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CHAPTER SEVEN

Arthur Joyce's Poststructural Rereading of Oaxacan Social History: A Story of Sacred Spaces, Rituals and the Agency of Commoners

“In addition to defense, Monte Albán was founded as a ceremonial center. Both leaders and common people traveled to the barren hilltop and began constructing the ceremonial center in order to communicate with the sacred realm in new and more powerful ways... Even in its first few centuries, the scale of the Main Plaza and its monumental architecture far exceeded earlier ceremonial spaces in the Valley of Oaxaca, indicating that performances of politico-religious ceremonies were important in the founding early history of the site... The construction of the Main Plaza precinct involved a program of place-making that materialized the founding community and its innovative political and religious ideas, institutions, and practices.”

Arthur A. Joyce, 2010¹

With a Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology at Rutgers University (1991), American archaeologist Arthur A. Joyce is another who comes to a career-long focus on Oaxacan archaeology that does not derive directly from the venerable Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal and John Paddock lineage. And thus while engaging the same materials, the same region and same timeframe as our previous archeologist-authors, he is formed and steeped in very different theoretical approaches and concerns. Equipped with information unavailable when previous versions were composed, including the results of his own excavations of the southwestern coastal region of Oaxaca, Joyce nonetheless

* Note that I have managed the footnotes in ways that respect “the first citation” (which is thus a full bibliographical citation) *in this chapter*, irrespective of whether that work was cited in a previous chapter. Also, to avoid confusion in this typescript, I have retained the quotation marks on all quotes, including those that are formatted as block quotations.

¹ Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 131.

perfectly exemplifies the fifth working proposition outlined in the Introduction—“the priority of presuppositions,” which accounts for “the contingent quality of every Monte Albán narrative (re)construction”—insofar as the novelty of his rendition of the Zapotec capital's history owes much less to new data than to alternate methodological frames and assumptions. In fact, he is, as we'll see momentarily, invested in two very different sets of theoretical propositions, neither of which has played large in any of the previous stories of Monte Albán and both of which lead to more generalized insights or “life lessons” that we have not previously encountered.

Like Marcus Winter, committed to telling a story of ancient Oaxacan social history that is far wider and deeper than that of the career of the great Zapotec capital, Joyce provides with his *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (2010) the most recent thoroughgoing synthesis of the region; and thus again, as in Winter's case, for me to distill from his much broader account a historical (re)construction focused strictly on Monte Albán is directly at odds with his expressly inclusive purposes. Also, like Paddock's 1966 overview, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,”² Joyce's book has a kind of double purpose insofar as his highly original story of Oaxaca and Monte Albán is embedded within deliberately unoriginal rehearsals of innumerable debates about various aspects of Oaxacan archaeology. And thus, like Richard Blanton's account, the flow of a fascinating and venturesome narrative is frequently interrupted by digressions about methods, competing opinions and controversies in the field.

Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos is, then, in large part, a survey textbook wherein Joyce inventories presently prevailing approaches to and ideas about ancient Oaxaca. In that respect, he positions himself as a largely neutral reporter on the recent past and current status of the archeological, ethnohistoric, ethnographic and iconographic research in the region. He acknowledges differences of opinion and, in a field famed for public

² John Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” part II in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. John Paddock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966, 1970), 83-242.

disagreements, aims for the sort of coverage that “opens up dialogue and constructive engagement on Oaxaca’s ancient past.”³ Moreover, unlike previous syntheses, his consideration of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs is augmented by commensurate attention to the lesser known Chatinos on southwestern coast of Oaxaca, the focus of Joyce’s own field research since the 1986. Additionally, however, that evenhanded inventory of ideas is paired with a more personal and opinionated strain insofar as, besides surveying the relevant alternatives, Joyce invariably weighs in with his own considered surmise as to both the most suitable theoretical frameworks and the most persuasive historical (re)constructions and interpretations.

It is, consequently, from that more self-asserting stream of this work that I can, via some selective reading, extract one more compelling and very different story of the emergence, flourishing and decline of Monte Albán.⁴ To be sure, Arthur Joyce provides us another “followable” version of events insofar as a coherent logic, or what I term two “guiding themes,” inform the beginning, middle and end of the story he tells⁵—but it

³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, xiv.

⁴ The story of Monte Albán summarized in this section is based overwhelmingly on a selective reading of Joyce’s book-length synthesis, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (2010). Nonetheless, that rendition of the history of the Zapotec capital is also informed, at points, by shorter and largely compatible works, most notably, four articles: [1] Arthur A. Joyce, “The Founding of Monte Albán: Sacred Propositions and Social Practices,” in *Agency in Archaeology*, eds. Marcia-Anne Dobres and John Robb (London: Routledge, 2000), 71-91; [2] Arthur A. Joyce, “Imperialism in Pre-Aztec Mesoamerica: Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, and the Lower Río Verde Valley,” in *Ancient Mesoamerica Warfare*, eds. M. Kathryn Brown and Travis W. Stanton (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2003), 49-72; [3] Arthur A. Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” in *Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, eds. Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 192-216; and [4] Arthur A. Joyce, “The Main Plaza of Monte Albán: A Life History of Place,” in *The Archaeology of Meaningful Places*, eds. Brenda J. Bowser and María Nieves Zedeño (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), 32-52.

⁵ On the “followability” of narrative, which I address in the Introduction, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. 1, 152. For comments that apply Ricoeur’s insights directly to archaeologically-based writing, see Mark Pluciennik,

does take considerable grooming, pruning and, in cases, patching to lay bare that highly provocative plotline. There are lots of impediments to the narrative flow. And note also that Joyce is another scholar whose ideas about Oaxaca history, especially concerning the role of religion, continued to evolve following the publication of his textbook synthesis; and thus my comments here ought not be construed as an accurate depiction of his final views. Yet again I accentuate that my focus is on the stories themselves rather than the full careers of their archaeologist-authors.

I. A FIRST GUIDING NARRATIVE THEME:

ACCENTUATING THE AGENCY AND NON-COMPLIANCE OF COMMONERS

Among the narrative options we've considered so far, both Joyce's methodological investments and his account of Monte Albán history most closely resemble those of Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, who, therefore, also become the authors with whom Joyce expresses his most significant disagreements. And, as always, it is the differences rather than the shared ground that will prove most interesting and revealing.

Like the co-authors of *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (1996), Joyce considers it crucial to make explicit the theoretical perspective that informs his hypotheses and, consequently, he produces a synthesis that is, by self-description, "more heavily theorized than other books on ancient Oaxaca."⁶ Reechoing their discontents, Joyce too criticizes the so-termed "processual approaches" that dominated in the 1960s and 1970s wherein archaeology was increasingly conceptualized as "a science based on positivistic philosophy with the goal of developing general, even universal, theories of the past."⁷ He too complains that those once-

"Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654. Also see Cornelius Holtorf, "Meta-stories of Archaeology," *World Archaeology*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2010): 381-93.

⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, xiv.

⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 18.

dominant approaches, which explain Oaxaca social history largely in terms of competition over natural resources, were distressingly mechanistic and impersonal insofar as “People as well as social institutions were seen as little more than functional components that contributed to the maintenance of an equilibrium state for the overall social or ecological system.”⁸ Accordingly, Joyce follows current trends in rejecting aspirations to develop general theories of society, history or cultural evolution in favor of “a more humanistic perspective” that acknowledges, even celebrates, the realization that purported “social systems” are invariably fragmented, contested, transient and incomplete.⁹ He, therefore, avoids any intimation of “cultural evolution,” with or without fixed stages, which might connote undue regularity in the course of Oaxaca’s social developments.

More specifically, as an antidote to the universalizing holism and anonymity of earlier “systems theory,” Joyce, again like Marcus, Flannery and many others, applauds the increased attention to the “agency” and personal initiative of ancient Oaxacan social actors.¹⁰ In fact, Joyce too explicitly endorses Sherry Ortner’s rationale for what she terms “action theory” (or sometimes “practice theory”) as a means of appreciating that human activities are constrained—but not entirely determined—by generalized social and cultural structures and schema.¹¹ Joyce can, thereby, agree entirely with the authors of *Zapotec Civilization* that, while much of Oaxaca history may have unfolded in conformity to regularized social or ecological processes, we need to accept as well that, “many changes can take place through the actor’s own decisions.”¹² That is to say, Joyce too urges us to hold open the prospect that enterprising Oaxacan groups and individuals not infrequently undertook creative and purposeful, if somewhat capricious, activities—

⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 18.

⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 20.

¹⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 25.

¹¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 26-27.

¹² Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico’s Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 31.

unpredictable contingencies that processual archaeologists fail to detect, but that, as we've seen, play exceptionally large roles in Marcus and Flannery's pre-Columbian narratives. And, moreover, affirming yet another of those scholars' foremost principles for (re)constructing ancient Oaxacan history, Joyce too concedes that, while such creative initiatives sometimes eventuated in the desired outcomes, many of the most significant developments at Monte Albán and elsewhere were the result of "unintended consequences."¹³

All these important similarities notwithstanding, Joyce makes two interrelated, if oddly juxtaposed, sorts of theoretical adjustments that will prove profoundly impactful for every episode in his version of the story of Monte Albán. The first set of adjustments—and thus a first guiding narrative theme—derives from a willingness to traffic more heavily than earlier Oaxacan archaeologists in theoretical perspectives drawn from poststructural, feminist and subaltern theories, which together direct Joyce to special concerns for individual and collective "identity construction," gender and sexuality dynamics, as well as status differences and disparities of power. Those influences lead Joyce not only to reaffirm Marcus and Flannery's emphasis on the "agency" of the ancient Oaxacan elite, but, additionally, to place an even stronger emphasis on the creative initiative of the non-elite or, for lack of a better term, "common people." Informed by voluminous debate about the applicability of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and Judith Butler to archaeological theory, Joyce supports the wary premise that "All societies are permeated and constituted by relations of power, which cannot be established or implemented without the production and circulation of knowledge."¹⁴ But he is even more fully persuaded that, in southern Mexico as elsewhere, "Dominant ideologies provide openings for negotiation,

¹³ See, for instance, Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 212.

¹⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 28.

contestation, and resistance because they usually include some form of social contract that delineates obligations of ruling authorities to their subjects.”¹⁵

Joyce, in other words, soundly rejects either explicit or implicit suggestions that non-elite Oaxacan constituencies were passively compliant to the ideological machinations of rulers. Never is he content with the familiar suggestions “that commoners have been duped by the dominant discourse,”¹⁶ an intimation that he detects, for instance, in the Marcus-Flannery story of Monte Albán.¹⁷ Alternatively, taking clues from subaltern studies’ insights into the creative and weighty role of non-elites in political processes, he highlights the oft-underestimated abilities of lower-status groups to resist, rearrange and manipulate dominant ideologies in ways that serve the interests of supposed subordinates as well as rulers. In his corrective view, Oaxacan “commoners”—a term that belies Joyce’s very high regard for farmers, craftspeople, merchants and so forth—were poorer but not less politically savvy or more acquiescent than the wealthier elite classes; commoners too have great independence and abundant “agency.” From this perspective, then, prevailing ideologies, if invariably favoring the ruling classes, nonetheless have the character of negotiated “social contracts” into which both elites and non-elites enter. As feminist and poststructuralist theorists remind him, political authority and dominant discourses are always negotiated and contested.¹⁸

In short, then, foregrounding the agency, initiative and underestimated independence of so-termed commoners—who, of course, always constitute by far the largest share of ancient Oaxaca’s population—has, as we’ll see, large ramifications for the (re)telling of every era of this region’s past.

¹⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 31.

¹⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 31.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 212.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 27-32; or Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 212.

**II. A SECOND GUIDING NARRATIVE THEME:
REVIVING A DETERMINATIVE ROLE FOR RELIGION, RITUAL AND “SACRED SPACE”**

Joyce's second crucial set of adjustments—for which he is far less thorough in delineating his theoretical debts—involves a much heightened role for religion and ritual, a renewed interest that, curiously enough, gives us a picture of Monte Albán and its residents that is, in important ways, more reminiscent of Alfonso Caso's and John Paddock's than those of his more current colleagues. It is telling, for instance, that Joyce's inventory of recently influential theoretical work makes no mention whatever of developments in the field of religious studies;¹⁹ his enumeration of “the key points” of his poststructural approach, replete with remarks about agency, identity and power, does not include any reference to religion or ritual;²⁰ and, with very rare exceptions, he cites no theories or theorists of religion per se.²¹ Nor does he utilize the now-commonplace language of “cosmovision,” whereby many Mesoamericanists are working to accentuate but also nuance the application of the problematic term “religion” to this context.²² Yet, on the other hand, it is arguably the larger and more determinative role that Joyce—among the very few archaeologists in any field to appeal frequently to the phraseology of “the sacred,” “the divine,” “sacred space,” “cosmic mountain” and “*axis mundi*”—

¹⁹ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 17-34 and 284-94.

²⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 287-88.

²¹ A nearly unique exception to Joyce's avoidance of scholars with a primary specialization in the study of religion is a passing reference to Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)—see Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 32—but there scant sign that important work had a significant influence on his approach to religion or ritual. At the same time, Joyce cites the social scientific work, David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), though likewise without elaboration.

²² See, for instance, Alfredo López Austin, “Cosmovision,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vol. 1, 268-74; or David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers*, second edition (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2014), chap. 2.

assigns to religion and ritual that most differentiates his narrative of Monte Albán from those of Blanton, Winter, Marcus and Flannery.²³

Phenomenologists of religion will immediately recognize this as terminology (in)famously associated with historian of religions Mircea Eliade; but then excited anticipation that they have, at long last, discovered a theoretical kindred spirit working in Oaxaca will, upon closer inspection, be only partly rewarded. Joyce does comment favorably on the increased prevalence of “methodologies of hermeneutics or the science of interpretation,” an approach most often associated in archaeological circles with Ian Hodder, as “a more appropriate methodology for examining the multiple and often contested meanings of materials and practices in the past.”²⁴ And religionists have to be struck by his heavy reliance on concepts and terms that, if long-contested, bear an unmistakable Eliadean stamp. But, perhaps unwilling to jeopardize his progressive, edgy, duly skeptical methodological profile, Joyce never once acknowledges that phenomenological interpretative lineage or, for that matter, any strain of religious studies.²⁵ That omission, however, becomes somewhat less glaring as we come to realize

²³ Joyce is not explicit concerning the way that he regards the category of “the sacred,” which he uses interchangeably with “the divine” and occasionally “the supernatural.” One can imagine that he adheres to the social scientific position that “the sacred” is a cultural construction rather than an ontological reality; but his usage of term, perhaps surprisingly, is actually similar to that of phenomenologists who exercise epoché or ‘bracketing’ insofar as they withhold judgment on the question of the existence or non-existence of “the sacred.”

²⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 20. In addition Ian Hodder, *The Archaeological Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) and among numerous works by that author that advocate for hermeneutical approaches, Joyce points also to Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1992).

²⁵ On matters of “sacred space,” Joyce frequently cites works by Wendy Ashmore such as “Site-Planning Principles and Concepts of Directionality among the Ancient Maya,” *Latin American Antiquity* 2 (1991): 199-226. Seemingly the nearest that Joyce ever comes to acknowledging the history of religions strain of scholarship is a passing reference (Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 194) to urban geographer Paul Wheatley’s *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971). As Wheatley’s student, David Carrasco, has repeatedly reminded us, that seminal

that his plotline, while frequently foregrounding Oaxacans' urgency to cultivate "an ongoing relationship with the divine,"²⁶ depends upon presuppositions about religion and ritual that are actually more Durkheimian than Eliadean. For Joyce, it is the social rather than existential ramifications of ritualizing that are really consequential in determining the course of Oaxacan history.

Nevertheless, even if Joyce is at most an inadvertent, likely reluctant, proponent of *Religionswissenschaft* and the phenomenology of religion, his rendition depends heavily on two of Mircea Eliade's signature concerns—namely, "archaic consciousness" and "sacred space." Each has major ramifications for Joyce's interpretation of pre-Columbian events, and thus each deserves brief comment before turning more directly to the particulars of his account.

A. THE "ARCHAIC CONSCIOUSNESS" OF ANCIENT OAXACANS: NON-MODERN PRIORITIES AND RELIGIOUS PRE-OCCUPATIONS

As discussed in previous chapters, all students of ancient Mesoamerica must navigate the vexing tension between avoiding ethnocentrism by assuming that the human actors in that context had decidedly non-Western ways of thinking versus the avoidance of exoticism by attributing to them thought processes that would strike contemporary audiences entirely reasonable and level-headed. Do we respect ancient Oaxacans by hypothesizing Mesoamerican beliefs and priorities very different from our own? Or do we enhance our prospects of understanding by imagining that they are quite similar to us? Are they more suitably depicted as strange or familiar?

Caso, Bernal and Paddock, all intent on heightening appreciation of pre-Columbian artistic and intellectual accomplishments that seem to reflect spiritual

work relies heavily on concepts and conceptions drawn from Mircea Eliade, who was a colleague of Wheatley's.

²⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 63.

sensitivities that moderns have lost, favor the former approach; they rely on the supposal of ancient Oaxacans' extreme religiosity to explain features of the archaeological record that seem otherwise to make no sense. By contrast, Blanton and Winter provide us Oaxacan protagonists whose highly practical priorities are neither significantly different from peoples in other traditional nor even modern contexts. And Marcus and Flannery, though individually and together having made compelling cases for both alternatives—and despite thoughtful reflections on the non-Western distinctiveness of “the ancient Zapotec mind”²⁷—opt in *Zapotec Civilization*, as we saw, to provide a story of Monte Albán featuring “‘actors’ who are conceived as essentially individualistic, self-interested, rational, and pragmatic,”²⁸ that is say, decidedly familiar.

