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# What is the Community? The Long View from Oaxaca, Mexico

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The community became known to social scientists through their experience with rural peasants and native peoples of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This community was conceived as families who lived near each other, the group of face-to-face interaction, the group that worked together and held common resources in land, shared rituals, and had some political recognition or self-governance. But such communities did not always exist. The paper traces change in local formations in Oaxaca, Mexico, over 3500 years, from early sedentary villages through urbanism, centralized and decentralized states, Colonialism, and capitalist expansion. Local groupings were always members of larger-scale formations and changed in their composition and functions in response both to higher levels of integration (regional systems, states) and to pressures from households and other constituent units. The autonomous community never existed and was not an early evolutionary stage. Likewise, communities are not a fixed, basal unit of society or social evolution.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Middle American ethnology came of age after the 1930s, a time when more or less corporate communities were being cracked open, or in the words of the moment, when modernization was altering traditional ways. This was the ethnographic experience.

Social Evolution & History, Vol. 2 No. 1, March 2003 4–24  
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In Mexico, the dissolution of the community is what anthropologists saw and wrote about, from Parsons' *Mitla* (1936) to Cancian's *The Decline of Community in Zinacantan* (1992) (and the novelist – González's *Pueblo en Vilo* [1968]). Each of these exemplary authors also described earlier times when the community and its institutions were different. Wolf's idea of closed corporate communities (1957) and detailed historical studies, like Chance and Taylor's (1985) on the origins of the religious hierarchy, described how and under what conditions people formed the institutions of the corporate community, and how communities, instead of dissolving in capitalist penetration, came to be the unitary communities of the twentieth century.

To understand how local groupings are formed, it is necessary to observe their continuity and change in a single region. I choose the place I know best, which is Oaxaca, in the highlands of southern Mexico, where I have studied the long archaeological and historical sequence. Villages in twentieth-century Oaxaca were both the face-to-face community and the civic-ceremonial community; the two characteristics coincided. But this was not always the case. The community as we know it was a creation of history.

The Oaxacan village of the twentieth century was a cluster of houses and their outdoor work areas, streets, a center where one could find the municipal offices, jail, schools, park, basketball court, and church, and on the outskirts, the cemetery. All these structures were elaborate or minimal, depending on the town's place in the regional hierarchy. The community's fields and forests, a mix of private and communal property, were jealously kept. But what is interesting about this full ensemble of features is that they did not come together until after the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 and the land reform that ensued in the 1930s. The communities of the ethnological present did not exist earlier in history and prehistory. It is not just the basketball court (and the obligatory municipal basketball trophy case) that are new in the last century – every feature of the ensemble post-dates the demographic crash of the colonial period.

Territorial land holding has been one of the main functions of this familiar ethnographic community. Villages, and in practice sometimes even their dependencies and sections, are autonomous social groups maintaining territory and regulating land holding. This is still the group that comes together in the struggle over

boundaries (Dennis 1987). It controls access to land, and the dispersal of credit, fertilizer, and irrigation water (Lees 1973). It makes collective policy about forests and grazing (see also Warman 1980: 286).

However, the village community's control over land, in the twentieth century its most basic function, in many instances was newly won and in most cases was contested, often successfully, by other interests. Farther back in time, too, the set of functions held by the local group was often quite different.

## OAXACAN COMMUNITIES BEFORE THE SPANISH CONQUEST

Much of the information on prehistoric communities in Oaxaca comes from regional archaeological surveys by Blanton, Feinman, Finsten, Nicholas, Balkansky, and myself (Blanton *et al.* 1982; Kowalewski *et al.* 1989; Finsten 1996; Balkansky *et al.* 2002) and excavations by Flannery's Human Ecology project (Flannery 1976; Flannery and Marcus 1983; Marcus and Flannery 1996).

For this discussion it is convenient to describe local groups in four successive periods: Pre-Urban 1500–500 B.C., Early Urban 500 B.C.–A.D. 250, Classic A.D. 250–750, and Postclassic A.D. 750–1520.

