2008) found that variability in the sources of fiscal revenues did correspond in the predicted manner with different governance practices and that the checks on principal power were not always evident in their European cases (Fargher and Blanton 2007).

Clearly, these empirical findings are not in accord (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Carballo et al 2014; DeMarrais and Earle 2017; Feinman 2013b) with long-standing and extant theoretical paradigms (e.g., Marx 1971; Polanyi et al. 1957; Wittfogel 1957) that relied heavily on conceptual inferences in the absence of robust empirical evidence from preindustrial cases. Empirically driven reconsiderations of the established frames and social mechanisms (*sensu*, Feinman and Nicholas 2016; Hedström and Swedberg 1996; Smith 2007) that underpin cross-cultural variation in preindustrial polities are needed. Specifically, an approach that examines the fiscal foundations of collective action (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Levi 1988; Monson and Scheidel 2015b) and not only outlines causal linkages to explain the bases for more collective versus autocratic forms of

governance, but by definition focuses on the dynamics (Ahlquist and Levi 2011) between the powerful and disempowered (leaders and followers), thereby explicitly removing the explanatory realm from a narrow consideration of just the small elite segment of populations.

This body of collective action theory outlines a useful analytical path toward understanding the essential properties of diverse forms of governance. From this perspective, collective forms of governance are distinguished from other, namely more autocratic governmental arrangements in the ways that principals or governors are linked with citizens in mutual bonds of obligation. The degree that voice is distributed, the extent of the checks on the power of principals, and the explicitness of social contracts, obligations, and laws are all key axes of variation. A prime underpinning factor is how governance or power is funded (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Levi 1988), the fiscal foundations of governance. What is critical is that patterns found consistently in prior comparative studies (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 2012b) are conceptually woven together through social mechanisms that link monopolization of revenues to the concentration of power and wealth, and consequent diminishment of subaltern voice. Alternatively, the proposed mechanisms also provide a basis for the linkage between economic interdependence, wider distribution of power and wealth, checks and balances, expenditures on public goods, services, and the infrastructures to maintain them. The conceptual tenets of this perspective, its relevance to variability in prehispanic Mesoamerican governance, and the potential significance of this research stream are outlined in the subsequent section.

Fiscal Foundation of Collective Action and Other Means of Governance

Archaeological findings from the lowland Maya region, the Valley of Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast, and other regions of Mesoamerica do not support the view that variation in modes of governance directly reflects long-standing cultural affiliations. Furthermore, given the diachronic changes now recognized in these regions, can modes of governance be viewed as a simple outgrowth of specific geographic settings. Rather, in most prehispanic Mesoamerican regions, the nature of governance shifted over time (and sometimes varied over space), even after the habitation of those areas by large dense populations. But, as noted above, even at comparable levels of vertical political complexity, the wielding of power, the bases of leadership, and governance took markedly distinctive forms. In other words, dynamic relations between leaders and followers shift and vary, and the economic bases of the former facilitate and constrain the nature of the relations and networks that bind cooperative formations (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Levi 1988). Although changes in these organizational patterns were noted previously

(Blanton et al. 1996), a causal model that defines the mechanisms and processes to account for changes and variation has only recently been proposed.