Equally well aware of persuasive arguments for both alternatives, Joyce elects to tip the (im)balance back toward recommendations that, in order to respect and understand pre-Columbian Mesoamericans, we need to appreciate that they were operating with concerns and relying of cosmological presuppositions very different from our own. His Oaxacan actors are much more “strange” and more “religiously inclined” than those of *Zapotec Civilization*. In that sense, perhaps to his chagrin, he endorses, albeit in qualified ways, something akin to Eliade's heuristic distinction between an “archaic consciousness” versus a “modern consciousness.”²⁹

There are, of course, abundant scholars along with Eliade who are implicated in the snarled old question of “how natives think.” Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's much-debated

²⁷ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 18-21.

²⁸ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31. It is important to note that Flannery and even more Marcus have likewise repeatedly pointed out many of these same features of indigenous Zapotec religion and thinking that Joyce enumerates; indeed Joyce Marcus is among Joyce's principal resources on the topic. But, in the account of Monte Albán they provide in *Zapotec Civilization*, they do not afford those non-Western presuppositions nearly the same weight that Arthur Joyce does in his account of the configuration and history of Monte Albán.

²⁹ See, for instance, Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), originally 1957.

ruminations about a “primitive mentality,” Claude Lévi Strauss’s reflections on the “savage mind,” the subsequent debate between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere concerning indigenous thought processes, and Paul Wheatley’s comments on the “cosmomagical thinking” without which, he suggests, we cannot not possibly understand the transitions from village to urban life in Mesoamerica and elsewhere, are only a few of the largest landmarks in the endless debate.³⁰ At this point, even broaching the notoriously disputed topic rightly evokes red flags among both anthropologists and religionists; every simple solution has serious vulnerabilities. But when Joyce provides his very apt ethnohistorically-informed summary of Oaxacans’ “religion and ideology on the eve of Spanish Conquest,”³¹ he enumerates, for better or worse, a number of the hallmarks that Eliade (and others) have typically used to differentiate “native” versus “modern” ways of conceptualizing the world and humans’ place in it.

Joyce contends, for instance, that indigenous Oaxacans operated with a “religion” that “was based on the belief in a vital force that animated all ‘living’ things.”³² For them, he writes, “earth, mountains, and the rivers are therefore not considered parts of the physical environment separate from humans, but have agency and are connected with people and deities via the sacred life force.”³³ Recchoing the insistence of Vine Deloria, Jr. and so many scholars of American Indians, his ancient Oaxacan protagonists operate

³⁰ See Lucien Lévy Bruhl, *How Natives Think* [*Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1910)], trans. Lilian A Clare (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1985); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* [*La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1969)] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); and Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, chap. 3. On ways in which the debate between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere might apply to our understandings of ancient Mesoamericans, see David Carrasco’s section on “The Debate: How ‘Natives’ Think about Europeans,” in his *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myth and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, revised edition (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000) 212-216.

³¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56-63.

³² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56.

³³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56.

with a characteristically “Native” worldview in which even elements of the landscape are “animate entities” rather than “inanimate objects.”³⁴ Likewise, Joyce’s observation that, “time in ancient Mesoamerica was sacred and a manifestation of the vital force of *ini*, *pèe*, or *cryasa*”³⁵ reechoes Eliade’s insistence that the preeminent contrast between “archaic” and “modern” consciousnesses is divergent ways of conceiving time.³⁶

Additionally, when Joyce contends that everywhere in ancient Oaxaca, irrespective of regional differences in detail, “the origins of the cosmos, time, deities, people, and sacred principles were the focus of indigenous creation stories,”³⁷ he is reiterating another central preoccupation that Eliade attributes to essentially all traditional peoples. Though Joyce, as we’ll note momentarily, relies much more heavily on the notion of a “sacred covenant”—a kind of legalistic, contractual metaphor that Eliade associates with Abrahamic rather than indigenous religions—he nonetheless makes the Eliadean observation that these ubiquitous creation stories were foundational in delineating humans’ responsibilities as participants in a dynamically relational universe wherein reciprocal obligations link humans and deities, humans and other elements of nature, and also elite humans with so-termed commoners. Moreover, Joyce contends, again in an Eliadean vein, that these reciprocal relations are maintained largely via rituals, sacrifice—including but by no means limited to human sacrifice—foremost among them:

“Mixtec and Zapotec creation stories therefore describe the fundamental relationship between people and the divine as a sacred covenant that established

³⁴ See, for instance, Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, second edition (Golden, Colorado: North American Press, 1992), chap. 5, “The Problem of Creation.”

³⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 58.

³⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), originally 1949.

³⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 58-59.

relations of debt and merit between humans and gods, with sacrifice as a fundamental condition of human existence.”³⁸

In other words, though nearly all of the poststructural theorists that he explicitly cites are “hermeneuts of suspicion” insofar as they tend to treat religion (to the extent that they even discuss it) as derivative of the socio-political factors that, according to them, actually drive social change, Joyce himself adopts a different starting point.³⁹ Surprisingly like Eliade and other phenomenologists of religion, he espouses something closer to the generous and empathetic stance of a “hermeneutics of retrieval” wherein indigenous religious sensibilities, however “weird” they may seem from a modern perspective, actually do play determinative roles in ancient Oaxacan decision-making. His social scientific commitments notwithstanding, the “more humanistic perspective” that Joyce embraces allows him to suggest repeatedly—and this is precisely consistent with Eliade’s conception of the priorities of the so-termed *homo religiosus*—that what makes life most rewarding for ancient Oaxacans is not political power, not sexual pleasure nor material prosperity, but rather “contact with the divine.”⁴⁰ His Oaxacan protagonists, by contrast to Blanton’s or Marcus and Flannery’s cagey political pragmatists, find nothing so urgent nor so satisfying as “communication with the sacred.” In this rendition, religion is a primary rather than ancillary factor.

³⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 60. It is perhaps worth noting some slippage in Joyce’s characterization of eve-of-the-Conquest Oaxacan religion insofar as he sometimes intimates that the foremost priority is challenging and interacting with an *impersonal* “vital force that animated all ‘living’ things” (e.g., p. 56), yet much more often he relies on the notion of a “sacred covenant” between humans and the divine, a metaphor that suggests Oaxacans were conceiving the divine in *more personal, anthropomorphic* ways. Though the two alternatives are perhaps not mutually exclusive, at this point, students of religion are more likely to embrace the former than the latter.

³⁹ For a clear and concise account of the difference between a “hermeneutics of suspicion” versus a “hermeneutics of retrieval” (or “hermeneutics of restoration”), see Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 193-96.

⁴⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 62.

Furthermore, despite his persistent interest in social inequalities, Joyce considers that this ever-pressing incentive to maintain “an ongoing relationship with the divine” is, so it seems, shared equally by elite and non-elite Oaxacans. Consistent with his affirmations of the agency and independent initiative of commoners, Joyce observes that non-elites had their own domestic-based ritual strategies for “accessing the sacred,” which were in place before, during and after the emergence of large ceremonial centers; in this respect, he too reiterates the familiar theme of centuries-long Oaxaca religious-cultural continuity that is especially apparent in non-elite social spheres. But he notes also that “nobles occupied a special place in relation to religious belief and practice, especially the sacred covenant and the acts of sacrifice that it required.”⁴¹ Instead of reaffirming that strain in the Marcus-Flannery account wherein elites *used* religious ideologies in which they themselves did not actually believe to manipulate gullible non-elites, the rulers in Joyce's account are fully and sincerely committed to their public and artistic religious rhetoric; elites too conduct themselves as *homo religiosus*.

Consequently, the noble-commoner “social contracts” that play such prominent roles in Joyce's renditions of the history of Monte Albán and other settlements are *not* based—as so many stories of ancient Oaxaca imply—on military intimidation or demands for tribute or manpower, but rather on a shared consensus among the elite and non-elite that they must collaborate in the preeminent goal of maintaining “contact with the sacred.” By contrast to other recent accounts, in Joyce's presentation, huge disparities in status and political power notwithstanding, the rulers and the ruled are strikingly likeminded their “religious” aspirations.

In sum, then, one may sense here that scholars of Oaxaca are replicating their own version of the much-discussed clash between Eric Thompson and Sylvanus Morley's mid-twentieth century, rose-hued characterization of the Classic Mayas as mystically inclined worshippers of time, neither adept nor interested in warfare or political strategizing, versus the (over-)corrections of Linda Schele's generation wherein those

⁴¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 62.

same Maya leaders are depicted as blood-obsessed political operatives, not infrequently ruthless in their interminable quests for power and authority.⁴² And the prospect that alternate stories of Monte Albán actually present competing stereotypes of native peoples rather than empirical historical differences should give us pause. Nonetheless, for comparative religionists, Joyce's characterization of Oaxacan beliefs and practices is refreshing insofar as he takes religion more seriously than most of his contemporaries; but it is also concerningly predictable insofar as that depiction is so broadly consistent with the generic view of indigenous religion that Mircea Eliade articulated more than a half century ago. Aside from some terminological specificities, Joyce provides little to distinguish Zapotec religion from that of Mixtecs, Chatinos or, for that matter, American Indians in general. Yet, be that as it may, by recasting his account with protagonists who are seemingly more amicable and definitely more "religiously motivated" than those in *Zapotec Civilization*, Joyce will present a storyline of Oaxaca history that is substantially different in every era.

B. SACRED SPACES AS RITUAL CONTEXTS: NEGOTIATING COSMOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL "SACRED COVENANTS"

While Joyce never actually uses the terms "archaic consciousness" or "homo religiosus," his appeal to another patently Eliadean theme—namely, "sacred space"—is explicit, frequent and, moreover, brings into the foreground a topic that is notably absent from the accounts of Blanton, Winter or Marcus and Flannery.⁴³ In his (re)construction,

⁴² For explicit discussion of these contrastive views of the Classic Maya, see the Introduction to Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kinds: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), 18-32.

⁴³ For a concise summary of ideas about "sacred space" that Eliade treats more fully in countless publications, see Mircea Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism," in Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988), 105-29; originally published as "Architecture sacrée et symbolisme," in *Mircea Eliade*, ed. Constantin Tacou (Paris: L'Herne, Cahiers de l'Herne #33, 1978), 141-56. Likewise for a concise summary of Eliade's model of sacred space, see Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), vol. II, chap. 14. Among many places that Joyce appeals to these ideas (without any explicit

long prior to the emergence of sedentary communities, “sacred mountaintops were associated with rain and the cosmic creation, while springs and caves were portals to the underworld,” and thus propitious “sacred places” for offerings and sacrifices.⁴⁴ Then, providing a kind of leitmotif for his entire Oaxacan history, each advance in village and subsequently urban development, from San José Mogote forward, issues in—and even depends upon!—the construction of more and more elaborate ceremonial precincts. In fact, in this religion-affirming story, Monte Albán ascends, remarkably enough, in very large part because its Main Plaza is conceived and then widely appreciated as a uniquely “sacred place,” an “*axis mundi*” par excellence; and, therefore, when that conception is compromised, the capital declines. In Joyce’s view, both the successes and failures of Oaxacan communities are contingent not simply on accessibility to resources or defensive capabilities, but even more on their appeal as places at which “contact with the divine” is enabled.

The configuration and scale of Oaxacan ceremonial spaces, of course, vary widely over time and place, from the modest to the sumptuous; yet, in each case, according to Joyce, so-termed sacred spaces, whether natural or humanly constructed, are important foremost as ambiances for group ritual. Though it is troubling that his commitment “to be explicit about theory”⁴⁵ does not extend to the endorsement of any particular theory of ritual, he repeatedly presents scenarios that underscore a notion of ritual-abetted negotiation and maintenance of “sacred covenants” that seems to work simultaneously at two different levels (a distinction he never explicitly makes).

First, at a cosmological level, ritual provides Oaxacans an occasion to negotiate with gods. Because he insists that religion in this context “was based on the belief in a

acknowledgement of Eliade), see, for instance, Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca.”

⁴⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 61.

⁴⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 17.

vital force that animated all 'living' things,"⁴⁶ one might expect Joyce to detect among the Zapotecs and Mixtecs something like Alfredo López Austin's fascinatingly non-Western description of Nahua ritual, including human sacrifice, as a means of strategically channeling and facilitating the flow of impersonal, fluid-like energies through various realms of the cosmos and human body.⁴⁷ That would, I think, be more persuasive. Alternatively, however, Joyce suggests more anthropomorphic (Abrahamic-like) conceptions of divinity by following John Monaghan's posit that, for Oaxacans, the fundamental relationship between people and the divine was understood as "a sacred covenant that established relations of debt and merit between humans and the gods, with sacrifice as a fundamental condition of human existence."⁴⁸ Accordingly, Joyce repeatedly asserts that Oaxacans' primary and deliberate motivation for ritualizing—sacrifice included—was to "communicate with the supernatural" or, more specifically, as befits this notion of a contractual relationship, to honor one's "covenantal" obligations to the gods and then to collect one's due rewards.

Second, at a more sociological level, ritual also provides elite and common people an occasion to negotiate among themselves. If humans and gods are bound in a reciprocal contractual relationship, so too are Oaxacan rulers and commoners, according to Joyce, joined by a "social contract." For him, then, not unlike Durkheim, collective

⁴⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56.

⁴⁷ See Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, trans. Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press 1988).

⁴⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 60. With respect to the notion of "sacred covenants," which is so important in Joyce's version of events, he credits John D. Monaghan, *The Covenants with Earth and Rain: Exchange, Sacrifice, and Revelation in Mixtec Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), who provides very persuasive, ethnographically-based evidence of that concept among the contemporary Mixtec community of Santiago Nuyoo, located in the Mixteca Alta region. Nonetheless, based on the way that pre-Columbian *impersonal* conceptions of divinity were, in colonial contexts in across the Americas, frequently transformed into more *personal* conceptions, which were presumably more amenable European Christian sensibilities, one has to suspect that the notion of a "covenant" was a colonial rather than pre-Columbian means of conceptualizing the relations between people and gods.

ritual is *ostensibly* important because it provides participants the (largely fictive) sense that they are in a healthy relationship with the gods; but ritual is *actually* more important as the premier context in which elite and non-elite constituencies negotiate all of the social alliances and inequalities with which Joyce is so much concerned. Given his subaltern sensibilities, Joyce rejects the notion that social identities, gender roles, discrepancies of status and power are ever simply assigned by the elite and accepted by passive non-elites. To the contrary, all of these ascriptions are contested and negotiated—and ritual contexts provide the paramount venues for those ongoing transactions and interventions. The group rituals undertaken in so-termed sacred spaces are, in other words, sites of social as well as cosmological negotiation wherein commoners are manipulated, but also empowered.

Owing to these paired roles for ritual, we can detect in Joyce's narrative an intriguing twist on the sort of "unintended consequences" that are so important in Marcus and Flannery's account insofar as there is a frequent disjunction between the ostensibly "religious" impetus that accounts for Oaxaca's ceremonial centers and the largely unforeseen, but exceptionally far-ranging, social ramifications of the ritual activities undertaken therein. Regarding purportedly "religious" motives, Joyce rejects the posit of those scholars (and many others) that the ceremonial plazas of Oaxaca, first at San José Mogote and later at Monte Albán and elsewhere, were strategically designed by calculating, condescending and self-interested leaders as theaters of intimidation and propagandizing; and, instead, Joyce—adopting at this point an empathetic approach more akin to that of Eliade—is, it seems, willing to accept that both the elite architects and non-elite laborers responsible for building those plazas proceeded with similarly heartfelt attempts to create a conduit to the supernatural. In his view, religious yearnings really do account for Oaxaca's monumental architecture! Nonetheless, regarding unanticipated but not necessarily untoward social consequences, irrespective of the planners' success or the lack thereof in contacting the supernatural, Joyce—at this juncture more like Durkheim than Eliade—appreciates these highly choreographed ritual occasions as the most fecund contexts in which groups and individuals acquire and/or resist their social identities.

Even if the spiritual rewards of ritual are elusive, the social repercussions are always ample.

In sum, then, concerning Joyce's methodological investments, via an unlikely combination of usually antagonist theoretical stances—a version of “practice theory” that derives from poststructural, feminist and subaltern studies coupled with an understated and indirect debt to the phenomenological history of religions—he presents us with a stirringly different narrative of ancient Oaxaca wherein nothing is quite so important as the creation, utilization and abandonment of “sacred spaces.” At points, depictions of the protagonists seem contradictory. On the one hand, precisely as we would expect from a scholar much influenced by the skepticism of contemporary social theory, Joyce often implies that these Oaxacan social actors made decisions on the basis of pragmatic self-interest and thus aspirations for material wealth, social status and political influence. In that respect, his protagonists are not so different from those of *Zapotec Civilization*, except insofar as Joyce redirects attention to the self-interested agency and initiative of commoners as well as elites. On the other hand, however, Joyce also retrieves an older (Eliadean) notion, in ways more reminiscent of Alfonso Caso's odes to the cerebral gifts of the Zapotecs, that what really motivates these ancient Oaxacan are aspirations not to wealth and status but rather to the maintenance of a “sacred contract,” which can be honored only by means of ritual that is undertaken in sacred spaces. These competing, or perhaps complementary, presuppositions about the driving motivations of ancient Oaxacans, as we'll see, assert themselves in every episode of Arthur Joyce's rendition of pre-Columbian southern Mexico.

III. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS:

ARTHUR JOYCE'S HISTORICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION

In any case, I turn now to Arthur Joyce's actual plotline for the history of Oaxaca. Exercising his special interests, he will revisit every era both with a special eye to so-called sacred spaces and with a poststructural perspective that urges him to unprecedented levels of concern for matters of identity, gender and sexuality, status

differences and disparities of power. Compelling as these lines of questioning may be, the archaeological data, especially for the earliest periods, seldom issue in certain answers. Moreover, owing to his dual purpose in recounting scholarly debates before weighing in with his own position, Joyce's storyline, not unlike Blanton's highly engaging account of Monte Albán as a "disembedded capital," is nested within a thicket of methodological digressions and debate summaries that, while worthy in themselves, often interrupt the flow of the eminently original tale he has to tell. Trees obstruct the forest, as it were. And Joyce's Monte Alban storiological lines are further tangled by his commitment to track respective developments in the Mixtec highlands and lower Río Verde Valley as well in Oaxaca's Central Valley. Consequently, Joyce's text lacks the clean narrative lines and focus of Marcus and Flannery's book.

