

Wal-Mart: the Panopticon of Time

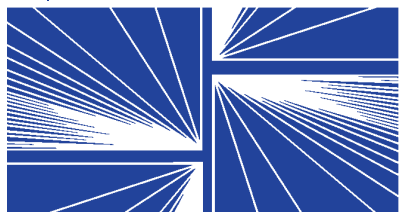
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Max Haiven
And
Scott Stoneman

Department of English and
Cultural Studies
McMaster University



Institute on Globalization
and the Human Condition
<http://globalization.mcmaster.ca>



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Max Haiven and Scott Stonemanⁱ

A 58-year-old Wal-Mart employee set himself on fire Thursday night outside the west suburban store where he worked and later died of his injuries. "I can't take it anymore," the man told a police officer on the scene, said Randy Sater, a watch commander with the Bloomington Police Department. "People tried to help this guy but he didn't want any part of it," Sater said. "His motive was he wanted to die. It's just tragic... Sater said this incident was something that was going to stay with witnesses for a long time." I can't even put it into words for somebody taking their life in this fashion," he said. "The pain, it's just incredible." (Spak 2009)

*To the men and women
who own men and women
we will not forgive you
for wasting our bodies and time
Leonard Cohen, *The Energy of Slaves**

INTRODUCTION: READING WAL-MART

At a moment when the future of global capitalism seems altogether uncertain, we want to take another look at Wal-Mart, the world's largest corporation. Despite its importance to the American and global economy, surprisingly little critical scholarship has emerged on the "Beast from Bentonville." In this working-paper we suggest that we can understand Wal-Mart as both a unique instance as well as a telling example of tendencies within the process of planetary social transformation that has come to be known as globalization. In particular, Wal-Mart strives to become what we will call a "panopticon of time": a particularly acute and emblematic crystallization of social, economic and technological forces which express a new constellation of power under globalizing capitalism. Wal-Mart represents among the most advanced consolidations of corporate, financial, technological and managerial technologies which employees afford it unprecedented control over consumers, employees, sub-contractors, communities and even nations, as well as unprecedented profit. We argue its power stems in part from its ability to hinge various modes of power: the local and the global, spectacle and surveillance, the private and the public, the everyday and the exceptional. And it is driven as much by the need to intervene in the production of subjects and the shaping of networks as the need to generate profit; indeed, these two imperatives have become inseparable. Wal-Mart is a symptom and an agent of the *depotentialization of time* under corporate globalization, the confinement or incarceration of temporality within the neoliberal webs of technology, commerce and management.

We begin by reviewing the case of Wal-Mart's financial, managerial and logistic power. Next, we take up extant criticisms of Wal-Mart which we argue tend to fail to fully apprehend and sufficiently contend the qualitatively new form of global power the firm represents. In order to better chart this new power, we then turn to some less commented-on aspects of the *dispositif* or assemblage of historically specific power relations Wal-Mart represents including its informatics empire, its

network ontology, and its mobilization of finance, health, spectacle and security to become a pivotal intervention in both global flows and everyday life. It is for this reason that, finally, we advance an argument that Wal-Mart is a panopticon of time which brings together multiple technologies of power to define a new architecture of control over temporality, a complex machine whose purpose is to imprison human potential in multiple overlapping ways.

Our method here is speculative, experimental and interpretive, and seeks to mobilize a broader imagination towards Wal-Mart than is usually manifest in the criticisms towards the firm. We seek to “read” Wal-Mart as if it were a text, an approach which demands less a narrow analytic focus and more a broad, conceptual, and three-dimensional vantage. We are seeking to bring to bear forms of theoretical criticism not usually applied to institutions as concrete as Wal-Mart and to do so in a way that attempts to frame the firm and its place within globalization in new ways. While there are evident drawbacks to this approach we hope that it will be useful in moving us towards a more capacious and paradigmatic approach to the emerging forms of power Wal-Mart exercises and represents.

Finally, while we believe resistance and struggle are central, they are not the focus of our paper. To clarify, we believe that Wal-Mart is an iteration of new tendencies in global capitalist power, a power whose primary driving evolutionary motor is its need to overcome, incorporate, subordinate, co-opt or otherwise harness evolving forms of resistance that always-already escape its grasp (see Hardt and Negri 2004; Virno 1996). Any analysis of resistance, however, must be informed by a rigorous analysis of power. As we will shortly make clear, we are deeply skeptical of forms of resistance to Wal-Mart currently on offer, at least in North America, precisely because they do not fully attend to the evolution of capitalist power the firm represents. By global standards they are also, even at their most energetic, phenomenally tepid in both their demands and their tactics.ⁱⁱ As a result, our analysis has a definite dystopian flavour. But this approach is as performative as it is analytic: we are seeking to paint a picture of the world Wal-Mart *wants* to build so as to call out those social forces which might stop it from coming to pass. As Frederic Jameson points out, tendencies, especially tendencies within capitalism, are only just that: tendencies (Jameson 2003, 717). We take it as a given that Wal-Mart and the tendencies it represents will run into insurmountable difficulties along the way to consolidating itself as a panopticon of time, that those difficulties will accumulate to the point that Wal-Mart will be replaced by yet another iteration of evolving capitalist power, and that this process of the violent rebirth of accumulation will continue. Continue, that is, until it is stopped. Whether it will be stopped when it runs aground on the bleached shores of a world exhausted of human and non-human “resources,” or by some form of multitudinous mutiny strong enough to shrug off the yoke of temporal oppression Wal-Mart represents is, ultimately, entirely up to us.

