

lineage, class, and power in the Aztec state

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The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan offer a dramatic case study in the emergence of state-level political organization. This paper focuses on the political processes of centralizing power in the Aztec state and suggests that the development of rigid class stratification in Tenochtitlan was a result of the economic, legal, and symbolic strategems employed in the struggle for power between the traditional lineage leaders of the prestate polity and a newly created central dynasty.¹

In thus focusing on the *political* processes of state building, I hope to balance the recent overemphasis in many Aztec studies on ecological approaches that slight the human side of social evolution. In this tradition, material needs are defined for which cultural solutions must be found. It is assumed that there is a “most effective solution to an ecological problem” and that “a strong selective force analogous to biological natural selection” will eventually lead to the dominance of the appropriate mode of political organization (Sanders and Price 1968:181).

While Sanders, a leading exponent of this approach, has stressed elsewhere (1974:131) that this is a process of interaction between culture and biophysical environment, and that “there is nothing absolute about this interactive relationship and various responses of a culture to an environment are possible,” in practice many ecological studies have tended to ignore this fundamental principle. The data and analyses on the environmental side of the equation are often excellent, but the human side seems curiously flat, inhabited by passive reactors devoid of motivation beyond an obsessive urge to propagate to the point of Malthusian disaster.

A recent example of this tendency is Harner’s (1977) “cannibal empire” paper in which he manages to pile the sins of hard-core ecological determinism on top of another great weakness of Aztec studies—an unfortunate fascination with human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism. Harner claims that the Aztec sacrificial cult was an elaborate legitimation for large-scale cannibalism, necessitated by animal protein deficiencies resulting from heavy overpopulation of the Aztec center and the decimation of local game. By the time he reaches his concluding section, Harner manages to include an extraordinary range of Aztec political and religious institutions among the consequences of chronic protein shortages. He does not attempt to explain how, historically, the people of Tenochtitlan discovered and institutionalized such an unusual “most effective solution to an ecological problem.”

However, the frequent excesses of the ecological approach may in part be excused as a

A processual analysis of state formation in the Aztec city Tenochtitlan shows that rigid class stratification developed as a strategy for coopting the traditional leaders of the lineage segments of the prestate polity and for integrating these leaders into a centralized state power system. The dynasty that ruled this increasingly centralized structure used control over tribute revenues from the city’s empire to separate the traditional leaders from their old constituencies, and, with a variety of legal and symbolic measures, to foster their self-identification as an elite ruling class.

reaction to an older, equally incomplete tradition that attempts to explain Aztec society on purely ideological grounds. A recent book by Brundage (1975) illustrates this second tendency. Whereas Harner attributes too fine a deterministic power to ecological context, Brundage writes as if the environment imposed no limitations at all on the world-creating capacities of ideology. He claims that religious devotion to warfare was so powerful among the Aztecs that it regularly overrode their political and economic interests. Their empire, he says, was of little real importance to them; it was virtually an accidental by-product of their lust for battle.

Thus, Harner's image is of a society that will do almost anything for food, and Brundage's is of a society that does not seem to care much about it. If either of these extreme views were correct, the Aztecs would indeed be a bizarre and unique case in human history. I believe that a political-processual approach can restore the Aztecs to the mainstream of studies in state formation—by examining how motivated political actors manipulated the economic resources that served simultaneously as the limitations on, goals of, and tools for their power stratagems. Unicausal ecological or ideological explanations regularly produce elegant theory of *why* a social system developed but leave us wondering exactly *how* it came to pass. Real social processes are always rather untidy and must be viewed at very great distance to appear elegant at all. Thus, in attempting to deal with the process of class differentiation and emergence of state organization, this paper does not offer as neatly delineated a view of Aztec society as those proposed by Harner or Brundage. I treat political economy as a social process of interaction between the human and the material in which the humans involved have complex individual motivations and complex relationships with one another. Within the limitations imposed by their material environment, these interpersonal relations are seen as the primary driving forces of social history. I do not disagree with the ecologists concerning the importance of environmental constraints in analyzing social evolution. Our difference is that where they are primarily concerned with elucidating the nature of those environmental constraints, my concern is more with analysis of how humans deal with those constraints and manipulate them in the service of goals that are only partially (or not at all) economic.

