
The Multiple Meanings of Wal-Mart

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what's good for wal-mart

One. Two. Three. In three seconds Wal-Mart nets one thousand dollars. Every hour the company earns nearly \$1.2 million, tripling the earnings of Target and Costco combined.¹ In many ways, Wal-Mart is the all-American dream – a dream on steroids. Originating as founder Sam Walton's five and dime, the first Wal-Mart opened in Arkansas in 1962 growing to eighteen stores by 1970 when the company went public.² Almost forty-five years later the corporation has developed into the world's largest retailer, employing 1.5 million people in 5000 plus stores worldwide, and netting a profit of \$10.3 billion last year alone. The centrality of Wal-Mart to the country's economy led one editor of *Advertising Age* to write, "generally speaking, what's good for Wal-Mart is good for the nation."³

the multiple meanings of wal-mart: an ideological struggle

But is Wal-Mart *really* good for the country? That is a topic of increasing debate. On the one hand, nearly 140 million people visit Wal-Mart stores each week, accounting for 8 percent of total retail sales in the U.S.⁴ In fact, more than one-quarter of the shampoo, diapers, and toothpaste bought in the nation is purchased at Wal-Mart.⁵ On the other hand, however, the company has come under increasing criticism. Starting with so-called NIMBY (not in my backyard) groups who launched local campaigns against big-box development, Wal-Mart is now

¹ Herring, Hubert B., "Wal-Mart's Profits: Nearly \$20,000 (Per Minute, That Is)," The New York Times Feb. 27, 2005.

² Walton, Sam and John Huey, "Sam Walton in His Own Words," Fortune 125.13 (1992).

³ "Wal-Mart Creates Winners All 'Round," Advertising Age 74.40 (2003).

⁴ Hemphill, Thomas A, "Rejuvenating Wal-Mart's Reputation," Business Horizons 48.1 (2005).

⁵ Greenhouse, Steven, "Opponents of Wal-Mart to Coordinate Efforts," New York Times Apr 3 2005.

facing criticism for a myriad of other offenses: sex discrimination; low wage, dead-end jobs; poor global manufacturing practices; and a reputation of bullying suppliers.

What Wal-Mart really means to America has become a discursive battle with real consequences for not only Wall Street, but for local communities as well. At first glance the clash may seem like a classic David and Goliath fight. Wal-Mart, a robber-baron corporation and monolithic ideological machine, feeds ideals of consumption and capitalism to the American masses,⁶ while small, local communities fight tooth-and-nail to protect their local businesses, small-town “feel” and quality of life.

Things are far more complicated than this simplistic view would imply, however. Wal-Mart has been effective - especially through its advertising, public relations, and founding myths - in constructing itself as a symbol of American middle class values, adopting the colors of the flag in its logo and emphasizing patriotism, family, hard work, and loyalty. It is also Wall Street’s sweetheart. In 2004, *Fortune* magazine named Wal-Mart the “most admired company in America,” the second consecutive year it had won the prize.⁷ Furthermore, many consumers insist that they appreciate Wal-Mart’s budget prices, apparently saving some up to 25 percent on their purchases.⁸

⁶ In the case of Wal-Mart, the masses generally live in rural areas, are women, and are of working or lower class. According to a recent article in *The Nation*, only six percent of Wal-Mart shoppers have annual family incomes of more than \$100,000 with 23 percent living on an income of less than \$25,000 a year. See: Featherstone, Liza, "Down and out in Discount America," *The Nation* 280.1 (2005).

⁷ Hemphill, "Rejuvenating Wal-Mart's Reputation."

⁸ Featherstone, "Down and out in Discount America."

In recent years, however, counter groups have taken an oppositional reading to Wal-Mart's message, emphasizing an image of a bad employer and bad neighbor. According to the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, "Wal-martization is the single major threat to the U.S. because it means low wages, no benefits and high turnover."⁹ And anti-sprawl activists claim that big-box stores like Wal-Mart bring massive traffic, water quality and environmental problems to a community and lead to the deterioration of downtown commercial centers.¹⁰