Those presentational obstacles notwithstanding, by concentrating on the Zapotec strand of his broad synthesis, one can distill a thematically consistent narrative of the long centuries in advance of Monte Albán, followed by even more distinctive renderings of the rise, florescence and fall of the capital. I fully concede that, because I find Joyce's renewed attention to religion, ritual and "sacred spaces" such a promising emendation to previous stories of Monte Albán, my remarks may accentuate those factors even more than he himself does.

A. THE FORMATIVE, PRE-URBAN ERA: THE VALLEY OF OAXACA IN ADVANCE OF MONTE ALBÁN

Joyce's account, another with a very long prelude to the emergence of the Zapotec capital, allows us to consider relevant circumstances both millennia in advance of the origins of Monte Albán as well as the far more proximate dynamics at San José Mogote, which, as we'll see, prefigure a great deal of what will happen at its larger and more famous heir.

1. Long Before Monte Albán: Barrio-Specific Ceremonial Precincts and Initial Early Formative “Co-Resident Groups”

Regarding this deeper history of the Mesoamerican region, Joyce's rendition, like other accounts, departs from the usual observations about the initial peopling of the Americas at the end of the Late Ice Age or Pleistocene and the earliest evidence for humans in Oaxaca during the Paleoindian period (10,000-8,000 BCE); but he is different in attempting to supplement standard archaeological treatments with his own sort of poststructural queries.⁴⁹ He works, therefore, not simply to identify early manifestations of village life and agrarian economies based on maize, but also Archaic-period markers of status differences, identity construction, gender roles and “rituals involving shamanism and autosacrifice that allowed people to communicate with the divine.”⁵⁰ He recounts, for instance, the discovery in the Valley of Oaxaca of “an open area of 20 m by 7 m delineated by parallel rows of boulders” that dates from 6650-5050 BCE, which may have been “a ritual space, probably a dance ground,” that is to say, a fixed sacred space constructed by nomadic people; he notes burial practices from the same era that suggest either “reverential treatment of the dead or human sacrifice” some 6000 years in advance of the founding of Monte Albán;⁵¹ and he is encouraged, if duly tentative, about suggestions that “women and gender roles likely played key roles in the origins of agriculture.”⁵² Generally speaking, however, the very long Archaic period (8000-1900 BCE) and the initial phases of the Early Formative period (1900-850 BCE) present only limited evidence for the Joyce's poststructural line of questioning, and thus we encounter much that is familiar from previous accounts.

⁴⁹ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 64-65.

⁵⁰ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 65.

⁵¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 69.

⁵² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 70.

With respect to the Valley of Oaxaca's earliest villages and the "origins of sedentism," beginning in the Tierra Largas Phase (about 1400 BCE), Joyce's more distinctive perspective begins to emerge. Consistent with his "practice theory" investments, Joyce joins Marcus and Flannery in resisting the intimations of Winter and others that the earliest permanent villages in Oaxaca can be explained strictly via resource management, specifically advances in maize cultivation, because, in his view, "changes in social relations and in relations between people and the landscape were also needed to make sedentism possible."⁵³ Additionally, where Marcus and Flannery posit that "ascribed status and a restricted chiefly authority" emerged in these early Early Formative villages and Blanton favors "a more broadly shared corporate governance,"⁵⁴ Joyce, consistent with his efforts to respect the underappreciated agency of commoners, avoids a tight focus on top-down leadership styles. He argues instead that early village life undoubtedly created new economic opportunities, new social practices, new identities and new structural conditions—that is, unanticipated consequences—within which leaders and other villagers "negotiated larger and more permanent associations."⁵⁵ In this story, which deprives entrepreneurial leaders the supereminent role they enjoy in *Zapotec Civilization*, dominant ideologies and leadership styles, rather than simply being imposed on so-termed commoners, always arise via negotiations between elite and non-elite constituencies.

Attentive to gender differences in these early Oaxacan villages, Joyce proposes that, most likely, "women were involved in food preparation and cooking, and men more focused on food acquisition, although with considerable overlap and sharing of tasks."⁵⁶ But much more salient for his eventual story of the founding of Monte Albán are his observations about the connections between the onset of sedentism and new forms of

⁵³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 72.

⁵⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73-74.

⁵⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 74.

⁵⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 76.

“sacred space.” He sees continued confidence among villagers that “landscape features like caves and mountains were imbued with sacred properties;”⁵⁷ and Joyce agrees that “the presence of burials adjacent to houses shows that residences were also an important ritual locus.”⁵⁸ More noteworthy, however, is additional “evidence for ritual practices that engaged people beyond the household,”⁵⁹ and thus, seemingly for the first time, architectural constructions specifically designed to support collective ritualizing. In his surmise, “Sedentism allowed for more intensive manipulations of space through the construction of permanent architecture.”⁶⁰ This is a major turning point in Oaxacan social history! Most notably, at San José Mogote—which, though still home to less than 200 residents, Joyce concurs was the largest Early Formative settlement in the region—the ample, seemingly non-residential structures that Marcus and Flannery identified as “Men’s Houses” and thus venues for the exercise of charismatic authority are, Joyce argues, “better interpreted as ritual buildings associated only with a select part of the village.”⁶¹

In other words, Joyce contends that, just as soon as Oaxacans enjoyed sedentary lifestyles, they began to devote substantial energy and resources to “the erection of physical or symbolic barriers, especially around public ceremonial precincts, that restricted the times and place of interaction allowing for control over both the content and preservation of social discourse and the creation of meaning and memory.”⁶² From the start of village life, erecting ritual contexts “beyond the household,” presumably in order to facilitate fuller “interactions with the divine,” was a top priority. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Joyce also maintains that, irrespective of “ritual buildings” and “public

⁵⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73.

⁵⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 78.

⁵⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 79.

⁶⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73.

⁶¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 81.

⁶² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73.

ceremonial precincts” that apparently accommodated the joint ritual practices of multiple households, the villages of this era, San José Mogote included, did *not* have any constructions that deserve the strict designation of “ceremonial centers,” that is to say, ritual contexts frequented not simply by multi-family barrio constituencies, but by the entire populace of the village.⁶³ There was not yet one sacred space in which everyone ritualized together. Accordingly—and this is a bold and counterintuitive assertion—Joyce argues that early Early Formative villages, most composed of less than a dozen small family households, some but not all of whom ritualized together, are more accurately assessed as “co-resident groups” than actual “communities” *per se*.⁶⁴

At this point, then, Joyce's account features families of roughly equal affluence, living in relatively peaceful proximity, without clear status distinctions but also without a uniting sense of community belonging. While he concedes the possibility of some barrio-specific “ritual specialists,”⁶⁵ more over-arching village leaders are notably absent from his description of this era. The largely leaderless situation is tolerable, though increasingly unstable as progressively larger permanent settlements “would have created social tensions, resulting from disputes with neighbors and competition over resources, including land, mates, and social valuables.”⁶⁶ Consistent with the absolutely pivotal role

⁶³ Actually Joyce is, at points, tentative as to whether or not the Early Formative “ritual buildings” accommodated the full or partial populace of a village; e.g., Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 82, opines, “The ritual buildings at San José Mogote are the strongest indicator of practices that engaged multiple households, although it is not clear whether they served only the Area C barrio or the entire community.” Elsewhere (e.g., *ibid.*, 98-100) he is more adamant that full community involvement in “ceremonial centers” do not arise until the later Early Formative.

⁶⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 82-83. One might note here, in this fascinating little summary section entitled with the interrogative, “A village but not a community?” there is some unfortunate slippage in his use of the term “community” insofar as Joyce is describing “early sedentary communities” that actually more suitably termed “co-resident groups” that lack a sense of “community” in the sense of “perceptions of shared interests, history, and identity.”

⁶⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 81.

⁶⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 83.

that ceremonial centers will play throughout the entire remainder of his pre-Columbian narrative, the resolution of mounting social complexity, competition and inequality in these “co-resident groups” will require the sorts of religio-civic activities that can transpire only in more fully encompassing public “sacred spaces.” But, as we’ll see momentarily, it is not until the later Early Formative that Oaxaca sees its first widely communal cemeteries and its first true ceremonial centers.

2. Still Before Monte Albán: The Emergence of True Ceremonial Centers, Community Identities and Rising Inequality

If during the Early Formative (1900-850 BCE) there are indications suggestive of emerging distinctions in prestige, wealth and power, by the Middle Formative (850-400 BCE)—that is to say, some four centuries in advance of Monte Albán’s founding—Joyce sees much more certain evidence of both community-wide identities and increasing social inequalities. In his terminology, so-termed co-resident groups became actual communities. Still he has difficulty discerning gendered activities except by analogy with later Mesoamerican patterns, “the strongest being an association of spinning and weaving with female identity.”⁶⁷ And with respect to infamously wide differences of opinion concerning Oaxacans’ interactions with other regions during this era, Joyce counters Marcus and Flannery’s blanket insistence that the most consequential alliances and competitions were strictly among increasingly competitive Oaxacan leaders and groups with modest claims that “Long-distance contacts led to the creation of broader social affiliations through which religious concepts and perhaps aesthetic values related to bodily adornment and prestige may have been appropriated.”⁶⁸ But he likewise rejects Caso’s and Bernal’s older claims that Olmec influences were a major factor, and is content to observe that, “exchange placed Mixtecs and Zapotecs in at least indirect

⁶⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 86.

⁶⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 91.

contact with the Olmec... [but] whether the Olmec-style designs reflect more intensive forms of interaction such as the spread of a religious cult is difficult to assess..."⁶⁹

While adopting a moderate position on the enduring old question of extra-regional involvements, Joyce—consistent with his guiding narrative themes—affords far greater weight to the unprecedented elaboration during the late Early Formative of two sorts of “public sacred spaces:” communal cemeteries and genuine ceremonial centers. In his surmise, neither of these new ways of arranging architectural space can be attributed primarily to increasingly effective resource management, as Winter would suggest, nor to the machinations of the ever more fiercely combative leaders whose rivalries dominate the *Zapotec Civilization* depiction of this era. By contrast, in Joyce's version, the advent of public cemeteries, which augmented burials in or near domiciles, was prompted foremost by heartfelt and widely shared urges to enhance communication with (un)dead ancestors. Yet, in what will become a recurrent historiological pattern, those religiously motivated practices also had very important—and largely unanticipated—socio-political ramifications both in facilitating an unprecedented sense of community belonging and in clarifying individual identities within an ambience of “increasing social distinctions, including inequalities of wealth and status.”⁷⁰ That is to say, ritualizing in these unprecedentedly inclusive mortuary ritual spaces worked, exactly as Durkheimians would predict, both to “construct community” and to “negotiate rising inequality.”⁷¹

Complementary and even more consequential are the innovations in spatial planning wherein the emergent ceremonial plazas of initial Early Formative are transformed, by the late Early Formative (i.e., by 850 BCE), into the genuine “ceremonial centers,” a development that Joyce also sees as imperative for transforming mere co-resident groups into Oaxaca's first truly integrated communities. Again San José Mogote, which during this span exploded in population from less than 200 to some 1400

⁶⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 95.

⁷⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 85.

⁷¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 85.

residents,⁷² thus extending its long lead as far and away the largest settlement in the region, is the main stage on which the dramatic transformations unfold. Joyce reaffirms Marcus and Flannery's account insofar as San José Mogote, only a few kilometers north of the still-vacant site of Monte Albán, usurps many of the later and larger Zapotec capital's claims to uniqueness and innovation. San José Mogote seems to have been, for instance, site of the first pottery use in Oaxaca, the first hieroglyphic writing and the first abode brick,⁷³ none of which is, however, remotely so important to Joyce's plotline as his contention that Structures 1 and 2 in the Area A barrio of San José Mogote represent not only "the first monumental building known in the Oaxaca Valley," but also "what is probably the first centrally located, community-wide ceremonial precinct in Oaxaca," that is to say, the first genuine ceremonial center.⁷⁴ This is a hugely important claim.

If one accepts viable contentions that Oaxacan initiatives in monumental building preceded those in the Central Mexican and Maya regions, and if one adheres to the also very plausible view that all of subsequent pre-Columbian era is dominated by interactions among great ceremonial centers, then, improbably, these developments at the not-so-famous site of San José Mogote are strong contenders for the pivotal turning point not only in Joyce's (re)construction of ancient Oaxaca but, moreover, for the whole of Mesoamerican history! And he does depict San José Mogote as a site of true inventiveness, which provides a kind of prototype for Monte Albán, in ways a dress rehearsal for the real spectacle that will unfold at the nearby mountain site. Yet, less prone to hyperbole than some earlier writers, Joyce mutes the spectacularity of these innovations by noting smaller-scale but parallel developments elsewhere in Oaxaca, for instance, at Tomaltepec,⁷⁵ and by accentuating the continuity of San José Mogote's late

⁷² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 84.

⁷³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 99.

⁷⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 98-100.

⁷⁵ Regarding Tomaltepec, see Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 99. And Joyce, *ibid.*, 104, writes, "It is likely that similar developments were occurring at sites like Etlalongo, Tayata, and Diuxi in the Mixtec Alta..."

Early Formative ritual-architectural choreography with that of earlier eras. Thus, instead of something brand new, he sees these unprecedentedly elaborate spaces and practices “as a ‘scaling up’ of both established architectural techniques and rituals that probably included dance, divination, and bloodletting.”⁷⁶ Moreover, always attentive to the independent agency of commoners, he asserts their fully enthusiastic involvement in the major building projects, which Joyce insists were initiated collectively rather by strong-arming leaders; and he notes that, irrespective of unprecedented public ritualizing, household excavations reveal the continued practice of more privatized “means of accessing the divine” including figurines, feasting and autosacrifice.⁷⁷ That is to say, at no time were strategies for “maintaining an ongoing relationship with the divine” confined exclusively to public spaces.

In sum, then, on this stretch from the late Early Formative into the initial Middle Formative—or, more specifically, from the San José Mogote Phase (1150-850 BCE) into the Guadalupe Phase (850-700 BCE)—Joyce can agree with Marcus and Flannery on the scale, timing and supreme importance of the construction at San José Mogote of a ceremonial complex that “probably could have accommodated hundreds of people during ritual performances,” that is to say, the entire populace of that community as well as visitors from surrounding ones.⁷⁸ But he emphatically disagrees with their ideas about the forces that account for it. Explicit in rejecting their explanation, Joyce argues that,

“the construction of the ceremonial complex [at San José Mogote] was not directed by powerful leaders, but instead was a communal project designed to build an expanded ceremonial space to communicate with the sacred realm and as

⁷⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 100.

⁷⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 95-96.

⁷⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 100. Though Joyce does acknowledge that non-resident visitors probably attended ritual events at San José Mogote (and of course latter at Monte Albán), pilgrimage per se does not a significant role in his account, though certainly it would be consistent with his stress on sites that are revered as “sacred places.”

a space where various community activities were carried out, perhaps including feasts, dances, and games.”⁷⁹

In other words, Joyce repeatedly insists, again counterintuitively, that no specific individuals or even a class of elite rulers can be credited with the ground-breaking innovations either of communal cemeteries or genuine ceremonial centers at San José Mogote. In his view, growing social distinctions and inequality remain, at this point, limited; the largely egalitarian ethos of previous eras remained intact. And thus, ceremonial centers emerged from widely shared sentiments, not from the manipulations of special interest groups. In short, unlikely as this view may seem to many, Joyce holds that, in this period, “large-scale construction projects and communal rituals were corporate endeavors and not under the direction of a centralized authority.”⁸⁰

That direct disagreement with Marcus and Flannery notwithstanding, Joyce nonetheless shares their “practice theory” skepticism that the world-changing socio-political outcome of these new ritual-architectural configurations was predictable even to the Oaxacan “agents” who initiated them. Regarding the substantial disjunction between deliberate “religious” motivations and eventual social consequences of these major enhancements in community-wide ritualizing, he writes,

“Although the intention of the original builders may not have been to create a focal point of community identity, the resulting institution—a ceremonial complex that connected the community to the divine—became a tradition that would continue through the remainder of the prehispanic period and up to the present as embodied in the churches found today in communities throughout Oaxaca.”⁸¹

In other words, in this scenario, San José Mogote's elaborations in public ritualizing had largely religious motivations, which were, in the late Early Formative, apparently shared by all members of the community; for Joyce, urges to interact with “the

⁷⁹ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 100.

⁸⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 116.

⁸¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 101.

supernatural” supersede more this-worldly political and economic incentives. And yet, ironically and seemingly to the surprise of their builders, these unprecedentedly inclusive “sacred spaces” also provided the forum and the catalysts to unprecedentedly exclusionary forms of leadership and social hierarchy. In this pivotal episode of Joyce’s (re)construction, ceremonial centers—or more properly the religio-civic ritualizing that took place within them—were engines of social change and inequality that, if you will, lacked conductors. In this story, emphases on agency notwithstanding, it is, as we’ll see momentarily, less accurate to say that ceremonial centers were created by strong leaders than that strong leaders were created by ceremonial centers.

