

Hiding in Plain Sight

The indigenous origins of social housing and democracy in the Americas

Sometime around AD 1150, a people called the Mexica migrated south from a place called Aztlán – its location is now unknown – to take up a new home in the heart of the Valley of Mexico, which now bears their name.¹ There they were eventually to carve out an empire, the Aztec Triple Alliance,² and build its capital at Tenochtitlan, an island-city in Lake Texcoco – one link in a chain of great lakes and lake-cities, and part of an urban landscape ringed by mountains. Lacking an urban tradition of their own, the Mexica modelled the layout of Tenochtitlan on that of another city they found, lying in ruins and virtually abandoned, in a valley about one day's journey distant. They called that other city Teotihuacan, the 'Place of Gods'.

It had been some time since anyone lived in Teotihuacan. By the twelfth century, when the Mexica arrived, nobody even seems to have remembered the city's original name. Still, the new arrivals clearly found the city – with its two colossal pyramids set against the Cerro Gordo – both alien and alluring, and far too large simply to ignore. Their response, aside from using it as a model for their own great city, was to veil Teotihuacan in myth, and cage its standing remains in a dense forest of names and symbols. As a result, we still see Teotihuacan largely through Aztec (Culhua-Mexica) eyes.³

Written references to Teotihuacan from the time it was still inhabited comprise a few tantalizing inscriptions from far to the east in the Maya lowlands, which call it 'the place of cattail reeds', corresponding to the Nahuatl word 'Tollan' and evoking a primordial, perfect city by the water.⁴ Otherwise all we have are sixteenth-century transcriptions of chronicles, set down in Spanish and Nahuatl, which describe Teotihuacan as a place full of

mountain pools and primal voids, from which the planets sprang at the beginning of time. The planets were followed by gods, and the gods by a mysterious race of fish-men, whose world had to be destroyed to make way for our own.

In historical terms, such sources are not very useful, especially since we have no way of knowing if these myths were ever told in the city when it was actually inhabited, or whether they were just invented by the Aztecs. Still, the legacy of those stories continues. It was the Aztecs, for instance, who made up the names 'Pyramid of the Sun', 'Pyramid of the Moon' and 'Way of the Dead', which archaeologists and tourists alike use to this day when describing the city's most visible monuments and the road that links them all.⁵

For all their facility with astronomical calculation, the builders of Tenochtitlan either didn't know or didn't find it important to know when, precisely, Teotihuacan had last been inhabited. Here, at least, archaeology has been able to fill in the gaps. We know now that the city of Teotihuacan had its heyday eight centuries before the coming of the Mexica, and more than 1,000 years before the arrival of the Spanish. Its foundation dates to around 100 BC, and its decline to around AD 600. We also know that, in the course of those centuries, Teotihuacan became a city of such grandeur and sophistication that it could easily be put on a par with Rome at the height of its imperial power.

We don't actually know if Teotihuacan was, like Rome, the centre of a great empire, but even conservative estimates place its population at around 100,000⁶ (perhaps as much as five times the likely population of Mohenjodaro, Uruk or any of the other early Eurasian cities we discussed in the last chapter). At its zenith, there were probably at least a million people distributed across the Valley of Mexico and surrounding lands, many of whom had only visited the great city once, or perhaps only knew someone who had, but nonetheless considered Teotihuacan the most important place in the entire world.

This much is broadly accepted by virtually every scholar and historian of ancient Mexico. More controversial is the question of what sort of city Teotihuacan was, and how it was governed. Pose this question to a specialist in the study of Mesoamerican history or archaeology (as we often have done), and you'll likely get the same reaction: a roll of the eyes and a resigned acknowledgement that there's just something 'weird' about the

place. Not merely because of its exceptional size, but because of its stubborn refusal to conform to expectations of how an early Mesoamerican city *should* have functioned.

At this point, the reader can probably guess what's coming. All the evidence suggests that Teotihuacan had, at its height of its power, found a way to govern itself without overlords – as did the much earlier cities of prehistoric Ukraine, Uruk-period Mesopotamia and Bronze Age Pakistan. Yet it did so with a very different technological foundation, and on an even larger scale.

But first some background.

As we've seen, when kings appear in the historical record, they tend to leave unmistakable traces. We can expect to find palaces, rich burials and monuments celebrating their conquests. All this is true in Mesoamerica as well.

In the wider region, the paradigm is set by a series of dynastic polities, located far from the Valley of Mexico in the Yucatán Peninsula and adjacent highlands. Today's historians know these polities as the Classic Maya (*c.*AD 150–900 – the term 'classic' is also applied to their ancient written language and to the chronological period in question). Cities like Tikal, Calakmul or Palenque were dominated by royal temples, ball-courts (settings for competitive, sometimes lethal games), images of war and humiliated captives (often publicly killed after ball games), complex calendrical rituals celebrating royal ancestors, and records of the deeds and biographies of living kings. In the modern imagination this has become the 'standard package' of Mesoamerican kingship, associated with ancient cities throughout the region from Monte Alban (in Oaxaca, *c.*AD 500–800) to Tula (in central Mexico, *c.*AD 850–1150), and arguably reaching as far north as Cahokia (near what's now East St Louis, *c.*AD 800–1200).

In Teotihuacan, all this seems to have been strikingly absent. Unlike in the Mayan cities, there are few written inscriptions in general.⁷ (For this reason, we don't know what language was spoken by the majority of Teotihuacan's inhabitants, although we know the city was sufficiently cosmopolitan to include among its population both Maya and Zapotec minorities familiar with the use of writing.)⁸ However, there remains plenty of pictorial art. Teotihuacan's citizens were prolific craft specialists and makers of images, leaving behind everything from monumental stone

sculptures to diminutive terracotta figures that could be held in the palm, as well as vivid wall paintings bustling with human activity (picture something like the carnivalesque feel of a Bruegel street scene and you are not too far off). Still, nowhere among some thousands of such images do we find even a single representation of a ruler striking, binding or otherwise dominating a subordinate – unlike in the contemporary arts of the Maya and Zapotec, where this is a constant theme. Today scholars pore over Teotihuacan imagery, searching for anything that might be construed as a kingly figure, but largely they fail. In many cases the artists seem to have deliberately frustrated such efforts, for instance by making all the figures in a given scene exactly the same size.

