the false market/no-market dichotomy (Wilk 1998, 469) for prehispanic Mesoamerican economies and premodern economies more generally (Feinman 2017).

6.5. The Fiscal Financing of Governance

The set of queries and debates prompted by the realization that most prehispanic Mesoamerican craft specialization was domestically situated also extended to the issue of how prehispanic governance was financed or funded. After all, if governors were not in control of basic production and distribution, as now seems to be the case, then what can we say about the fiscal undergirding of Mesoamerican polities? This is not an easy question to address archaeologically, but fortunately a comprehensive study, based largely on early conquest-era texts, has provided a perspective on the fiscal financing of the Aztec empire (Smith 2015).

Although, in the past, Mesoamerican archaeologists have, perhaps, been too liberal in their extrapolations of Aztec practices to earlier eras, the wide array of financial resources procured by Aztec governors and tax collectors do provide some research directions that are worth considering. Most Aztec revenue for fiscal financing was derived from tax assessments, including of labor, land, and for market participation (Smith 2015). Taxes for the Aztec often were paid in crafted goods, especially textiles. The Aztec fiscal regime was heavily reliant on the taxing of the local population, or what has been referred to as internal revenues (Blanton and Fargher 2008). A reliance on internal revenues aligns with the relatively collective mode of governance or distributed power arrangement of the Late Aztec polity (Smith 2015, 106; see also Blanton and Fargher 2008; Feinman and Carballo 2018). Like textiles, marine shell ornaments (especially less elaborate or heavily crafted shell ornaments) were a kind of bulk luxury good (Blanton and Fargher 2012; Blanton et al. 2005), valued, but not extremely rare, and also not a basic necessity, like food.

The occupants of the excavated house in Ejutla made bulk luxuries (simple shell ornaments), goods produced for communal and domestic rituals (ceramic figurines and whistles), and basic utilitarian objects, such as fired-clay tortilla griddles and incense burners. In contrast, elsewhere in Mesoamerica, craft specialists attached to (or members of) elaborate or palatial households produced rare, highly valued goods for elite adornment or exchange (Emery and Aoyama 2007; Inomata and Triadan 2014). For the Classic Maya, at least, such prestige goods may have had a more direct role in financing the power of rulers through gift exchanges and other means that fostered the transactional networks and personalized performances of the powerful/palace dwellers (e.g., Halperin and Foias 2010; McAnany 2008). The centralized control of the trade corridors in which these high-value goods and products passed also was fundamental to the fiscal support of polities with more personalized, autocratic rule (Feinman 2021; Feinman and Carballo 2018).

6.6. Following Archaeological Threads

In this chapter, we have contextualized the research foundation and questions that we brought to the Ejutla study in a wider theoretical context, and we discussed how our findings contributed to ongoing debates concerning craft specialization, markets, and premodern economies. Over the last 50–75 years, the cultural evolutionary frameworks advanced by Childe (1950), Fried (1967), Service (1962), and others have spurred a bountiful episode of archaeological research across the globe, including in Mesoamerica. While we must recognize the great contributions of these researchers and how their ideas and concepts fueled research, it is also time to delve into, trust, and synthesize the expanded record on the past that 50–75 years of question-oriented investigations have generated.

Although archaeologists will always need models and examples from contemporary and historically described behaviors to help make sense of our highly partial material record, it is also time to acknowledge that the past is not a simple reflection of the present—and, furthermore, that conjectural constructs drawn from selective readings of snippets of historical or contemporary behaviors may not be adequate models for what happened in a past that was less homogeneous than often presumed. Rather than projecting rigid categorical constructs back onto the past, we now have enough information collected systematically, thoroughly, and along many empirical dimensions to build our interpretations of the past following threads of archaeological data forward, rather than extrapolating back from the present, thereby ignoring what we actually have painstakingly learned about the past by studying its empirical and material remnants.