3. Just Before Monte Albán: The Appropriation of a Ceremonial Center and Exclusionary versus Communal Forms of Authority

To this point in his rendition of pre-urban Oaxacan history, Arthur Joyce has taken every opportunity to downplay the role of authoritarian top-down leadership, emphasizing instead the relatively modest wealth and status distinctions that, he thinks, persist well into the Middle Formative. Moreover, and more like the older accounts of Caso, Bernal and Paddock in which violence plays little role in the events leading up to the emergence of Monte Albán, Joyce has, to this point, persistently rejected Marcus and Flannery’s depiction of Formative-era Oaxaca as a context of ever-more fierce aggression and infighting among self-serving rulers. More than any other comprehensive (re)construction, Bernal’s and Paddock’s included, Joyce’s so far presents ancient Oaxacan social interactions not only as constantly renegotiated and thus largely consensual, but, moreover, as informed at every juncture by decidedly non-modern cosmological presuppositions. In short, perhaps unexpectedly given Joyce’s poststructural theoretical investments, to this point in the story his protagonists have demonstrated priorities that are highly consistent with Eliade’s characterization of an “archaic consciousness,” which is much more concerned to maintain otherworldly connections than to acquire worldly possessions or influence. Thus far these Oaxacan actors have been, especially in contrast to the Machiavellian combatants in *Zapotec*

Civilization, cordial, cooperative, contemplative and little predisposed to egocentric aggression.

However, with his account of the rising social inequality that develops in the wake of San José Mogote's far-famed ceremonial center, and then the eventual demise of that center's long-unchallenged dominance of the Valley of Oaxaca—events that Joyce concurs are crucial in setting the table for the founding of Monte Albán—violence and authoritarian leadership finally do emerge as tremendously important. That is to say, factors that his stress on an enduring stratum of egalitarian values and “negotiated social contracts” has tended until now to minimize do, if belatedly, come to the fore.

As Joyce explains, the most hotly debated development in the San José (1150-850 BCE) and Guadalupe (850-700 BCE) Phases—that is, the era in which San José Mogote rose to unrivaled scale and prestige in the Valley of Oaxaca—involves disagreement over what sort of models of leadership were in place.⁸² Recall that Marcus and Flannery, consistent with their emphasis on powerfully determinative charismatic leaders, advocate for “chiefdoms,” a leadership formation based on the development of “ranked descent groups” in which entrepreneurial leaders making hereditary claims to authority endeavored “to have as many farmers, craftspeople, and warriors under [their] control as possible;”⁸³ in short, individual rulers' control of manpower was the top priority. Richard Blanton and his colleagues, by contrast, “contest the chiefdom model, arguing instead for a corporate form of governance without inherited status distinctions wherein members of prominent households, rather than a single chief, contributed to political decision-making.”⁸⁴ Predictably, Joyce, who invariably emphasizes the extent to which

⁸² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111.

⁸³ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 240. Their fuller description of the “chiefdom model” they discern in this period is in *ibid.*, chap. 8.

⁸⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111, summarizing Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Linda M. Nicholas, *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 36-42.

policy decisions and ideology are negotiated among elites and non-elites, opts for a position much closer to Blanton's.⁸⁵

The seemingly stark differences of opinion are somewhat mitigated, though, when we realize that Joyce does not rule out the prospect of hereditary-based authority and exceptionally powerful rulers, but instead contends that those forms of radical inequality did not emerge until later, after rather than before 700 BCE. The main dispute is, in other words, primarily over the timing of its emergence rather than the style of authority. In his version of events, a class of powerful Oaxacan "nobles" appeared on the scene not before, but after—indeed, largely because of!—the presence of ceremonial centers like that at San José Mogote. Authoritarian rulers were, in other words, more opportunistic beneficiaries than instigators of the new spaces and practices. According to this script, once communal cemeteries and the great ceremonial plaza were in place, those two sorts of "sacred spaces" functioned not only in their primary role as "portals to the divine," but additionally as ambiances of socio-political differentiation; in a moment that resembles the Marcus-Flannery emphasis on "unintended consequences," these religious-motivated spatial configurations played an ancillary but very important role as incubators for the production of religio-civic leaders. Therefore, in Joyce's scheme, intriguingly, a highly privileged elite class was more the result than the stimulus of San José Mogote's great ceremonial center.

At the risk of oversimplifying his understanding of the somewhat serendipitous process whereby so-termed nobles emerged, and then the separation between elites and non-elites intensified, Joyce presents a situation in which, so it seems, observant and canny individuals recognized that the new elaborations in public ritualizing also opened both the need and the opportunity for new leadership roles; and then they astutely capitalized on the situation to put themselves forward to occupy those positions. Reminiscent of Max Weber's timeworn description of the emergence of charismatic authority, specially gifted individuals and groups recognized in these well-attended

⁸⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111.

ceremonial occasions a fortuitous opening, what some (Joyce not included) might term an opportune “liminal space,” in which to take the sort of initiative whereby they could win designation as ritual specialists, that is, persons who played a special role in facilitating interactions between their human communities and the divine. Then, having made themselves (appear to be) indispensable conduits through which the wider populace could “communicate with the sacred,” they acquired increasing prestige and influence. In short, once having established credibility in these intermediary roles, these emergent rulers set in motion a process through which their privileged status was broadened, amplified and increasingly institutionalized.

Critics unfamiliar with Mesoamerican archaeology but nonetheless impressed by the narrative flow of Joyce's synthesis might wonder where these opportunistic Oaxacan leaders had been in the earlier, centuries-long episodes of the story. Does it really require full-blown ceremonial centers to produce enterprising religio-civic leaders? And more suspicious commentators, of which there are many, even if they are persuaded that these public ceremonial occasions provided ideal environments for the advancement of charismatic leaders, are inclined to depict those public ceremonial proceedings more darkly as forums of intimidation, manipulation and propaganda in which unscrupulous rulers exploit the naivety of the masses. Yet, consistent with his more empathetic (if arguably overgenerous) assessment of ancient Oaxacans' genuine religious sensibilities, Joyce characterizes the relationship between emergent religio-civic authorities and the wider populace as one of mutual respect and shared purpose insofar as all parties have as their primary goal “communication with the sacred.” After the fashion of phenomenological epoché or bracketing, Joyce entertains without condescension the possibility that all of San José Mogote's residents, from the wealthiest to the poorest, along with visitors from the surrounding area, came together in the great ceremonial plaza primarily to do their respective parts in maintaining the “sacred covenant.” In his religion-affirming and iconoclastic rendition, these Formative-era worshipful assemblies were only secondarily—if in hugely consequential ways—occasions to assert hegemony and announce “who is in charge.”

Yet, even if Joyce imagines these ceremonial occasions as largely benign in their early forms, they do precipitate an irreversible process that leads to leadership styles and “inherited status distinctions” considerably more like those that we encounter in *Zapotec Civilization*. Thus after 700 BCE, in the years of San José Mogote’s greatest influence (still a couple centuries in advance of the founding of Monte Albán), Joyce discerns major transitions wherein leaders’ supposed special prowess in acting as mediators between people and the divine issued in an elite class who, on the basis of hereditary status, began also to claim exclusionary control over the more material aspects of Oaxacan life. From this point forward, there is no turning back. Nobles increasingly exercised a prerogative to “mobilize goods and labor as tribute or sacrifices that enacted the sacred covenant and contributed to their ability to petition the gods on behalf of their followers.”⁸⁶ At this juncture, leaders asserted the right to carry out human sacrifice, which will be an important feature all subsequent episodes of Joyce’s account; and along with claiming privilege as a consequence of their ancestry, the nobility began to promote the notion that they became “deities at death.”⁸⁷ Further signaling their increasing appropriation of the ceremonial spaces that Joyce insists had been initially conceived as “corporate endeavors... not under the direction of a centralized authority,” nobles also begin to construct ever-more elaborate residences in close proximity to those “sacred spaces,” thus accentuating their widening distance from—and mounting hegemony over—the masses who continued to occupy humble wattle-and-daub dwellings at the edges of San José Mogote.⁸⁸

In short, Joyce continues to give the impression that religio-civic leaders were, at least in the beginning, genuine in their sense of obligation to play a uniquely indispensable role in facilitating interactions between all Oaxacans and the divine; that is to say, he continues to avoid depicting these increasingly powerful rulers as greedy and condescending. And always he underscores the frequently non-compliant agency of

⁸⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111.

⁸⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111.

⁸⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111.

commoners; in this poststructural story, authority is always contested. Yet at this point, he nonetheless acknowledges also the escalation of more and more restricted, exclusionary and unequal forms of power, which directly conflicted with the traditional “egalitarian ethos” that had characterized all earlier chapters in his history of ancient Oaxaca. In a presage of his interpretation of Monte Albán’s eventual downfall, Joyce explains how the profound “structural contradictions” between long-standing communal social formations and these newer “exclusionary forms of power” account not only for the demise of San José Mogote, but indeed for a great deal of what happens throughout the remainder of pre-Columbian history. Thus, where earlier stories put the spotlight on the motives and activities of high-profile rulers and thereby, according to Joyce’s complaints, allow the initiative of commoners to disappear into the shadows, he will interpret every subsequent situation—including those that account for Monte Albán’s founding, rise and demise—as a negotiation of elite and non-elite interests.

B. [EARLY PERIOD I] THE ORIGINS OF MONTE ALBÁN: DISILLUSIONMENT, COMMONER AGENCY, A SACRED MOUNTAIN AND A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

Just like everyone since Alfonso Caso, Joyce agrees that Monte Albán appears suddenly—in his term, via a “big bang”⁸⁹—prodigious in its earliest manifestation, without a long arc of modest developments; and thus he too is challenged to explain how and why a formerly vacant mountaintop became, in startlingly short order, the premier capital in the region. And like all recent commentators, Joyce concurs that the main instigators of Monte Albán were emigrants from San José Mogote who, in the wake of that capital’s decline, relocated a few kilometers to the south atop the lofty and waterless site. His own explanation of the linkage between the two capitals is somewhat obscured by his pedagogical commitment to rehearse alternate opinions and debates on the topic; but continued reliance on an alternate set of “practice theory” assumptions—in which it is so-termed commoners who actually do the most to direct the course of Oaxacan history—does lead him to an daringly revised interpretation of the conjoined decline of San José

⁸⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 129.

Mogote and subsequent founding of Monte Albán. This is a particularly iconoclastic segment of Joyce's rereading of the evidence that showcases both his investments in poststructural theory and a much-heightened role for religion.

1. Religiously Motivated Discontent at San José Mogote: The Unappeal of Overbearing Religio-Civic Authorities

As per usual, Joyce summarizes competing ideas about the events surrounding San José Mogote's decline and the launch of Monte Albán with which we are familiar from earlier accounts. He reminds us, for instance, that San José Mogote enjoyed a full millennium as the largest and most influential community in the region, at points ten times largest than its nearest rival. He notes also the perplexing incongruity wherein, by 700 BCE, contemporaneous with the onset of new and more authoritarian leadership styles, San José Mogote, on the one hand, experienced a major demographic loss and, on the other hand, despite declining population, witnessed a great increase in the scale of its monumental architecture, especially as represented by elaborations of its ceremonial center at Mound 1.⁹⁰ Additionally, he reviews evidence for population increases and large-scaled architecture at other communities in the area, developments that seem to comport with Marcus and Flannery's view that such major building projects were largely a reflection of intensifying competitions among self-aggrandizing leaders, each wanting a grander ceremonial plaza than his neighbors. In their view, the Rosario Phase (700-500 BCE), immediately in advance of Monte Albán's founding, was an era of intensifying warfare, raiding and conflict in which San José Mogote's former monopoly was seriously challenged by numerous up-and-coming subregional centers; and destruction by fire of major constructions in several of those centers—including the Structure 28 temple at San José Mogote that was burned to the ground about 600 BCE—supports that depiction.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 121.

⁹¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 123.

Joyce cannot disagree that “San José Mogote was increasingly under threat and losing both its demographic advantage and its political power relative to other communities in the Valley of Oaxaca.”⁹² He is, however, unwilling to attribute the *raison d’être* of any ceremonial plaza to more political than genuinely religious motivations; and thus he argues that the construction of San José Mogote’s bigger and better ritual space was not a propagandistic ploy, but, instead, simply a “further ‘scaling up’ of public architecture and ritual performance,” driven by essentially the same widely-held sense of responsibility to maintain a healthy relationship between the community and the divine that accounts for the original conception of the ceremonial precinct.⁹³ Moreover, regarding San José Mogote’s declining population, we can, with more selective reading, ferret out an explanation that is also perfectly consistent with his views concerning the independent “agency” and strongly religious predispositions of Oaxacan commoners. Two key factors are conjoined. The first is a kind of redoubled religious disillusionment that non-elites feel in response to the burning of the most prized portion of their sacred center. Especially if commoners were already irked by nobles’ irreverent appropriations of communal ceremonial plaza for their own private residents, then, in Joyce’s words, “the charred remnants of the temple [at top Structure 28] would have been a stark demonstration of profound political and religious crisis.”⁹⁴

The second factor is connected to Joyce’s recurrent insistence that, in the largely accommodating environs of Oaxaca, commoners could quite easily support themselves, and thus that their involvements with a large ceremonial center like San José Mogote were more voluntary than mandatory. That is to say, the loyalties and investments of non-elites in such centers did *not* depend, according to this script, on political and economic necessities nor on a requirement for militaristic protection. To the contrary, the special allure of San José Mogote was a grand ceremonial plaza in which to communicate with the divine and thereby maintain the sacred covenant. And thus in the face of

⁹² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 123.

⁹³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 122.

⁹⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 123.

doubled disillusionment born from overbearing religio-civic authorities and then the torched temple, both of which precluded those devotional activities, religiously predisposed commoners could simply walk away from the aging city. Again in Joyce's words, "... it is possible that resistance to the novel political relations of the Rosario phase led some people to 'vote with their feet' and join relatives in other communities or establish new ones."⁹⁵

In other words, Joyce suggests, for one, that the discontent of San José Mogote's non-elite was not primarily a consequence of forced labor, poor living conditions or military defeat, but rather disenchantment with the elite's high-handed and exclusionary (mis)management of the revamped ceremonial plaza, which was, in this account, the principal attraction for life in San José Mogote. And, for two, owing to the non-elite's oft-underestimated economic independence, acting on that largely religious disillusionment by relocating elsewhere was completely within the realm of possibility. Accordingly, he presents the wholesale depopulation of the once-great capital less as a forced evacuation than a kind of exodus, a well-considered and religiously-motivated choice rather than a terror-induced flight.

2. Religiously Motivated Site-Selection at Monte Albán: The Appeal of a "Cosmic Mountain" and "Axis Mundi"

That intriguing explanation of San José Mogote's decline, though presented in a somewhat tentative and disjointed way in Joyce's debate-summarizing synthesis, does provide the necessary foreshadowing for a similarly novel explanation of the site selection and founding of Monte Albán, topics about which he is much more direct and emphatic. Recall that Marcus Winter makes the case that the emergence of the mountain capital was not, after all, the spectacular anomaly that many accounts would have us believe, but instead simply the most prominent instance of ecological patterns and processes that were at work throughout Oaxaca history; in his view, the seemingly

⁹⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 127.

inconvenient siting of Monte Albán actually represents just one more exercise of astute resource management.⁹⁶ Recall also that Richard Blanton's provocative story of a "disembedded capital"—that is, a regional administrative center that was deliberately located at a site ill-suited and unwanted either for agricultural or commercial activities—depicts the foundation of the city as a largely defensive strategy, undertaken "in the face of external threat;"⁹⁷ and the Marcus-Flannery account of Monte Albán origins via "synoikism" supplements the concerns for defense with the more aggressively offensive motives of rulers who are determined to "build power."⁹⁸ But like Blanton—along with countless more casual visitors to the site—they too believe that calculating leaders picked the precipitous place largely because of its virtues as a kind of natural fortress.

Joyce, however, now more adamant than tentative, contests both the identity of the prime instigators and their alleged motivations for the selecting the high and dry site. The question of Monte Albán's founding is, in fact, the quintessential venue in which to exercise his two major complaints with Marcus and Flannery's version of action theory. First, their concerted focus on the agency and deliberative decision-making of leaders, Joyce says, obscures and underestimates the agency and influence of commoners. In his words,

"The synoikism model views the founding of Monte Albán as a total societal response with elites as decision-makers and organizers, but there is little concern with the ways in which people of varying identities may have differentially participated in and been affected by the move and resulting social transformation."⁹⁹

⁹⁶ See Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Carteles editores, P.G.O., 1989, 1992), 34-36; or see the discussion of Marcus Winter's story of Monte Albán in chapter 5.

⁹⁷ See Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978; Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press, 2004), 36ff; or see the discussion of Richard Blanton's story of Monte Albán in chapter 4.

⁹⁸ See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 11; or see the discussion of their story of Monte Albán in chapter 6.

⁹⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 129.

First, then, from Joyce's poststructuralist perspective, the choice to resettle at Monte Albán was yet another broad-based, collective and negotiated decision rather than an agenda simply imposed by egoistic leaders. And second, *Zapotec Civilization's* well-intentioned efforts to avoid exoticizing ancient Oaxacans by depicting them as "essentially individualistic, self-interested, rational, and pragmatic,"¹⁰⁰ also obscures and underestimates the genuine—and genuinely non-modern—religious sensibilities of both leaders and commoners, which, in Joyce's opinion, provide the real key to understanding the site selection and origins of Monte Albán. He agrees that the violent political crisis at San José Mogote "was important in motivating the decision to relocate to Monte Albán,"¹⁰¹ and the defensive merits of the hilltop location are an undeniable factor in its appeal. But he nonetheless argues that, "in addition to defense, Monte Albán was founded as a ceremonial center,"¹⁰² that is, a place at which to renew the "sacred covenant" via revitalized interactions with the divine. In short, according to the daringly different hypothesis on which he insists both in his book and several articles, "the evidence strongly indicates that Monte Albán was founded by a new religious movement that engaged a broad spectrum of the people who set out to build a ceremonial center on the sacred hilltop."¹⁰³

In this story of Monte Albán's founding, then, which is radically at odds with images of self-serving leaders exploiting the manpower of commoners to serve their own political ambitions, we encounter a disgruntled but religiously inspired group of former

¹⁰⁰ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 131.

¹⁰² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 131.