2. PAX WAL-MART AND THE BARBARIANS

The Beast from Bentonville...

By some estimates, Wal-Mart is the single largest private institution in human history. Its net sales in 2008, according to the company’s annual report of that year, were over \$374.5-billion, an 8.6 percent increase over 2007, a figure which rivals the GDP of China or Saudi Arabia and accounted for some 2.7 percent of the GDP of the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ The same report indicates that, as the world’s single largest private employer, it directly puts to work over 2-million human beings around the globe (3), about the total working population of Ireland or New Zealand.^{iv} Taken as a network of power (as

we do in this paper), this number increases exponentially. Wal-Mart cheerleader William H. Marquard (2007, 21) estimates that the firm's influence within the United States alone "extends directly to the 35-million people who work in the retail, manufacturing, and wholesaling business Wal-Mart affects." This is about the working population of the Philippines (the world's 12th most populous nation), and slightly less than Germany. This figure does not take into account the millions employed in the factories and sweatshops of Wal-Mart's over 9,000 direct suppliers and their subcontractors around the globe. Worldwide, its stores, which operate under at least 46 different "banners," are visited by an estimated 176-million customers a month (Wal-Mart Annual Report 2007, 26, 66), roughly the equivalent of the entire population of Pakistan or Brazil. With its breathtaking size comes unparalleled power not only to effect the lives of millions but also to intervene in and shape global flows of labour, commodities, information and policy, a power beholden only to the dictates of profit and driven by the single-minded pursuit of maximum efficiency.

Wal-Mart was birthed in the Ozark mountains of Northern Arkansas in the 1960s when founder Sam Walton (whose heirs, according to Forbes magazine, enjoyed between them \$93.1-billion in 2008) established the discount retailer, taking advantage of farm workers dispossessed by agricultural industrialization to staff his growing chain (Moreton 2006, 62-65). Walton's own personal background is telling: his grandfather acquired land recently stolen from its indigenous inhabitants and his father repossessed farms during the depression (ibid. 74-75; Walton and Huey 1992, 5), giving us some inkling of Wal-Mart's genealogical roots in processes of colonialism and enclosure (see Federici 2005). Walton's firm grew based on his unswerving faith that, as real family incomes decreased across the US Sunbelt, the absolute lowest prices would be key to gaining market share, rather than gimmicks, marketing or other strategies. It was the 1980s and 90s, however, which saw the massive expansion of Wal-Mart's austere and homogeneous discount stores as the ranks of the American working poor swelled (Karjanen 2006, 147-148). Unlike urban department stores, Wal-Mart thrived and continues to thrive in rural, semi-rural and suburban areas and has become adept at picking up innovations in supply-chain logistics, marketing, labour cost reduction, consumer research and price manipulation, as well as developing its own host of retail and business technologies (Lichtenstein 2006, 14-16). By the mid '90s Wal-Mart, already the fastest-growing discount retailer for some time, outstripped all its competitors to become the largest retailer in history, largely thanks to its hyper-efficient management of every aspect of its operations from its outsourced Asian suppliers and subcontractors to its clockwork logistics and transportation network to its uniform and union-sanitized retail locations (Petrovic and Hamilton 2006, 123-130). By the turn of the millennium, Wal-Mart became by some estimates the world's largest corporation, propelled by its saturation of the US market and its continental and overseas expansion. In its 2008 annual report, Wal-Mart boasted 7,262 stores world-wide (4,141 in the United States alone) with banners in Japan, Brazil, China, India, Central America, Canada and Britain. Between 1995-1999 Wal-Mart accounted for 25 percent of the United States' productivity gains (Hoopes 2006, 89). By 2007 it controlled at least 20 percent of the American dry grocery market, 29 percent of nonfood grocery market, 30 percent of health and beauty aids market, and 45 percent of general merchandise sales (Bianco 2007). In 2003 Wal-Mart was already Hollywood's single largest outlet, selling 15-20 percent of all compact discs, videos, DVDs and books in the United States (Bianco and Zellner 2003; Useem 2003). More recent reports estimate they control 40 percent of the \$17-billion annual DVD market in the United States (Grover 2006) and similar proportions for other cultural commodities (Fox 2005; Schiller 2005).