While the debate over the meaning of Wal-Mart has been circulating for years, both its tenor and intensity has recently increased. The most obvious question is: why now? In order for the budget-store business model to be successful, the company needs to be big and needs to keep costs low. Wal-Mart has done both, slashing operating expenses and expanding at a staggering rate. Since Lee Scott, Wal-Mart CEO, took over five years ago, the company has built more than 1,200 new stores and increased its annual sales nearly \$120 billion. But after years of expansion in rural areas, Wal-Mart is now looking to move into a new market – metropolitan centers, primarily on the east and west coasts. However, with this move a new level of resistance has ensued. As one trade magazine recently reported, "As the retailer seeks to expand into suburbs and cities, it has encountered more resistance from people whose traditions and values may be different from those of Wal-Mart's historic customers."¹¹

The meaning of Wal-Mart has become an ideological contest. It is no longer merely a debate over low prices, employment practices and urban sprawl. Wal-Mart is a symbol of the so-called

⁹ Stringer, Kortney, "In Ad Blitz, Wal-Mart Counters Public Image as Harsh Employer," Wall Street Journal Jan 14 2005.

¹⁰ Norman, Al, Slam-Dunking Wal-Mart! (Raphel Marketing, 2003).

¹¹ Stateman, Alison, "Being Wal-Mart," Public Relations Strategist 10.4 (2004).

red-state/blue-state divide. It is rural versus urban; traditional versus progressive; religious versus secular. Fundamentally, it is a contest over who really understands American needs and values. It is a contest over who will supply those needs and values. And, ultimately, it is a contest over who will define the values.

Here Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony¹² can provide a helpful theoretical framework for understanding this new ideological battleground. Gramsci used the term "hegemony" to signify the power of one social class over others. This power isn't simply political and economic, however, it is the power of the dominant class to project its worldview as the natural or "common sense" viewpoint. Like Althusser, Gramsci rejected pure economic determinism in the establishment of ideology.¹³ However, unlike Althusser, Gramsci emphasized the notion of ideological *struggles*, which he termed as counter-hegemonic movements. He noted, "common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself."

In reference to the Wal-Mart debate, the site of this ideological struggle has played out most prominently in Wal-Mart television advertising and the subsequent appropriation of those advertising images by anti-Wal-Mart activists. In its ads, Wal-Mart connects itself with the dominant ideologies of American "traditional values." Through images of family, neighborhood, community, patriotism, hard work and frugality, Wal-Mart situates itself in the middle of the

¹² Gramsci, Antonio, "Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci," Prison Notebooks (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

¹³ For a full discussion of Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatuses, see: Althusser, Louis, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays (London: New Left Books, 1971).

American “hometown.”¹⁴ Wal-Mart, or so its advertising would claim, understands what Americans need and what Americans want. And, importantly, through its massive distribution chain, it provides the infrastructure for supplying those needs and wants.

the site of struggle: wal-mart advertising

In reaction to the Frankfurt School’s mass culture critique,¹⁵ Richard Dyer in his essay, “Entertainment and Utopia,” argues that the entertainment industry responds to the real needs and real desires of its audiences by giving them an image of “something better to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide.”¹⁶ He goes on argue that these utopian desires are symbolized by both representational and non-representational means, such as music, color, movement, and camerawork. And though Dyer was concerned primarily with the entertainment industry, his insights are useful in identifying the meaning of both the images in Wal-Mart advertising as well as what desires the advertisements are trying to fulfill.

The utopian image that Wal-Mart portrays is a nostalgic, idealized hometown where values such as family, community, hard work, honesty and frugality are central.¹⁷ Unlike its competitors, Wal-Mart does not use professional actors in its advertising. Instead, “regular folk” are shown in everyday situations. A senior vice president of one of Wal-Mart’s ad agencies, GSD&M, has

¹⁴ Arnold, Stephen J, Robert V Kozinets and Jay M Handelman, "Hometown Ideology and Retailer Legitimation: The Institutional Semiotics of Wal-Mart Flyers," Journal of Retailing 77.2 (2001).

¹⁵ Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno, The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

¹⁶ Dyer, Richard, "Entertainment and Utopia," The Cultural Studies Reader, ed. Simon During (London; New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁷ Arnold, Kozinets and Handelman, "Hometown Ideology and Retailer Legitimation: The Institutional Semiotics of Wal-Mart Flyers."

said, “There’s always a true story. They get out of the ivory tower. The bubble of advertising is out of touch with America. Wal-Mart lives in the real world.”¹⁸

This so-called real world is populated by children, parents, pets, and even Wal-Mart “associates” and “partners”¹⁹ who demonstrate how Wal-Mart is an important part of their daily lives.