*Pre-Urban, 1500–500 B.C.* The transition from gathering and hunting already had been made, and this was a time of Neolithic farming villages. Settlement consisted of head towns of 1000–2000 people, each with a halo of small villages and hamlets. This whole settlement cluster occupied an area with a diameter of roughly 25 km. Head towns, such as San José Mogote, had internal neighborhood divisions, public buildings, and much more evidence of rank status distinctions, craft specialization, and long-distance exchange connections. Outside of the head towns, settlements were so small that it is hard to think of them in terms of political power. But several features of the hamlets suggest some perduring importance, which may have to do with connecting people to land. Hamlets were usually next to well-watered land. There is no evidence of competition for land. Many, if not most, had public buildings on platform mounds, and at least one excavated site had a cemetery (Whalen 1981). There are indications of local integrative rituals. These very same places and the same platform mounds had remarkably long occupations continuing into later times, suggesting

an ideological connection between people and particular places on the landscape. Since most settlements – the hamlets – were too small to be economically or politically viable on their own, it was the whole settlement cluster, headed by the larger town, that had all the functions of community. The small, dispersed hamlets may have worked well for putting farmers next to their fields, but they were far too small to be persistent and effective land-tenuring units. The small settlements (except those with civic-ceremonial architecture) were the most likely to be abandoned, the least likely to continue from one 200- or 300-year archaeological phase to the next. One needs to go farther up the political hierarchy to find the authority in matters of land and territory.

*Early Urban, 500 B.C.–A.D. 250.* This was a time of growth in population and expansion of hierarchy. By the end of the period one can speak of states, and several centers in Oaxaca had populations of 15,000–20,000 people and urban central place functions.

There was significant regional variation in settlement patterns. In the Valley of Oaxaca, the most urbanized region, there was a robust hierarchy led by Monte Albán, the major city, numerous towns in the middle range, and small villages and hamlets. These latter tended to be grouped in local clusters of several hundred inhabitants living within a kilometer or two of each other. Usually one of the sites in the rural cluster had some civic-ceremonial architecture, continuing the pattern of the Pre-Urban period.

In the Mixteca Alta, the mountains to the west of the Valley of Oaxaca, the Pre-Urban settlement clusters were suddenly abandoned around 300 B.C. and new, fortified hilltowns were built on high peaks overlooking the same small valleys. These hilltowns had populations of several hundred people, organized as corporate communities. Over the next several hundred years almost all of the hilltowns were abandoned, as populations consolidated into a few large cities. It is likely that the corporate institutions developed by hilltowns persisted in later periods.

*Classic, A.D. 250–750.* Regional populations in the Mixteca Alta and Valley of Oaxaca were each over 100,000. State administrative penetration down to the local level is apparent. As in Early Urban times, rural people lived within clusters of small settlements, but by Classic times these had increased in number and population size (Kowalewski 1994: 128). In the Valley of Oaxaca, over half of the local settlement clusters had no public architecture. People in

those situations were 2–5 km away from the nearest civic-ceremonial center. The places with civic-ceremonial complexes, in turn, were not alike. They varied in the number and scale of civic-ceremonial buildings, reflecting their place in a four- or five-tiered state hierarchy. Also, the civic-ceremonial centers varied in their layout of platform mound and plaza complexes, so they were not simply larger or smaller versions of one another, but different in purpose. In particular, mounds and plazas on the edges of districts took on a form different than the mounds and plazas in the towns in the core of their districts.

Lower-level civic-ceremonial centers had quite clumped, uneven geographical spacing and highly variable public architecture. This is not what one would expect for the basal political level. In fact, the lowest-ranking civic-ceremonial architecture that was fairly evenly spread over the region occurred only at centers farther up the central place hierarchy, at the region's second and third tier. These were evenly spaced and correspond to territorial districts whose boundaries were marked by single mounds, which municipalities sometimes use for boundary markers today. The high-ranking centers are where we find the greatest frequencies of Zapotec funerary urns. Funerary ritual linked noble families to deceased ancestors, who might help bring rain (Marcus and Flannery 1996: 208–210); such rituals occurred more often at the major centers where rulers had their palaces and exercised control over land and water.

In sum, with increasing growth, complexity, and specialization in civic-ceremonial functions in the Classic period, certain services were removed from small settlements and concentrated at higher levels, especially that of the district. The local, face-to-face social group did not have all the 'basic' functions of the Middle American community (political recognition, market, ritual, control over land); instead, these functions were found at district capitals, which were 10 km distant from some of their local settlement clusters.