From its strangle-hold on sub-contracted suppliers around the world to its transportation and logistics network to its army of consultants and lobbyists to its diverse global subsidiary holdings, Wal-Mart represents a corporate empire whose success and power is both a unique example and a constitutive part of what has come to be known as corporate globalization. Misha Petrovic and Gary Hamilton (2006, 108-109) note that the firm's ability not simply to respond to but to *create* markets is "the most profound of all Wal-Mart's effects." It has managed, through its massive economic force

and momentum as well as its extreme internal discipline and an unrivalled internal data system (Hoopes 2006, 83) to reverse the traditional dependency of retailers on suppliers, subordinating those who source its products to its own dictates, mobilizing a discursive politics of frugality and efficiency to squeeze as much profit out of the system and pass the savings on to its customers, brutally undercutting its retail competitors. Much is made, for instance, of Wal-Mart's subordination of manufacturer Proctor and Gamble, who is now plugged directly in to the Bentonville data system to better manage just-in-time production for its largest client—poetic justice for the once domineering household products firm known for its bullying of retailers throughout the late 20th century (Bonacich and Hardie 2006, 173; Hoopes 2006, 91). The overall effect is, first, that only firms with massive economies of scale can afford to compete with such emaciated profit margins, intensifying the concentration of production in the hands of a select few global corporations who fanatically search the world for the cheapest production costs (effectively: low wages, low taxes and lax regulation) (*ibid.*; Hoopes 2006; Petrovic and Hamilton 2006, 130-132). Second, against this logistical juggernaut, other firms, both large and small, both chains and independents, have little chance to offer competitive prices, leading to an increasingly homogenized retail landscape, especially in smaller locales including suburbs, rural areas and, increasingly, inner cities. This effect is exacerbated by the practice of “predatory pricing” where Wal-Mart bullies its way into small towns and neighbourhoods with armies of lobbyists, lawyers and public-relations specialists, undersells local business, drains the area of capital, and leaves the site a virtual ghost town (Karjanen 2006; Mitchell 2006; Quinn 2000).^v

Wal-Mart's unprecedented grip on the North American consumer market allows it to force suppliers to adhere to its strict rules and “standards.” Such dictates have recently included requiring suppliers to place invasive Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags (tiny radio transmitters) in all products which will allow Wal-Mart to track items within and beyond its global supply chain (Trunick 2006; Kharif 2004; Wal-Mart Annual Report 2007; Lacy 2004; King 2006; Albrecht and McIntyre 2006; Shih, Lin, and Lin 2005; Rao, Thanthy, and Pendse 2007). RFID is an expansion of the Universal Product Code (UPC) and bar-code revolution developed in the 1980s (at whose vanguard Wal-Mart was as well) and is part and parcel of Wal-Mart's status as the world's most expansive “data-miner,” collecting unfathomable amounts of real-time data about its supply-chain as well as tracking its workers and consumers to better lubricate production, distribution and sales (Hays 2004; Woyke 2006). All this is part of a seismic shift in the corporate imaginary, spearheaded in part by Wal-Mart, towards a “logistics revolution” which harnesses emerging digital and cybernetic technologies for managing production, distribution and sales in as swift and efficient manner as possible (Bonacich and Hardie 2006; Petrovic and Hamilton 2006).

While Wal-Mart's advocates attribute its success to such technologically-driven supply-chain efficiency, the firm is built on the back of discounted labour. Its rise cannot be separated from that of the post-modern Asian sweatshop and the proliferation of export-processing zones around the world on the cusp of the 21st century. 80 percent of Wal-Mart's over 9,000 supplier factories are located in China, producing over 70 percent of the non-grocery products sold at its stores around the world; indeed, in 2004, Wal-Mart's imports from China accounted for 11 percent of the U.S. trade deficit with that country (Bianco 2006, 15). The firm is the single largest importer to the United States with almost twice the number of standard shipping units as the next largest importer (and Wal-Mart's chief discount competitor) Target (Bonacich and Hardie 2006; *Top 100 importers and exporters* 2006). Despite claims to the contrary, Wal-Mart has only a rhetorical interest in the horrific labour conditions perpetuated by its sub-contractors and sub-sub-contractors around the world.^{vi} As part and parcel of this industrial apparatus, Wal-Mart is also at the vanguard of both creating and serving the growing consumer class in urban and sub-urban China (Simons 2008; Trunick 2006).