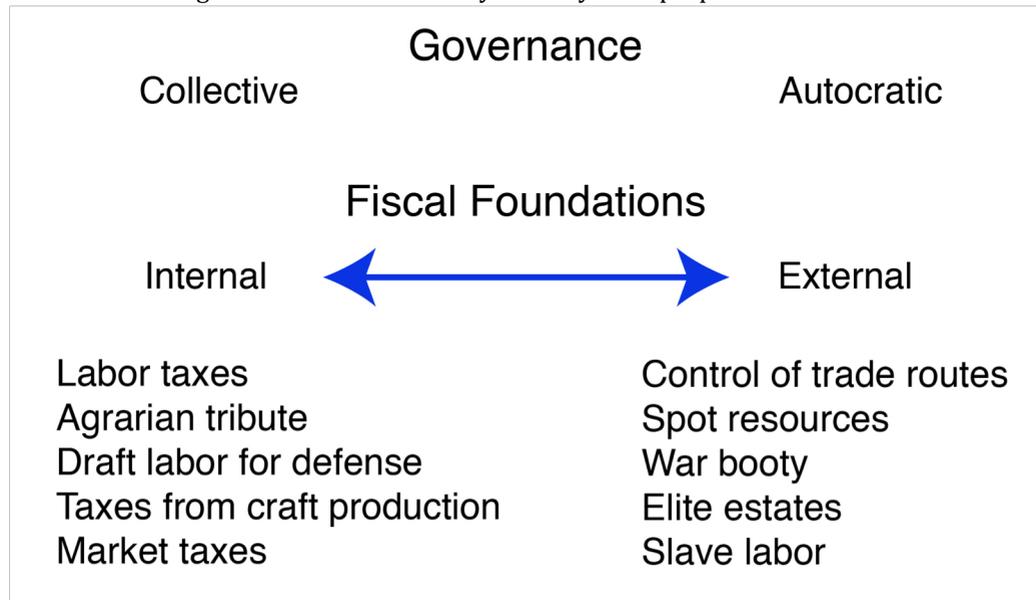


Figure 2. Financial underpinnings of government

In a series of studies, a conceptual lens drawn from theories of collective action has been employed as a productive basis to explore and account for elements of this political variation across prehispanic Mesoamerica. Prior to undertaking a review of those specific studies, I outline some of the key mechanisms and analytical expectations that undergird the overarching approach. As outlined in the aforementioned comparative historical analyses (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Levi 1988), the fiscal foundations of governance and power repeatedly have been shown to have a consistent association with the ways that leadership and government are enacted. Basically, when leadership is largely dependent on the immediate population for the bulk of its funding, through broad-based taxes or labor drafts—what has been termed a reliance on internal resources (Blanton and Fargher 2008)—governance tends to be less autocratic (more collective) with citizens having greater voice and checks placed on concentrated power and wealth (Blanton and Fargher 2016:276–277). In these contexts, bureaucracies are more elaborate, both as a means of collecting revenues and a basis to disperse public goods and services. Alternatively, when the funds of power that underlay government are amassed, acquired, or channeled more directly by rulers—what has been referred to as a reliance on external resources—the practice of

governance tends to be more autocratic (Figure 2). External resources include the control of trade routes, direct payments from foreign allies, war booty, private or slave estates, or hegemony over valuable spot resources. In such arrangements, bureaucratic infrastructures are less evident as neither broad-based tax collection nor provisioning of goods and services are top priorities. Rather, personality cults, transactional networks, and concentrations of wealth and power are more typical (Blanton and Fargher 2008).

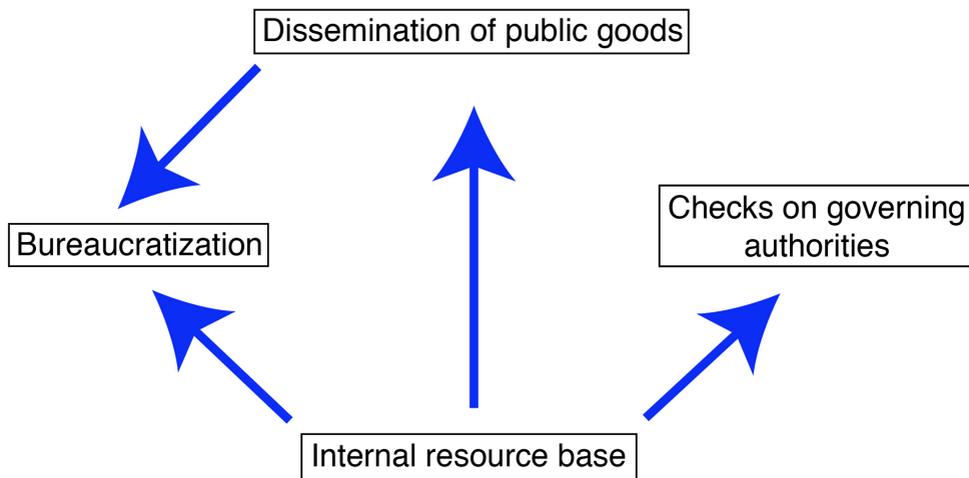
In the latter cases (based on external resources), leaders rely less on exactions from their immediate populace and so are freer to afford diminished representation, voice, or services to their citizens. In these contexts, funds of power do not depend on the broad-based building of trust or institutional (social) capital as, instead, the fiscal bases of power stem from the direct or hegemonic control of resources or exclusive transactional networks. In contrast, when leaders and governance depend on the sustainable exaction of taxes or draft labor from the local populace (internal resources), they must establish elements of trust and build bases for cooperation and compliance with obligations. Trust, participation, and cooperation are most easily achieved when populations are afforded degrees of agency, voice, and public goods and services that enhance the security and/or quality of life for participating citizens (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016:40–43). Fiscal financing dependent on local exactions requires both institutional infrastructures to collect taxes and monitor compliance and bureaucratic institutions to provide and administer public goods.