In my view, Aztec political history hinged around the power struggle between the traditional leaders of the local subunits of the society and a central authority originally established primarily for organizing protection against foreign enemies. This initially weak central dynasty was eventually able to use monopolization of the new wealth tapped by the entry of the Aztecs into imperial conquest to begin the process of centralization of internal power within the state. As a stratagem for centralizing power, the dynasty adopted measures encouraging the traditional local leaders to develop a new self-identity as members of a ruling elite. This new identity provided them with both the symbolic and material means to distinguish themselves from the masses. The distinctiveness of this emerging class was reinforced through a number of legal and structural innovations, which served the ambitions of the central dynasty by isolating the traditional leaders from their local constituencies and by increasing their stake in the dynasty's power. Thus, class stratification emerged as the result of the political stratagems employed in the drive toward centralized power.

foundation of the Tenochca dynasty

At the time of their arrival in the Valley of Mexico in the thirteenth century, the Aztecs were poor and—in the eyes of the powerful cities that dominated virtually all of the prime land—marginally civilized. Their presence was an annoyance to the established powers, and they lived in perpetual fear of destruction. They survived several attacks (though suf-

fering greatly reduced numbers) and about the year 1345 were finally able to secure the isolated and swampy islands that eventually became the great imperial city of Tenochtitlan.

Evidence on Aztec political organization at the time of the founding of Tenochtitlan is scanty. The primary political units appear to have been the *calpulli*, lineage groups in which the Aztecs had been organized in their ancestral homeland and during their long migration to the Valley of Mexico. They are often described as clans because they claimed at least a fictive kinship relationship linking their members, functioned as a corporate land-holding group, and employed, on some level, a redistributive economy operated through the house of the *calpulli* leader. Even as late as the Conquest each *calpulli* occupied a separate barrio of Tenochtitlan and retained a considerable degree of administrative autonomy. When the city was first founded, this autonomy was probably even more strongly marked (Carrasco 1971:363–368; Monzón 1949).

A weak paramount leader existed at this time—probably the chief priest of the patron god—but the *calpulli* leaders apparently were the real foci of power. Their offices were hereditary, and they held private lands for their personal support, outside the corporate *calpulli* land structure. Besides their economic role in assigning *calpulli* land and operating a redistributive center, each provided judicial services for the members of his own *calpulli* (Rounds n.d.). As lineage elders their powers were no doubt circumscribed by those of the other powerful members of their groups, and some lingering ethos of tribal egalitarianism. Although they were limited in their authority, the *calpulli* leaders do seem to have succeeded in consolidating some measure of economic advantage over their fellows.

Still, there is no evidence that the *calpulli* leaders of early Tenochtitlan constituted a self-conscious ruling class. The histories of the Aztec migration record constant bickering among the *calpulli*, and one account of the foundation of Tenochtitlan (Codex Ramírez 1944:39–40) gives a clear impression of the competitiveness and conflict among the *calpulli* leaders. It appears that, although they met as a group to govern the city as a whole, the *calpulli* leaders felt no sense of solidarity as a noble class. Each was guarding his personal power by protecting the interests of his own *calpulli* against those of the others.

This centrifugal tendency of *calpulli* competitiveness was, however, balanced by the common stake in self-defense against Tenochtitlan's hostile neighbors. These powerful cities all exemplified a more strongly centralized mode of political power, to which the Tenochca were exposed during periodic military alliances. This experience apparently convinced the Aztecs of the military superiority of more centralized rule, for in 1372 they formally adopted a *tlatoani* (plural *tlatoque*, literally "speaker") as the central governor of the city. Despite the automatic assumption by some ecologists that agricultural hydraulic works were the reason for this increased centralization of authority, the military hypothesis seems more tenable. During this period the Aztecs were short of land and of pure water suitable for irrigation, and so practiced very little agriculture. They subsisted primarily on fish and waterfowl, and vegetables obtained in trade for surpluses of these resources (Palerm 1966: 69–70). Elaboration of the famous *chinampa* system of intensive agriculture was still several decades away and occurred mainly after the war that launched the Aztecs' career of imperial conquest. Even in later years their *chinampa* system was never sufficient to meet the demands of the city's growing population (Calnek 1972). On the other hand, the military threat was very real at this time, and it was the military impact of the establishment of this office that eventually led the Tenochca to power.

Significantly, the new *tlatoani*, Acamapichtli of Culhuacan, was a foreigner, not one of the *calpulli* leaders. There is no evidence that he was forced on Tenochtitlan. Rather, the *calpulli* leaders seem to have voluntarily invited him to form the dynasty that endured until the Spanish Conquest. Acamapichtli carried the most distinguished bloodline of the region and probably brought with him some important alliances, as many writers have pointed out. But it is likely also that this resort to a foreign noble reflected the long-standing com-

petitiveness of the *calpulli* and their leaders, who apparently found their own powers too closely balanced—and jealously guarded—to allow elevation of one of their own number to a superior status. Inviting in an outsider solved this immediate problem, although it is unlikely that Acamapichtli could have quickly ended the political bickering among the *calpulli*.