¹⁰³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 131. On the prospect that "Monte Albán was founded by adherents of a new social and religious movement in reaction to the political crisis of the late Middle Formative," see also *ibid.*, 141. And concerning his fuller ideas on the origins of Monte Albán, see Joyce, "The Founding of Monte Albán;" Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca;" and Joyce, "The Main Plaza of Monte Albán."

San José Mogote residents, presumably with some capable leadership but composed mainly of “people other than nobility,” who, in pursuit of a fresh start, relocate to a vacant mountain. The San José Mogote emigrants in this version are not frightened or cowering refugees, but rather a strong-willed faction unwilling to abide the excesses and neglect of “covenantal” obligations perpetrated by that center’s leaders.¹⁰⁴ And thus in Joyce’s solution to the notorious quandary of Monte Albán’s site selection, those itinerant aspirants opted for a site that had both intrinsic appeal as an *axis mundi* and “cosmic mountain” and the potential for even greater architecturally-enhanced appeal as a bigger and better replica of the now-desecrated San José Mogote ceremonial plaza. Estimable military advantages notwithstanding, the mountain location of an unprecedentedly ambitious new capital owes foremost to religious incentives.

Joyce’s paired commitments to poststructuralist and broadly phenomenological presuppositions lead him, in other words, to a provocative proposal that is certain to inspire mixed receptions. Some would congratulate both the retrieval of a much less nasty, more spiritually-inclined portrayal of ancient Oaxacans, along with what seems to be a refreshing endorsement of populist over authoritarian decision-making; this is the sort of idealistic foundation narrative in which present-day indigenous Oaxacans could take great pride. And yet, reviewing the same storyline, skeptics have to be concerned by resonances of the mythologem of freedom-of-religion seekers with which we are familiar from syrupy stories of the English Puritans’ abandonment of their Old World homeland in favor of their own shining “city upon a hill” in the New World. Mounting numbers of critics, “action theorists” among them, who are dubious that the Puritans’ motives for resetting in America were strictly or even primarily faith-based are liable to be equally distrustful of that characterization of Monte Albán’s founders. Still, none can dispute the storiological richness of an egalitarian community of ancient Oaxacan pioneers, resolute in their religious priorities, who are unwilling to acquiesce to the excesses of San José Mogote rulers, and thus fashion for themselves a grand new beginning.

¹⁰⁴ Here I am somewhat oversimplifying Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 130, on the four main “factors that motivated the move to Monte Albán,” the third of which is “the development of a religious movement...”

C. [PERIODS I & II] THE ASCENT OF MONTE ALBÁN: INCLUSIVE SACRED SPACE AND HEALTHY MAINTENANCE OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Irrespective of the inevitably mixed responses it will engender, in this story, wherein restive and religiously motivated founders transform an unoccupied hilltop into a new ceremonial center and home, the initial conception of Monte Albán—which launches the capital, in short order, to singular prominence in the region—is pictured as a blend of impressive originality but also reworked patterns from earlier and elsewhere. Among frequent claims to major innovation, remember that John Paddock first described the initial settlers of Monte Albán as “pre-urban,” then, on second thought, wrote, “but a good case can be made for granting them urban status...”¹⁰⁵ Winter is more categorical in awarding Monte Albán the title of “the first urban center in Oaxaca,” perhaps the only settlement in the region ever to deserve that distinction;¹⁰⁶ and Marcus and Flannery go even farther in proposing that “the great emergent novelty of 500-200 BCE was an urban society, something without precedent in Mesoamerica.”¹⁰⁷

Though Joyce too accepts that Monte Albán emerged as “the result of a ‘big bang’ that dramatically transformed history”¹⁰⁸ and that it was “Oaxaca’s earliest and largest prehispanic city,”¹⁰⁹ in his account, the most crucial transitions had already transpired at San José Mogote, site of Oaxaca’s first genuine ceremonial center. Actually, though he

¹⁰⁵ John Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” part II in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. John Paddock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970 [originally 1966]), 99.

¹⁰⁶ Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 32.

¹⁰⁷ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.

¹⁰⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 119. With respect to his definition of city, Joyce, *ibid.*, writes that, “Ancient Oaxacan cities were primarily centers of political and religious authority that produced relations of dominance and dependence among the people of the urban centers and their hinterlands.”

maintains that the initial iteration of the Main Plaza gave expression to “the founding community and its innovative political and religious ideas, institutions and practices,”¹¹⁰ in his descriptions, it is far easier to see continuity with San José Mogote than radical disjunction. For him, the conception of Monte Albán is highly ambitious but not so remarkably innovative.

1. Tradition-based Innovation: Linking the Old Sacred Covenant to New Levels of Human Sacrifice and Warfare

In any case, regarding purportedly new features, if one accepts the storyline about disillusionment with the heavy-handed tactics of leaders at San José Mogote, one might also expect a kinder and gentler ambience at the new capital; but, with respect to what others term Periods I and II or “Preclassic” Monte Albán, Joyce actually describes a “newly configured warfare and human-sacrifice-based covenant”¹¹¹ that seems to continue rather than break with coarsening trends at San José Mogote. He interprets the first occurrence of effigy vessels depicting deities like Cocijo, the Old God and the wide-billed bird deity, for instance, as evidence of “new religious cults;” but he notes also the persistence of “traditional activities such as autosacrificial bloodletting, ancestor worship, divination, and ritual feasting.”¹¹² He sees a new prominence for ballgame rituals, though ball courts too were already present at San José Mogote.¹¹³ And contrary to Marcus and Flannery’s insistence that Monte Albán was a completely independent invention, the consequence of events and decisions undertaken strictly within the Valley of Oaxaca,¹¹⁴ Joyce returns to older ideas of interregional influence that mitigate that originality insofar as he sees abundant evidence that “the founders of Monte Albán drew

¹¹⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 119.

¹¹¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 139.

¹¹² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 139.

¹¹³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 139.

¹¹⁴ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154, among other places, reject earlier opinions about the foreign-born inspiration of Monte Albán I.

on established ideas from other parts of Mesoamerica.”¹¹⁵ Actually, to borrow his own term (which he does not use in this context), the Period I Monte Albán of his description seems more like the “further ‘scaling up’ of public architecture and ritual performance” that he observed at San José Mogote than a distinctly new point of departure.¹¹⁶

In fact, irrespective of his argument that the site selection owed more to religious propensities than military strategizing, even the innovation that Joyce most accentuates—namely, new levels of human sacrifice, which is “now linked the activation of the sacred covenant to warfare”¹¹⁷—is actually a continuation of the increasing politicization of ceremonial spaces that he observed at San José Mogote. He cannot, therefore, avoid the famously graphic, unmistakably militaristic iconographic displays that dominate virtually all descriptions of early Monte Albán. He reminds us, for instance, that the some 400 *Danzante* carved stone monuments produced in this initial period constitute “roughly 80 percent of the total monument record from Monte Albán;”¹¹⁸ and, for him, the only interpretations worthy of serious consideration are those that stress the figures’

¹¹⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 139.

¹¹⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 297, note 7, explains his reliance on more recent revisions of the ceramic sequence developed by Alfonso Caso and his colleagues, and thus his non-use of Caso’s timeworn five-part scheme. Nonetheless, in the interest of facilitating cross-comparisons of Joyce’s (re)construction with the earlier versions we’ve discussed, I have in a few cases reinserted that old terminology, that is, Periods I-V.

¹¹⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 139. On the always-controversial topic of “human sacrifice,” it is noteworthy that while Joyce follows most interpreters in seeing a close linkage between human sacrifice and war (*ibid.*, 126), and he concedes that most sacrificial victims were probably captives taken in war (*ibid.*, 151), consistent with his emphasis on the priority of religious over militaristic motivations, he argues that, at Monte Albán, “human sacrifice represents a new and more spectacular ritual practice used to communicate with the divine” (*ibid.*, 125). In other words, instead of a means of intimidation, “Nobles deployed human sacrifice as another way to maintain allegiance since it was the most potent way in which the sacred covenant could be activated to petition deities for fertility and prosperity on behalf of the community” (*ibid.*, 127).

¹¹⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134.

association with sacrifice and war.¹¹⁹ Likewise, he joins the prevailing consensus that the later (Period II) “conquest slabs” on Building J in the southern end of the Great Plaza—most of which depict the decapitated heads of rulers¹²⁰—are similarly associated with sacrifice, warfare and fertility. And he affirms that, from its outset, residential patterns and mortuary practices indicate that the new capital was leading rather than exempting itself from the increasing social differentiation evidenced across the entire region.¹²¹ In short, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, Joyce's fresh emphases on the religious predilections and bottom-up support of the capital's founders do not lead him to a more peaceable description of Periods I and II Monte Albán than we have encountered in earlier accounts.

2. Monte Albán as “Sacred Space”: An *Axis Mundi*, *Imago Mundi* and Site for Ritual Reenactments of Cosmogony

What is strikingly new in Joyce's account is his unprecedented elaboration on the “place-making” that, he thinks, informed, indeed motivated, this grandiose architectural undertaking. As noted, absent any direct reference to Mircea Eliade, he nonetheless describes the initial conception and configuration of Monte Albán in ways that historians of religions will recognize as conforming perfectly to Eliade's generalized model of the manner in which traditional peoples in innumerable cultural contexts—that is to say, groups operating with an “archaic consciousness”—have organized their “sacred spaces.”¹²² On the alpine site-selection, for instance, when Joyce agrees that was “an ideal location for political and military control since it is located in the center of the

¹¹⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 136-37, summarizes the relative merits of Michael Coe's and Javier Urcid's more recent and venturesome interpretation of the Danzantes, both of which stress sacrifice and war.

¹²⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 137.

¹²¹ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 141-46.

¹²² As noted earlier, for concise summaries of Mircea Eliade's widely discussed ideas about “sacred space,” see, for example, Eliade, “Sacred Architecture and Symbolism,” or Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chap. 14.

valley where the arms meet,"¹²³ but then stresses even more that "Zapotecs considered the entire ceremonial precinct as a sacred mountain of creation and sustenance,"¹²⁴ he is reechoing precisely a point about "cosmic mountains" that Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* makes via abundant examples from Asia, Australia and the ancient Near East.¹²⁵ To imagine that by positioning their capital on a mountaintop they have likewise positioned themselves for privileged "access to the sacred" is, in Eliade's assessment, a nearly ubiquitous cross-cultural pattern.

Moreover, in Joyce's comments on the humanly constructed enhancements of that fortuitous natural setting, he reiterates at least three more of Eliade's most celebrated themes. First, regarding the notion of an "*axis mundi*," Joyce argues repeatedly that Monte Albán was conceived and perceived as the sort of "sacred center" or, in Eliade's language, a "point of ontological transition" at which human beings can pass from the "profane" earthly context into rewarding engagements with "the sacred."¹²⁶ Second, when Joyce observes with similar frequency that "the symbolism and spatial arrangement of the architecture and iconography suggest that the Main Plaza symbolized the Zapotec version of the cosmos,"¹²⁷ he perfectly exemplifies Eliade's complementary notion of an "*imago mundi*" wherein peoples in innumerable contexts feel compelled to construct houses, temples, ceremonial precincts and/or whole cities as "microcosms" that are

¹²³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 128.

¹²⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134.

¹²⁵ See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: New American Library, 1958), chap. 10, "Sacred Places: Temple, Palace, 'Centre of the World.'"

¹²⁶ Time and again, especially in Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca" and more sparingly in his book, Joyce explicitly argues that "monumental buildings and public building plazas that were built as *axis mundi* or points of communication and mediation between humans and the divine." Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 119.

¹²⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134.

parallel in structure to the cosmos at large.¹²⁸ And third, when Joyce opines that this sort of microcosmic conception of the Monte Albán's Main Plaza made it the ideal setting "where rituals could be performed, reenacting and commemorating the cosmic creation,"¹²⁹ he is reaffirming not only Eliade's relentless emphasis on the paramount significance of cosmogonies, but, moreover, the Eliadean notion that all of this cosmic symbolism is, in very large part, the backdrop to ritual performance.¹³⁰ All of this architectural symbolism comes to life, as it were, only in ritual.

Some may be concerned (and others favorably impressed) by the seemingly generic applicability of these ideas about sacred space; and the contention that the Main Plaza was preeminently a context for public ritual is, of course, not new. But Joyce, unlike previous versions, urges us to consider seriously the possibility that Monte Albán's spectacular early success—the meteoric ascent during Period I from nothing to supereminence in the region, which no one can deny—really does derive first and foremost from unique success in creating or capitalizing on a so-termed *axis mundi* at which privileged access to the sacred was (understood to be) possible. Just as Eliade would, Joyce presents the cosmogrammatic configuration of the Main Plaza not as a propagandistic pretext whereby rulers tricked or manipulated docile masses, but instead as the earnest expression of cosmological convictions to which both elite and non-elite participants adhered. This was the architectural expression of a "sacred covenant" and "social contract" to which all parties willingly adhered.

In short, it is, according to this (re)construction, nobles' and commoners' shared investments in building and maintaining a ceremonial center of unsurpassed scale, and thus unmatched effectiveness in engaging the divine, that holds at bay the greatest threat to social disorder—namely, the "structural contradictions" between communal versus

¹²⁸ See Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism," 112ff.

¹²⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134.

¹³⁰ See Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism," 112-15.

exclusionary models of authority, which arose at San José Mogote and would vex every sizeable Oaxacan settlement thereafter.

3. Elite and Non-Elite Cooperation: An Inclusive Great Plaza and a Preclassic “Golden Age” of Monte Albán

In this account of early Monte Albán (which crosses boundaries of Periods I and II), we may, then, detect again the “action theory” notion of unanticipated, but often highly fortuitous, consequences insofar as a capital founded by “a new religious movement” primarily as a site for enhanced engagements with the gods quickly—and perhaps beyond the religiously-inclined founders’ expectations—acquired as well political and economic supremacy in the Oaxaca Valley. Political domination is, we are urged to believe, almost accidental, a happy byproduct rather than a driving incentive. Joyce reviews arguments and evidence for mounting levels of violent conflict, forced labor, tribute demands and warfare, likely in pursuit of captives taken for human sacrifice, all of which he concurs did increase during this period.¹³¹ But he specifically rejects hypotheses that early Monte Albán was involved in the sort large-scale “predatory warfare” that was designed to subjugate their political rivals.¹³² And thus, following a review of the hotly debated issue of Monte Albán’s relations with surrounding areas during this (Period II) era and the prospect of an “empire,” he comes to a conclusion more like Winter’s than Marcus and Flannery’s:

“Monte Albán may have periodically gone to war with people in neighboring regions and perhaps even conquered some communities outside the Oaxaca Valley, but the evidence at present does not support the hypothesis that Monte Albán controlled a substantial empire.”¹³³

¹³¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 151-55.

¹³² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 152.

¹³³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 155.

Alternatively, instead of a kind of wholesale victory of authoritarian and exclusionary leadership styles, Joyce's account of early Monte Albán provides us a more conciliatory, socially inclusive picture wherein nobles and commoners are collaborating in the ongoing construction and maintenance of a ceremonial center that can meet the religious needs of all social groups. In this ("Preclassic") era, all participants in the "new religious movement" are working together to play their respective roles in honoring the "sacred covenant."

That is to say, though not a pollyanna image of perfect social harmony, Joyce, consistent with his subaltern theoretical commitments, does present a scenario in which Period I and II hereditary nobles and communal organizations were involved in constant negotiations and contestations of political authority. These nobles, like the early leaders of San José Mogote, seemingly understood the limits of their hegemony in the face of commoners who persistently asserted their agency and interests. The Monte Albán rulers of this era, then, whether for pragmatic or genuinely humble motives, moderated their self-interest and won authority overwhelmingly on the basis of their (perception as) indispensable mediators between the populace and the divine. Thus in radical contrast to those frequent characterizations of Mesoamerican religio-civic plazas as forums in which self-aggrandizing leaders advanced their own claims to entitlement, Joyce suggests that, during Monte Albán's first centuries, nearly the opposite was the case:

"Despite increasing political and religious authority, public settings like the Main Plaza stressed the symbols of communal authority and an emerging corporate identity, while muting representations of the increasingly powerful rulers of the city."¹³⁴

In sum, during this early era in the city's history (roughly Periods I and II), though nobles lived near the ceremonial precinct and no doubt directed the public rituals, they abstained both from overt representations of themselves and from high-status residences directly on the ceremonial plaza,¹³⁵ a kind of over-reaching of authority that,

¹³⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 146.

¹³⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 144.

according to Joyce's plotline, had engendered such resentment at San José Mogote. In this phase, the Main Plaza was open on all sides, figuratively and literally inviting the participation the very broad spectrum of people who felt an investment in this "sacred space." In short, at this point, the inherent contradictions between traditional communal models of decision-making and the newer forms of exclusionary, hereditary-based authority were successfully accommodated. These early rulers of Monte Albán had, it seems, learned something from the excesses of their San José Mogote predecessors; and thus they respected the social contract. And, in Joyce's account, so long as that perpetual tension was adjudicated in tolerable ways, Monte Albán would continue to stretch its lead as the most prestigious and powerful capital in the region. In fact, in his rendition of the history of the Zapotec capital, it is this early era—i.e., Periods I and II or the so-termed "Preclassic" in lots of older schemes, not the "Classic" era (i.e., Period III)—that actually constitutes the "Golden Age" of Monte Albán. This is when the sacred city and its ceremonial plaza were working best.