In accord with the aforementioned theories of collective action, governance based on internal resources should correlate with bureaucratic structures and the provision of public goods and services. In contrast, reliance on external resources allows for lesser investments in the structures of governance and a greater reliance on transactional networks and interpersonal (e.g., kin) ties. Reduced investments in both public goods and the structures and institutions of bureaucracy allow those leaders to consolidate wealth and power more personally and directly. Fiscal dependence on internal resources requires building social capital, delivering goods and services to citizens, maintenance of complex bureaucratic structures, and so affords fewer opportunities to concentrate wealth or consolidate power (Blanton and Fargher 2011). In their comparison of 30 premodern states, Richard Blanton and Lane Fargher (2008, 2011) systematically quantified indices for key aspects of governance and found that internal resource dependence, bureaucratization, higher dispersal of public goods, and checks on the concentration of political power were all correlated across their sample of historical cases (Figure 3).

The investigation of variation in prehispanic Mesoamerican governance and the root causes of variation and change is important for a number of reasons. Historically, this issue has been a focus of prehispanic archaeological research, and the application of new explanatory frames provides a basis to understand that

organizational variation and change is more than the product of the local physical environment or long-standing cultural traditions. More important is the recognition that collective forms of governance, with checks and balances on principal power, subaltern voice, provisioning of goods and services—characteristics shared with what also has been described as “good governance” (e.g., Gisselquist 2012; Levi 2006; Rothstein 2011; Rothstein and Teorell 2013), is not the exclusive domain of Europe or contemporary polities. Furthermore, if the conceptual constructs derived from Olson, Levi, Blanton and Fargher, and others can enlighten recognized variability in the prehispanic governance of Mesoamerica, then we not only would be able to tear down the artificial conceptual wall that long has divided our vision of past and present political formations, but doubt would be cast on long-held presumptions concerning teleological trajectories, progress, and modernization that are ingrained in our thinking and theories of why governance varies over time and space (e.g., Carneiro 1973; Lipset 1959).

Larger Complex Societies



(Adapted from Blanton and Fargher 2008)

Figure 3. Fiscal model of collective action (adapted from Blanton and Fargher 2008:254)

Undoubtedly, the past differs from the present in key areas of technology, transport, communication, and more. But the different arrangements in which we

cooperate and organize ourselves appear to have key cross-time parallels (Feinman 2010, 2011, 2012b, 2013a; Freeman et al. 2018). Recognition of these correspondences opens new potential lessons concerning sustainability (Feinman and Carballo 2018; Peregrine 2017) and how different human cooperative formations and modes respond to distinct challenges and disasters (e.g., Middleton 2012, 2017) over long temporal sequences.

Applications to the Mesoamerican Past

The collective action conceptual frame outlined above has been assessed mostly in historical contexts, in which documents are the primary records. In consequence, some refinements are needed both in the ways that we approach and conceptualize the archaeological record and in the manner that we operationalize theoretical expectations concerning variation in governance. The extensive historical analysis implemented by Blanton and Fargher (2008) relies principally on written sources for their coding and assessments. Yet any consideration of prehispanic Mesoamerica, especially prior to the Late Postclassic period (ca. AD 1250–1520) or for the Classic Maya (AD 250–900) for which we have written sources (Marcus 1992), requires a near total dependence on archaeological data. Prehispanic Mesoamerica is a highly suitable cultural region to examine the collective action frame as variability in governance has long been recognized, numerous theoretical lenses have been focused on that diversity, but none has yet adequately explained key elements of spatial and temporal diversity in any kind of holistic manner. Mesoamerica also affords a rich pool of information (archaeological and historical) on a large array of central places, whose apogees varied across time (e.g., Feinman and Carballo 2018). At the same time, knowledge regarding a sizable number of these cities and head towns is supplemented by regional-scale settlement pattern information, which offers a wider vantage for some prehispanic polities.

To date, three comparative analyses focused on ancient Mesoamerica have been undertaken to examine variation from the lens of the collective action frame. One (Fargher et al. 2011a; see also Fargher et al. 2010), which examines the Late Postclassic era, draws mainly but not solely on textual findings. The other two (Carballo 2016; Feinman and Carballo 2018) rely heavily on archaeological evidence. Here, I synthesize the major test implications and indicators defined in these analyses (see also Blanton and Fargher 2011; Fargher et al. 2010, 2011b), especially where they might diverge from more conventional ways of interpreting the archaeological record. Significantly, traditional measures of political complexity, access to wealth, and monumental construction have to be parsed to evaluate whether they reflect more or less collective political relations.