Writers on Aztec history have often made the curious assumption that with the seating of Acamapichtli the *calpulli* leaders handed over virtually all of their former powers to the new dynasty. I would be surprised if this were the case. As Walter Goldschmidt has pointed out (personal communication), few peoples have ever deliberately intended to subject themselves to authoritarian rule. Rather, they surrendered certain limited powers for specific purposes, which then were cultivated by their holders until they grew unrecognizably in scope and strength. In the present case, the external military threat was the probable reason why the *calpulli* leaders surrendered any of their powers at all, and meeting that military threat through coordinated action under a *tlatoani* would have required the old leaders to relinquish little of their control of internal policy. In point of fact, the few accounts of the reigns of the early *tlatoque* deal primarily with foreign relations, and it seems certain that Acamapichtli and his immediate successors were very weak in domestic politics.

Besides the fact that the fledgling dynasty had little leverage with which to counter the powerful *calpulli* leaders, the surrounding early states seem to have offered little in the way of alternative political systems. Although they were more strongly centralized than Tenochtitlan, they were hardly exemplars of fully developed, bureaucratic states. Even Azcapotzalco, often considered the main source of the later Tenochca political system (for example, see Carrasco 1971:372), was held together largely by a charismatic ruler whose control began to fragment as he declined into senility. These were, in Yehudi Cohen's (1969) term, "inchoate states," still in the process of supplanting the older local centers of power. No state in the Valley had yet approached thorough centralization of power. Thus, besides being dependent on the *calpulli* leaders for support of his own position, Acamapichtli was also dependent on them as the only available mechanism of social control and authority over the masses of the Aztec people.

This is, of course, a common pattern. Service (1975:301-302) has noted that in archaic states social control of the masses typically continued to be exercised through the traditional local mechanisms, with the dictates of the central ruler working their way down through the long-established local chiefs. Ronald Cohen (1977:29) says that "the state when it emerges uses the ingredients at hand, and moulds them to support its newer, more complex authority structures."

Essentially the same point is made by Webster (1976:820), who adds that although this was the most efficient way of first establishing central rule, "it was a potentially unstable strategy because local leaders possessed their own syndromes of authority and were potential competitors." This defines the Aztec case neatly, for the *tlatoani* was both dependent on the *calpulli* leaders as executors of his commands and limited by them as independent power centers. As argued above, it is unlikely that the *calpulli* leaders would voluntarily surrender any more of their established authority than was absolutely necessary to gain greater military security. On the other hand, the *tlatoani* would necessarily be insecure in his own position as long as the local leaders remained so independent, and so he would look for ways to undermine this decentralized power structure and to develop less threatening mechanisms for administration of his realm.

This situation has been widely recognized in modern analyses of Aztec political life, but there is a pervasive misunderstanding in the literature about the strategy for centralizing power adopted by Acamapichtli's dynasty. Adams (1966:113) speaks for this viewpoint when he states that the *tlatoque* developed a new ruling class of soldiers superimposed over the traditional *calpulli* "nobility." Although few would go as far as Brundage (1975) in

asserting the domination of this warrior class over even the *tlatoque*, the common theme is clearly that a new class, consisting either of the many offspring of Acamapichtli, or of others, promoted to ruling status primarily on the basis of military achievement, became a new, bureaucratized center of power at the expense of the traditional *calpulli* authorities.

I will argue below that the “warriors” who constituted the bulk of the newly emerging ruling class were in fact the traditional *calpulli* leaders, who were incorporated by the dynasty into the central government but who retained authority over their old *calpulli*, albeit with numerous restrictions. The dynasty did not create a new nobility above the traditional leaders but rather subverted them into being instruments of central rule instead of competing foci of power. To use the terms suggested by Richard N. Adams (1975), the strategy of the dynasty was not to destroy the power of the *calpulli* leaders but to change its perceived character from power allocated from below by their lineage followers to power delegated from above by the *tlatoani*. Thus, the leaders’ control of their *calpulli* would be coopted into the service of central rule. Creation of the identity of the leaders—along with the core of the dynasty—as an elite social class proved an appropriate strategem, for it simultaneously turned the self-interest of the *calpulli* leaders in favor of loyalty to the dynasty and helped to segregate them from their lineage mates in a manner calculated to reduce the intensity of old ties.

Had this process not been cut short by the Conquest, the *calpulli* leaders might have eventually been converted into a quiescent class of bureaucrats. As it was, a true, self-conscious ruling class had been created by the arrival of Cortes, although the descendants of the old leaders still retained significant ties with their *calpulli* and continued to pass their offices on by heredity to their sons or brothers (Rounds n.d.). Most social control was still exercised through the old *calpulli* structure, but centralization of power had taken a long step forward.