*Postclassic, A.D. 750–1520.* In the Postclassic (I refer mainly to the Late Postclassic, A.D. 1250–1520), local clusters were merged into extensive belts (10–12 km) of continuous dispersed and nucleated settlement. Gaps of a few kilometers between these extensive occupations marked the home territories of señoríos – petty kingdoms or city-states, described in native and Spanish sixteenth-century documents (Taylor 1972; Spores 1967; Romero 1986; Ter-

raciano 2000). These señoríos ranged in size from 30 to 300 km<sup>2</sup>, and in population from 2000 to 40,000 inhabitants. They were basic market territories. Some were defended by forts. The señorío was ruled by a cacique, a hereditary royal who was owed tribute in labor and goods. For commoners, access to land may have been through the cacique or by virtue of communal right. Señoríos differed from today's municipalities in that they were usually larger, the modern municipalities being formed by subdivision of these units over the last 500 years. Unlike the districts of the Classic period (and the post-Independence era, discussed below), Postclassic señoríos were autonomous, not subject to a regional state.

Postclassic Oaxaca is a good example of Hanson's 'city-state culture' (Lind 2000). Multiple institutions, including markets, long-distance trade, movement of laborers, the land holdings of caciques, pilgrimages, and oracles crossed and blurred señorío boundaries.

The material facilities for public civic and ceremonial occasions were generally not as massive or prominent as they were in earlier periods. Temples, platforms, palaces, and ballcourts were in use. Ceremonial observance took place in the home, at public and secluded shrines located away from town centers, in more or less private rituals by and for the nobility, and in private, discrete ways such as the offerings dug into older pyramids.

What was the community in the late prehispanic period? Face-to-face interaction and some of the shared labor took place among nearby households and hamlets; but in many instances this local group had become unbounded, merged into a continuous sprawl. Lineages, neighborhoods, towns, señoríos, and higher-level regional groupings all existed, as indicated by both documentary and archaeological evidence (Smith 1993). Yet with the exception of the señorío, none of these integrative levels was particularly well marked or defined. This 'fuzziness' of boundaries at all levels is attested to by both archaeological and documentary information.

In commercialized times such as the Mesoamerican Postclassic, power is built by moving value about freely, which is difficult where there are corporate obstacles (Blanton *et al.* 1996). Commercial power is easily transferred from place to place. It makes boundaries dissolve. In the language of money, this is liquid, financial capital, as opposed to a more slowly moving industrial

capital, which would be closer to the landed, corporate form of power that was more in evidence in the Classic period. Mobile, regional interests do not build local, corporate community power; instead these interests (caciques, and other operators, such as merchants) assemble power ad hoc from their networks. Corporate institutions, such as a would-be local commune, are confronted by great obstacles in a network world. Corporate power must constantly guard its boundaries; it must deprecate and refuse to recognize the valences attached to intrusive objects, while constantly exalting the value of its own. Corporate communities must keep track of their people. Network-operating caciques may try to incorporate their local followers internally, to consolidate and stabilize a power base; likewise, local followers may act as one to resist a cacique's depredations. This is why the Postclassic and Colonial señoríos contained nascent corporate communal organizations ready to advance claims against their caciques.

## **OAXACAN COMMUNITIES AFTER THE SPANISH CONQUEST**

*Colonial Period, 1520–1820.* The Spanish conquest and ensuing demographic collapse transformed Oaxacan society, but there were also long-term continuities. The magnitude of the change is difficult to comprehend. The native population fell by 90%, from hundreds of thousands to a few tens of thousands, reaching its nadir around 1650. In this society, heavily dependent on market exchange, disruptions led to centuries of economic depression. Although it took a hundred years or more, some of the most populous and powerful prehispanic centers bowed to Spanish-founded towns. The Spanish built a single capital in a region that previously had no overall, centralized administration. Every one of what would become the Colonial district capitals was a sixteenth-century *congregación*, a new town. Mercantile wheat, cochineal (red dye), and livestock production altered labor allocation, land use, and land tenure (Hamnett 1971; Taylor 1972).

Community continuity and re-emergence took place in a weakened demographic and political environment. Crown administrative jurisdictions, *encomiendas* (private, tribute-labor fiefs), the numerous ecclesiastical divisions, native caciques' dispersed claims, and the vast holdings the family of Mexico's conqueror, Hernando Cortés, combined to make Oaxaca's political map a con-

fusion of overlapping, weak, and contested claims (García Martínez 1969; Welte 1973–1978; Gerhard 1993). This situation settled somewhat in the later Colonial period, but it was still in evidence at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

There were continuities between prequest señoríos and Colonial jurisdictions at the district scale, and in some cases between prehispanic towns and those that would become the municipalities of today. These continuities exist because the Spanish, in all their competing efforts to establish control in New Spain, had to rely on the indigenous political system. Other towns and villages only came into being in the Colonial period. Some of these were the villages of laborers on large estates (*haciendas*).