Among Wal-Mart's more familiar offenses is its exploitation of workers in the Global North, the subject of an epic battle on multiple fronts. It “employs” armies of part-time, temporary workers

(Zimmerman and Hudson 2006) whose precarity is exacerbated by Wal-Mart's legendary human resources protocols (*Discounting rights* 2007) which merge corporate paternalism (employees are "coached" and, in extreme cases, publicly "shamed" when they fail to live up to their "potential") with a ruthless commitment of efficiency (Rosen 2006). Indeed, Thomas J. Adams (2006) identifies Wal-Mart's "shop-floor totalitarianism" as paradigmatic of new technologies of labour discipline under globalization. Of its over 2-million employees, an estimated 40 percent are part-time (Zimmerman and Hudson 2006)^{vii} and the firm has an annual employee turnover rate of at least 44 percent (Bianco and Zellner 2003; Rosen 2006, 247), meaning somewhere in the range of 880,000 people will be hired and fired by Wal-Mart each year, mostly economically marginalized students, retirees, and "second family earners" who are Wal-Mart's preferred precariat (Lichtenstein 2006). Anthony Bianco (2006, 3) reports that the average Wal-Mart employee in the United States makes substantially less than the US retail average of \$12.28. The highest estimate, Wal-Mart's own, is \$9.68 per hour (twice the average minimum wage \$5.15); even then, the typical employee would earn only \$17,600 annually, substantially short of the poverty line at \$19,157. The firm has been charged with multiple racist and sexist hiring and promotion practices, with claimants numbering in the millions and claims amounting to billions of dollars, most of which its legions of lawyers have been able to stall in the court system (Wal-Mart Annual Report 2007, 66; *Discounting rights* 2007, 5). It exploits cheap and desperate Latin American migrant labour to clean its U.S. superstores and otherwise plug the gaps in its sprawling empire (Greenhouse 2004b; Barbaro 2005a). Its human resources department manipulates pay and hours of work leading to numerous lawsuits over unpaid overtime and broad employee dissatisfaction with irregular work scheduling (Gogoi 2007a). Many workers must survive on state subsidies of, on average, about \$2,103 per employee per year "in the form of food stamps, school lunches, medicaid for uninsured workers, housing assistance, low-income energy assistance, etc." (Hoopes 2006, 99; see also Karjanen 2006, 155-158). Similarly, Wal-Mart's rampant spread, at the rate of 1.45 new stores per day in 2006 (Bianco 2006, 3), is much thanks to state subsidies, tax-cuts and infrastructure spending of city and town councils and state governments, coerced or convinced that Wal-Mart will bring jobs and prosperity, in spite of the voluminous evidence to the contrary. As Stacy Mitchell puts it, "Wal-Mart is as much a product of public policy as it is of consumer choice" (quoted in Patel 2007, 236).

Critics charge that Wal-Mart's environmental record is abysmal at every level, from the industrial waste its sweatshops produce to the pollution created by its massive logistics and transportation empire to the various toxic chemicals emanating from the construction, operations and acclimatization of its thousands of stores (*It's not easy being green* 2007; *Wal-Mart's sustainability initiative: a civil society critique* 2007; *Toxic Runoff* 2007; Norman 2007; Patel 2007; Rosenthal 2008; Spencer and Ye 2008).^{viii} This is not to mention the dramatic and, so far, ill-charted effect of the transportation costs of the "global assembly line" and network of sub-contractors who produce Wal-Mart's typically over-packaged and wantonly profligate array of consumer products (see Rosenthal 2008).

Wal-Mart's security forces, larger than those of many countries, act with impunity within and beyond its walls. Often poorly trained and steeped in a violent patriarchal security culture, Wal-Mart security has killed several suspected shoplifters and allowed multiple heinous crimes to occur under their watch (see for instance *Family of NY man* 2008; Crowe 2005). Wal-Mart's "Threat Research" team has been found to have spied on and even infiltrated groups seeking to halt Wal-Mart's advance or distribute information on the retailer (Zimmerman and McWilliams 2007) and has created fake grassroots group (so called "astroturf" [Stauber and Rampton 1995, 13-14] whose fake online blogs are called "flogs") to promote its agenda (Barbaro 2006). The firm's union-busting tactics and resources (including several dedicated "flying squads" deployed from head offices in Bentonville, Arkansas, and its use of private investigators and lie detectors) are legendary and have included closing whole stores to prevent unionization (*Discounting rights* 2007; Wal-Mart Revamps Advocacy

Group Doing Battle With Unions 2007; *Wal-Mart hired security guards to spy on Quebec employees* 2005; Adams 2006; Clark 2007). Indeed, Wal-Mart's centralization of almost all their operations from their Bentonville headquarters is infamous, relying on the most advanced computer systems as well as its particular brand of corporate culture to combine technological surveillance with peer and synoptic supervisory oversight. For instance, Bentonville actively tracks signals like the speed of check-out transactions, the number of sales of each product, and the schedules of workers to command local managers to intensify the store's efficiency (Rosen 2006).