To assess the distinctions drawn along the continuum between collective and autocratic forms of governance, it is necessary to outline indicators for the relevant variables, such as evidence for distributed power or checks on the clout of

principals, concentrations of wealth and power, the aggrandizement of specific individuals and families, investments in public goods and services, uses of nonresidential space and structures, and perspectives on how leadership and governance were funded. By focusing on the Late Postclassic era in the Mesoamerican highlands, Fargher and colleagues (Fargher et al. 2011a) integrate textual and archaeological data to contrast different political arrangements across four regions. They describe not only marked organizational contrasts between the Tlaxcallan polity, ruled by a council, and the more despotically led political formations of the Postclassic Mixteca Alta and the Valley of Puebla, but also the variation in correlates of governance practices (expectations based on the collective action frame) with the diverse ways in which power was funded. Tlaxcallan was dependent principally on internal resources (taxation), while the Mixtecan and Valley of Puebla polities relied more on external resources, especially the farming of royal/elite estates. Basin of Mexico polities were intermediate, with greater degrees of power sharing and bureaucracy than in the more despotic Mixtecan polities but less collectivity than in Tlaxcallan. Likewise, the funds of power for governance relied on both external and internal resources.

In a comparative analysis focused on an earlier time, David Carballo (2016) examines Preclassic (1500 BC–AD 1) political formations in the Central Mexican highlands, building from a similar frame. For this analysis, Carballo (2016:120) relies heavily on archaeological indicators to contrast the organization of these early central places. Once again, variation was noted in patterns of sociopolitical inclusiveness with most of the centers organized in a manner that was indicative of more collective modes of organization. Large, open, broadly accessible plazas were found at many of the settlements. For the most part, the economic base was small-holder agricultural production, which likely corresponded with an internal funding of governance. To implement his comparative study, Carballo (2016: tab. 3.3) put forth a series of analytical contrasts between more collective and autocratic formations, which provides one key source for the axes of correlates outlined here (Table 1).

A more broadly defined, yet still preliminary, analysis examines diversity in governance at 26 Mesoamerican central places from across the entire prehispanic era (Feinman and Carballo 2018). Based on a series of archaeological indicators (Feinman and Carballo 2018:10), which are grouped into three broad categories (political economy, governance, and architecture), the 26 cities are nominally ranked along an axis of greater-to-lesser governmental collectivity. A strong correspondence is found with the fundamental tenets/expectations of the fiscal foundations of collective action for 21 of the 26 cases. Twelve cases reflect high degrees of collectivity for all three variables, while nine cases fall out at the other end of the scale, with low degrees of collectivity. Only five (of 26) cases (Feinman and Carballo 2018:12) are not situated at the two ends of the collective/autocratic

range, which given the longevity of these central places and the potential for governance practices to shift over time, is a surprisingly low number. Although just a start, these results are provocative as they illustrate (for a large sample of cases) that the same variables that co-occurred in the prior Mesoamerican studies (Carballo 2016; Fargher et al., 2011a) and the 30-case historical analysis (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016) also were associated here.

If we examine the three studies of prehispanic Mesoamerica together, we see that there was significant variation not simply in the scale and hierarchical complexity of polities but also in the practices of governance. Mesoamerican variation in governance tended to parallel axes of differences found by Blanton and Fargher (2008) in their global historical sample. In Mesoamerica, this variation in political and economic practices does not conform simply to either geography or time. That is, Postclassic polities did not always govern one way and Classic polities another; likewise, polities situated in highland regions did not always differ from lowland polities in a consistent or standard way. Both collective and autocratic governance was practiced in select highland and lowland settings. In several Mesoamerican regions, polities shifted markedly in how power was funded and how leadership was implemented over time. Maya polities, which largely were governed autocratically during the Classic period, were more collective in the Postclassic. Inversely, in the Valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán tended toward collective governance for more than a millennium during the later Formative and Classic periods, but the Postclassic polities in the region were much less collectively organized.