Children and dogs are portrayed in neighborhoods that are grassy, clean and safe. Adults are depicted in family and community settings. Everyone is caring, hardworking, smart, and budget savvy. But despite their hard work, these adults have the time to devote to their families and friends, striking the ideal balance between their work and family lives.

The tone of voice in the ads is ordinary and friendly. It is a voice that is neither pretentious nor ironic. Instead, the language is plain and straightforward. The “real actors” speak directly to the audience, insisting that ‘I am just like you,’ ‘I understand how you feel,’ ‘I appreciate that you are just looking for the best value for your hard-earned money.’ And, ultimately, ‘Wal-Mart can help you out too.’

Though everyone is depicted as ordinary and normal, there is a visual lushness to the ads. Indoor shots are bright and warm, illustrating a “homey” feel. Outdoor shots portray blue skies, full light, and a green environment. This is also a world of health and happiness. People are active; kids run and play, moms shop and care-take; associates greet and assist. Clothing is often brightly colored and adds to the cheerful depiction of the products displayed – pink furry pillows,

¹⁸ Atkinson, Claire, "Prices and People Stressed in Retail Titan's Advertising," Advertising Age 74.40 (2003).

¹⁹ In Wal-Mart parlance, employees are called “associates” and suppliers are termed “partners.” Again, the emphasis is on community and togetherness.

sky blue aquatic-themed shower curtains, and deep “oak-like” jewelry boxes. And, there is a sense of abundance. The home settings have the right amount of things to feel comfortable and cared for, but not so much as to be stifling. And shots inside the Wal-Mart stores are expansive, showing never-ending rows of goods and produce.

Finally, the Wal-Mart tagline, “*Always Low Prices, Always Wal-Mart, Always,*” pledges that the customer will be guaranteed the chance to maximize their resources. This Puritan, all-American ethic, is further reinforced with the company’s logo. Not only does the logo use white and blue, but the company name is portrayed as Wal**Mart*, with a star separating the words, further emphasizing a patriotic, flag waving theme. Overwhelmingly the appeal is to family, community and country.

“Marilyn and Brittany”

In the “Marilyn and Brittany” ad, the shot opens with two African American women, a middle-aged, divorced mother and her teenage daughter, jogging together. They are outdoors in a grassy, expansive, sunlit park. The camera shifts from their running, to a close-up of the mother and daughter in a playful embrace. In the voiceover, Brittany insists that her mother is “like my best friend.” The shot switches back to the pair jogging, this time, however, the camera is directed only on their legs, which move in perfect synchronicity. The two look the same. They are running in step, both of their hair is pulled pack into ponytails, and both wear running suits. During their bonded shots, Brittany remarks that they have gotten “really close” since they moved into a new apartment.

The ad then transitions to that apartment, where Marilyn's happy face is interacting with someone off screen. Next the viewer sees a number of product shots – a jewelry box, fish towel, shower curtain, and soap dispenser – all situated and ready for use. The products are in the center of the shot and Marilyn and Brittany are shown touching, gazing at or feeling their new purchases. The products have become the actors in the ad and in the voiceover Marilyn tells us she is “newly-divorced” and in need of new things for the apartment. The shot focuses back on Marilyn, who addresses us – the audience – and states, “Me being a single parent and being on a budget, Wal-Mart really helps me out.” Immediately we switch back to the apartment and see Brittany falling into a newly made bed, arms outstretched with a sense that “I've made it.” And lest we forget who has provided the products for the good life, the shot ends with the two women in front of a Wal-Mart SuperCenter, with the motto – Always Low Prices – emblazoned on the screen.

This is a family that is *just like us*. The single mom is faced with the pressures that we all face – rent, clothing, food and living expenses. She must budget her money in order to provide for her family. In addition, Marilyn is tackling a new transition and wants to provide a comfortable home for her daughter. The two are close, in step, best friends, and share everything. And through the purchase of home accessories, they have become even closer. Moreover, they have created a home where we all feel safe and well cared for. And all of this has been made possible by the low prices, convenience, quality and selection at their local Wal-Mart.