This community, the group of daily interaction and the basal political unit, was a product of a European civic model and the struggle against big landlords. It was in the Colonial period that villages and towns began to take on their familiar look (to us): nucleated, a well-defined center with public buildings, a grid pattern of streets, and a cemetery on the outskirts. Socially this was the group of face-to-face interaction. None of these characteristics were true for the local settlements or for the señorío of Postclassic times. In the Colonial period, villages had official recognition in administrative and Church hierarchies, and some self-governance. Villages were legal actors. The state played a significant role in establishing viable communities by decreeing that towns should have a *fundo legal*, a certain (small) amount of land (Taylor 1972, 1976; García Martínez 1993). Churches were established in every village.

Institutional and single-owner estates, mining concessions, and livestock grazing companies, although not large by northern Mexico standards, were numerous and controlled much of the good land (Esteva 1913; Bernstein 1964; Pastor 1987; Esparza 1988; Romero 1990). Villages struggled with some or little success against encroachments by the mines and *haciendas* of caciques, the Church, and private landlords. Gradually the hereditary caciques lost their personal rule to a corporate village institution or to outside landlords.

The *raison d'être* of Colonial and nineteenth-century communities was territorial defense of the land crucial for livelihood. With some significant exceptions, Oaxaca's rural inhabitants peasantized, that is, they adopted community-based strategies for protec-

tion, land rights, solidarity, and exchange. Native language-speaking and the maintenance of a localist cosmovision are hallmarks of peasantized villages.

*Independence, 1820–1920.* The nineteenth century was a time of gradual population growth. It also saw increasing penetration by extractive capitalism (agriculture, commerce, and mining), and in the early twentieth century, the railroad. This was backed by the state, whose presence in Oaxaca became increasingly powerful. Rural communities were affected by these movements, and also by the state's efforts to confiscate the land holdings of the Church and to free the communal holdings of villages. Communities were under considerable external pressure, and in many instances their ability to control their labor and resources dwindled.

The real power rested in the landlord class. Its key institution was the hacienda, reinforced by ideologies of hierarchy, patriarchy, and Church (Esparza 1985). Landlords controlled the crucial water resources, and exercised an iron-fisted control over labor, through wages, debt peonage, rural stores, older forms of labor tribute, militias, and armed thugs. The landlord class controlled Oaxaca's regional commerce (peasant markets, stores, petty manufactures, and imports).

The places that articulated these various institutions of the landlord class were the district capitals, of which Oaxaca had 26, controlling over a thousand villages and towns. The district capitals were the lowest level at which market, certain commercial, communications, ecclesiastical, judicial, political, and military functions coincided. They were still overwhelmingly peasant towns. The major landlord families lived in Oaxaca City, or outside the state.

Peasantization and closed corporate communities (Wolf 1957) were the rule. But in areas with large-scale capitalist ventures in mining, industry, and commercial agriculture, 'traditional' communities were broken and de-peasantized (Iszaevich 1973; Coatsworth 1981; Chassen and Martínez 1990; Kowalewski and Saindon 1992). These communities were more open, they had lost the corporate means of protection, communal land rights, and intra-village exchange. Typically they no longer spoke indigenous languages.

The main mechanism for breaking the commune was the wholesale movement of labor. The historical evidence for movement of laborers and their families is quite specific. For example, an 1861

head-tax roll for the Hacienda de San José del Cacique listed 14 contributors, who were all landless laborers. The roll for the same place in 1894 had 50 contributors, and the document shows an influx of young workers. Included on the second list were 13 new surnames. Only 53% of the 17 surnames on this 1894 list were still present in the village in the 1980s (Kowalewski and Montiel 1986). Contrast this rural movement in nineteenth-century Oaxaca to the example Netting (1993: 68–69) cites for his enduring smallholders in Törbel, Switzerland, where he documented twelve generations of family continuity.