Little of this happened during the reigns of the first three *tlatoque*, for they lacked any leverage to break the allegiance of the leaders to their individual *calpulli*. Consolidation of the dynasty’s power did not really get underway until a bold military stroke suddenly placed vast new economic power in the hands of Itzcoatl, the fourth *tlatoani*. These new revenues proved the key to creation of the new class and thus to the centralization of control.

external empire and internal control

The turning point of the Aztec political career came around 1430, when Tenochtitlan led a rebellion against the then-dominant imperial center of Azcapotzalco. This action launched the Aztecs’ own empire. Azcapotzalco had dominated most of the Valley for several decades, and the Aztecs had long played the role of loyal subordinates. But when the long-lived ruler of Azcapotzalco finally died, the Aztecs and their allies were able to exploit internal power struggles for control of the old empire to destroy its dominance completely. Rather than allowing total dissolution of the empire, however, the allies divided up the patrimony of their victim. The prize provided enormous riches, and the lion’s share obtained by Tenochtitlan brought a flood of wealth into the city that inevitably had tremendous impact on the internal social order.

The nature of that impact was determined by a simple political fact: all the new riches fell initially to the *tlatoani*, rather than to individuals, and the *tlatoani* was able (within certain limits) to distribute the new lands and tribute according to his own ends. The tool the dynasty had previously lacked for building its central power was now at hand.

An undoubtedly apocryphal (but still instructive) story in an early chronicle (Durán 1951:I, 75) demonstrates how this influx of new wealth contributed to the separation of defined political and economic classes in Aztec society. When it became apparent that war

with Azcapotzalco was inevitable, the common people of Tenochtitlan were smitten with panic and asked to leave the city. The *tlatoni*, Itzcoatl, sought to console them, saying “don’t fear, my children, we will free you and nothing bad will befall you.” But the people were still afraid and asked what would become of them if the city failed in this war. The ruler replied:

If we fail in our intent we will place ourselves in your hands, so that our flesh becomes your food, and thus you will revenge yourselves on us and eat us on broken and dirty plates, so that we and our flesh are totally degraded.

The people accepted this offer, and responded in kind:

You yourselves have given your sentence; and so we obligate ourselves, that if you succeed, we will serve you and pay you tribute and farm your land and build your houses and serve you as our true lords; and we will give you our daughters and sisters and nieces to serve you; and when you go to war we will carry your baggage and arms upon our shoulders, and will serve you on all the roads you march; and finally, we will sell and subject our persons and goods into your service forever (Durán 1951:I, 75).

Although this unlikely social compact may be dismissed as myth, the story is doubtless an accurate reflection of the fundamental changes in the social structure that began with this war. The control exercised by the throne—and the obligations of the people to the *tlatoni*—had obviously been restricted; but following the war the dynasty used the new empire to begin consolidation of its power. With their new riches the *tlatoque* at last had a lever capable of seducing the *calpulli* leaders into a closer association with the central dynasty. At the same time they initiated measures that helped to separate those leaders from their personal constituencies. The combination of these two strategems produced the hardening class lines of late Aztec society.

Itzcoatl began distribution of the spoils, consisting mainly of the land and associated vassals of the fallen empire, shortly after the end of the war (Durán 1951:I,78–79). The bulk went to Itzcoatl himself and to two brothers’ sons who were his closest advisors and stood in line of succession to his office. Generous distributions were also made to the nobles who had fought in the rebellion, but only a pittance was granted to the patrimony of each *calpulli*.

As noted above, Robert McC. Adams argues that the *tlatoque* superimposed a new military ruling class over the *calpulli* leaders. He says (1966:113) that the new wealth distributed by Itzcoatl “served to strengthen the hand of the military orders in their struggle for ascendancy over the traditional *calpulli* leadership and to provide an economic basis for the formation of a noble class.” Who were the members of these military orders? Durán (1951:I,97–98) identifies the warriors receiving land and honors in this distribution as brothers, cousins, and nephews of Itzcoatl, meaning that they were all descendants of Acamapichtli. Many writers have thus assumed that the offspring of Acamapichtli constituted the noble class, as distinct from the *calpulli* leaders. However, my reading of the primary sources suggests that these two categories proposed by modern investigators actually consisted of the same people.

According to one sixteenth-century account (*Relación de la Genealogía* 1891:275), shortly after becoming the first *tlatoni*, Acamapichtli married twenty Aztec women who “were nobles, daughters of the lords of the territory. . . who were thus of lineage, whose offspring were lords and from them descended almost all of the lords there were in the territory.” These are the offspring assumed by Adams and others to have been the beginning of the new noble class that was to replace the *calpulli* leaders. This interpretation requires us, however, to believe that the *calpulli* leaders knowingly participated in the propagation of a noble class that was to usurp their own rights and privileges. It is more consistent with both the specific sources for this case and our general knowledge of political behavior to interpret this to mean that the marriages were used by the traditional *calpulli* leaders to

strengthen their own lineages. In this period the “lords of the territory” could only have been the *calpulli* leaders, and so the twenty women were their daughters. Although patrilineality was the dominant principle in Aztec kin reckoning, the system was really ambilateral. Succession through the female line was commonly stressed wherever it was of advantage. Zorita (1891:79–80) states that it was a common rule in the Valley of Mexico that when a ruler died without leaving a competent son, the son of one of his daughters might succeed. Within the dynastic politics of Tenochtitlan, marriages were often used to keep isolated branches of the lineage involved in the succession through the female line (Carrasco 1971:370). Thus, Caso (1963:867) and Monzón (1949:72–77) are surely correct when they state that the sons of Acamapichtli inherited the *calpulli* leadership of their mothers’ fathers.