Despite many of these unsavoury practices, Wal-Mart maintains a puritanical approach to consumer goods refusing to carry many controversial books and magazines and demanding popular music be censored to adhere to a nebulous and arbitrary slogan of family values (Bianco and Zellner 2003; Fox 2005; Schiller 2005; Stone 2007). This is not to mention that non-mainstream publications and culture are effectively "censored" by the refusal of Wal-Mart, who dominates the retail media market, to carry them. The recent decision by Wal-Mart to cut over 1,000 magazine titles from its stock will be the death knell of many smaller publications (Kelly 2008). The effects of this form of free market censorship are especially pronounced in rural or sub-urban areas where Wal-Mart represents among the only places to shop, having left the local retail landscape otherwise etiolated.

It is tempting to imagine Wal-Mart merely as a place to buy those things superfluous to life, a clearinghouse for the endless array of consumer products none of us really "need." But the firm is increasingly encroaching on more and more vital areas of human social existence. At least 20 percent of food sales in the United States and 30 percent in Mexico (Michell 2007, 11-17) occur at Wal-Mart whose market share in groceries is at least 30-40% in many American cities (Bianco 2006, 119-226). Wal-Mart also houses numerous subsidiary services, either renting out space or owning franchises of restaurants (predominantly, McDonald's), hairdressers, dry-cleaners, pet groomers, travel agents, insurance brokers, real-estate and mortgage agents, and other commercial services. As we shall discuss shortly, Wal-Mart's expansion into both banking and healthcare represent worrisome trends in its ability to pincer more and more aspects of social space and lived temporality. Indeed, the firm recently shed its reticence towards the diversification of its stores and has begun to target its locations to local tastes based on consumer data and ethnic and class demographics in an attempt to saturate ever more aspects of everyday life (Kabel 2006).

Wal-Mart's response to these many criticisms, which have intensified since the mid-90s, has been comprehensive and swift, despite the company's long-standing (or at least oft boasted) aversion to the politics of image and public relations (Hoopes 2006, 93). Since the time of Sam Walton the company has distrusted advertising and held that the lowest price is a superior marketing technique than any attempt to lure customers through rhetorical slights of hand (Slater 2003, 180-181). In response to criticisms, Wal-Mart has intensified its PR efforts (Barbaro 2005b, Neff 2009) but tends to retrench itself in its famous libertarian visage as a compassionate giant, a friend of the people which is, at its core, based on the principles of frugality, family discipline, and "servant leadership" (a form of evangelical patriarchal neoliberal management – see Moreton 2007). Wal-Mart casts itself as a general social good for America and the consumer, explaining that its drive to squeeze the most time and money out of its operations lowers prices for average people and that it is at the vanguard of voluntary labour and environmental regulation, a benevolence governments can only sour with intervention. As of February 26, 2009, Wal-Mart's website boasted it had saved American consumers over \$44.5-billion since the beginning of the year.

In sum, Wal-Mart is an instantiation of a form of corporate power which is as expansively global as it is intensively local. It operates as a hub or hinge of multiple processes, bringing together health, consumerism, new patterns of labour, global transportation and communication, the affective and subjective aspects of life, finance, culture and food. This is no mere over-inflated storefront but rather a paradigmatic nexus of the array of sometimes concurrent, sometimes contradictory forces

collectively known as globalization—an organization oriented to a saturation of the time of everyday life for both workers and consumers (the line between which is often substantially blurred).

...and its discontents

While Wal-Mart's more disturbing traits have been by now exhaustively mapped^{ix}, we believe that extant criticisms and resistance to Wal-Mart all too often fail to appreciate that these, taken together, represent the crystallization of disturbing new and qualitatively different tendencies in capitalist organization. Most approach Wal-Mart as merely an extension of or aberration from post-War Fordist corporate behaviour against which tropes of regulation, responsibility, fairness and corporate citizenship will be effective. Even critics who note the more "post-Fordist" aspects of Wal-Mart largely frame the issue as if "post-Fordism" is some sort of momentary deviation from the Keynesianist norm and "new deal" platitudes which *ought* to govern so-called "first world" economies, a view as politically limiting as it is anachronistic.