Another key element of royal display in the ancient kingdoms of Mesoamerica, the ceremonial ball-court is also conspicuous by its absence at Teotihuacan.⁹ Neither has there been found any equivalent to the great tombs of Siyahj Chan K'awiil at Tikal or K'inich Janaab Pakal in Palenque. And not for lack of trying. Archaeologists have combed through the ancient tunnels around the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon and under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, only to discover that the passages do not lead to royal tombs, or even robbed-out tomb chambers, but to chthonic labyrinths and mineral-crusting shrines: evocations of other worlds, no doubt, but not the graves of sacred rulers.¹⁰

Some have suggested that the self-conscious rejection of outside convention at Teotihuacan runs even deeper. For instance, the city's artists appear to have been aware of formal and compositional principles found among their Mesoamerican neighbours, and to have set about deliberately inverting them. Where Maya and Zapotec art draws on a tradition of relief carving derived from the earlier Olmec kings of Veracruz, favouring curves and flowing forms, the sculpture of Teotihuacan shows humans and humanoid figures as flat composites, tightly fitted to angular blocks. Some decades ago, these contrasts led Esther Pasztory – a Hungarian-American art historian who spent much of her career studying Teotihuacan's art and imagery – to a radical conclusion. What we have, she argued, with highland Teotihuacan and the lowland Maya, is nothing less than a case of conscious cultural inversion – or what we've been calling schismogenesis – but this time on the scale of urban civilizations.¹¹

Teotihuacan, in Pasztory's view, created a new tradition of art to express the ways in which its society was different from that of its contemporaries

elsewhere in Mesoamerica. In doing so it rejected both the specific visual trope of ruler and captive and the glorification of aristocratic individuals in general. In this it was strikingly different from both the earlier cultural tradition of the Olmec, and from contemporary Maya polities. If the visual arts of Teotihuacan celebrated anything, Pasztory insisted, then it was the community as a whole and its collective values, which – over a period of some centuries – successfully prevented the emergence of ‘dynastic personality cults’.¹²

According to Pasztory, Teotihuacan was not just ‘anti-dynastic’ in spirit, it was itself a utopian experiment in urban life. Those who created it thought of themselves as creating a new and different kind of city, a Tollan for the people, without overlords or kings. Following in Pasztory’s footsteps, other scholars, eliminating virtually every other possibility, arrived at similar conclusions. In its early years, they concluded, Teotihuacan had gone some way down the road to authoritarian rule, but then around AD 300 suddenly reversed course: possibly there was a revolution of sorts, followed by a more equal distribution of the city’s resources and the establishment of a kind of ‘collective governance’.¹³

The general consensus among those who know the site best is that Teotihuacan was, in fact, a city organized along some sort of self-consciously egalitarian lines. And, as we’ve seen, in world-historical terms all this is not nearly as weird or anomalous as scholars – or anyone else, for that matter – tend to assume. It is equally true if we simply try to understand Teotihuacan within its Mesoamerican context. The city didn’t come out of nowhere. While there might be a recognizable ‘package’ of Mesoamerican kingship, there also appears to have been a very different, dare we say republican, tradition as well.

What we propose to do in this chapter, then, is bring to the surface this neglected strand of Mesoamerican social history: one of urban republics, large-scale projects of social welfare, and indigenous forms of democracy that can be followed down to the time of the Spanish conquest and beyond.

IN WHICH WE FIRST CONSIDER AN EXAMPLE OF STRANGER-KINGS IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS, AND THEIR AFFILIATION WITH TEOTIHUACAN

Let us start by leaving behind the city itself, and the valleys and plateaus of central Mexico, for the tropical forest kingdoms of the Classic Maya, whose ruins lie to the east: in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, and within the modern countries of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. In the fifth century AD, something remarkable happens in the art and writing of some of these Maya city-states, including the largest and most prominent among them, Tikal.

Finely carved scenes on Mayan monuments of this period show figures seated on thrones, and wearing what can be instantly recognized as foreign, Teotihuacan-style dress and weaponry (the spear-throwers called *atlatls*, feathered shields, and so on), clearly distinct from the garb and finery of local rulers. Archaeologists working in western Honduras, near the border with Guatemala, have even unearthed what, judging by the grave goods, appear to be the actual burials of these stranger-kings at the base level of a temple at the site of Copán, which went through seven further phases of construction. Here, glyphic inscriptions describe at least some of these individuals as actually coming from the Land of the Cattail Reeds.¹⁴

Two things (at least) are very hard to explain here. First, why are there images of what appear to be Teotihuacano lords on thrones in Tikal, when there are no similar images of lords sitting on thrones at Teotihuacan itself? Second, how could Teotihuacan ever have mounted a successful military expedition against a kingdom over 600 miles away? Most experts assume the latter was simply impossible on logistical grounds, and they are probably correct to do so (although we should keep an open mind; after all, who could have predicted on logistical grounds that a motley crew of Spaniards would bring down a Mesoamerican empire of many millions?). The first question certainly requires more careful consideration. Were the individuals depicted as seated kings really from central Mexico at all?

It's possible we are just dealing here with local lords who had a taste for exotica. We know from art and inscriptions that Maya grandees sometimes enjoyed dressing up in Teotihuacan warrior gear, sometimes beheld visions of Teotihuacan spirits after ritual bloodletting, and generally liked to style themselves 'Lords and Ladies of the West'. The city was certainly far enough away for the Maya to see it as a place of exotic fantasies, some kind of distant Shangri-La. But there are reasons to suspect it was more than just that. For one thing, people did regularly move back and forth. Obsidian from Teotihuacan adorned the Maya gods, and Teotihuacan's deities wore

green quetzal feathers from the Maya lowlands. Mercenaries and traders went both ways, pilgrimages and diplomatic visits followed; immigrants from Teotihuacan built temples in Maya cities, and there was even a Maya neighbourhood, replete with murals, at Teotihuacan itself.¹⁵

How do we resolve the puzzle of this Mayan depiction of Teotihuacan kings? Well, first of all, if history teaches us anything about long-distance trade routes, it's that they are likely to be full of unscrupulous characters of various sorts: bandits, runaways, grifters, smugglers, religious visionaries, spies – or figures who may be any combination of these at a given time. This was no less true in Mesoamerica than anywhere else. The Aztecs, for instance, employed orders of heavily armed warrior-merchants called *pochteca*, who also gathered intelligence on the cities where they traded.

History is also full of stories of adventurous travellers who either find themselves taken into some alien society and miraculously transformed there into kings or embodiments of sacred power: 'stranger-kings' like Captain James Cook, who – on casting anchor in Hawaii in 1779 – was accorded the status of an ancient Polynesian fertility god called Lono; or others who, like Hernán Cortés, did their best to convince local people that they should be welcomed as such.¹⁶ Worldwide, a remarkably large percentage of dynastic histories begin precisely this way, with a man (it's almost always a man) who mysteriously appears from somewhere far away. It is easy to see how an adventurous traveller from a famous city might have taken advantage of such notions. Could something like this have happened in the Maya lowlands in the fifth century AD?

From inscriptions at Tikal, we do know the names of some of these particular stranger-kings and their close associates, or at least the names they adopted as Maya nobles. One, called Sihyaj K'ahk' ('Born of Fire'), seems never himself to have ruled but helped install a series of Teotihuacano 'princes' on Maya thrones, including the throne of Tikal. We also know that these princes married local women of high rank, and that their offspring became Maya rulers, who also celebrated their ancestral connection to Teotihuacan: the 'Tollan of the West'.