As *calpulli* leaders, these sons of Acamapichtli would have been ex officio war leaders, for Durán (1951:1,169) explains that the military fought in *calpulli* units. It is perhaps not accidental that the number of nobles especially honored by Itzcoatl after the destruction of Azcapotzalco was twenty, the same as the number of wives given Acamapichtli by the *calpulli* leaders. They were, I would argue, the heirs to the *calpulli* offices of the sons of Acamapichtli, and thus the “brothers, cousins and nephews” of Itzcoatl. There was no battle for ascendancy between the military orders and the *calpulli* leaders, for the *calpulli* leaders were the ranking officers of the military (compare Rounds n.d. for an elaboration of this point).

The throne and the traditional *calpulli* offices were thereby linked through close kin ties. However, our general knowledge of dynastic politics should warn us not to assume that the *calpulli* offices were subverted to complete submission to the throne simply by filling them with Acamapichtli’s sons. The lesson of human history is, rather, that filial affection is subordinated to ambition for power. The young dynasty as yet had little to offer of either power or wealth, whereas kin ties through their mothers gave Acamapichtli’s sons their *calpulli* offices, in which the real power (and sources of revenue) still rested in early Tenochtitlan. Acamapichtli’s marriages connected the dynasty and the traditional powers but probably did little to change the way that power was distributed between central and local foci. It was not until Itzcoatl’s successful revolt against Azcapotzalco, sixty years after the seating of Acamapichtli, that power began to shift decisively in favor of centralized rule.

Many writers have recognized that the new wealth gained by Itzcoatl provided the economic basis for the differentiation of the noble class. However, most have left the point without historical elaboration, as if class society simply “emerged” when the necessary permissive conditions were met. Nothing ever simply “emerges” in human society; some person or group must take action to make it happen. Of course the ultimate consequences of their actions may not be understood by the actors themselves, but they will understand their immediate self-interest in the matter, and that self-interest will provide a discoverable motivation for their actions. In the present case, I have shown how the uneasy distribution of power between central and local foci left the early *tlatoque* in a position of political vulnerability that could only be mitigated by destroying—or coopting—the strong lineage ties of their competitors, the *calpulli* leaders. The new wealth of empire gave the *tlatoque* new leverage, but they were still limited in the ways that leverage could possibly be used. Destruction of the *calpulli* leaders was not a viable alternative for two reasons. First, the Aztec military was organized in *calpulli* units and thus was almost certainly under the direct control of the local leaders. The *tlatoani* had no independent military force to turn against the *calpulli* heads.² Second, the *tlatoani* had no alternative mechanism for social control over the masses if he destroyed the *calpulli* organization. Even at the time of the Conquest, Tenochtitlan was not nearly so bureaucratized as many writers have imagined,

and during the reigns of the early *tlatoque* there was virtually no bureaucracy at all. Therefore, Itzcoatl and his successors used their imperial revenues to coopt the leaders of the *calpulli* organization and to absorb their traditional avenues of social control into a centralized administration. The actions taken by these *tlatoque* to obtain the loyalty of the *calpulli* leaders suggest that the creation of a self-conscious elite class was a deliberate strategem in their campaign for power.

During the first decades after the destruction of Azcapotzalco, the new class was established by a series of economic, symbolic, and legal innovations. In association with the very first distributions of land, Itzcoatl decreed a series of new titles, with special insignia, for the most honored of the nobility (Durán 1951:1,97-98). His successor Motecuhzoma I expanded this system and backed it up by promulgating a number of rigid sumptuary laws. The first four defined insignia unique to the *tlatoani* and set the death penalty for any nobleman or commoner who entered the central palace wearing footgear. Cotton clothing was reserved for the nobility, and commoners were restricted to maguey-fiber mantles that must not fall below the knee. The decorations authorized on the cotton mantles worn by the various ranks of nobles were to be determined by the *tlatoani*, and the forms of jewelry and other insignia that might be affected by each were specified. Only the highest ranking were allowed to build two-stored or gabled houses. Finally, Motecuhzoma decreed that special rooms in his palace would be set aside as the salons of each rank of the nobility, and members of each rank were strictly limited to their appropriate gathering place. Death was the penalty for any violation of these laws (Durán 1951:1, 214-217).

An elaborate hierarchy of military rank and insignia was also developed during this period. Noblemen rose through the ranks partly on the basis of the number of captives they had taken in battle and were rewarded with ever more flamboyant uniforms to advertise their prowess (Sahagún 1950-1969:IX,75-77; Codex Mendoza 1938: folios 64 and 65 recto).