What is absent in the ad is a focus on the store itself. Even in ads where people are seen shopping inside a Wal-Mart, the focal point is not the store but, instead, the people who shop there – their

needs and desires. Though not physically depicted, the symbol of Wal-Mart is pervasive. Into the mix of family, home, comfort and happiness, Wal-Mart isn't shown as the world's largest retailer. Wal-Mart is portrayed as a neighbor. It understands your needs. It shares your values. In fact, they aren't just your values; they are *all* of our values.

Wal-Mart understands that families like Marilyn and Brittany are under pressure, but it is there to help with low prices – *always*. The company cares and is loyal, providing the greatest value all of the time. It is consistent, constant and predictable. It is part of the family. And, importantly, it fights for our needs – holding suppliers to cutthroat prices so that we can have the products we want at a price we can afford. In the television ads, Wal-Mart gets it. It isn't controversial. It isn't a corporate behemoth. It is just like the local merchants in the community. It is *my* Wal-Mart.

oppositional readings: the anti-wal-mart movement

And yet, not all Americans believe that it really is their store. Instead, many groups have taken an oppositional stance in what Wal-Mart really means, using Wal-Mart's own symbols in an attempt to vilify the corporation.

In part picking up on Gramsci's notion of the struggle in hegemony, Stuart Hall in his essay "Encoding/Decoding" argues that the dominant ideology is typically encoded as the preferred reading in a media text. However, readers do not automatically adopt the preferred reading. Instead, the social situation of the viewer may lead them to adopt a different perspective. He describes a combination of three different readings: A *dominant* reading is produced by those whose social situation favors the preferred reading. A *negotiated* reading is produced by those

who acknowledge the legitimacy of the hegemonic definition but adapt the reading to fit their own situation. Finally, an *oppositional* reading is produced by those whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the preferred reading.²⁰

The range of cultural and moral symbols that Wal-Mart employs in its advertising suggests that the preferred reading is that the company is a valued neighbor to a community that is clean, safe, and friendly. However, anti-Wal-Mart groups have challenged this hegemonic position. They have proposed an oppositional reading to Wal-Mart's position, arguing that Wal-Mart is unhealthy for the environment, unfriendly to workers and their families, destroys local economies, and is a bad neighbor. This oppositional battle has waged not in national advertising campaigns; but instead is being fought on the editorial pages of regional newspapers, in local anti-Wal-Mart movements, on the Internet, and in the national media coverage of Wal-Mart's legal troubles.

In recent years oppositional groups have been effective in smearing Wal-Mart's image of value, efficiency, family-friendly communities, and safe neighborhoods. With accusations that the corporation is insensitive to community desires, groups have fought hard to keep the stores and super-centers out of their towns. For example, a group in Pittsfield Township, Michigan has evoked Sam Walton's famous motto that Wal-Mart doesn't go where it is unwanted, as a mobilizing cry. Creating posters, flyers and a letter-writing campaign with the tag line "Wal-Mart Not Welcome," the Pittsfield group has called into question Wal-Mart's mythology that it really understands the needs and desires of local communities.

²⁰ Hall, Stuart., "Encoding/Decoding," Culture, Media, Language (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

This group has also questioned the notion that Wal-Mart is a safe, family-friendly space. The site for this particular Wal-Mart is in close proximity to a newly built grade and high school. Local residents are apprehensive about the amount of traffic that the store will bring to the area's already congested roads and, further, are concerned that the increased traffic poses a risk to their children's safety. Using recent negative reports about the store's unsafe parking lots, gun sale violations, and purportedly lax tobacco regulations, the group has made an attempt to portray the company as unfeeling, unsafe and a risk to children. In a recent rally, community members portrayed this evil Wal-Mart with hand-lettered picket signs that read, "Wal-Mart, Anti – Community – Labor – Family – American!" or "Attn Wal-Mart: Our Children's Safety Comes First." One protestor even carried a hot pink sign, which read "Protect Our Kids Tobacco Sold to Minors" and had the ever-present Wal-Mart smiley face smoking a cigarette and looking really, quite unhappy.

National groups have also engaged in the de-mythologizing campaign. For instance, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union has taken the corporation's name and maligned it, waging an anti-Walmartization campaign, which claims that Wal-Mart workers are underpaid, overworked, and treated unfairly. Building on recent press reports indicating that Wal-Mart's salaries are low and health insurance premiums are priced high, UFCW has argued that many Wal-Mart employees are forced to turn to taxpayer-supported Medicaid for health care.²¹ This has led some to claim themselves as "Wal-Mart free," questioning the real costs of low prices.