Free-flowing labor and de-peasantization meant that people put less energy into community-level institutions. In 1883 Manuel Martínez Gracida compiled a statistical and geographical catalogue of villages and towns in the State of Oaxaca, including descriptions and monetary values of all Church and civic buildings and cemeteries in each place (Martínez Gracida 1883). I do not know how these monetary values were determined (the purpose was Reform), but as a whole they are consistent. Church buildings were worth much more than civil buildings, cemeteries were worth the least, and all three are positively correlated. The towns in the most de-peasantized region, ETLA, just north of Oaxaca City, rank toward the low end in absolute values and values per capita, for all three categories: Church, civic, and cemetery. For example, of the top 83 places in the Valley of Oaxaca in value of Church buildings per capita, only two are in ETLA. These are the church in the ETLA district capital and one impressive hacienda church. Since this represents accumulated value, one wonders how long before 1883 people in ETLA had ceased investing in community facilities. Pastor (1987: 540ff.) says that de-peasantization was already well under way in the valleys of the Mixteca by the 1830s. It is perhaps noteworthy that Martínez Gracida described many of the ETLA districts churches as lying in ruins in his day.

In sum, communities away from capital-intensive enterprises could defend themselves behind a screen of closed, corporate institutions. Such institutions were broken in areas of modern estates and other capitalist ventures, which expanded the numbers of landless peasants. Local communities were relatively weak, though numerous. The real power rested with an external landlord class, whose institutions of enforcement were headquartered in the district capitals.

*Post-Revolution, 1920–1970.* The communities known to Oaxaca's first ethnographers, wherein coincided local political authority, integrative ritual, regular face-to-face interaction, and land rights, are products of the Revolution and its land reform, 1910 to the 1940s (García 1942). They are the result of efforts from the peasants themselves and from the revolutionary state, which sought to build up its power against that of the provincial landlord/commercial class entrenched at the district and state capital level (Warman 1980: 163, 259; Reina 1993; Ruiz Cervantes 1986, 1988, 1994; Martínez Vásquez 1990: 138ff.). Land reform, and other twentieth-century projects such as schools, potable water, electricity, and farm credits, strengthened community institutions. Petitioning for and maintaining these projects legally required the collective action of peasant committees. Consequences of these movements coming from the local level and from the national state were some weakening of landlordism as a basis of power (though these families simply shifted their emphasis to their commercial side); increasing national involvement in local affairs, supplanting provincial authority; and a weakening of district-level institutions (Martínez Vásquez 1990; Murphy and Stepick 1991; Arellanes Meixueiro 1999).

*1970 – Present.* Since about 1970 the cycle of waxing and waning community strength has reversed again. External forces are extracting community resources, and community members devote less energy to community-level institutions. The trends are not limited to Oaxaca (Young 1978; de la Peña 1981: 240–246; Collier 1987). Another round of federally sponsored reform privatizing communal land is underway – its effects are still uncertain (Stephen 2002). Exploitation by export crop monoculture (coffee, timber, mineral, and water rights) often pits single municipalities against the full power of the national state (Hernández Díaz 1987; Greenberg 1989; Reina 1994). Labor emigration (Gregory 1990; Corbett *et al.* 1992), historically significant in Oaxaca, has escalated in this period, accelerating a decline in small-scale agriculture. The much more mobile labor force further de-peasantizes and empties the countryside. Loss of autonomy is also evident in partisan political battles for control of the larger municipalities (Díaz Montes 1992). In the Valley of Oaxaca, the loss of community autonomy is very evident in places of urbanization, which is not trivial, since the physical sprawl of Oaxaca City now covers 22

previously independent municipalities.

## THE MYTH OF THE AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY

To recapitulate, for the Oaxaca case at hand, Pre-Urban *loca*, face-to-face groups were too small to be viable as autonomous units. Local settlement was dispersed. Social functions were dispersed. Clusters of small hamlets and villages often did not have the full array of economic and civic-ceremonial functions. Such services were available, but at a higher, head-town level, beyond the face-to-face group. In other words, the full set of institutions required for existence did not reside in the Neolithic village, but in a formation above the level of the village.

As the ancient state grew, services were often lifted from the local level and concentrated in mid-level central places identifiable as the administrative-ceremonial arms of the state. As it was to be in the nineteenth century, land rights and the landlord class were headquartered at district capitals during the Early Urban and Classic periods.

In the Postclassic, open networks rather than closed corporate groups were the rule, on every scale from the local to the *señorío* (city-state), and across the macroregion. Power was spread among many noble palaces, shrines, and markets, which were institutions of regional not just local function. Local groups and households were in a position to counter-balance the power of caciques. That 'bottom-up' force was exercised by commoners, organized as communities, against the caciques and their hereditary estates during the Colonial period too.