David Webster (1976:819) has pointed out that rulers in early states often fan the desire of their subordinates for royal favors by setting "a standard for all other ambitious men" with their personal conspicuous consumption, precisely because they lack the power to enforce personal loyalty. The Aztec rulers consumed in spectacular fashion and made certain that their subordinates had ample opportunity to observe and be inspired. Each day the bulk of the nobility was required to attend the palace and to conduct business in the palace salons established by Motecuhzoma I (Sahagún 1950-1969:IV,41-45; Durán 1951:II,162; Las Casas 1967:378). Lunch was an extraordinary ritual in which a vast variety of foods was first sampled by the *tlatoani* and then served to the assembled mass of nobles (Díaz 1956:209-211; Sahagún 1950-1969:IX,37-40). Clothing, jewelry, and other exotic goods were distributed to the nobles at regular religious festivals and at celebrations preceding and following military campaigns (Carrasco 1971:362-363; Zorita 1891:162). Zorita (1891:156) says that the *tlatoani* supported many lords and officers in his palace, "according to the quality [that is, rank] of each one."

Finally, from his treasury the *tlatoani* funded the spectacular religious edifices and rituals that demonstrated so vividly the favor his regime had found in the eyes of the gods. Through all of these measures a clearly defined noble class was being created, visibly identifiable as those who fed at the *tlatoani's* table, wore distinctive dress, and figured prominently in public ceremonies. Most fundamentally, of course, the nobility were those who were direct recipients of tribute. The old *calpulli* leaders were included with their sons and daughters, but their lineage followers were not. This heady environment must have played powerfully on their egos, as is expressed in the description of the royal palace given after the Conquest by one of these Aztec noblemen:

It is a fearful place, a place of fear, of glory. There is glory, there are glories, things made glorious. There is bragging, there is boasting; there are haughtiness, presumption, pride, arrogance. There is self-praise, there is a state of gaudiness. There is much gaudiness, there is

much arrogance—a state of arrogance. It is a place where one is intoxicated, flattered, perverted (Sahagún 1950–1969:XII,270).

The dynasty had thus changed the major source of income of the *calpulli* leaders from their *calpulli* and limited private estates to imperial tribute received either directly from conquered lands granted by the *tlatoani* or through constant “gifts” from the *tlatoani*’s own treasury. I have already noted that in their distributions of land the *tlatoque* were careful not to enrich the *calpulli* themselves, so that competing for the ruler’s favor was the only way for an ambitious nobleman to keep pace with the rising standards of wealth and ostentation that marked the emerging ruling class. Little more could be extracted from the lineage than had previously been possible, and too strident an insistence on the interests of his *calpulli* was doubtless a sure way for a nobleman to lose ground in the palace hierarchy.

Still, it must not be supposed that the *calpulli* leaders rushed to abandon their traditional roles and seats of authority. Their personal strategies must have focused on attempting to share the benefits of nobility, of currying the favor of the *tlatoani*, while continuing to maintain their local constituencies. As in other political systems, the weight of a nobleman’s private base of power doubtless figured heavily in his success in ascending to the higher ranks. Also, aside from such Machiavellian considerations, traditional loyalties must still be taken into account. The multiplex ties of the leader to his *calpulli* surely made demands not lightly dismissed. Sumptuary and ritual symbols may be created overnight, but the real separation of the interests of a traditional lineage into distinctive class orientations takes time, and, especially, the passing of generations. Even by the time of the Conquest the *calpulli* remained important administrative components of the city, in part because of the slowness of the development of bureaucratic alternatives, but also because men of influence continued to assert their interests.

controls on the powers of the nobility

The *tlatoque* attempted to limit the ability of the nobles to use administrative responsibilities as a source of personal power. They did so by constant stress on the principle that the only power held by the nobility was that delegated from the throne (a point repeated endlessly in the early chronicles, one source of the exaggerated impression of thorough bureaucratization of the state), and also by more mundane measures.

First among these was the requirement that the nobles conduct all official business in their salons at the central palace. This served several purposes: it helped reinforce the doctrine that the nobles were acting as the agents of the *tlatoani*; it separated the nobles physically from their *calpulli* and made them seem more remote and aloof from their old constituents; and it placed the nobles under the closer scrutiny of the *tlatoani* and the inner circle of his dynasty.

Although most of the significant offices of the nobility continued to be filled by inheritance, the *tlatoani* held the right of confirming the successor. How much influence he actually was able to exercise in the original selection among the eligible relatives of the deceased official is unknown, but the doctrine was that the *tlatoani* controlled advancement in the hierarchy. Presumably he could at least block from office a noble who had particularly displeased him, although a given case might involve a dangerous testing of power between the throne and powerful lineages. In any case, the threat of a royal refusal of confirmation was another mechanism for disciplining his subordinates. Furthermore, through the sumptuary laws described earlier, his partial control of advancement in the hierarchy gave the *tlatoani* another means of control over the consumption of luxury goods.