In the case of Wal-Mart, we argue that such approaches, nostalgic for the "good old days of capitalism" risk not only being ineffective but may even lend key support to the foundations of Wal-Mart's legitimating mythology. Indeed, Wal-Mart actively distinguishes itself from older images of the corporation and corporate imperialism by idolizing the modest, down-home hard-working image of its founder, Sam Walton, and painting the firm as the gift of a straight-talking upstart from Arkansas, a folk hero suffering the slings and arrows of the decadent, arrogant cosmopolitan corporate giants of the metropolis (Boje and Rosile 2008; Useem 2003; Walton and Huey 1992)^x. Not coincidentally, this hypocritical rhetoric also characterized the tenor of George W. Bush's neo-conservative movement to whose election war-chest Wal-Mart contributed somewhere in the range of two million dollars in 2004 (Sasseen 2008; Zimmerman and Maher 2008). While attempts to reveal the cold reality behind this façade are clearly important, Bethany Moreton (2007) notes that Wal-Mart's nostalgic, post-modern Christian discourse has real meaning for and purchase on the lives of millions of disenfranchised and alienated people (especially in the US South), and is not to be taken lightly. She explains that Wal-Mart's imaginary answers the crisis of neoliberal masculinity (see also Giroux 2005) with the patriarchal logic of "servant leadership" to wed gendered subjectivity to a service-oriented neoliberal economy. Moreton's analysis makes clear that the fight against Wal-Mart is not merely economic and political but also, and perhaps in some ways primarily, cultural^{xi}. It is not merely low prices which, as Marx and Engels (2004, 66) put it, are "the heavy artillery [that] batters down all Chinese walls," both around national economies and the delicate membranes of everyday life. It is also Wal-Mart's success at offering useful resources to people for creating themselves as subjects within neoliberal late capitalism that makes it what we will shortly define as a panopticon of time. So dedicated are shoppers to the imaginary on offer that Wal-Mart's "astroturf" support groups are presently being replaced by its new Consumer Action Network (CAN) where customers sign up to a company-run political action committee to lobby local and state governments and defend Wal-Mart from its detractors. By the end of 2008 the CAN branch New England, an area known for its opposition to Wal-Mart, boasted over 61,000 members (Podsada 2008).

Against this potent concoction of low prices and cultural politics, extant criticisms of Wal-Mart from scholars, journalists, non-governmental organizations, unions and citizens' advocacy groups seem to stand little chance, at least as they are currently conceived and executed, of mobilizing the disenfranchised.

For instance, while Robert Greenwald's widely-screened documentary *Wal-Mart, the High Cost of Low Prices*, highlights many of Wal-Mart's more egregious offenses against American labour and

community, it relies upon the mobilization an American nationalist nostalgia for a mythic, pastoral, white, patriarchal and untroubled “mom-and-pop” capitalism. The critiques of Wal-Mart featured in the film and the film itself tend to echo the aesthetic refrain of down-home folksiness that is characteristic of Wal-Mart’s preferred autobiography (Arnold, Rozinets and Handelman 2001). Fundamentally, the film paints Wal-Mart as a contingent “bad apple,” rather than as a necessary articulation of global systems of power. Similarly, in his journalistic expose *The United State of Wal-Mart* John Dicker (2005) identifies some of the firm’s key labour and environmental crimes, but does so only within the frame of their selling-short the mythic American Dream. Dicker is unapologetically hostile and demeaning towards almost any mobilization against Wal-Mart, recommending instead that concerned (American) citizens content themselves with petitioning city-hall for new zoning by-laws to curb the worst excesses of Wal-Mart’s spread. Bill Quinn’s (2000) book is a bit more feisty and is written in broadly accessible down-home prose, but, as the title suggests, it remains myopically American-centric and fails to identify Wal-Mart with a form of global capitalism. Resistance is figured as individualistic and even where he suggests forms of collective action, they are framed in largely militia-like terms. Once again, the response to Wal-Mart is framed within a political imaginary which takes as its landscape the return to the true spirit of American capitalism that never was.

These texts are indicative of a field or even a *genre* of anti-Wal-Mart writing and discourse whose “meta-narrative” is, in our estimation, fundamentally flawed. It relies upon tropes of morality, politics and rhetoric more proper to a previous moment of accumulation, one that is unable or unwilling to contextualize Wal-Mart as part of what Luc Botanscki and Eva Chiappello (2005) have identified as a shift towards “The New Spirit of Capitalism.” This “new spirit” is one where power and authority are legitimated in new ways that only partially rely on tropes of an earlier, Fordist/Keynesian, moment. Instead, power in the 21st century has learned from and incorporated criticisms of these previous moments to devise new strategies of power and legitimation, a process we can see at work in Wal-Mart’s cultural and economic success. This is not to say the criticisms of Wal-Mart listed above are ineffective, only that their effectiveness may have significant limits and may, in some cases, do more to normalize and empower Wal-Mart’s own interests than stymie them.