A further finding (Feinman and Carballo 2018) is that there are statistically significant differences between more and less collectively governed centers in this Mesoamerican sample when it comes to demographic scale and sustainability. In general, more collective governance was found at more populous centers (Feinman and Carballo 2018: fig. 2b). In one sense, this result is not entirely surprising as people might have opted to move to places where public goods and services were available. In-migration clearly was a key factor in the early growth of Mesoamerican cities, such as Teotihuacan (Cowgill 2015; Gómez Chávez 2017) and Monte Albán (Feinman et al. 1985). Furthermore, the centers with collectively organized governance in this sample had much longer apogees as the principal centers in their respective regions than did their less collectively organized counterparts (Feinman and Carballo 2018: fig. 2c). Although still preliminary (albeit statistically significant), these results illustrate that the consideration of variation in governance is critical for understanding the long-term histories of polities and the macroregions of which they were a part. In fact, the findings run counter to the predictions of some theorists, who argue that less bureaucratic, more flexible structures adapt more efficiently to shifting conditions and so are

more resilient (e.g., Redman and Kinzig 2003:4). Those conditions do not seem to be met in this prehispanic Mesoamerican sample (see also Blanton 2010:46–50).

To facilitate future investigations, a comprehensive set of archaeological correlates is compiled that may be used to characterize a continuous diversity in leadership and governance practices (as more or less collective) for prehispanic Mesoamerica. In point of fact, they are applicable to other global regions as well (Table 1). Where possible, I draw on specific published examples (e.g., Feinman 2001; Feinman and Carballo 2018) to illustrate and contrast the kinds of information that has been and can be further and more systematically marshalled to assess diversity in the practices of governance. At present, the examination of the archaeological record for these axes of variation may not yield a suitable foundation for high-powered quantitative analyses. After all, some of these criteria demand “reading” the archaeological record in new ways that will require re-analysis, reporting, and in some cases, further fieldwork. Nevertheless, for many cases, more nominal analyses of these criteria can be undertaken now (Feinman and Carballo 2018; see also the nominal treatment of certain variables in Turchin et al. 2018). More precise levels of quantification may be possible for some, as discussed below. In archaeology over the last century, we have seen that many aspects of human behavior that we considered beyond the reach of the archaeological endeavor decades ago (such as any insights into social/political organization) are now open to far more in-depth and multifaceted examination (e.g., Hawkes 1954:161–162; Kristiansen 2014). A lesson being that if the right questions were not posed by archaeologists in the past, it is doubtful that the procedures and methods needed to answer those queries would be part of our practice today.

Archaeological Correlates

To assess whether polities were associated with relatively collective or autocratic forms of governance requires new perspectives on and expectations brought to the archaeological record. Fortunately, the archaeology of government is not a new research avenue (Blanton and Fargher 2011; Smith 2007; Smith et al. 2016a; Trigger 1974), and regime changes do tend to leave material imprints (Blanton and Fargher 2012; Blockmans 2003). Here, I draw from and integrate the previous Mesoamerican studies to outline variables, archaeological indicators, and expectations that can be assessed in future investigations (Table 1). To get beyond the key dimensions of complexity and scale, for which we have established criteria, deeper, more nuanced analyses are needed to evaluate patterns of variation in the equally crucial manners in which governance is organized and implemented. Simply put, despotism and inequality have different footprints than governmental formations characterized by distributed power and more equitable wealth

dispersal, and the material correlates of these behavioral disparities should be archaeologically visible.

Table 1. Variability in governance.

Principal Power and Legitimation

Collective	Autocratic
Relatively modest high-status residences	Elaborate and centrally located elite residences
Broad access to public buildings	Public construction emphasizes exclusive access
Large-scale public construction exceeds private construction Symbol systems depict natural themes, fertility, cosmology	Private construction exceeds public construction Symbolism of rulers as divine
“Faceless” rulership	Conspicuous individualized rulers, elaborately attired
Shared power	All-powerful principals Kin-based inheritance

Governance/Bureaucracy

Collective	Autocratic
Open plazas—accessibility, visibility	Closed, restrictive nonresidential spaces
Central sectors house concentrated public buildings	Dispersed nonresidential buildings
Large settlements are densely inhabited	Dispersed settlement
Diverse kinds of public buildings indicative of varied functions of governance	Political activities concentrated in large palaces
Community temples	Dynastic temples
Public art emphasizes public goods and services	Art glorifies dynast

Public Goods and Services

Collective	Autocratic
Large, central public spaces	Restricted/limited space for public association
Investments ease communication and transport	Inefficient movement within and between centers
Public goods construction, such as roads, markets, agricultural infrastructure, community defensive walls, open plazas, wide streets Marketplaces constructed and sustained	Little investment in broadly accessible public goods and services
Public provisioning during stress episodes	

Access to Wealth

Collective	Autocratic
Muted socioeconomic differentiation	Heightened socioeconomic differentiation
Limited variability in burial goods and funerary contexts	Highly elaborated burial goods and funerary contexts
Diminished variation in house size and elaboration	Great variation in house size and elaboration
More communal land	More private property/elite estates
	Most storage private
	Concentrated portable wealth