In another use of this confirmation power, the *tlatoani* tied the bulk of the new land grants to offices, rather than to persons. The old patrimonial estates of the leaders ap-

parently were inherited by lineal heirs, but the *tlatoque* specified that the new lands would pass to the new incumbent of the office instead. In practice, these two forms of inheritance almost always coincided because only gross incompetence was likely to keep a man's principal heir from succeeding to his office (Carrasco 1971:359). But the *tlatoani's* ability to break the normal line of succession to the office meant that the main source of the nobility's new income was vulnerable to the displeasure of the throne.

Finally, the land grants to the nobles were made in small, scattered parcels. This practice ensured that no individual could develop a significant territorial hegemony that might be converted into a base of independent political power. Each tributary had obligations to a bewildering maze of recipients, which prevented clear political allegiances from forming (Gibson 1971:390).

Further restrictions applied to the nobles in their role as judges of their *calpulli* (compare Rounds n.d. on this judicial role). Zorita (1891:109) establishes that the *calpulli* leaders performed this function only in the appropriate rooms at the central palace, and Davies (1974:179) relates a story that in Tetzcoco a judge was executed for deciding a case in his own home. It is likely that the same penalty applied in Tenochtitlan. Furthermore, cases involving the nobles were to be referred to a higher level, under the direct control of the *tlatoani's* inner council (Sahagún 1950–1969:IX,55; Las Casas 1967:II,384; Zorita 1891:111,113; Motolinia 1971:353–355).

This Aztec legal system has received lavish praise in accounts from the sixteenth-century chronicles (for example, Sahagún 1950–1969:IX,42) to the modern day (for example, Peterson 1959:118). It is praised for the high standards of rectitude demanded of the nobles in their judicial capacity and the harsh punishment applied to those who unfairly favored a fellow noble over a commoner in a decision. Some advanced sense of justice or refined concept of equality before the law is read into this and the fact that, at least for some specific crimes, noblemen were subjected to harsher penalties than were commoners (Pomar 1891:31; Alcobiz 1891:308). Whatever the ideological justification given in the post-Conquest chronicles, it needs to be considered how such rules advanced the cause of centralizing state power under the *tlatoani*. The judicial control traditionally exercised by the *calpulli* leaders over their lineages was undoubtedly a significant source of their personal authority. As in other such systems, the judicial decision would have been a major tool in the leaders' patronage powers. By stripping the *calpulli* leader/nobleman of his flexibility in judicial matters, the *tlatoque* robbed him of a chief lever for building his personal factional support. The higher standards of rectitude demanded of nobles reflect not only an ideological concern with confirming the greater purity of the emerging class, but also Elman Service's point that control of the nobility is a greater problem—and a higher priority—for the ruler of an emerging state than is control of the commoners, which is already well-established under the traditional modes of authority (Service 1975:301–302). Yehudi Cohen (1969) has demonstrated that laws governing sexual behavior become most rigid under the special problems of social control evoked by the transition toward centralized state rule, and—at least in the Aztec case—it appears that during this transitional period some procedural laws may have followed a similar pattern for the same reasons.

administration of the empire

A number of writers have commented on the strikingly loose form of imperial administration adopted by the dynasty. Most conquered territories were never placed under direct Aztec administrative control; instead, local rulers were left in authority, with an agreement for payment of tribute in staples and luxury goods to be made periodically (Gibson 1971;

Zorita 1891:164). Some analysts have found this limited jurisdiction odd, and Brundage (1975:67) has gone so far as to claim that the empire was of little real importance to the Aztecs. But this hardly seems tenable in light of the empire's economic impact, both in terms of the subsistence base of the general population and the effects of luxury goods on the internal political arena. Since the agricultural base of Tenochtitlan never approached self-sufficiency, the tribute system was clearly essential to the city's economic viability.

Exactly how tribute goods were distributed among the city's population is as yet poorly understood. Recent studies by Kurtz (1974) and Berdan (1977a, 1977b) have shown that the bulk of tribute remained in the hands of the nobility, although Kurtz (1974:694) guesses that one-quarter to one-half of the staple goods may have filtered down to the commoners in the *calpulli*. Given the large proportion of the commoner population that was engaged in nonagricultural occupations (Calnek 1972:114), certainly much of the food supply was ultimately dependent on the tribute system, whether the food was received by the commoners directly in return for services rendered or acquired in the marketplace through barter for other goods thus earned. Whatever the exact mechanisms of distribution, through its monopolization of the bulk of the imperial tribute and its regulation and taxation of the marketplace, the dynasty was able to exercise considerable control over Tenochtitlan's economic system.

