In 2006, in a conference call with Wal Mart workers, Senator Barack Obama proclaimed that although Wal Mart was making enormous profits, "it has chosen to go with low wages and diminished benefits." The battle to force the company to examine its values and practices, he added, "is absolutely vital to America today."

Since he became president, Mr. Obama has been less visible and less vocal in the campaign to wake up - or bring down - Wal Mart. Criticism of the world's largest company, however, has not diminished. In The Retail Revolution, Nelson Lichtenstein, a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, provides a passionate, partisan, and (largely) persuasive account of how Wal Mart's "relentless Darwinism" has created a world that is increasingly inhospitable "to the well-being of countless people who make, sell, or buy the products that line their shelves."

Born in Bentonville, Arkansas less than fifty years ago, Wal Mart now employs two million workers, seventy percent of them in the United States, in more than six thousand huge stores. Importing more goods from China than either the United Kingdom or Russia, the company, Lichtenstein demonstrates, has "set a new stage in the history of corporate capitalism," in which retailers have the whip hand over manufacturers. And the biggest among them have the power to rezone cities, "legislate" key components of social and industrial policy in the United States, and "negotiate" with countries on almost every continent.

Lichtenstein acknowledges, grudgingly, that Wal Mart's "downward squeeze on prices" saves American consumers upwards of $263 billion a year, about $2,329 per household. And that Wal Mart's business practices are in no small measure responsible for the impressive increase in productivity in retailing, as measured by real value added per hour, in the last two decades.

Although he does not run the numbers, Lichtenstein implies that these benefits pale in comparison to the damage Wal Mart has done to American workers. Wages, he
reveals, are well below the average for large retail establishments. Wal Mart defines full-time employment as thirty-four hours per work, curtails over-time by forcing "associates" to work "off-the-clock," fights virtually all workman's compensation claims, and provides health care benefits to only a fraction of its staff. Worst of all for Lichtenstein, who has an old lefty's faith in the power of organized labor, Wal Mart uses every weapon in the toolbox, including indoctrination, intimidation, and termination, to keep trade unions at bay.

Little wonder, then, that most of the company's employees are teenagers, retirees, and men and women with two jobs. Or that far more Wal Mart workers than those at other retail establishments rely on food stamps, Medicare, and subsidized housing, costing taxpayers billions of dollars.

When Wal Mart pressures suppliers to reduce costs per unit, Lichtenstein concludes, it generates "a cascade of social pathologies which corrupt and distort every supply chain relationship" - and the Wal-Martization of corporate America. The retail revolution isn't just about bar codes, satellite uplinks, distribution conveyer belts, self-service, item affinity sales, and one-stop shopping. Dependent on government de-regulation and global free trade, it has brought cheap goods, low inflation, and "stagnation in the living standards of most American families."

Hoping, perhaps, that wish will give birth to fact, Lichtenstein predicts that "Wal Mart and its clones face a day of reckoning." The era of laissez-faire government is ending. Even more importantly, China is beginning to boost wages and improve working conditions, reforms that will raise the prices of toys and T-shirts. If Wal Mart and its competitors don't recognize "that the reservoir of super-exploitable labor is vanishing," he warns, they'll find themselves "on their own downward spiral."

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