Financing

Collective	Autocratic
Internal	External
Focus on staple goods	Prestige goods exchange and individualized, high-status transactional networks
	Specialized producers attached to ruling elite households

Power and Legitimation

A central variable is how the power of principals is distributed. Was it concentrated in one leader or family or more widely distributed? Were governmental offices at the center of governance or were individuals, their families, and cults of personality? The nature, size, elaboration, and spatial centrality of palaces (elaborated elite residences) provide a key analytical portal. How many palaces were occupied simultaneously? Did one residence stand out as particularly elaborate? How much larger and ornate were they than other housing, and can these residential differences be translated into rough costs in labor and materials? Were palatial residences at the core of settlement centers or were other monumental constructions at the heart of the urban core, and how did the size of palaces scale vis-à-vis other monumental (public) buildings? Access patterns to monumental buildings, restrictive or more open, also can inform.

For example, at large Classic Maya centers, such as Palenque and Tikal, main palaces were extensive (multiroomed), centrally situated, and juxtaposed in the same structure both elite residential housing and political and ritual spaces (Figure 1). In later Postclassic Maya settlements, which were more collectively organized, elite residential and political/ritual spaces tend to be more dissociated (Liendo Stuardo 2003). Whereas there is little debate over whether the main palace at Palenque, with its multiple rooms and impressive tower (Liendo Stuardo 2003; Marken 2007), or the Central Acropolis at Tikal (Harrison and Andrews 2004) were the residences of a number of those site's rulers, the specific domicile of the rulers of more collectively organized Teotihuacan is disputed, with various hypotheses advanced (Cowgill 1983; Feinman and Nicholas 2016:285–286; Flannery 1998; Manzanilla 2012; Sanders and Evans 2006).

Legitimation of rulers, and their public displays, also are potentially revealing as they provide insights into the ties between the rulers and followers. In public art and texts, did one ruler or ruling family dominate or appear larger than others? Were only certain principals named? Or, were depictions of elite generally more “faceless” perhaps with multiple principals? What seems more central, the individual or the office, and what was the basis of succession? Was it through kinship or primogeniture, which would reflect concentrated power, or more open processes? Were charismatic public displays enacted by flamboyant rulers used to attract and inspire the adherence of followers or did public displays and gatherings aim to build and communicate devotion to shared aims through social inclusion and coordinated participation (Blanton 2016; Feinman 2016)?

Classic Maya royalty generally inherited their dynastic positions from their forebears, as is displayed in specific inscribed texts (e.g., Marcus 1992:344). These Maya rulers had names, and their specific life histories were recorded and displayed. They governed largely on the basis of their role as intermediaries with the supernatural, and a vital element of that was the personification of deities in

charismatic events and ceremonies in which they were central performers (Demarest 2004; Friedel 2008; Inomata 2006). In contrast, few, if any, rulers at Teotihuacan are definitively known or named. When powerful people from that site are depicted, for example in mural art, they are masked, often portrayed in linear arrays or processions (Feinman 2001; Pasztory 1997:56). Unlike for the Classic Maya, there are no accession scenes or depictions of a “king list” or succession of rulers in any records from Teotihuacan (Cowgill 1997, 2015).

Political/Bureaucratic Organization

Although complex polities, states and empires, are all hierarchically organized, their chains of command or bureaucratic structures take markedly different forms. As noted above, certain polities tend to build up more extensive infrastructure to collect taxes and distribute public goods, while autocratic governance generally works through ruler-centric networks more transactionally, operating through interpersonal ties, without as much investment in bureaucratic personnel. These organizational differences are seemingly reflected on the ground in architecture and settlement planning. Larger bureaucracies entail a greater number of public buildings and likely a wider variety of such structures, associated with different governmental tasks. To facilitate communication between different governmental arms, these activities often are spatially clustered in urban contexts (Blanton and Fargher 2011:507–509). Yet, at the same time, infrastructural power may penetrate smaller dependent communities outside metropolises (Blanton and Fargher 2012:30–31). In contrast, political systems based on more transactional arrangements require less diversity in constructed spaces, and they may be more dispersed/less compact spatially. In more collective polities, where citizens may have greater opportunities to express their voices, large plazas and other spaces for aggregations would be expected to be present, accessible, and centrally situated. Although quantitative and in-depth comparative analyses of Mesoamerican plazas have begun (Ossa et al. 2017; Tsukamoto and Inomata 2014), more holistic considerations are in order.