From examination of burials at Copán we also know that, before their elevation to royal status, at least some of these adventurous individuals led extremely colourful lives, fighting and travelling and fighting again, and that they may not originally have come either from Copán or from Teotihuacan but somewhere else entirely.¹⁷ Taking all lines of evidence

into account, it seems likely that these progenitors of Maya dynasties were originally members of groups that specialized in long-distance travel – traders, soldiers of fortune, missionaries or perhaps even spies – who, perhaps quite suddenly, found themselves elevated to royalty.¹⁸

There is a remarkable analogy for this process closer to our times. Many centuries later, when the focus of Maya culture – and most of its largest cities – had shifted to Yucatán in the north, a similar wave of central Mexican influence occurred, most dramatically evident in the city of Chichén Itzá, whose Temple of the Warriors seems to be directly modelled on the Toltec capital of Tula (a later Tollan). Again, we don't really know what happened, but later chronicles, written secretly under Spanish rule, described the Itzá in almost exactly these terms: as a band of uprooted warriors, 'stuttering foreigners' from the west, who managed to seize control of a series of cities in Yucatán and ended up in a prolonged rivalry with another dynasty of Toltec exiles – or at least, exiles who insisted they were originally Toltec – called the Xiu.¹⁹ These chronicles are full of accounts of the exiles' wanderings in the wilderness, temporary periods of glory, accusations of oppression, and sombre prophecies of future tribulation. Once again, we seem to be dealing with a feeling among the Maya that kings really *should* come from somewhere far away, and with the willingness of at least a few unscrupulous foreigners to take advantage of this idea.

All this is only guesswork. Still, it's clear the images and records from places like Tikal tell us more about Maya concepts of royal power than they do about Teotihuacan itself, where not a shred of compelling evidence for the institution of kingship has yet been found. The 'Mexican' princes of the Maya lowlands, bedecked in regalia and seated on thrones, were engaging in exactly the sort of grandiose political gestures that had no place in their putative homeland. If not a monarchy, then, what was Teotihuacan? There is, we suggest, no one answer to this question – and over a period of five centuries there is no particular reason why there ought to be.

Let's look at a central portion of the standard architectural plan of Teotihuacan, pieced together from the most exhaustive survey of an urban landscape ever undertaken by archaeologists.²⁰ Having gone to the lengths of recording a built environment on that scale – all eight square miles of it – archaeologists naturally want to see it all at once, in a single gasp. Modern

archaeology often presents to us something like the chronologically collapsed plan of Mohenjo-daro and other 'first cities' with centuries or even millennia of urban history folded into a single map. It's visually stunning, but actually quite flat and artificial. In the case of Teotihuacan, it gives an effect at once harmonious and misleading.

At the centre, anchoring the whole mirage, stand the great monuments – the two Pyramids and the Ciudadela (Citadel) containing the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. Extending for miles around are smaller but still impressively appointed residences that housed the city's population: some 2,000 multi-family apartments, finely built from stone masonry and organized on a tidy orthogonal grid, aligned to the ceremonial centre of the city. It is an almost perfectly functional image of civic prosperity and hierarchy. We are, it would seem, in the presence of something like More's *Utopia* or Campanella's *City of the Sun*. But there is a problem. The residences and pyramids do not strictly belong together, or at least not all of them. Their construction occupies different phases of time. Nor is the temple quite what it seems.

In fact, in historical terms it is all something of a grand illusion. To understand what's going on here we have to make some attempt, however tentative, to reconstruct a basic chronological sequence for the city's development.

HOW THE PEOPLE OF TEOTIHUACAN TURNED THEIR BACKS ON MONUMENT-BUILDING AND HUMAN SACRIFICE, AND INSTEAD EMBARKED ON A REMARKABLE PROJECT OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Teotihuacan's growth to urban dimensions began around the year 0. At that time, whole populations were on the move across the Basin of Mexico and Valley of Puebla, fleeing the effects of seismic activity on their southern frontiers, which included a Plinian eruption of the volcano Popocatepetl. From AD 50 to 150, the flow of people into Teotihuacan siphoned life from surrounding areas. Villages and towns were abandoned, and also whole cities, like Cuicuilco, with its early traditions of pyramid-building. Under several feet of ash lie the ruins of other abandoned settlements. At the Pueblan site of Tetimpa, just eight miles from Popocatepetl, archaeologists

have unearthed houses that foreshadow – on a smaller scale – the civic architecture of Teotihuacan.²¹

Here the later chronicles do provide some useful, or at least thought-provoking accounts. Folk memories of a mass exodus survived right up to the time of the *conquista*. One tradition, preserved in the work of the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, tells how Teotihuacan was founded by a coalition of elders, priests and wise men from other settlements. As the city grew it incorporated these smaller traditions, maize gods and village ancestors rubbing shoulders with urban deities of fire and rain.

What we can refer to as Teotihuacan's 'Old City' was organized on a parish system, with local shrines serving particular neighbourhoods. The layout of these district temples – three buildings around a central plaza – also follows the plan of earlier structures at Tetimpa, which housed the cults of village ancestors.²² In these early days, from AD 100 to 200, the residential quarters of Teotihuacan may well have looked like an enormous shanty town – but we don't really know,²³ just as we have no clear idea how the fledgling city divided access to arable land and other resources among its citizens. Maize was widely farmed, to be eaten by humans and domestic animals. People kept and ate turkeys, dogs, rabbits and hares. They also grew beans, and enjoyed access to whitetail deer and peccaries, as well as wild fruits and vegetables. Seafood arrived from the distant coast, presumably smoked or salted; but how far the various sectors of the urban economy were integrated at this time, and how exactly resources were pulled in from a wider hinterland, is altogether unclear.²⁴

Teotihuacan: residential apartments surrounding major monuments in the central districts



- 1 Pyramid of the Moon
- 2 Pyramid of the Sun
- 3 Ciudadela
- 4 Temple of Quetzalcoatl
- 5 'Street of the Dead'
- 6 Great Compound

What we can say is that the Teotihuacanos' efforts to create a civic identity focused initially on the building of monuments: the raising of a sacred city in the midst of the wider urban sprawl.²⁵ This meant the creation of an entirely new landscape in the centre of Teotihuacan, requiring the work of some thousands of labourers. Pyramid-mountains and artificial rivers went up, providing a stage for the performance of calendrical rituals. In a colossal feat of civil engineering, the channels of the Rio San Juan and Rio San Lorenzo were diverted, tying them to the city's orthogonal grid and transforming their marshy banks into solid foundations (all this, recall, without the benefit of working animals or metal tools). This in turn laid the basis for a grand architectural programme which saw the erection of the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon and the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. The temple faced a sunken plaza that captured the floodwaters of the San Juan to form a seasonal lake, its waters lapping at painted carvings of plumed serpents and shells on the temple façade, making them glisten as rains began to fall in late spring.²⁶