D. [PERIOD III] CLASSIC-ERA MONTE ALBÁN: INCREASINGLY EXCLUSIVE SACRED SPACE AND BREACHES OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Though Joyce is willing to label the next 500 years of Monte Albán's history "the Classic period," this is, for him, an urban florescence only in a highly qualified sense. In fact, his account of the events that lead from the Late and Terminal Formative era (roughly 300 BCE-300 CE) into the so-termed Classic era (300-800 CE) describe, ironically enough, a transition from growth, prosperity and inclusion to an era of retrenchment, exclusion and diminished regional control.¹³⁶ In this stretch, the

¹³⁶ Note again that in the chronological scheme on which Joyce relies (see *ibid.*, 16) can be awkward to correlate with earlier schemes and terminology. For instance, he uses the terms "Classic" (300 CE-800 CE) and "Postclassic" (800 CE-1521), but never "Preclassic." Thus what he terms the "Terminal Formative" (roughly 0-300 CE) immediately precedes the "Early Classic" (roughly 300-500 CE). Additionally, he avoids entirely any reference to Caso's five-stages so that all of my attempts to correlate his presentation with Periods I, II, III, IV and V—which I do in order to facilitate comparisons between Joyce's and earlier (re)construction narratives—are rough and provisional.

commoner protagonists of the story transition from enthusiastic involvement in the city's religio-civic ritual proceedings to disillusionment and disengagement. That is to say, if Monte Albán's Main Plaza had been in the Middle and Late Formative (850-100 BCE; i.e., very roughly Period I) an inclusive space—a site of widely public rituals wherein peoples of all social standings could engage the sacred, express their concerns, negotiate power and thereby acquire a sense of belonging to the corporate identity of the capital—by the Terminal Formative (0-300 CE; i.e., roughly Period II), that workable but always tenuous accommodation of inherently conflicting communal and exclusionary models of authority was increasingly stressed. For Joyce, the opening into the Classic era (i.e., Period III), then, provides a sequence of events very reminiscent of the beginning-of-the-end at San José Mogote around 700 BCE insofar as the Monte Albán nobility now took a series of steps to consolidate their authoritarian control over the ceremonial center, high-handed maneuvers that had the untoward effect of alienating the wider populace. Again the crucial dynamic was untoward relations between elites and non-elites, and again it was a turning point from which there was no return.

1. Early Classic Exclusionary Modes of Authority: Overreaching Elites and Disaffected, thus Rebellious Non-Elites

Though Joyce describes a long and fairly smooth arc toward more exclusionary modes of authority at Monte Albán, the old distinction between Periods IIIA and IIIB survives in an acknowledgement of substantially different Early and Late Classic eras. With respect to the Early Classic (300-500 CE), that trend is especially apparent in shifting status of the city's main ceremonial precinct or "sacred space." Perhaps most revealing of a new and less conciliatory relations between elites and non-elites, access to the Main Plaza, previously open on all sides, was, beginning in the Late Formative and continuing into the Early Classic, as Blanton observed, increasingly restricted by narrow entry points at the corners; Monte Albán elites, in other words, exercised more and more control over who entered and what transpired in the ceremonial precinct.¹³⁷ Nobles'

¹³⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 155, 218.

residences directly on the Main Plaza, notably absent in earlier iterations of this ritual space, began to appear, and thus set in motion a process whereby a public venue for large-scale ceremonies was progressively transformed into a place dominated by the domestic and ritual activities of the elite.¹³⁸

Additionally, there were increasingly elaborate high-status burials, increasing tribute demands, and evidence that nobles were enjoying increasing control of prestige goods, which together lead Joyce to conclude that, by the Nisa Phase (0-300 CE), just in advance of the Early Classic, “the rulers of Monte Albán through alliance, religious persuasion, and military conquest had probably extended their authority over the entire Valley of Oaxaca and perhaps into contiguous valleys of Ejuta, Miahuatlán, and Sola.”¹³⁹ That is to say, during the latter stages of the Formative (roughly Period II), Monte Albán nobles were successfully consolidating their authority and privileged status—but in ways that gradually excluded and disaffected the commoners who, in Joyce's description of the Middle Formative, had previously felt themselves full participants in the religio-civic proceedings of the city.

Again like the pattern we know from San José Mogote, wherein rulers overplayed their hand, as it were—and again depicting Joyce's persistent attention to the non-complacent agency of commoners—this appropriation of Monte Albán's ceremonial plaza eventually, about 200 CE, “erupted in a major political upheaval at Monte Albán.”¹⁴⁰ Disaffected non-elites became rebellious non-elites. The construction of a defensive wall around the vulnerable slopes of the city is one indication of major conflict; but even more salient in this account is a wholesale revamping of the Main Plaza wherein

¹³⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 156, notes that, by the Nisa Phase (100 BCE-300 CE), “In Area IV-Norte on the northwest side of the Main Plaza Zapotecs built the first high-status residence directly facing the Main Plaza...”

¹³⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 157.

¹⁴⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 159 Joyce, *ibid.*, 206, considers this upheaval to have been “the result of internal political changes” not, say, influence from Teotihuacan.

structures were dismantled and numerous carved stones were variously plastered over, broken and deposited as fill for new constructions.¹⁴¹

This Early Classic episode in Joyce's story provides, then, an explanation for the widely strewn and damaged *Danzante* figures that visitors since the nineteenth century had recognized as obviously dislodged from their original positions. Though it may be difficult to interpret the tortured *Danzante* figures as signs of Monte Albán's corporate inclusiveness (one might think they symbolize exactly the opposite), according to Joyce, Formative-period public art in the Main Plaza, clearly visible to the widely inclusive audiences that attended the rituals of that era, had "stressed communal involvement in and benefits from warfare, sacrifice, and ritual, while muting the significance of nobles."¹⁴² But, by contrast, the radical remodeling of the Early Classic jettisoned visible signs of collective military victories and accomplishments in favor of a newly configured Main Plaza that was now the privileged possession of the ruling classes. In short, commoners were "largely excluded from leadership at the supra-community level"¹⁴³ as exclusionary models of authority quite fully overwhelmed the more broadly inclusive corporate forms of leadership with which they had long been at odds.¹⁴⁴ The social contract between elites and non-elites had been broken.

2. Unprecedentedly Authoritarian Forms of Governance, but Declining Economic and Political Influence

It is, then, the new and different social formations that emerge in the wake of "the fragmentation and chaos of the Terminal Formative," most notably, "the ascendancy of the nobility"—an eventuality certain to disturb subaltern sensibilities—that set the tone

¹⁴¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 217.

¹⁴² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 217.

¹⁴³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 197.

¹⁴⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 159.

for Joyce's remarks on the Early and Late Classic eras (Periods IIIA and IIIB in older accounts). The structural contradictions between communal and authoritarian forms of governance that had created conflict and instability in earlier urban polities are now absent, not because they were resolved but because the latter has so fully overpowered the former.¹⁴⁵ At this point, the gap between nobility and commoner—signaled by contrastive dress, residences, access to exotic goods, control of esoteric knowledge and access to rituals, including those that transpire in the Main Plaza—was wider than ever before.¹⁴⁶

Now almost completely under the authoritarian control of the elite, Monte Albán continued to be a major political, religious and demographic center; yet, in the Classic period, irrespective of that laudatory label, the prestigious capital was no longer the dominant demographic center in the valley.¹⁴⁷ Several other sites, most notably Jalieza, each with its own elite class, rivaled Monte Albán in size, economic clout and political influence. Thus contrary to older assumptions about a Classic-era “fluorescence”—but consistent with Marcus and Flannery's account of deliberate downsizing or “consolidation” during Period IIIA¹⁴⁸—Joyce notes that, by the Early Classic, there had been a “contraction of Monte Albán's influence in surrounding areas,” which required the rulers of Monte Albán to cede control of areas beyond the Central Valleys that had been conquered during the Terminal Formative. The unprecedentedly authoritarian leaders of this era, again ironically, controlled less territory than their (Period II) predecessors and, moreover, were forced into new levels of compromise and negotiation with the roughly commensurate rulers of other Oaxacan settlements. Thus where the older tensions between Monte Albán nobles and commoners were muted, Classic-era Monte Albán

¹⁴⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 196.

¹⁴⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 198.

¹⁴⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 200.

¹⁴⁸ See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 230, 244 or my discussion of their position in chapter 6.

faced a new set of contradictions and tensions, now between the capital's nobility and the rulers of several competing, nearly commensurate Oaxacan settlements.¹⁴⁹

Also, by the way, though it is not a major component of his (re)construction, Joyce is compelled to address extended and still-ongoing debate about the relations between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan in this period. On this contentious topic, he rejects both diametrically opposed suggestions about complete independence from the Central Mexican capital and Marcus Winter's iconoclastic hypothesis that the Zapotec capital was, at this point, literally conquered and dominated by Teotihuacan.¹⁵⁰ Alternatively, Joyce again takes a moderate position with respect to extra-regional interactions by concluding that, "Although some form of hegemonic relations is a possibility, I think the evidence is more consistent with reciprocal economic and political relations between the rulers of Monte Albán and Teotihuacan."¹⁵¹ In other words, while he repeatedly acknowledges a measure of exchange between Monte Albán and other Mesoamerican regions, at no point in Joyce's version of events, this era included, are Zapotec involvements with or debts to peoples outside of Oaxaca, either positive or negative, matters of great importance.

3. Late Classic Appropriations of the Main Plaza: Dominating Elites and Disengaged, thus Liberated Non-Elites

In any case, continuing his focus on Monte Albán as the region's preeminent "sacred place," Joyce's account of developments in the Late Classic (500-800 CE) again feature major changes in the sort of ritual-architectural events that transpire in the Main Plaza. That is to say, given the new set of social and political realities, Joyce, to his credit, continues to challenge the over-simple assumption that the sorts of religio-civic proceedings in the Main Plaza were fairly constant throughout the city's long history. To

¹⁴⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 197.

¹⁵⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 201-5.

¹⁵¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 205.

the contrary, he describes more major adjustments—indeed a kind of reinvention or “revalorization”¹⁵²—of both the physical features and, even more importantly, the ritual usages of the region’s preeminent sacred space. Just as was the case with every Oaxacan ceremonial center since the first one at San José Mogote, the Late Classic Main Plaza continued to be a site at which to interact with the divine and to maintain the still-relevant “sacred covenant;” Joyce contends that those ostensible religious functions remain in place. And also like those hosted in all previous ceremonial centers, Late Classic-era ritual events in the Main Plaza continued to serve ancillary, but crucially important, roles in negotiating power among various social constituencies as well as providing contexts in which to “construct” and refine the respective identities of those groups. Those essential social functions also remained intact.

But what changed in major ways was the composition of the social groups who were involved in those religio-civic ritual occasions. As noted, during the Formative era (i.e., Period I and most of Period II), the principal participants were Monte Albán nobles *and* commoners; but through the Early and Late Classic eras (i.e., Periods IIIA and IIIB), commoners were increasingly excluded from the Main Plaza except on now-infrequent community-wide ritual occasions; and thus the primary negotiations of authority and identity were among Monte Albán nobles and the nobles from other competing Oaxacan centers. The evidence suggests to Joyce that, at this point, “Zapotec nobles were less concerned with large-scaled ceremonies that engaged commoners and more focused on rituals involving restricted audiences of other elites.”¹⁵³ Now for the first time, instead of collective themes, individual rulers are depicted on carved stones; and the genealogies of rulers are likewise represented in much more detailed and prominent ways.¹⁵⁴ By now there were abundant high-status dwellings directly on the ceremonial precinct; and Joyce

¹⁵² On the “revalorization” of architecture and places, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 12.

¹⁵³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 225.

¹⁵⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 213, credits Javier Urcid’s work in identifying “at least 11 different rulers of Monte Albán” that are depicted on carved stones from this era.

suggests that rituals were increasingly devoted to commemorations of the revered ancestors from whom various nobles claimed descent, and thus special entitlements and authority.¹⁵⁵ As he explains, “For Monte Albán’s leading families, the Main Plaza was now both a ceremonial and residential area.”¹⁵⁶ Instead of trying to impress the wider populace, the religio-civic events of the Late Classic had become occasions for elites to impress and negotiate with one another.¹⁵⁷

4. The Persistent Agency and Non-Compliance of Non-Elites: Exclusion Transformed into Opportunity

Accordingly, Joyce’s aspiration to a Oaxacan history that attends more fully to the usually underestimated agency of commoners—and his basic subaltern proposition that non-elites are constantly involved in negotiations and contestations of dominant ideologies—are more difficult to sustain in his treatment of the Classic period. During this era, “largely excluded from leadership at the supra-community level,”¹⁵⁸ commoners, arguably the main actors in this entire historical (re)construction, are, it may seem, forced into minor roles, perhaps even bit parts. Yet, consistent with his poststructural leanings, Joyce is not content to accept a storyline in which non-elites either disappear from view or simply acquiesce to authority without resistance. And thus he ends his discussion of the Classic period by presenting a scenario in which, in a sense, when one door closed on commoners, other doors and opportunities opened. As Joyce explains:

“The exclusionary structure of political authority [in the Classic era] probably means that most commoners had little access to the upper echelons of Zapotec society, but this does not mean that non-elites were powerless or lacked agency. I

¹⁵⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 212.

¹⁵⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 225.

¹⁵⁷ It is, by the way, somewhat surprising that human sacrifice, which Joyce presents as very prominent and important in Formative Era ritual events in the Main Plaza, is largely absent from his description Classic Era ritual events (though one assumes it continued).

¹⁵⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 197.

argue that there was a diversity of subject positions through which non-elites negotiated social relationships. In addition to distinctions defined by age and gender, commoners also had access to a variety of occupations including farming, food preparation, raising children, and craft specializations such as the production of pottery, textiles, and shell ornaments.”¹⁵⁹

In sum with respect to the Classic era, then, once again consistent with his practice theory premises, Joyce shows how the deliberate attempts of Monte Albán rulers to consolidate and strengthen their control had the “unintended outcome” of substantially weakening the allegiance of commoners who, as they had centuries earlier at San José Mogote, transformed their disaffection with the elites into a set of new opportunities.¹⁶⁰ From the perspective of now-excluded social constituencies, the old “sacred space” took on yet another new significance insofar as “It is possible that for many people the Main Plaza and other restricted ceremonial spaces came to symbolize the evasion of moral responsibilities for rulers to their people.”¹⁶¹

Nevertheless, again exemplifying the dominant subaltern historiographical theme in this entire account, instead of settling for merely passive resentment, non-elite Oaxacans exercised the sort of “agency” and creative resilience that allowed them to turn a seemingly unfortunate barrier into a bridge to new levels of social autonomy and occupational flexibility. Where in the Early Classic, disaffected commoners rebelled against the exclusionary practices of the Monte Albán elite, in the Late Classic, even more disenfranchised, commoners, just as they had at San José Mogote, exercised their independence and simply left the mountain capital in favor of sites where they were

¹⁵⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 224. Given his earlier suggestions that the non-elite actors in this story cared about noting so much as “communication with the divine,” and throughout commoners are congratulated for their ingenious challenges to hegemony, it is somewhat surprising that Joyce, *ibid.*, observes that, in the Classic Period, “Nobles and especially rulers... had a greater degree of control over people’s access to the divine, since there is little evidence for non-elite domestic rituals other than mortuary ceremonies.”

¹⁶⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 226.

¹⁶¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 226.

better able to exercise their still-strong religious inclinations. Excluded from full participation in religio-civic life of the great capital but unwilling to acquiesce to that marginal status, they took the initiative to move elsewhere. And thereby, non-elites again find a way, against the odds, to reclaim their role as the leading actors in Joyce's (re)construction narrative, emerging as eminently resourceful and at least as shrewd as the nobles. But, as we'll note next, without their support, the demise of Monte Albán was inevitable.

E. [PERIODS IV & V] THE COLLAPSE AND AFTERMATH OF MONTE ALBÁN: SHORT-SIGHTED RULERS, RECALCITRANT COMMONERS AND RESILIENT SACRED SPACE

Joyce's treatment of the Postclassic collapse of Monte Albán follows the same pattern of rehearsing alternatives before presenting his own. Tellingly reminiscent of Alfonso Caso's reticence about proposing a definitive explanation of Monte Albán's collapse and abandonment, his survey of state-of-the-art interpretations—most of which focus on some combination of warfare, landscape degradation, climate change and internal political unrest—reveals that tentativeness and disagreement remain the watchwords concerning the demise of Oaxaca's Classic-period polities.¹⁶² Even now, though he finds a measure of truth in several hypotheses, Joyce reminds us that “causes of the collapse are not well understood...”¹⁶³ He is, for instance, persuaded that Mixtecs established an important a Postclassic presence in the Valley of Oaxaca, especially via intermarriage with Zapotec royal houses,¹⁶⁴ but he is not convinced that, as Ignacio Bernal and others have suggested, the fall of the Zapotec capital was “due largely to the penetration of Mixtecs.”¹⁶⁵ He concurs that the Postclassic decline of Oaxaca's cities

¹⁶² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 248.

¹⁶³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 249.

¹⁶⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 264.

¹⁶⁵ Ignacio Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico as Seen in the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, 1968), 99.

“was part of a political transformation that affected all of Mesoamerica,”¹⁶⁶ but he is less impressed than Richard Blanton with the possibility that Teotihuacan's collapse played a large role in Monte Albán's demise.¹⁶⁷ And though Joyce is willing to concede that ecological factors always play a role, his account affords far less weight than that of Marcus Winter to the prospect that the 1200 years of heavy habitation in the Oaxaca Valley had decimated the region's natural resources, which in turn adversely affected Monte Albán's tribute economy.¹⁶⁸

1. Poststructural Explanations of Collapse: Elite Introversion and Non-Elite Disaffected Independence

Alternatively, Joyce's remarks on Monte Albán's decline, suitably enough, rely on the same poststructural premises and questions that he deployed to explain the emergence and ascent of the capital. Here again unwilling to focus as fully as Marcus and Flannery on the calculated decisions and Postclassic “power building” of leaders,¹⁶⁹ Joyce is nonetheless in complete agreement with prevailing assessments that “factional competition among prominent groups and their constituencies was an important factor;”¹⁷⁰ and his version of practice theory does support the notion that the increasingly self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing priorities of rulers in this era had unintended—and, in this case, particularly untoward—consequences. In fact, Joyce provides us an account that, narratively speaking, as we'll see, actually has notable resonances with Bernal's older and oft-repeated notion that the “decadence” of Period IV Monte Albán can be attributed to a “complete introversion” in which Zapotec culture, which had thrived in

¹⁶⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 248.