Recent efforts by mainstream unions to organize Wal-Mart to increase worker wages and reduce unpaid overtime, while clearly important, are not in our opinion sufficient to address the truly global order that Wal-Mart instantiates and perpetuates. It is a sad fact that, after 60 years of the “post-war compromise” in which labour was bought off as a junior partner with the state and capital under the aegis of nationalist progress (and based on third-world exploitation, internal racialized economic apartheid and built on the bedrock of women’s discounted reproductive and productive labour), the political imagination of organized labour is limited to formal institutional organizing. While such efforts have been admirably vigorous, traditional unions’ failure to organize Wal-Mart is not altogether surprising given that they have largely failed to articulate a worldview that substantively challenges that of Wal-Mart. The death of unionization is as much the result of union movement’s failure at cultural politics as the success of Wal-Mart’s anti-union machine. Unionization efforts have run into Wal-Mart’s unique but demonstrative power. The company’s scale has allowed it to coordinate highly effective union-busting techniques across its empire and, where this has proven impossible, worked with corrupt or state-run unions in places like China and Mexico (Mitchell 2008). High employee turnover rates, facilitated by the radical deskilling of Wal-Mart work (Adams 2006) has meant Wal-Mart has little incentive to retain workers who refuse to be orderly “associates.” And it has shown its willingness to cut off its own limbs infected by unionization, closing stores in Jonquière, Quebec and other locales to prevent the spread of unionization and send a clear message to other “associates” and the communities in which they live that organized labour is not welcome (*Discounting rights* 2007). All this points to a new form of corporate power for which the traditional labour movement is, both epistemologically and ontologically, simply unprepared.

The most comprehensive academic approach to Wal-Mart comes from the proceedings of a 2004 conference at the University of California at Santa Barbara focusing on Wal-Mart as the “face of 21st century capitalism” (Lichtenstein 2006) which brought together a wide variety of scholars seeking to analyze Wal-Mart as what conference convener and proceedings editor Nelson Lichtenstein calls a “template” for 21st century capitalism of post-Fordist labour and economic production. We agree with Lichtenstein and his colleagues that Wal-Mart is a demonstrative architecture of emergent trends in capitalist organization and make reference to this excellent collection throughout our paper. But a few caveats are in order as much to clarify our own position as by way of critique. While Wal-Mart is a crystallization of trends of 21st century capitalism we think calling it a “template” (as in a solid form, from which copies are minted) is incorrect. Wal-Mart is a singularity and while techniques or technologies of global power are being honed, perfected and exported from Wal-Mart, the firm as a whole is not a *template* per se. Second, 21st century capitalism is global and Wal-Mart represents an uniquely American instance of it, albeit one that is being globalized to Canada, Mexico, the UK, Japan, China and elsewhere. While Wal-Mart dreams of being present around the globe and while its “supply chain” is truly global, to say it is the template for *global* capitalism is incorrect. Even where Wal-Mart has moved beyond the NAFTA zone it has done so in localized ways, often taking over local mega-retailers and tailoring its corporate culture to suit local markets (for instance, dropping a lot of the “servant leadership” down-home “charm” of its American success). It is more accurate to say that Wal-Mart is the acute crystallization of a collection of processes of corporate and neoliberal globalization which manifest themselves differently around the globe. If 21st century capitalism has a key strength it is precisely that it does *not* have a single template—that it is a mobile set of technologies for revolutionizing, exacerbating and coordinating local forms of exploitation (see De Angelis 2007).

Finally, Lichtenstein and his colleagues take a decidedly less imaginative approach to contending Wal-Mart than we think is prudent. For Lichtenstein (who is among the more critical scholars in the collection), “the fight is not against Wal-Mart per se, on aesthetic or consumerist grounds, but against the reactionary squeeze the corporation has been able to mount against wages and income of all who labor within, compete with, or depend on the new retail-centered political economy” (28). The struggle to “democratize our economic life” is based on bringing together workers, advocates, consumers, politicians and unions and to “channel this critical wave into a broad coalition that can begin to transform the nature of work at Wal-Mart and the whole business model under which the big-box retailers are now restructuring so much of the economic world” (30). We are deeply skeptical of the possibility of regulating or reeducating Wal-Mart specifically and global capitalism generally. In our view, should we wish to democratize our economic life, we need to create a much more critical approach to social transformation and the political imagination in which Wal-Mart and the pernicious technologies of human unfreedom it represents do not have the right to exist and where the mobilization of a diverse coalition of groups and actors sees as its endgame the direct collective control of their lives and fates, unmediated by organizations which, no matter how chastened, imprison our time and devour the earth in the name of profit.

Given the political, economic and (especially) cultural power of institutions like Wal-Mart, the movement necessary to create any meaningful and lasting regulation would need to be so powerful, well-organized, creative and grassroots that it would never be mobilized around or satisfied with minor reforms. Such a movement would be based on the demand for a very different society at every level. If Wal-Mart is an icon of post-Fordism it is so as politically as it is economically: it signals the passing of a moment of compromise and conciliation between those who control time and those whose time is controlled and it demands a new politics of radical social change.