All that effort of monumental construction required sacrifices, not just of labour and resources but of human life. Each major phase of building is associated with archaeological evidence of ritual killing. Adding together human remains from the two pyramids and the temple, the victims can be counted in the hundreds. Their bodies were placed in pits or trenches arranged symmetrically to define the ground plan of the edifice that would rise over them. At the corners of the Sun Pyramid, offerings of infants were found; under the Moon Pyramid, foreign captives, some decapitated or otherwise mutilated; and in the foundations of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent lay the corpses of male warriors, arms tied back at point of death, buried with the tools and trophies of their former trade. Among the bodies were found obsidian knives and spearheads, trinkets of shell and greenstone and collars made of human teeth and jawbones (some, as it turns out, cunningly faked in shell).²⁷

You would think that at this point – around AD 200 – the fate of Teotihuacan was sealed: its destiny to join the ranks of 'classic' Mesoamerican civilizations with their strong traditions of warrior

aristocracy and city-states governed by hereditary nobles. What we might then expect to see next, in the archaeological record, is a concentration of power around the city's focal monuments: the rise of luxurious palaces, inhabited by rulers who were the font of wealth and privilege, with attached quarters for elite kinsmen; and the development of monumental art to glorify their military conquests, the lucrative tribute it generated and their services to the gods. But the evidence tells a very different story, because the citizens of Teotihuacan chose a different path.

In fact, the entire trajectory of Teotihuacan's political development seems to have gone off on a remarkable tangent. Instead of building palaces and elite quarters, the citizens embarked on a remarkable project of urban renewal, supplying high-quality apartments for nearly all the city's population, regardless of wealth or status.²⁸ Without written sources, we can't really say why. Archaeologists are not yet able to distinguish the precise sequence of events with any confidence. But nobody doubts that something did happen, and what we will try to do now is sketch out what it was.

The big turnaround in Teotihuacan's fortunes seems to have begun around AD 300. At that time, or shortly after, the Temple of the Feathered Serpent was desecrated and its stores of offerings looted. Not only was it set on fire; many of the gargoyle-like heads of the Feathered Serpent on its façade were smashed or ground to a stump. A large-stepped platform was then constructed to its west, which made what was left of the temple invisible from its main avenue. If you visit the heavily reconstructed ruins of Teotihuacan today and wish to see what remains of its goggle-eyed gods and plumed snakeheads you will have to stand on top of this platform, which archaeologists call the *adosada*.²⁹

At this point all new pyramid construction stopped permanently, and there is no further evidence of ritually sanctioned killing at the established Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, which remained in use as civic monuments until around AD 550 – albeit for other, less lethal purposes about which we know little.³⁰ Instead, what we see after AD 300 is an extraordinary flow of urban resources into the provision of excellent stone-built housing, not just for the wealthy or privileged but for the great majority of Teotihuacan's population. These impressive apartments, laid out in regular plots from one end of the city to the other, were probably not an innovation of this period.

Their construction on a city-grid may have begun a century or so earlier, as did the razing of older and more ramshackle dwellings to make way for them.³¹

Archaeologists at first considered the masonry apartments to be palaces, and it is possible that is exactly how they began around AD 200, when the city seemed set on a course of political centralization. But after AD 300, when the Temple of the Feathered Serpent was desecrated, their construction continued apace, until most of the city's 100,000 or so residents were effectively living in 'palatial', or at least very comfortable, conditions.³² So what were these apartments like, and what kind of homes did people make in them?

The evidence suggests we should picture small groups of nuclear families, living comfortable lives in single-storey buildings, each equipped with integral drainage facilities and finely plastered floors and walls. Each family seems to have had its own set of rooms within the larger apartment block, complete with private porticoes where light entered the otherwise windowless rooms. We can deduce that the average apartment compound would have housed in total around 100 people, who would have encountered each other routinely in a central courtyard, which also seems to have been the focus of domestic rituals, perhaps jointly observed. Most of these communal spaces were fitted with altars in the standard style of civic construction (known as *talud-tablero*), and the walls were often brightly painted with murals. Some courtyards had pyramid-shaped shrines, suggesting this architectural form had taken on new and less exclusive roles within the city.³³

René Millon, the archaeologist responsible for producing the first detailed map of Teotihuacan's layout, felt that the apartment compound was actually invented as a form of social housing, 'designed for urban life in a city that was becoming increasingly crowded, perhaps approaching the chaotic'.³⁴ Each block was initially laid out to similar scale and dimensions, on plots of roughly 3,600 square metres, although some deviated from this ideal scheme. Strict uniformity was avoided in the arrangement of rooms and courtyards, so in the last resort each compound was unique. Even the more modest apartments show signs of a comfortable lifestyle, with access to imported goods and a staple diet of corn tortillas, eggs, turkey and rabbit meat, and the milk-hued drink known as *pulque* (an alcoholic beverage fermented from the spiky agave plant).³⁵

In other words, few were deprived. More than that, many citizens enjoyed a standard of living that is rarely achieved across such a wide sector of urban society in any period of urban history, including our own. Teotihuacan had indeed changed its course away from monarchy and aristocracy to become instead a 'Tollan of the people'.

But how was this remarkable transformation achieved? Apart from spoilage of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, there are few signs of violence. Land and resources appear to have been allocated to family groups who became neighbours. In this multi-ethnic city, each co-residential group of between sixty and 100 people would have enjoyed two kinds of communal life. One was based on kinship, with family ties extending far beyond the apartment block and often beyond the city – ties which could have troublesome implications, as we'll shortly see. The other was based more strictly on co-residence in apartments and neighbourhoods, often reinforced by shared craft specializations such as garment-making or obsidian-working.

Both forms of urban community, existing alongside one another, retained a human scale, a world away from our modern conception of the 'housing estate' in which nuclear families are sequestered by the thousands in multi-storey monoliths. So we are back to the question with which we started: what held this 'New Teotihuacan' together, if not a hereditary elite or some other type of governing class?

Without written evidence it may never be possible to reconstruct the details, but by now we can probably rule out any sort of top-down system in which elite cadres of royal administrators or priests drew up plans and sent out orders. A more likely possibility is that authority was distributed among local assemblies, perhaps answerable to a governing council. If any trace of these community associations survives it is in the district shrines known as 'three-temple complexes'. At least twenty such complexes were dispersed throughout the city, serving a total of 2,000 apartments, one for every 100 apartment blocks.³⁶

This might imply the delegation of government to neighbourhood councils with constituencies similar in size to those of Mesopotamian citywards, or the assembly houses of Ukrainian mega-sites we discussed in [Chapter Eight](#), or for that matter the *barrios* of later Mesoamerican towns. It may seem hard to imagine a city this size running successfully in this way for centuries without strong leaders or an extensive bureaucracy; but as

we'll see, first-hand accounts of later cities from the time of the Spanish conquest lend credence to the idea.