In prehispanic Mesoamerica, some of the largest plazas and open spaces, such as the Main Plaza at Monte Albán and the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan, are found at relatively collectively governed polities. These centers of collective governance also had relatively high population densities (Feinman and Nicholas 2012b). Large, nonpalatial public buildings dominated their central precincts. Classic Maya cities were mostly less densely occupied. Temples and palaces dominated their central precincts. At the same time, the temples at the Classic Maya sites tended to be more exclusive, steeply elevated off the ground with smaller flat spaces at the top and narrower stairways as compared to the temples at more collectively organized cities. At a regional scale, looking at the Valley of Oaxaca settlement patterns across time (Feinman and Nicholas 2013, 2017a; Kowalewski et al. 1989), platform

construction for public buildings was more prevalent at large and small communities in the region at times of collective governance, whereas in the Late Postclassic (Monte Albán V), public buildings were less massive, less diverse, and rarer at both large and small communities (Blanton 1989).

Where we have in-depth prehispanic written accounts, for the Classic Maya and the Postclassic Mixtec kingdoms (also less collectively organized), we have ample evidence that legitimation, rulership, and the political process was indeed highly transactional, revolving around the personal and kin networks of powerful leaders, their courtly dependents, and elite allies and rivals (e.g., Feinman 2017; Jackson 2013; Marcus 1992; Spores 1967). We lack such personalized historical accounts for the seemingly most collectively organized centers (Feinman and Carballo 2018), which in itself may be telling, but clearly more in-depth investigation of these axes of variation is needed (Smith et al. 2016a).

Public Goods

More collectively organized governance should be associated with greater investment in public goods that benefit the local populace. Infrastructural investments such as wide and coherently networked streets and roads (Blanton and Fargher 2011:509–512), marketplaces, public meeting spots (plazas), and defensive features should all be fostered and more heavily supported when governance is collective (Feinman and Carballo 2018). Significant allotments in these realms tend to leave archaeological traces. With collective forms of governance, greater investments in provisioning in the face of disasters would be expected, and although material remnants of such practices may be hard to decipher without documents, they likely contributed to lesser disparities in wealth and well-being.

At Teotihuacan, governance was highly collective, and the site had both wide streets and was built on an orthogonal grid (Smith 2017). From across the city, distances to religious activities were more accessible than at Tikal (Dennehy et al. 2016:152). Monte Albán, also collectively organized, was interlinked through a web of roads (Blanton 1978), as were other Classic period Valley of Oaxaca centers, such as El Palmillo (Feinman and Nicholas 2004). Site plans and the deployment of accessways provide starting points for the assessment of the distribution of public good in Mesoamerican cities, but more quantitative analyses also are underway (e.g., Dennehy et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2016b; Stanley et al. 2016). Such efforts, although offering a constructive path forward, involve a complex web of assumptions and have to date not employed a means of measuring/assessing access to certain services and goods on a per capita basis. This is a key consideration, as in the modern world, the provisioning of goods and services has been shown to be less costly and more efficient where demographic densities are

higher and settlement more concentrated (e.g., Carruthers and Ulfarsson 2003; Ladd 1992).

Access to and Distribution of Wealth

Although less directly integral to the fiscal foundations of collective action constructs (Figure 3), my expectation is that greater disparities in wealth, both during life and at death, generally should correlate with more autocratic governance regimes and vice versa (e.g., Blanton and Fargher 2016:276–277; Feinman et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2018:16–21). Large funerary monuments associated with specific powerful deceased figures should be more characteristic of these less collective political formations. The extent of variation in the scale and elaboration of domestic architecture should be exaggerated with more autocratic modes of governance. Residential architecture should be more homogeneous when governance takes more collective forms (e.g., Blanton 1994). Likewise, the relative importance of (and greater disparities in) portable wealth should be larger in less collectively organized polities. Differentials in other axes of wealth, such as land and private storage, should be distributed in similar ways. In contrast, wealth differentials should be more muted in collectively organized polities.

Although far more quantitative analyses are certainly necessary to assess these associations, the patterns for ancient Mesoamerica seem to fit these expectations in regard to variation and elaboration in house architecture (Feinman et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2018:16–21), degree of equity in portable wealth distributions in residential contexts and graves, as well as funerary architectural variability/differential elaboration (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 2001; Feinman and Carballo 2018). Concerning the latter, at Teotihuacan, we have yet to isolate where the powerful were interred, while at many Classic Maya sites many royal burials are known, and they tend to be in exclusive settings that were both costly to build and that ultimately were filled with ornate, valued offerings (e.g., Fitzsimmons 2009).