Since the tribute system was so essential to the dynasty's centralization of power, it is likely that the seemingly loose mode of imperial administration reflected not a lack of interest in the empire but a belief that a more intensive approach might prove counterproductive in its continuing effort to curb the independent power of the traditional *calpulli* leaders. The alternative would have been to place large territories under the direct administrative control of these individuals and thereby risk allowing them to enlarge their independent bases of power. But such intensive control of production in the tributaries was not necessary in order to control the flow of goods into Tenochtitlan, which was really the key to the dynasty's power. As Carol Smith (1976) has shown, control of exchange is as potent a tool as control of production for domination of an economic system.

Instead of risking this additional power in the hands of the nobility, the dynasty left the responsibility for producing tribute goods in the hands of the local nobility of the conquered provinces, who in the event of recalcitrance could be attacked without necessitating fraternal strife in the internal polity. At the same time, such bureaucratization as existed in the Aztec state developed precisely around the mechanisms for collecting, processing, and storing the incoming tribute. The officials charged with this responsibility were the *calpixque*, who were commoners unable to use their administrative powers to build a political base (Hicks n.d.) Thus, the revenues of the dynasty were insulated from fragmentation at the hands of competing power centers.

conclusions

This paper has presented a processual analysis of the emergence of centralized state authority and class stratification in Aztec Tenochtitlan. The leaders of the *calpulli*, the political segments of prestate Aztec society, adopted a central ruler as a means of improving their military defense against hostile neighbors. This central dynasty was at first very limited in its control of internal affairs, which remained largely under the authority of the *calpulli* leaders. However, the entry of Tenochtitlan into a career of imperial conquest brought greatly expanded revenues under the control of the dynasty, which was able to use its new wealth to begin consolidation of its power over internal politics. The strategems employed by the dynasty in its drive toward centralization of power created a distinctive

elite ruling class, through which the traditional *calpulli* leaders were coopted as instruments of the state authority. Although centralization was well advanced by the time of the Spanish Conquest, much of the older *calpulli* political structure still remained intact, as the lower level in the state hierarchy.

Ecological and ideological factors, of course, play key roles in political evolution. The Aztecs' imperial career undoubtedly was stimulated in part by the constantly increasing demand of a growing nonagricultural population for new sources of supplies, and the militarism that built the empire was clearly legitimated by elaborate ideological support. But it cannot simply be asserted that either ideology or ecology "caused" the rise of the Aztec state. The influence of these tools and limiting factors must be traced through the way they were used by motivated political actors in their drive for power and material comforts. In this case we have seen how control over the solution to an ecological problem—the need for an expanded base of agricultural support for Tenochtitlan—was turned to solving a political problem, the need of the dynasty to ensure its continued existence by consolidating its power over the dispersed authority structure of the prestate polity. It is clear that the militaristic ideology that Brundage claims to be the driving force of Aztec society actually served these more mundane purposes, rather than hindered them as Brundage believes. The self-interest of conflicting power groups was thus the link between environment and ideology, and a key to the concrete social processes through which state centralization and class stratification were constructed in Aztec society.³

notes

¹ This paper has benefited from critiques of earlier drafts by Robert B. Edgerton, Hugh Gladwin, Walter Goldschmidt, Sally Falk Moore, H. B. Nicholson, and Carlos Velez-I. None of these scholars should be construed as necessarily endorsing all of the viewpoints expressed in this final version.

² R. G. Fox (personal communication) has asked whether there might not have been some bodyguard around the *tlaoque* that provided personal military protection, as Maine found for the Irish chiefs and Fox himself found for the Rajput rulers of northern India (Fox 1972). In these cases, the bodyguard was formed outside the kin system and thus constituted a power base for the ruler free from entanglements in the earlier power structures. The Aztec data are very weak on this point. There is no evidence of any armed bodyguard for the *tlaotani*, and a number of writers have noted the ease with which Cortes and a few men were able to kidnap Motecuhzoma, apparently encountering no resistance at all (Davies 1972:218–219; Gorenstein 1966:60). There seems to have been no peacetime standing army, and the chronicles of Cortes and Diaz del Castillo do not mention armed guards in the palace, although they obviously would have been interested in such details. It seems remarkable that there would have been no bodyguard for the *tlaotani*, but in any case the complete lack of mention thereof suggests that a palace guard must not have constituted a significant political force.

³ After this paper had been submitted, I received an advance copy of Warwick Bray's forthcoming article "Civilizing the Aztecs" (n.d.), which covers much of the same ground as my own. Bray's work is excellent and is recommended to the reader interested in further information on the economic and religious life of Tenochtitlan and the earlier history of the Aztecs. Bray's earlier paper (1970) should also be consulted. Unfortunately, however, Bray perpetuates the notion that a new aristocracy was imposed over the *calpulli* leaders, and on this point our analyses diverge radically.

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Date of Submission: December 12, 1977

Date of Acceptance: January 30, 1978