Another, more ebullient face of Teotihuacan's civic identity is revealed in its mural art. Despite efforts to see them as sombre religious iconography, these playful pictorial scenes – painted on the interior walls of apartment compounds from around AD 350 – often seem veritably psychedelic.³⁷ Streaming effigies emerge from clustered plant, human and animal bodies, framed by figures with elaborate costumes, sometimes grasping hallucinogenic seeds and mushrooms; and among the crowd scenes we find flower eaters with rainbows bursting from their heads.³⁸ Such scenes often depict human figures all at roughly the same size, with no individual raised up over another.³⁹

Of course, these murals represent Teotihuacanos as they liked to imagine themselves; social realities are always more complex. Archaeological excavations in a part of the city known as Teopancazco, lying south of the city centre, show just how complex those realities could actually get. Traces of domestic life in Teopancazco dating to around AD 350 reveal the affluent life of its inhabitants, whose shell-ornamented cotton dress suggests they originally came from the Gulf Coast and continued to trade with that region. From there they also brought with them certain customs, including unusually violent rituals, which are not so far documented elsewhere in the city. These seem to have involved the capture and decapitation of foreign enemies, whose heads were kept and buried in offering vessels, found within their private homes.⁴⁰

Now here we have something going on that would obviously be very difficult to square with the idea of communal living on a large scale; and this is precisely our point. Below the surface of civil society at Teotihuacan there must have been all sorts of social tensions simmering away among groups of radically different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who were constantly moving in and out, consolidating relationships with foreign trading partners, cultivating alter egos in remote places and sometimes bringing those forms of identity back with them. (We might allow ourselves to imagine what would happen should a Teotihuacano freebooter who'd managed to make himself King of Tikal ever have returned home.) By around AD 550, the social fabric of the city had begun to come apart at the seams. There is no compelling evidence of foreign invasion. Things seem to have disintegrated from within. Almost as suddenly as it had once

coalesced some five centuries previously, the city's population dispersed again, leaving their Tollan behind them.⁴¹

The rise and decline of Teotihuacan set in motion a roughly cyclical pattern of demographic concentration and dispersal in central Mexico which repeated itself a number of times between AD 300 and 1200, down to the disintegration of Tula and the fall of the Toltec state.⁴² Over this longer span of time, what was the legacy of Teotihuacan and its grand urban experiment? Should we view the whole episode as a passing deviation, a blip (albeit an extremely large blip) on the road that led from Olmec hierarchy to Toltec aristocracy and eventually Aztec imperialism? Or might the egalitarian aspects of Teotihuacan have a distinct legacy of their own? Few have really considered the latter possibility, but there are good reasons to ask, especially since early Spanish accounts of the Mexican highlands provide some extraordinarily suggestive material – including descriptions of indigenous cities which, to European eyes, could only be understood as republics, or even democracies.

ON THE CASE OF TLAXCALA, AN INDIGENOUS REPUBLIC
THAT RESISTED THE AZTEC EMPIRE THEN CAME TO JOIN
FORCES WITH SPANISH INVADERS, AND HOW ITS FATEFUL
DECISION EMERGED FROM DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATIONS
IN AN URBAN PARLIAMENT (AS OPPOSED TO THE
DAZZLING EFFECTS OF EUROPEAN TECHNOLOGY ON
'INDIAN MINDS')

With this in mind, let's now consider a very different case of cultural contact, which takes us forwards in time to the beginnings of European expansion in the Americas. It concerns an indigenous city-state by the name of Tlaxcala, adjacent to what's now the Mexican state of Puebla, which played a pivotal role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire or Triple Alliance. Here is how Charles C. Mann, in his acclaimed *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (2005), describes what happened in 1519 when Hernán Cortés passed through:

Marching inland from the sea, the Spanish at first fought repeatedly with Tlaxcala, a confederation of four small kingdoms that had maintained its independence despite repeated Alliance incursions.

Thanks to their guns, horses, and steel blades, the foreigners won every battle, even with Tlaxcala's huge numerical advantage. But Cortés's forces shrank with every fight. He was on the verge of losing everything when the four Tlaxcala kings abruptly reversed course. Concluding from the results of their battles that they could wipe out the Europeans, though at great cost, the Indian leaders offered what seemed a win-win deal: they would stop attacking Cortés, sparing his life, the lives of the surviving Spaniards, and those of many Indians, if he in return would join with Tlaxcala in a united assault on the hated Triple Alliance.⁴³

Now there is a basic problem with this account. There were no kings in Tlaxcala. Therefore, it could not in any sense be described as a confederation of kingdoms. So how did Mann come to think there were? As an award-winning science journalist, but not a specialist in the history of sixteenth-century Mesoamerica, he was at the mercy of secondary sources; and this, it turns out, is where much of the problem begins.

No doubt Mann must have assumed (as would any reasonable person) that if Tlaxcala were anything other than a kingdom – say a republic or a democracy, or even some form of oligarchy – then the secondary literature would have been full of lively debates about what this implies, not just for our understanding of the Spanish conquest as a key turning point in modern world history, but for the development of indigenous societies in Mesoamerica, or indeed for political theory in general. Oddly, he'd have been wrong to assume this.⁴⁴ Finding ourselves in a similar position, we decided to delve a little deeper. What we found, we must admit, was rather startling, even to us. Let's begin by comparing Mann's account to the one Cortés himself addressed to his king, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

In his *Five Letters of Relation*, written between 1519 and 1526, Hernán Cortés recounts his entry to the mountain-ringed Valley of Puebla, on the southern tip of the Mexican *altiplano*. The valley at that time sheltered numerous native cities, of which the largest included pyramid-studded Cholula, and also the city of Tlaxcala. It was indeed in Tlaxcala that Cortés found local allies who fought alongside him, advancing first on Cholula and then going on to defeat the armies of Moctezuma the Younger and lay waste to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, in the neighbouring Valley of Mexico. Cortés estimated the population of Tlaxcala and its rural dependencies at

150,000. ‘There is a market in this city,’ he reported back to Charles V, ‘in which more than thirty thousand people are occupied in buying and selling,’ and the province ‘contains many wide-spreading fertile valleys all tilled and sown, no part of it being left wild, and measures some ninety leagues in circumference’. Also, the ‘order of government so far observed among the people resembles very much the republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa for there is no supreme overlord.’⁴⁵

Cortés was a minor aristocrat from a part of Spain where even municipal councils were still something of a novelty; one might argue he had little real knowledge of republics and therefore would hardly be the most reliable judge of such matters. Perhaps so; but by 1519 he had considerable experience in identifying Mesoamerican kings and either recruiting or neutralizing them, since this is largely what he had been doing since his arrival on the mainland. In Tlaxcala, he couldn’t find any. Instead, after an initial clash with Tlaxcalteca warriors, he found himself engaged with representatives of a popular urban council whose every decision had to be collectively ratified. Here is where things become decidedly strange, in terms of how the history of these events has come down to us.