The nucleated, local civic-ceremonial, land-holding community, which is often taken as the model for the commune, is a product of Colonial congregación, Church and state administrative needs, and a continuing struggle over community versus outsider access to land. In the nineteenth century, the district scale has been the seat of landlord and provincial merchant power. As local communities became more powerful and fought off the landlord class, the district capital declined. The national state too had its reasons to restrict the power of the provincial landlords and merchants, and to deal directly with the local community.

For most of the time since the Neolithic in Oaxaca, local groups were relatively open. As described above, people generally lived in

dispersed, small groups. They participated in civic-ceremonial and economic institutions shared broadly with other local groups over a hundred or more square kilometers. This was the usual pattern. The exceptions are instructive. A very prominent exception to the open local group is the fortified hilltown, which developed in the Early Urban period as a desperate military measure and lived on in the Classic as a means of organizing labor. The hilltown was a much more communal organization than the typical open, dispersed local group. Another significant exception seems to be the closed corporate community of the last two or three centuries (*i.e.*, what is easily taken as the model of the Mesoamerican village is in fact an exception). This community had root stock as subordinate institution of the Postclassic señorío, onto which was grafted the Spanish feudal model of the town; its local utility was as a collective defense of land and labor against outside depredations. These two exceptions, the hilltown and the closed corporate community, evolved to confront extreme threats to life, land, and livelihood. It would not be wise to conclude that such threats did not exist over most of the 3500-year period of social evolution under examination, but these two periods were outstanding episodes.

An interesting corollary has to do with specialized craft production. In Middle American ethnology the phenomenon of 'village specialization' is well known. Bronislaw Malinowski's last project before his death in 1942 was a study of the peasant market system and village specialization in the Valley of Oaxaca (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1957). With village specialization, crafts such as the making of tortillas, charcoal, distilled drink, baskets, pottery, textiles, etc., tended to concentrate in certain villages. Production took place within the household, but a large portion of a village's inhabitants took on the same craft (in addition to being peasant farmers). Villages became known for their particular craft goods, which were offered for sale by producer-retailers, or wholesale buyers, in the peasant marketing system (Beals 1975; Cook and Diskin 1976).

Archaeologists who have studied the pre-Spanish economy have found plenty of evidence for specialized craft production as well as circumstantial evidence for market exchange. There is archaeological evidence for the specialized manufacture of pottery vessels, figurines, urns, grinding stones, chipped stone tools, textiles, lime, shell jewelry, salt, cactus products, etc. All of this appears to be organized at the household scale, not in large work-

shops. But in Pre-Spanish times individual crafts did not concentrate in particular villages. Instead, craft specialists were found widely scattered, and there was a strong tendency for specialist households to have not one, but several lines of craft items, for example, shell, pottery, and chipped stone in one household (Kowalewski *et al.* 1989; Feinman *et al.* 2001). The pattern of craft specialization thus matches the one I have been describing for other local services: definitely significant, but dispersed instead of concentrated in the corporate community.

There are several reasons why village specialization became a predominant pattern when it did in the last few centuries. Availability of raw materials and proximity to markets are often necessary conditions. But in the case of Oaxacan village specialization, the pattern cannot be separated from the modern political economy of capitalism (Cook and Binford 1991). A major factor is the action of intermediary capitalists – buyers-up and putters-out – who often established and controlled local production and marketing. In turn, household craft producers have organized cooperatives to improve their marketing position. Thus the institution of village specialization is not endemic to Middle America throughout its history; it too was a product of the same political-economic forces that brought about the corporate community, and it assumed a corporate stance.

To conclude, the community was never self-defining, primordial, pristine, or autonomous in Oaxaca. It probably was never any of those things anywhere else, either. The community is a derived, not a primordial formation. Like social formations at lower and higher scales (households, families, clans, states), local groupings form and take on functions in relation to each other and to the context of institutions at higher and lower levels. The accommodation of institutions to one another on the same level and at different levels, and the ebb and flow of power among them, is part of the engine of history. Society evolves not from some fundamental part or particle, but as a complex whole. No one level is primary or fundamental, not a community at the base nor the polity or culture at a higher level. Although this conclusion may make present many more challenges than some students are willing to accept, it is nonetheless true that cultural evolution is a most difficult scientific problem.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the financial support given the Oaxaca settlement research by the National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the National Geographic Society, and the University of Georgia. Authority was granted by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología and its Centro INAH Oaxaca. I needed guidance in historical research, for which I thank Manuel Esparza and many other colleagues and institutions in Oaxaca who gave me their time. I am indebted to the Museum of Northern Arizona for allowing me to be a Scholar in Residence while carrying out this research.

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