¹⁶⁷ See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 103.

¹⁶⁸ See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 70. On the prospect that, by the Postclassic Era, the Zapotecs population had grown to a point that exhausted the natural resources of the valley, also see Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica” 149-51.

¹⁶⁹ See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

¹⁷⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 248.

previous eras via creative outreach and interactions with other cultures, in the Postclassic era, “turns in on itself and becomes detached from the stream of events in Mesoamerica.”¹⁷¹ In Joyce's rendition, though, the undoing of Monte Albán's rulers depends less on their detachment from other Mesoamerican cultures than on a kind of vaingloriousness that leaves them increasingly disengaged from the Oaxacan commoners who had formerly felt loyal investments in the great capital, but now simply left the city in favor of smaller and more egalitarian communities.¹⁷² As in every phase of Joyce's (re)construction, it is again the contested relations between elites and non-elites that are most consequential in determining the course of Oaxacan history.

While he is always careful to avoid clean breaks between periods, in Joyce's commentary, the use and perception of Monte Albán's by-then largely vacant ceremonial center is significantly different in the Early Postclassic (800-1250 CE; roughly Period IV in older chronological schemes) versus the Late Postclassic (1250 CE-1521; roughly Period V). With respect to the Early Postclassic, Joyce echoes Marcus Winter both in warning that until more data are available “it will be difficult to make definitive arguments,” but also in noting the current evidence suggests that this was “a period of fragmentation with the collapse of political centers like Monte Albán and Jalieza, dispersal of people into smaller communities, and perhaps a decrease in regional population.”¹⁷³ Again reminiscent of his account of the wholesale abandonment of San José Mogote some 1500 years earlier, Monte Albán's increasingly disaffected non-elite constituencies, when faced with the abrasively exclusionary tactics of nobles, had both the independence and wherewithal to simply “vote with their feet” and relocate to less

¹⁷¹ Ignacio Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3: “Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica,” volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchoppe (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 805.

¹⁷² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 249-50.

¹⁷³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 251. Perhaps surprisingly, Joyce, *ibid.*, 257, notes that, “Early Postclassic social change in the lower Río Verde Valley is therefore much better understood than in the Oaxacan highlands, in large part because of the clearly defined ceramic phase.”

centralized and more egalitarian settlements.¹⁷⁴ In this story, the so-termed collapse is, therefore, not a consequence of military defeat nor ecological crisis but rather the short-sighted self-indulgence of rulers who monopolized the Main Plaza as a forum in which to impress one another, and thereby deprived the wider populace access to their most prized sacred space. Egoistic nobles, in a sense, squandered their most valuable resource—the mountaintop *axis mundi*—which was the real basis of their appeal; and thus ever-recalcitrant and pro-active commoners were again compelled to exercise their “agency” by withdrawing their support for the polity of Monte Albán.

2. Early Postclassic Revalorizations: Frequent, Extensive and Unregulated Ritualizing in the Main Plaza

Joyce agrees, then, that Monte Albán, still a major working site in the Late Classic Xoo Phase (500-800 CE), was, by approximately 800 CE—i.e., the onset of the Early Postclassic—on the one hand, largely or entirely abandoned. Non-elites, excluded and alienated by the elitist rulers, had left in large numbers. Without their indispensable support, ruling institutions and dynasties had collapsed at Monte Albán and other urban centers in the Oaxaca Valley; monumental art and writing ceased; nobles had lost the bulk of their wealth and political authority; and thus the temples, elite residences and other architectural features of the formerly posh Main Plaza “fell to ruins.”¹⁷⁵ Never again would this be a living city. By 800 CE, Monte Albán had already begun to take on early stages of the overgrown aspect that Europeans would encounter centuries later.

Yet, on the other hand, according to Joyce, irrespective of its abandonment and severe disrepair during the Early Postclassic, Monte Albán's famed sacred space experienced yet another reinvention (or “revalorization”), albeit a more humble one,

¹⁷⁴ Though Joyce is not explicit about the parallels between his account of Middle Formative commoners “voting with their feet” and abandoning San José Mogote about 700 BCE (see *ibid.*, 127) and Early Postclassic commoners abandoning Monte Albán about 800 CE (see *ibid.*, 251), the similarities are notable.

¹⁷⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 251.

wherein non-residents periodically returned to the old ceremonial precinct to ritualize, though in ways decidedly different from the elitist events of the Classic era.¹⁷⁶ This was yet another new and very different chapter in the storied career of the Main Plaza. While few if any major efforts were made to reclaim or refurbish the dilapidated buildings, those vacant structures—particularly the tombs and so-termed “temple-patio-altar complexes” (TPAs)—now functioned as still-esteemed sites at which visitors to the uninhabited city deposited offerings. In fact, while some accounts give the impression that Caso's famous discovery of the Postclassic (apparently) Mixtec reuse of the Classic-era Zapotec Tomb 7 represents a spectacular special case,¹⁷⁷ Joyce notes that “Liobaa-phase [800 CE-1250 CE] offerings recovered in TPAs, especially those in the North and South Platforms, consisted of thousands of objects resulting from repeated rituals over the course of several centuries...”¹⁷⁸ The Early Postclassic ceremonial burial of human remains and other objects within the old city was, in other words, frequent, extensive and prolonged. Though pilgrimage per se is, somewhat oddly, never an important theme in Joyce's account, his description gives the impression that the former site of intensive habitation was now operating as a kind of sparsely populated but much-revered pilgrimage destination.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 251. Though Joyce does not use the term “revalorization,” the kind of new ritual uses of much older architectural forms that he describes here is a particularly apt demonstration of the way in which I have used that Eliadean concept. See Lindsay Jones, “Revalorizing Mircea Eliade's Notion of Revalorization: Reflections on the Present-day Reuses of Mesoamerica's Pre-Columbian Sites and Architectures,” *Archaevs: Studies in the History of Religions* XV (2011): 119-59.

¹⁷⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 276, locates the Mixtec reuse of Tomb 7 in the Chila phase (1250-1520 CE), which is to say, the Late (not Early) Postclassic.

¹⁷⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 252.

¹⁷⁹ Actually there are numerous points in Joyce's account of ancient Oaxacan history in which one might suspect that pilgrimage played a very important role, and he does make at least a passing reference to the applicability of Paul Wheatley's *Pivot of the Four Quarters* (see Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 194), which presents pilgrimage as a crucial factor in the transition from rural to urban settlement. But Joyce does not, it seems, pursue that interpretive avenue.

In Joyce's assessment, the composition and abundance of those Early Postclassic deposits "suggest the continuous 'feeding' of sacrificial offerings to the divine."¹⁸⁰ That is to say, while the genealogical preoccupations of Classic-era elites no longer dominated those ritual occasions, he suspects that the same urge to "communicate with the divine" and to maintain the "sacred covenant" that had underwritten the original foundation of the once-great capital remained intact or, perhaps more properly, resurfaced. Indeed, while Zapotec elites, who now lived in more humble circumstances on the valley floor, apparently continued to take a special interest in the home of their ancestors—they too were now occasional visitors to the old city—their loss of control had reopened the sacred mountain to the wide access it enjoyed during the Middle and Late Formative eras. In support of that rejuvenated accessibility, Joyce observes that, "the use of common objects such as miniature utilitarian ceramics and obsidian artifacts suggests a much broader range of people participated in these rituals relative to the highly restricted practices of the Classic period."¹⁸¹

In short, fully consistent with his affirmation of the paired agency and religious inclinations of commoners, Joyce's characterization of Early Postclassic ritualizing in the Main Plaza, albeit brief and tentative, presents these occasions less as the sad remnants of a lost glory than as something like the overdue reclamation of a sacred space by its rightful owners. Communal priorities again prevailed over exclusionary ones.

3. Late Postclassic Political Irrelevance and Religious Prestige: The Monte Albán Ruins as a Religio-Cultural Resource

In comparison to the Early Postclassic, the Late Postclassic in Oaxaca, roughly 1250 CE until the arrival of Spaniards in 1521 (Period V in older schemes), is better understood, largely because of the wealth of Mixtec codices from this era, which,

¹⁸⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 252.

¹⁸¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 252.

together with more abundant archaeological data, enable Joyce to provide a fulsome account of specific leaders and events in that area.¹⁸² In this final segment of his (re)construction, the ever-more-overgrown site of Monte Albán occupies an ironic combination of political obscurity and religious prestige.

At this point, Monte Albán is, then, empty of both people and political influence. Though Joyce agrees that strategic marriage alliances with Zapotec royal houses did bring unprecedented numbers of Mixtecs into the Valley of Oaxaca during the Late Postclassic, he affords Mixtecs' no major role in Monte Albán's decline (which had already transpired), and he disagrees with older views that Mixtecs actually gained control over large parts of the central valley.¹⁸³ In his view, "by the late fourteenth century Zaachila [only a few kilometers from Monte Albán] emerged as the dominant community in the Valley of Oaxaca;"¹⁸⁴ but by the mid-fifteenth century, "Zaachila was eclipsed by Cuilapan [also within a few kilometers of the old capital] as the major power in the Valley of Oaxaca..."¹⁸⁵ Yet again the major developments can be explained by the permanent tensions between communal versus authoritarian models of authority insofar as both the declining population of the Early Postclassic and the tendency back toward egalitarian communities were now reversed. Again reminiscent of Winter's view, Joyce contends that "The Late Postclassic in highland Oaxaca was a time of population growth and the reemergence of powerful ruling dynasties."¹⁸⁶ That is to say, irrespective of connotations of decadence and the cursory treatment that this era gets in earlier Monte Albán narratives, Joyce shares Winter's view that it was in the centuries just before the arrival of Spanish that the Valley of Oaxaca actually reached its peak population.¹⁸⁷ But,

¹⁸² See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 258-66.

¹⁸³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 264.

¹⁸⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 264.

¹⁸⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 265.

¹⁸⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 270.

¹⁸⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 271.

contrary to the centralization of the Classic era, the large Late Postclassic population was dispersed among numerous competing sites including Cuilapan, Mitla and Macuilxóchitl, each with some 10,000 residents, along with Yagul, Tlalixtac and Jalieza, each of which was home to over 6,000 people;¹⁸⁸ and each of those political centers had its own hereditary rulers who jockeyed for control of the valley. There was, however, no effort to resuscitate Monte Albán, which, in that obvious political sense, remained a non-factor in this era.

Monte Albán's political irrelevance and ongoing physical decay notwithstanding, the sacred mountain continued to enjoy ample prestige and allure among both Zapotecs and Mixtecs—of both elite and non-elite standing. The periodic visitation and offertory rituals of the Early Postclassic continued, though perhaps with less frequency. Most notably, it was during this phase that, Joyce agrees, Mixtecs interred at least nine persons along with a fabulous cache of gold, silver, copper, bone and other offerings in the Classic-era Zapotec Tomb 7. That seminal but not unique case signals that elites (as well as non-elites) from numerous near and far Late Postclassic settlements persisted in their actual visits to the old city, presumably both as a means of capitalizing on the site's unique "access to the divine"—still the place was considered an *axis mundi*—and as a means of cultivating politically strategic genealogical connections with the former rulers of Monte Albán. With respect to the recurrent opening of the ancient burial, Joyce opines that, "Ceremonies in Tomb 7 were highly restricted with only important nobles and religious specialists participating."¹⁸⁹ Likewise and predictably, however, he also accentuates the significant autonomy and economic flexibility that commoners continued to enjoy at this time;¹⁹⁰ and since elites apparently made no significant efforts to again reside on the mountain, the wide access and interest of non-elites in visiting the site was

¹⁸⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 271.

¹⁸⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 276.

¹⁹⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 277.

also allowed to continue.¹⁹¹ In short, neither commoners' nor elites' enthusiasm for the sacred site waned.

Moreover, Joyce's account of the Late Postclassic brings to the fore yet one more sort of revalorization of the Main Plaza wherein the vacant city had by this time acquired the status of a mythical place of creation.¹⁹² Thus in addition to actual journeys to the site, the rich fund of Late Postclassic epigraphic and ethnohistoric sources reveals that Monte Albán was, and probably had been for a long time, esteemed not just as a physical place and *axis mundi*, but also a legendary place and thus a valued cultural resource. In this respect, one is reminded of the Aztecs' extreme affection for the similarly long-abandoned Teotihuacan, which also was a site of occasional Postclassic visitation, but, even more importantly, was imagined as "the birthplace of the gods" that provided the Aztecs (and many others) a symbolic paradigm of urban excellence and authority.¹⁹³ By the same token, though the particulars are debated among epigraphers, Joyce notes persuasive evidence from Mixtec codices wherein various Late Postclassic leaders and factions were, it seems, maneuvering to enhance their legitimacy via by the presentation of (largely fictive) associations with the sacred mountain of Monte Albán.¹⁹⁴ And he recounts additionally how an image of the Monte Albán's ceremonial plaza was carved into a Late Postclassic lintel at Mitla, a commemorative gesture no doubt replicated in

¹⁹¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 276, does belie the too-simple image of total vacancy and open access at Late Postclassic Monte Albán by noting that, "In addition to rituals, a defensive wall was also built over the South Platform creating a fortress for the people living in surrounding communities."

¹⁹² See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 276.

¹⁹³ On Teotihuacan (or Tollan) as paradigm of authority for the Aztecs and numerous other peoples, see, for example, David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, revised edition (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), chap. 3; or *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, eds. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000). Though Joyce is not explicit about this connection, the parallels between the esteemed statuses of Teotihuacan and Monte Albán are clearly evident.

¹⁹⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 259.

many Oaxacan contexts that not only “underscores the continuing significance of the hilltop as a sacred place,”¹⁹⁵ but, moreover, demonstrates the ongoing utility of linking oneself or one's ruling dynasty with Monte Albán long after the place had ceased to exercise any real political or economic influence. In Joyce's apt surmise, “The identification of the Main Plaza as a place of creation represents another appropriation of the ceremonial precinct by the nobility, although in this case it is the appropriation of the plaza's past to legitimate political relations in the Late Postclassic present.”¹⁹⁶

Irrespective of that enduring prestige among Oaxacans of all social standings, Joyce's succinct comments on the fifteenth-century Mexica intrusion into the Valley of Oaxaca, and then the subsequent arrival of Spaniards in 1521, follow the partyline in suggesting that the abandoned old city attracted no special attention from either of those groups. Be that as it may, given the centrality of “sacred space” in this story, together with Joyce's description of the religious predispositions of Oaxacans “on the eve of the Spanish Conquest,”¹⁹⁷ he does lead us to suspect that so-termed commoners, even amid drastically changing political circumstances, would have continued to regard the Monte Albán mountaintop as “a portal to the divine.”

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS: PROTAGONIST COMMONERS, ANTAGONIST NOBLES AND THE HISTORY OF A SACRED PLACE

To reiterate and sum up, because he treats Monte Albán's collapse and aftermath as well as the city's initial founding and ascent, Arthur A. Joyce's *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos* provides, among other things, perhaps the most complete start-to-finish narrative account of the great Zapotec capital.¹⁹⁸ In Paul Ricoeur's terms, his

¹⁹⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 276.

¹⁹⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 276.

¹⁹⁷ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56-63.

¹⁹⁸ The very different start-to-finish synthesis in Marcus, *Monte Albán*, may present the closest competition in that regard.

“emplotment” of Monte Albán’s history eventuates in a (re)construction narrative that is eminently “followable” insofar as it has a very clear beginning, middle and ending, all linked by the same coherent logic and guiding themes.¹⁹⁹ The uniqueness and originality of his rendition, which one has to extract from his abundant rehearsals of competing opinions on all sorts of topics, derive, in large part, from his pairing of strange theoretical bedfellows, poststructuralism and the phenomenology of religion. Each of those schools of thought accounts for a different narrative leitmotif, and thus a quite different set of insights, “life lessons” and constructive resources that readers might glean from this story of Monte Albán.

A. A POSTSTRUCTURAL ENDORSEMENT OF POPULISM: THE DIGNITY, APLOMB AND AGENCY OF “COMMON PEOPLE”

Regarding the first guiding narrative theme, Joyce is relentless in reminding us that, “This book presents a synthesis of the prehispanic history and cultural achievements of the Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos of Oaxaca from a poststructural theoretical perspective.”²⁰⁰ Identifying functionalism, systems theory and neo-evolutionism as his triad of methodological nemeses, he asserts that where those older approaches tend to obscure the unique and unpredictable nature of Oaxacan history by reducing it to supposedly generalizable patterns or stages of cultural evolution such as chiefdoms, states or empires, “poststructural theory views social change as a result of both everyday practice and creative accommodations to unanticipated and contingent circumstances.”²⁰¹ Where those older approaches presume that societies are “coherent and integrated systems” or “functional wholes,” and thus “minimize intrasocietal tensions and conflicts that are present in all groups and may be the key sources of social change and

¹⁹⁹ On the essential role of story-crafting or so-termed “emplotment,” see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 53; and on “followability,” see *ibid.*, 49 and 149-55.

²⁰⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 283.

²⁰¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 289.

innovation,”²⁰² poststructuralist approaches, and more specifically “practice theory,” accentuate the ways in which dominant ideologies are constantly contested and structures of power are continually negotiated among elites and non-elites.²⁰³ Consequently, Joyce emphatically rejects “top-down perspectives” in which “rulers are seen as the sole decision-makers who drive social change;”²⁰⁴ and thus, unlike any previous account, he positions “commoners” as the primary protagonists in his stories of Oaxaca and Monte Albán.

His entire (re)construction hinges, in other words, on the permanent tensions between elite advocates for exclusionary models of authority versus non-elite proponents of more communal and egalitarian social arrangements; never-ending negotiation between elites and non-elites is the preeminent factor in determining the course of Oaxacan social history. And where most accounts present this tension as a hopeless mismatch, with rulers pulling all the strings, so to speak, Joyce reconfigures the clash as a ceaseless contest between very different, but similarly robust and commanding forces.