It is worth emphasizing again that we are dealing here with what is, by most estimations, one of the pivotal episodes of modern world history: the events leading directly up to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, and a blueprint for subsequent European conquests throughout the Americas. We assume that nobody – even the most ardent believer in the forces of technological progress, or ‘guns, germs, and steel’ – would go so far as to claim that fewer than 1,000 Spaniards could ever have conquered Tenochtitlan (a highly organized city, covering over five square miles, containing roughly a quarter of a million people) without the help of these indigenous allies, who included some 20,000 warriors from Tlaxcala. In which case, to understand what was really going on it becomes crucial to understand why the Tlaxcalteca decided to join forces with Cortés, and how – with a population of tens of thousands, and no supreme overlord to govern them – they arrived at a decision to do so.

On the first matter, our sources are clear. The Tlaxcalteca were out to settle old scores. From their perspective, an alliance with Cortés might bring to a favourable end their struggles against the Aztec Triple Alliance, and the so-called ‘Flowery Wars’ between the Valleys of Puebla and Mexico.⁴⁶ As usual, most of our sources reflect the perspective of Aztec

elites, who liked to portray Tlaxcala's long-standing resistance to their imperial yoke as something between a game and imperial largesse (they allowed the Tlaxcalteca to remain independent, the Aztecs later insisted to their Spanish conquerors, because, after all, the empire's soldiers needed somewhere to train; their priests needed a stockyard of human victims for sacrifice to the gods, and so forth). But this was braggadocio. In fact, Tlaxcala and its Otomí guerrilla units had been holding the Aztecs successfully at bay for generations. Their resistance was not just military. Tlaxcalteca cultivated a civic ethos that worked against the emergence of ambitious leaders, and hence potential quislings – a counter-example to Aztec principles of governance.

Here we come to the crux of the problem.

Politically, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and the city-state of Tlaxcala embodied opposite ideals (no less than, say, ancient Sparta and Athens). Still, little of this history is known, because the story we've become used to telling about the conquest of the Americas is an entirely different one. The fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 is often used to illustrate what some feel to be deeper, underlying currents of change in human societies: the forces that give history its overall shape and direction. Starting with Alfred Crosby and Jared Diamond,⁴⁷ writers in this vein have repeatedly pointed out that the conquistadors had something akin to manifest destiny on their side. Not the divinely ordained sort of destiny they envisaged for themselves, but rather the unstoppable force of an invisible army of Neolithic Old World microbes, marching alongside the Spaniards, carrying waves of smallpox to decimate indigenous populations, and a Bronze Age legacy of metal weapons, guns and horses to shock and awe the helpless natives.

We like to tell ourselves that Europeans introduced the Americas not just to these agents of destruction but also to modern industrial democracy, ingredients for which were nowhere to be found there, not even in embryo. All this supposedly came as a single cultural package: advanced metallurgy, animal-powered vehicles, alphabetic writing systems and a certain penchant for freethinking that is seen as necessary for technological progress. 'Natives', in contrast, are assumed to have existed in some sort of alternative, quasi-mystical universe. They could not, by definition, be arguing about political constitutions or engaging in processes of sober deliberation over decisions that changed the course of world history; and if European observers report them doing so, they must either be mistaken, or

were simply projecting on to ‘Indians’ their own ideas about democratic governance, even when those ideas were hardly practised in Europe itself.

As we’ve also seen, this way of reading history would have been quite alien to Enlightenment philosophers, who were more inclined to think their ideals of freedom and equality owed much to the peoples of the New World and were by no means certain if those ideals were at all compatible with industrial advance. We are dealing, again, with powerful modern myths. Such myths don’t merely inform what people say: to an even greater extent, they ensure certain things go unnoticed. Some of the key early sources on Tlaxcala have never even appeared in translation, and new data emerging in recent years has not really been noticed outside specialist circles. Let’s see if we can’t set the record straight.

How, exactly, did the Tlaxcalteca arrive at a decision to ally with Cortés on the field of battle, thereby ensuring the Spaniards’ victory over the Aztec Empire? It is clear the matter was fraught and deeply divisive (as it was in other Pueblan cities as well: in Cholula, for example, the same dilemma occasioned a rupture between the leaders of six *calpolli* – urban wards – three of whom took the others hostage, whereupon the latter absconded to Tlaxcala).⁴⁸ In Tlaxcala itself, though, the argument took a very different form to what happened in Cholula.

Some of the evidence is to be found in Bernal Díaz’s famous *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1568), which contains lengthy passages on the Spaniards’ interactions with warriors and emissaries from Tlaxcala. Another much-used source is the illustrated codex known as *Historia de Tlaxcala* (1585), by the mestizo historian Diego Muñoz Camargo; and there are also important writings by the Franciscan friar Toribio of Benavente. But the most detailed source – in our minds the key one – is a book that is hardly ever cited; in fact, it is hardly ever read, at least by historians (though specialists in Renaissance humanism sometimes comment on its literary style). We are referring to the unfinished *Crónica de la Nueva España*, composed between 1558 and 1563 by Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, one of the first rectors of the University of Mexico.⁴⁹

Cervantes de Salazar was born around 1515 in the Spanish city of Toledo and studied at the prestigious University of Salamanca, where his scholarly reputation was second to none. After a time in Flanders he became Latin secretary to the Archbishop of Seville; this gained him entry to the court of

Charles V, where he heard Hernán Cortés relating his experiences of the New World. This young and gifted scholar soon became a devotee of the conquistador, and within a few years of Cortés's death in 1547 Cervantes de Salazar set sail for Mexico. On arrival, he taught Latin on premises owned by Cortés's son and heir, but soon became a central figure in the newly established university while also taking holy orders; he would attempt to juggle ecclesiastical and scholarly duties for the remainder of his life, with mixed success.

In 1558 the Municipality of Mexico, composed mainly of first-generation conquistadors or their descendants, was sufficiently impressed with Cervantes de Salazar's scholarly abilities to grant him his greatest wish: an annual stipend of 200 gold pesos to support his composition of a general history of New Spain, focusing on the themes of discovery and conquest. This was quite the endorsement and, two years later, Cervantes de Salazar (already some way into his manuscript) won a further grant, which was specifically intended to support a period of fieldwork. He must have visited Tlaxcala and its environs during that time in order to obtain valuable historical evidence directly from local caciques who lived through the *conquista*, and from their immediate descendants.⁵⁰

The municipality appears to have kept its appointed chronicler on a tight leash, demanding three-monthly updates on his manuscript. His last submission came in 1563, by which time, despite his best efforts, he was embroiled in a bitter ecclesiastical dispute that put him on the wrong side of the General Inquisitor, the powerful Pedro Moya de Contreras. In those acrimonious years, Cervantes de Salazar saw Martín Cortés and many of his other close associates variously imprisoned, tortured or exiled as rebels against the Spanish Crown. Cervantes de Salazar made sufficient compromises to escape such a fate; but his reputation suffered, and to this day he is often regarded as a minor academic source by comparison, say, with Bernardino de Sahagún. Ultimately, both scholars' work would meet a similar fate, delivered to the imperial councils of the Indies and the Inquisition in Spain for obligatory censorship of matters relating to 'idolatrous practices' (though not, it seems, on matters of indigenous politics), without allowing any original or copy to remain in circulation.⁵¹