²¹ Albright, Mark, "Wal-Mart Stops Smiling at Critics," St. Petersburg Times April 6, 2005.

the dance of strategy, or who is the counter-hegemonic force here?

But the discourse hasn't ended here. In reaction to increasingly negative press about its company, Wal-Mart is on the defensive. In January 2005, the corporation launched a massive public relations campaign, buying full-page ad space in more than 100 newspapers nationwide, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. The ad headlined with a quote from CEO Scott, "Wal-Mart is working for everyone" and went on to read that "some of our critics are working only for themselves." The ad, containing a letter from Scott, was supposedly a response to "special interest groups and critics" who have "spread misinformation about Wal-Mart."²² In addition to the ads, the company launched a new website called walmartfacts.com, which includes information about Wal-Mart's wage and benefit plans. The site also features testimonials from Wal-Mart associates.

And despite its increasing bad press over sex discrimination, labor practices, and a predominantly overseas manufacturing workforce; Wal-Mart continues to insist that it really understands the needs and desires of Americans. It has taken an almost evangelizing stance, stating that through its commitment to low prices it is staunchly protecting the average American. Furthermore, the company seems to view those who criticize it as misguided and out-of-touch with the customer base it serves. One spokesperson stated, "We understand that it might be fashionable to belittle the savings that Wal-Mart provides. The critics are out of touch. We understand what that extra \$50 or \$60 a week you save shopping at Wal-Mart means for people who live from paycheck to paycheck."²³ And when during the last presidential campaign Senator

²² Ives, Nat, "Wal-Mart and Eli Lilly Turn to Full-Page Ads to Address Their Critics," [New York Times](#) Jan 14 2005.

²³ Heaster, Randolph, "As Wal-Mart Managers Meet in Kansas City, Retail Giant Faces Angry Squall," [The Kansas City Star](#) January 26 2005.

Kerry called Wal-Mart “disgraceful” and a “symbol of what is wrong with America,” a Republican strategist responded: “When you've grown up as wealthy as Howard Dean and John Kerry, Wal-Mart is just not a place you're particularly familiar with. The idea of being able to go in and save when you purchase something, trying to stretch your \$25,000 income, that's just something they're not familiar with.”²⁴

Though this neoconservative stance with appeals to populist values and the resentment of economic elites is a discourse that has been particularly prominent since the last election, there is something to be said for this position: Wal-Mart has 140 million weekly customers who frequent its stores. And though in some cases these consumers may have limited options of where to shop, many want to shop at Wal-Mart. As the Hills wrote in their letter to the editor to the *Saline Reporter* (Pittsfield Township's local newspaper), “In these times of high costs, our citizens would be well-served to have this store here. The positives include money saving food and general merchandise, a top-rated corporation as our neighbor, increased jobs available for our residents, and increased retail and services being added to the area as a result of Wal-Mart's presence.”²⁵

Whether these 140 million weekly customers are simply duped into believing Wal-Mart's mythology is a question of debate. But since its founding Wal-Mart has been focused on small communities across the country, building in towns that all other retailers have ignored. The company has provided the infrastructure and the products for American consumption. And now, with its push into urban centers, what those values really are have been called into question.

²⁴ Kornblut, Anne E., "Wal-Mart Symbolizing Political Divisions," Boston Globe Apr 11 2004.

²⁵ "Letter to the Editor: November 11," Saline Reporter Nov 11 2004.

What is most striking, however, is the strategic position that Wal-Mart has taken. While at once using the dominant values of mom and apple pie, it has also positioned itself as a subordinated class, making claims that unions, urban elites, the mass media, and even (gasp!) Democrats, don't really understand the working class of America. So while the anti-Wal-Mart groups have taken a counter-hegemonic stance, Wal-Mart has also attempted to take a similar stance – claiming that anti-Wal-Mart groups are simply elite, out-of-touch, urbanites who are trying to keep the working class down by denying them good prices and the chance for the “good life.”

Though the Wal-Mart debate is simply one of many discourses in current circulation, it is an important one because it points to a debate about whose values really matter. And though certainly not a battle that will be resolved quickly, it is an interesting case for the strategy of who claims to be dominant and who claims to be oppressed.

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