Financing

Marked differences are expected in how governance and power are funded. In more collective formations, most resources would be derived through internal resources, that is, from the local populace mainly through distributed taxation on smallholder, agrarian producers. The basic economic underpinnings would be aligned with practices of staple finance (*sensu*, D'Altroy and Earle 1985). Alternatively, more autocratic forms of governance would be reliant on external resources, such as control of trade routes, elite or slave estates, war booty, and/or exploitation of spot resources. In these formations, the control of exchange networks could in certain instances be amplified by prestige goods produced by specialists attached to elite residential complexes (Figure 2; Table 1).

The role of Classic Maya lords in long-distance transfers of valued goods through exchange, gift giving, and other means, especially along the Usumacinta River, is established (Demarest 2004; Demarest et al. 2014). Members of Maya elite households skillfully crafted exotic and valued resources into power-laden valuables (Inomata 2001). Although the empirical record is less ample, elite craft production (cloth, metallurgy) and engagement in long- and medium-scale exchange networks also was important to Postclassic Mixtec lords (e.g., Hamann 1997; Pohl 2003a, 2003b). To date, the roles of portable wealth, attached specialization, and elite-focused exchange networks seem less evident in the cases with more collective forms of governance (Feinman and Carballo 2018).

Concluding Thoughts

For generations, archaeologists have endeavored to explain the variability that was noted in prehispanic Mesoamerican governance and political organization. Initially, they catalogued that diversity, even de-emphasizing it at the expense of cultural similarities that cross time in the region. Later, they looked to temporal change and environmental and spatial variation as explanatory factors, sometimes coupled with the important dimensions of scale and complexity. But none of these interpretive lenses met with more than partial interpretive success, and much research retreated toward idiosyncratic frames and away from systematic comparison.

Based on a series of comparative analyses that adopted a collective action perspective, we are beginning to see that the variation in governance across the prehispanic Mesoamerican world corresponded with how power and governance was funded. Furthermore, neither environmental setting nor any uniform trajectory of change can explain the noted variation. In key ways, the continuous axis of observed collective–autocratic variability broadly parallels what has been reported for global historical contexts (e.g., Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; see also Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Feinman 2010; Turchin 2016). For ancient Mesoamerica, we are beginning to define and recognize the polar ends of this continuum, but much more work is required to understand the cases and contexts in the middle, the ones where the funding of power was a combination of internal and external revenues.

Of course, the scale of socioeconomic networks remains a key variable for understanding variability in governance (e.g., Feinman 2013a), but size alone cannot adequately account for the recorded variation, past or present. As shown in a previous analysis (Feinman and Carballo 2018), Teotihuacan and later Aztec Tenochtitlán were two of Mesoamerica's largest cities, both centered in the Basin of Mexico. But whereas Teotihuacan was collectively organized, Postclassic Tenochtitlán was seemingly governed somewhat less collectively, and the role of the Aztec principals in the receipt of high valued goods through tribute provided

an important, although not the predominant, source of revenue in a diversified fiscal base (Smith 2015). Nevertheless, despite its imperial scale, Aztec governance was relatively collective with the power of the ruler checked by a high council (Blanton and Fargher 2008; Fargher et al. 2017; Smith 2015). Public goods were provided at a comparatively high level (Blanton and Fargher 2008; Smith 2012, 2015). Hopefully, this essay promotes more research on the funding and workings of governance in prehispanic Mesoamerica, specifically at Teotihuacan and other archaeological sites, so that this question and related others can be more fully examined.

Despite the results presented here, application of collective action frames to Mesoamerican archaeology remains at a relatively nascent stage. Efforts to implement this theoretical lens to other archaeological contexts also are just beginning (DeMarrais and Earle 2017). Yet the further consideration of governmental variation and its relationship to sustainability, demographic change, and economic growth may provide a historical vantage relevant for informing more than merely the deep past alone (e.g., Mickey et al. 2017; Wade 2017; Waldner and Lust 2018). To understand the long-term histories as well as the sustainability of human cooperative formations, it is becoming clear that we must assess and examine differences in governance and the social mechanisms that link variation in political forms to other key societal dimensions, such as how power is fiscally financed. In other words, with apologies to Lowenthal (1999), the past might not be so foreign a country. In terms of key underpinnings of cooperative interpersonal relations, there may be more cross-time parallels and lessons for the present in the historical and archaeological pasts than we have wanted to acknowledge. The time is now to start assembling a better comparative reading on the past so as to reflect more fully on the present and hopefully provide the empirically informed basis to help craft better futures.

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