The result was that, for a period of centuries, Cervantes de Salazar's *Crónica* was effectively hiding in plain sight.⁵² It is largely to the remarkable efforts of Zelia Maria Magdalena Nuttall (1857–1933) –

pioneering archaeologist, anthropologist and finder of lost codices – that we owe not just the rediscovery of Cervantes de Salazar’s unfinished *Crónica de la Nueva España*, which she identified in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid in 1911, but also most of the surviving details of his life and the circumstances of its composition, which she extracted from the archives of the town council in the city of Mexico, finding (to her astonishment) that less careful historians who went before her had discovered nothing worthy of note there. It was only in 1914 that the *Crónica* saw publication. To this day there is still no critical introduction or commentary to guide readers through its sixteenth-century prose, or point them towards its significance as a record of political affairs in an indigenous Mesoamerican city.⁵³

Critics have emphasized that Cervantes de Salazar was writing a few decades after the facts he described, basing his chronicle on earlier accounts – but this is equally true of other key sources regarding the Spanish conquest. They also note he wasn’t a particularly competent ethnographer in the mould of, say, Sahagún, being more steeped in the works of Horace and Livy than the indigenous traditions of Mexico. All this may be true, just as it is true that the literary tradition prevailing at the time tended to invoke Greek and especially Roman examples at the drop of a hat. Still, the *Crónica* is clearly not some kind of projection of Salazar’s classical training. It contains rich descriptions of indigenous figures and institutions from the time of the Spanish invasion which bear no resemblance to any classical sources and which in many cases are corroborated by first-hand accounts. What are not, apparently, in those other accounts are the details that Cervantes de Salazar provides.

Of special interest to us are those extended sections of the *Crónica* that deal directly with the governing council of Tlaxcala, and its deliberations over whether to ally with the Spanish invaders. They include lengthy accounts of speeches and diplomatic gifts going back and forth between representatives of the Spaniards and their Tlaxcalteca counterparts, whose oratory in council occasioned much admiration. According to Cervantes de Salazar, those who spoke for Tlaxcala included elder statesmen – such as Xicotencatl the Elder, father to the military general also named Xicotencatl who is still lionized in the state of Tlaxcala to this day⁵⁴ – but also masters of commerce, religious experts and the top legal authorities of the time. What Salazar describes in these remarkable passages is evidently not the workings of a royal court but of a mature urban parliament, which sought

consensus for its decisions through reasoned argument and lengthy deliberations – carrying on, when necessary, for weeks at a time.

The key passages are in Book Three. Cortés is still encamped outside the city with his newfound Totonac allies. Ambassadors move back and forth between the Spaniards and the *Ayuntamiento* (city council) of Tlaxcala, where deliberations commence. After many welcomes and much kissing of hands, a lord named Maxixcatzin – well known for his ‘great prudence and affable conversation’ – gets the ball rolling with an eloquent appeal for the Tlaxcalteca to follow his lead (indeed, to follow what the gods and ancestors ordained), and ally with Cortés to rise up against their common Aztec oppressors. His reasoning is widely accepted in the council, until that is, Xicotencatl the Elder – by then over 100 years old and almost blind – intervenes.

A chapter follows, detailing ‘the brave speech that Xicotencatl made, contradicting Maxixcatzin’. Nothing, he reminds the council, is harder to resist than an ‘enemy within’, which is what the newcomers will likely become if welcomed into town. Why, asks Xicotencatl,

... does Maxixcatzin deem these people gods, who seem more like ravenous monsters thrown up by the intemperate sea to blight us, gorging themselves on gold, silver, stones, and pearls; sleeping in their own clothes; and generally acting in the manner of those who would one day make cruel masters ... There are barely enough chickens, rabbits, or corn-fields in the entire land to feed their bottomless appetites, or those of their ravenous ‘deer’ [the Spanish horses]. Why would we – who live without servitude, and never acknowledged a king – spill our blood, only to make ourselves into slaves?⁵⁵

Members of the council, we learn, were swayed by Xicotencatl’s words: ‘a murmur began among them, speaking with each other, the voices were rising, each one declaring what he felt.’ The council was divided, and without consensus. What followed would be familiar to anyone who has participated in a process of consensus decision-making: when matters seem to come to loggerheads, rather than putting it to a vote someone proposes a creative synthesis. Temilotecutl – one of the city’s four ‘senior justices’ – stepped in with a cunning plan. To satisfy both sides of the debate, Cortés

would be invited into the city, but as soon as he entered Tlaxcalteca territory the city's leading general, Xicotencatl the Younger, would ambush him, together with a contingent of Otomí warriors. If the ambush succeeded, they would be heroes. If it failed, they would blame it on the uncouth and impulsive Otomí, make their excuses, and ally themselves with the invaders.

We need not rehearse here the events leading to an alliance between Tlaxcala and Cortés;⁵⁶ we have said enough to give the reader a flavour of our sources concerning the democracy of Tlaxcala, and the facility of its politicians in reasoned debate. Such accounts have not fared well in the hands of modern historians. Few would go so far as to suggest that what de Salazar described never really happened, or was simply his own imagination of a scene from some ancient Greek agora or Roman senate, placed into the mouths of 'Indians'. Yet on those rare occasions when the *Crónica* is considered by scholars today, it is mostly as a contribution to the literary genre of early Catholic humanism rather than as a source of historical information about indigenous forms of government – in much the same way that commentators on the writings of Lahontan never really concern themselves with what Kandiaronk might actually have argued, but dwell on the possibility that some passages might be inspired by Greek satirists like Lucian.⁵⁷

There is a subtle snobbery at play here. It's not so much that anyone denies outright that accounts of deliberative politics reflect historical reality; it's just that no one seems to find this fact particularly interesting. What seems interesting to historians is invariably the relation of these accounts to European textual traditions, or European expectations. Much the same occurs with the treatment of later texts from Tlaxcala: extant, detailed written records of the proceedings at its municipal council in the decades following the Spanish conquest, the *Tlaxcalan Actas*, which affirm at length both the oratorical skills of indigenous politicians and their facility with principles of consensus decision-making and reasoned debate.⁵⁸

You might think all this would be of interest to historians. Instead, what really seems to strike them as worthy of debate is the degree to which democratic mores displayed in the texts might be some sort of near-miraculous adaptation by 'astute Indians' to the political expectations of their European masters: effectively some kind of elaborate play-acting.⁵⁹ Why such historians imagine that a collection of sixteenth-century Spanish

friars, petty aristocrats and soldiers were likely to know anything about democratic procedure (much less, be impressed by it) is unclear, because educated opinion in Europe was almost uniformly anti-democratic at the time. If anyone was learning something new from the encounter, it was surely the Spaniards.