Balancing the two sides, his unprecedentedly glowing characterization of commoners is matched, then, with a decidedly underwhelming depiction of Oaxacan elites. Never in this story do Monte Albán rulers receive the sorts of accolades for artistic, architectural and intellectual prowess that Caso, Bernal and Paddock heap on them; and nor are they really complimented for the sort of verve, entrepreneurial genius and nasty efficiency that Marcus and Flannery afford them. Instead, Joyce's ironically labeled “nobles” are mere provisional sovereigns, who are prone to petty displays of self-importance wherein they overestimate the privileged status that they actually owe to the support of commoners. They are far less self-aware and less modern-minded than the rulers in the Blanton and Marcus-Flannery versions insofar as Joyce's rulers are sincere (if ultimately deluded) both in their religious investments and in their claims to

²⁰² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 285.

²⁰³ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 27-32.

²⁰⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 285.

cosmologically-based socio-political superiority; and in that regard they are actually more gullible and less discerning than non-elites, who always see through nobles' self-aggrandizing claims to entitlement.

Ancient Oaxacan elites are, then, cast as antagonists to the more heroic and compelling non-elites who never waver in their certainty that life's greatest rewards lie not in the acquisition of wealth, prestige and power, but in the cultivation of egalitarian values and the responsible maintenance of "an ongoing relationship with the divine." In Joyce's rendition, unlike any other we've considered, commoners—by which he means "farmers, craftspeople, children, elders, merchants, and so on"²⁰⁵—are, instead of the unskilled labor that supports the agenda of elites, repositioned as highly independent decision-makers in their own right whose agency and initiative are absolutely crucial in determining the way that ancient Oaxacan politics and history unfold. "Ordinary people," not rulers are, intriguingly, the leading actors and agents of change of this story.

These commoner protagonists are, moreover, depicted as astute cultural critics and even advocates for moral fairness who seem, irrespective of their non-modern religious investments, to share the post-Enlightenment conviction of Joyce and subaltern theorists that all people are "really" essentially equal, and thus all claims to privilege on the basis of gender, class and descent are actually socially constructed fictions, which therefore can—and should—be exposed, resisted and renegotiated. Time and again in this story, non-elites "speak truth to power," as it were, either via popular rebellion or, more often, simply by withdrawing their crucial support for elite initiatives and moving elsewhere. Indeed it was that sort of bottom-up disillusionment and desertion of San José Mogote that led to the original founding of a new capital at Monte Albán; and it was precisely the same sort of popular discontent and abandonment that was responsible for Monte Albán's eventual demise. Commoners not elites invariably have the final word in the history of each ancient capital.

²⁰⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 288.

In that sense, then, this entire narrative synthesis might be read as a kind of ode to or celebration of a version of civil disobedience and populism. Unlike Caso's, Bernal's and Paddock's attempts to enhance images of indigenous Mesoamericans, especially underappreciated native Oaxacans, Joyce makes himself an advocate for "common people," presumably in any socio-cultural context. Irrespective of a focus on class rather than ethnicity, Joyce's account, not unlike John Paddock's a half century earlier, displays a characteristically American disdain for hierarchy and endorsement of a principle of social and political equality, a kind of democratic egalitarianism that the ancient Oaxacan elites frequently abuse but that non-elites just as persistently rescue. In short, Joyce's ancient Oaxacan non-elites are the heroic underdogs who, refreshingly enough, always prevail even if, on the face of it—and in other narrative accounts of Monte Albán—they appear as hopelessly overmatched and vulnerable; and the elites are anti-heroes who always eventually get their just deserts.

It is, then, a story with recurrent "happy endings" insofar as socio-political hierarchy and exclusionary authority, in the long run, always collapse in face of more righteous egalitarian priorities. And yet, iconoclastic as this realignment of emphases may seem, Joyce's synthesis is, in this respect, a sign-of-the-theoretical-times insofar as it is the fairly predictable outcome of revisiting the Oaxaca data from a vogue poststructural perspective. This story of Monte Albán delivers, to be sure, a highly appealing populist message—though one that critical readers might perceive as actually much more a product of the subaltern presuppositions that Joyce brings to his analysis than an actual conclusion that emerges from the empirical data.

B. RELIGION REAFFIRMED: CEREMONIAL PLAZAS AS SITES OF RELIGIOUS DEVOTION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC NEGOTIATION

With respect to his second set of guiding narrative themes, Joyce also owes a large if unacknowledged debt to a less fashionable and very different scholarly tradition—namely, the phenomenology of religion. Though he avoids, for whatever reason, any direct reference to any version of religious studies, and he declines to include

either religion or ritual among “the key points” of his approach,²⁰⁶ one might argue that it is his special concern for religion, ritual and “sacred space” that most sets his (re)construction apart from any other that we have considered. Instead of following poststructural trends in dismissing religion as a kind of deception that obfuscates more salient political motives, Joyce, after the fashion of religionists in the tradition of Mircea Eliade, adopts a generous and affirming stance wherein religious sensibilities really do play leading, not derivative, roles in the pre-Hispanic social history.

Regarding an operative theory of human nature (which, as we've seen, every historical account requires), where other current archeological-authors wager that our best chance of understanding and appreciating ancient Oaxacans is to see them as pragmatic, rational and “secular,”²⁰⁷ Joyce, attributes to both elites and commoners a mindset surprisingly similar to Eliade's description of an “archaic consciousness” wherein they want, at least initially, nothing so much as the sort of “access to the divine” that enables them to honor their side of a “sacred covenant that established relations of debt and merit between humans and the gods as, with sacrifice as a fundamental condition of human existence.”²⁰⁸ Though the elite antagonists are prone to egoistical excesses, they are steadfast in their otherworldly commitments; and likewise the commoner protagonists, never disparaged as superstitious or credulous, are savvy political actors who are nonetheless “deeply religious” in a positive sense. In this story, Oaxacans' urge to meet their religious and “covenantal” obligations are genuine motives rather than pretenses or pretexts.

Exploring the ways by which these native actors pursue those commitments, Joyce, as we've seen, relies heavily and to great advantage on another vintage Eliadean

²⁰⁶ For a concise enumeration of what he regards as “the key points” of a poststructural theoretical approach, religion not included, see Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 287-88.

²⁰⁷ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

²⁰⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 60.

theme, “sacred space.” His wider history of Oaxaca in advance of Monte Albán is, in fact, largely a history of sacred spaces—from the early Early Formative veneration of natural mountain and cave sanctuaries; to the domestic and barrio-specific worship spaces of “co-resident groups;” to the later Early Formative emergence of the communal cemeteries, public architecture and the more inclusive ceremonial precincts that were absolutely crucial in the creation of shared community identities. Likewise specifically at Monte Albán, he does a marvelous job of demonstrating the successive but very different usages of the Main Plaza as a Formative-era venue for highly inclusive religio-civic ritualizing, a Classic-era venue for exclusionary competitions among nobles and, in the Postclassic-era, a vacant and dilapidated courtyard that continued to attract elite and non-elite pilgrims, as well as becoming a quasi-mythical place of creation that was eulogized in various iconographic and architectural contexts.²⁰⁹ And for Joyce, the unique potency of such a ceremonial precinct depends upon a kind of double purpose or efficacy.

First, he stresses repeatedly that natural and built sanctuary spaces are alluring because they have the character of an *axis mundi* that affords special “interactions with the divine;” and, again like phenomenologists, he consistently represents this aspiration to “communicate with the sacred” as an actual rather than pretended motivation for the creation of elaborate ceremonial precincts and ritualizing within them. In this story, then, the creation of the region’s very first “centrally located, community-wide ceremonial precinct” at San José Mogote²¹⁰ is a watershed moment—arguably the crucial turning point!—not only in his (re)construction of Oaxaca’s pre-Columbian past but in all of Mesoamerican history. Indeed San José Mogote provides a perfect precedent and template for Monte Albán’s subsequent history insofar as the appeal and thus dramatic population increases of both centers depend upon a heartfelt confidence—among both elites and non-elites—that their ceremonial precincts are uniquely propitious

²⁰⁹ As noted earlier, Joyce’s unsurpassed attention to the changing uses and conceptions of Main Plaza make his work an exceptionally rich resource for the composition of a “ritual-architectural reception history” of Monte Albán that I will present in subsequent work.

²¹⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 98-100.

environments in which to cultivate a felicitous human-divine relationship. In the early eras at each capital, when these ceremonial complexes are in their most healthy primes, they host inclusive religio-civic proceedings in which rulers and commoners alike are playing their respective roles in the shared project of maintaining the “sacred covenant.” In those eras, ceremonial plazas are crucial components in meeting the devotional needs of all sectors of society.

Secondly, however, and even more crucial to Joyce's plotline, such spaces, in addition to their explicitly religious function, are the preeminent forums for the religio-civic ritual wherein elites and non-elites undertake the negotiations of power and competing ideologies that Joyce sees as the very stuff of social interaction. It is, for him, like Durkheim, in public ritual contexts that both corporate and individual identities are constructed, internalized, honed, reassessed and contested. He does not, then, entirely exempt himself from widely pervasive characterizations of Mesoamerica's great ceremonial plazas—from Tenochtitlán to Chichén Itzá to Monte Albán—as stages for the sort of intimidation and propagandistic political theater wherein rulers variously seduce and browbeat subordinates into compliant submission, especially via dramatically choreographed human sacrifices. He does consider that, particularly in Monte Albán's first several centuries, the religio-civic proceedings in the Main Plaza were “emotionally charged ritual performances” through which rulers apprised audiences of thousands of “ideological messages about their place in the social and economic order;”²¹¹ and he does concur that the graphic imagery of *Danzante* figures and “conquest slabs” on Building J were designed to showcase “a newly configured warfare and human sacrifice-based covenant,” which may well have frightened onlookers into capitulation.²¹² In that respect, he echoes the conclusions of many previous interpreters.

But Joyce is more original and distinctive—and more consistent with his poststructural program—in stressing that that these dramatically staged ceremonials were

²¹¹ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in Oaxaca,” 194.

²¹² See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 139.

not simply propagandistic occasions for rulers to impress and manipulate commoners, but rather opportune environments for always-restive non-elites to talk back, resist, protest, negotiate and assert their own interests. For him, societies exist on the basis of constantly renegotiated “social contracts” between elites and non-elites; and “sacred spaces,” rather than forums of indoctrination, are the quintessential contexts for those ongoing arbitrations.

Consequently, given that twofold function of sacred spaces, when elites seize exclusionary control of ceremonial plazas as they did at San José Mogote and later Monte Albán, they engender a kind of redoubled alienation among non-elites. On the one hand, commoners are denied the privileged access to the divine that Joyce represents as their unshakable first priority. Though they can pursue their devotional lives in more private and domestic contexts, corporate ceremonial plazas have a unique appeal that they cannot live without; and therefore, commoners' respective abandonment of those great centers has a specifically religious component as they feel compelled to move to alternate locales where they can replicate those environments of corporate ritualizing. But, on the other hand, in Joyce's poststructural story, rulers' exclusionary appropriations of ceremonial plazas also have the even more dire consequence of denying commoners their premier contexts in which to contest and renegotiate the so-termed social contact. In other words, their religious disenfranchisement is mirrored by a more socio-economic alienation wherein, via a sort of “taxation with representation” theme, their voice is silenced and thus their more material interests suppressed. That too is an intolerable situation, which ever-enterprising non-elites redress by taking the initiative to move elsewhere and begin anew.

C. MONTE ALBÁN AS FOREVER A “SACRED SPACE”: ENDURING RESPECT FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE AND SPECIAL PLACES

In sum, then, as regards the many lessons and the diverse sorts of constructive initiatives to which contemporary readers might put from Arthur Joyce's revisionist treatment of ancient Oaxaca and Monte Albán, two quite different alternatives stand out.

For one, the poststructural and subaltern framing leads, predictably, as we've noted repeatedly, to a heightened appreciation of the agency of commoners, and thus to a tacit endorsement of civil disobedience, populism and egalitarian values. For so-inclined present-day audiences, this story of Monte Albán, better than any other (except perhaps Paddock's), provides a resource for social justice initiatives in which "ordinary people" challenge, resist and work to realign prevailing structures of power. In this account, when the vigorous resistance of disrespected commoners brings down San José Mogote and later Monte Albán, these "collapses" are represented less as catastrophes than as non-elites successfully exercising an inalienable right to just and equitable treatment. These commoner protagonists demonstrate the sort of courage and verve that is required to contest rather than acquiesce to unfair treatment. Accordingly, in a contemporary Oaxacan environment in which "megamarches," street protests, highway blockades and extended occupations of public spaces—most notably the zocalo of Oaxaca de Juárez, which is so frequently the site of popular political demonstrations by discontent teachers and indigenous rights groups—this version of the region's history can provide great hope and inspiration. In this narrative (re)construction, not only is popular dissent against authoritarian rule a central feature of Oaxacan history all the way back to the Formative era, it is a story in which so-termed commoners—to the great extent that they take action to improve their situation—frequently prevail in making very tangible socio-political change. Yes, predictably, Joyce's poststructural inclinations lead him to provide compelling and encouraging pre-Columbian models of hierarchy-challenging social justice activism.

Secondly, however, less predictably and perhaps even inadvertently, Joyce's reaffirmation of a central role for religion also makes his story by far the most serviceable resource for those constituencies that resent the commercialization of Monte Albán as an "archeological-tourist destination" in ways that, from their view, are insufficiently attentive to the "sacred" status that they regard as a permanent and intrinsic feature of the mountaintop site. Though complaints of this sort have been less prominent at Monte Albán than at some other sites in Mesoamerica and elsewhere, the 1987 designation of

the ancient city as an UNESCO World Heritage Site, while a badge of honor for Oaxacans and definitely a major financial enhancement for a economically depressed region that depends so heavily on tourism, is not a development that pleases everyone.²¹³ For some, the commodification and even the archaeological excavation of the ruins are a kind of defilement or desecration of a site that always has been—and thus always should be—revered most of all as a “cosmic mountain” and worship space. For instance, at present, Monte Albán, like all major ruins in Mexico, enjoys by far its largest visitation on the spring equinox, which happens to correspond with the national holiday marking the birthday of Benito Juárez, not only the republic's only Indian president but, in fact, a Zapotec from Oaxaca. Unlike Chichén Itzá's famous “serpent of light phenomenon,” there is nothing of special astronomical consequence to see on this day; this is, by all outward appearances, a day like any other. And yet the reverent tone of visitors who choose this as the date to visit the ruins alerts us to a large constituency, indigenous peoples among them, for whom the appeal of Monte Albán is less as a window into the ancient past than as a “live” sacred space that continues to present privileged “access to the divine.”

Persons with variations on that sort of reverent engagement with the site are widely varied from well-informed traditionalist views to more “New Age” sensibilities wherein “visitors from all over the world, many of them dressed in white, converge on Monte Albán at the spring equinox to recharge their energy levels;”²¹⁴ and there is little reason to imagine that Joyce's academic presentation is concerned either to support or undermine their activities. Nor are we required in the context of the present project to make any recommendation concerning the contentious matter of how best to manage and

²¹³ See, for instance, Víctor de la Cruz, “Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado Zapoteco o solo sitio turístico?,” in *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles Garcia (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 145-56; reprinted in *Monte Albán: conciencia e imaginación*, comp. Jorge Machorro Flores (Oaxaca de Juárez: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 2004), 150-53.

²¹⁴ “The 8 best places in Mexico to celebrate the spring equinox,” <http://geo-mexico.com>; visited June 12, 2015.

monitor access to the ruins of Monte Albán. Nonetheless, Joyce's is, of the scholarly accounts reviewed in this book, unquestionably the rendition of the Zapotec capital's history that best serves these religiously-inclined visitors.

In that respect, Joyce provides a narrative in which the mountain site was revered and respected as a locale with special cosmological properties—in his phrase, “a portal to the divine”—both long in advance of the emergence of the city and for centuries after the capital's demise, a scenario that provides compelling “evidence” that there is indeed something intrinsically powerful about this place, which was and continues to be rediscovered by very different audiences for more than 3000 years! If one is persuaded that it was a sacred place for three millennia, then it is a short step to argue that it must continue to be respected as such. And more specifically, his account of the elite appropriation of the Main Plaza during the Classic era provides a perfect analogue for the twentieth-century appropriation of the very same ceremonial plaza by the Mexican government and then UNESCO's arguably domineering control of access to the site, and, consequently, an ideal model for the sort of active resistance that could reopen the site to more inclusive participation.

In the end, then, Arthur Joyce's thoroughgoing synthesis presents, along with everything else, an especially clear demonstration of each of the working propositions enumerated in the Introduction to this book. For instance, like earlier researchers, committed to historical accuracy and rigorous attention to the best available archaeological information, he nonetheless kneads his results as a grand narrative of ancient Oaxaca and Monte Albán. Still storycrafting is the preeminent means, even for academics, to engage ruins. Moreover, Joyce's strong and explicit reliance on poststructuralism, together with his appeal to the theoretics of sacred space, demonstrate that it is not new data but rather an alternate set of presuppositions that gives his account its unique and provocatively different tenor. And, furthermore, because his (re)construction provides such a strong resource not only for egalitarian, hierarchy-challenging social justice initiatives but also those who are determined to accentuate Monte Albán's continuing prestige as space for ritual and worship, Joyce's rendition

demonstrates yet again that archaeology-based syntheses stand not only as historical accounts but also as superabundant assets on which contemporary audiences may draw for all sorts of constructive purposes, including many pursuits that their scholarly authors neither intended nor expected. Indeed, Arthur Joyce's iconoclastic account reminds us, as did each of the previous versions, that every thoroughgoing story of Monte Albán enjoys a life of its own, serving aims and aspirations that reach far beyond the great Zapotec capital of southern Mexico.