In the current intellectual climate, to suggest the Tlaxcalteca were anything but cynics or victims is considered just a tiny bit dangerous: one is opening oneself up to charges of naive romanticism.⁶⁰ In fact, these days more or less any attempt to suggest that Europeans learned anything at all of moral or social value from Native American people is likely to be met with mild derision and accusations of indulging in ‘noble savage’ tropes, or occasionally almost hysterical condemnation.⁶¹

But a strong case can be made that the deliberations recorded in Spanish sources are exactly what they seem to be – a glimpse into the mechanics of collective indigenous government – and if these deliberations bear any superficial resemblance to debates recorded in Thucydides or Xenophon, this is because, well, there are really only so many ways to conduct a political debate. At least one Spanish source provides explicit confirmation in this regard. Here we turn to Friar Toribio of Benavente, called by locals Motolinía (the ‘afflicted one’) for his ragged appearance, a sobriquet he seems to have happily adopted. It is to Motolinía and his Tlaxcalteca informants – who included Antonio Xicotencatl, most likely a grandson of Xicotencatl the Elder – that we owe the *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* (1541).⁶²

Motolinía confirms Cortés’s original observation: that Tlaxcala was indeed an indigenous republic governed not by a king, nor even by rotating office holders (as at Cholula), but by a council of elected officials (*teuctli*) answerable to the citizenry as a whole. Exactly how many sat on the high council of Tlaxcala is not clear: Spanish sources suggest any number from fifty to 200. Perhaps it depended on the matter at hand. Neither, unfortunately, does he tell us anything in detail about how these individuals were selected for office, or who was eligible (other Pueblan cities, including royal ones, rotated official duties among representatives of *calpolli*). On the topic of Tlaxcalteca modes of political training and instruction, however, Motolinía’s account comes alive.

Those who aspired to a role on the council of Tlaxcala, far from being expected to demonstrate personal charisma or the ability to outdo rivals, did

so in a spirit of self-deprecation – even shame. They were required to subordinate themselves to the people of the city. To ensure that this subordination was no mere show, each was subject to trials, starting with mandatory exposure to public abuse, regarded as the proper reward of ambition, and then – with one’s ego in tatters – a long period of seclusion, in which the aspiring politician suffered ordeals of fasting, sleep deprivation, bloodletting and a strict regime of moral instruction. The initiation ended with a ‘coming out’ of the newly constituted public servant, amid feasting and celebration.⁶³

Clearly, taking up office in this indigenous democracy required personality traits very different to those we take for granted in modern electoral politics. On this latter point, it is worth recalling that ancient Greek writers were well aware of the tendency for elections to throw up charismatic leaders with tyrannical pretensions. This is why they considered elections an aristocratic mode of political appointment, quite at odds with democratic principles; and why for much of European history the truly democratic way of filling offices was assumed to be by lottery.

Cortés may have praised Tlaxcala as an agrarian and commercial arcadia but, as Motolinía explains, when its citizens thought about their own political values, they actually saw those values as coming from the desert. Like other Nahuatl speakers, including the Aztecs, Tlaxcalteca liked to claim they were descended from Chichimec. These were considered the original hunter-gatherers who lived ascetic lives in deserts and forests, dwelling in primitive huts, ignorant of village or city life, rejecting corn and cooked food, bereft of clothing or organized religion, and living on wild things alone.⁶⁴ The ordeals endured by aspiring councillors in Tlaxcala were reminders of the need to cultivate Chichimec qualities (ultimately to be balanced by the Toltec virtues of an urbane warrior; and just where the correct balance lay was much debated among the Tlaxcalteca).

If all this sounds a little familiar, we must ask ourselves why. The Spanish friars will no doubt have heard echoes in these tales of Old World tropes for republican virtue – that same atavistic streak running from the biblical prophets through to Ibn Khaldun, not to mention their own ethic of world renunciation. The correspondences are so close that one begins to wonder if, in their auto-ethnography, the Tlaxcalteca in this case actually did present themselves to Spaniards in terms they knew would be instantly recognized and understood. Certainly, we know that the citizens of Tlaxcala

staged some remarkable theatrical spectacles for the benefit of their conquerors, including a 1539 pageant of the Crusader *Conquest of Jerusalem*, in which the climax was a mass baptism of (actual) pagans, dressed up as Moors.⁶⁵

Spanish observers may even have learned from Tlaxcalteca or Aztec sources what it means to have once been a ‘noble savage’. Nor can we rule out the possibility that indigenous Mexican ideas on the subject entered wider streams of European political thought that gathered force only in the days of Rousseau, whose State of Nature maps with alarming fidelity on to Motolinía’s account of the Chichimec, right down to the ‘primitive hut dwellings’ in which they were supposed to have lived. Perhaps some of the seeds of our own evolutionary story about how it all began with simple, egalitarian hunter-gatherers were sown right there, in the imaginations of city-dwelling Amerindians.

But we digress.

Amid all this mutual positioning, what can we really conclude about the political constitution of Tlaxcala at the time of the Spanish conquest? Was it really a functioning urban democracy and, if so, how many other such democracies might have existed in the pre-Columbian Americas? Or are we confronting a mirage, a strategic conjuring of the ‘ideal commonwealth’, supplied to a receptive audience of millenarian friars? Were elements of history and mimesis both at work?

If all we had to go on were written sources, there would always be room for doubt; but archaeologists confirm that by the fourteenth century AD the city of Tlaxcala was, in fact, already organized on an entirely different basis to Tenochtitlan. There is no sign of a palace or central temple, and no major ball-court (an important setting, recall, for royal ritual in other Mesoamerican cities). Instead, archaeological survey reveals a cityscape given over almost entirely to the well-appointed residences of its citizens, constructed to uniformly high standards around more than twenty district plazas, all raised up on grand earthen terraces. The largest municipal assemblies were housed in a civic complex called Tizatlan, but this was located outside the city itself, with spaces for public gatherings entered via broad gateways.⁶⁶

Modern archaeological investigations thus confirm the existence of an indigenous republic at Tlaxcala long before Cortés set foot on Mexican soil, while later written sources leave us in little doubt as to its democratic

credentials. The contrasts with other known Mesoamerican cities of the time are quite striking – though it should also be said that fifth-century Athens was something of an outlier, surrounded by petty kingdoms and oligarchies. Nor should these contrasts be overdrawn. What we have learned in this chapter is that the political traditions of Tlaxcala are not an anomaly, but lie in one broad stream of urban development which can be traced back, in outline, to the experiments in social welfare undertaken 1,000 years earlier at Teotihuacan. Despite Aztec claims to a special relationship with that abandoned city, Tlaxcala was at least as much a part of its legacy as the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan – and in most really significant ways, more so.

After all, it was the Aztec rulers of Tenochtitlan who finally broke with tradition, creating a predatory empire that was in some ways closer to the dominant European political models of the time, or what has since come to be known as ‘the state’. In the next chapter, we intend to turn back and consider this term. What precisely is a state? Does it really mark an entirely new phase of human history? Is the term even useful any more?