3. THE NEW DISPOSITIF

The dispositif

On our way to defining Wal-Mart as a panopticon of time we want to discuss several aspects of Wal-Mart's power which are particularly important and which tend to go without comment in mainstream criticism. We understand these aspects in the way Michel Foucault described *dispositifs*, a word without sufficient English translation (it is most often translated as "apparatus"^{xii}). It refers to something that is both a *capacity* and an *orientation*, both a *power* and a *predisposition*. In his theorization of power relations, Foucault (1980) understood the *dispositif* (which is a concept which undergirded almost all his later work but was rarely directly elaborated) as a vector or trajectory of institutional power and surveillance which, combined with *discourse*, imbricated subjects into the institutional fold and reproduced systems and patterns of power relations. To take his classic example, one major part of the original panopticon prison's power was to make the prisoner subject to a variety of discourses or orders of truth: criminology, psychology, prison management, civics, etc. Through these discourses, wielded by experts legitimated by the inter-institutional system, not only would prisoners be labeled as deviant (and thus their social life constrained), they would become *interpolated* to understand themselves in the terms given them by these discourses, in effect imprisoning themselves (Foucault 1977). Yet Power is not merely discursive — it also takes a complex array of material social forces to create something like a modern prison. Dispositifs are the historically, socially and culturally specific ways these discursive and material forces fit together. Crucially, *dispositifs* represent the social space of struggle over the processes of *subjectivation*, the way we come to understand ourselves and act in relation to the interpersonal and institutional power relations which enmesh our lives. Subjectivity, the way we find our place in a world of fluctuating power relations, is based, as Judith Butler (1990, 2004) argues, on processes of performativity: the creative habituation of repeated activity through which we come to imagine ourselves as social actors. *Dispositifs* intervene (both materially and discursively) in and define the spaces and resources for performativity we have at our disposal to (re-)form ourselves as subjects and social actors. In other words, dispositifs are broad frameworks by which power intervenes in the ways subjects in institutions reproduce themselves and each other. As Gilles Deleuze puts it, the *dispositif* is an "analytic" of power which is concerned "not [with] how we are dominated and trapped in what we are but in *how we might become*" (emphasis ours, cited in Cote 2007, 24).

The famous architecture of the panopticon, where the guards may observe all the prisoners at once without being seen (thus *virtually* subjecting the inmates to constant surveillance) is an example of a *dispositif* which brings together both material and discursive power to create a limited set of resources for the production of subjectivity towards a social order reproductive of reigning power relations. Yet so, too, is the assemblage of social, economic and political powers which must come together to create, fill, staff and sustain such a prison. The *dispositif* refers to the way various forms of power come together and crystallize into something real (if not always something we can *touch*): new managerial techniques, computer networks, employee codes of conduct, or mega-stores, as well as the broader structures of economic (capitalist) and political (state) power.

While Foucault's writing emerged as part of an overall dissatisfaction with Marxist approaches, Mark Cote (2007) argues that there have always been "many Foucaults," many valences to the complex and often elusive intellectual and his many theoretical afterlives. Cote focuses his research on what he calls the "Italian Foucault," a figure in critical dialogue (both actual and metaphorical) with the Italian *Autonomia* movement of radical socialism which emerged out of a dissatisfaction with the complicity and political mediocrity of the Communist and Socialist parties through the massive

industrial and social restructuring of Italy in the 1960s to become a massive and powerful social movement before its severe repression by the state in the late 1970s (Wright 2002)^{xiii}. For Cote, the Italian Foucault developed his theories of social power not as a flight from the analysis of capitalism but as a coming at it *the long way around*, based not in discovering the eternal laws of accumulation and then *deducing* social power but, rather, starting with concrete analyses of social power relations and the creation of subjects and *inducing* the historically specific forms of capitalist formation.

We orient our discussion of *dispositifs* within this frame of the “Italian Foucault,” seeking to understand how capitalism is constantly being rebuilt from the “ground” or “social floor” up. Wal-Mart, we argue, is as essential a part of this process today as was Jeremy Bentham’s plans for the panopticon to the birth of industrial capitalism and social regulation in the 18th century (De Angelis 2007). Indeed, it is perhaps more important because, unlike the panopticon (which was never built in its designer’s life, nor ever to his exact specifications), Wal-Mart is not just a plan whose underlying logic and spirit spreads throughout society but is a *dispositif* which actively evolves as a real material force as it dialectically develops its plan and agenda.

Before we continue to elaborate the concept of the panopticon of time we want to dwell on some aspects of Wal-Mart’s power that usually pass without comment. They regard Wal-Mart’s massive informatics empire, its network logic, and its manipulation of risk. They also speak to Wal-Mart’s ability to saturate life and time. By sketching these we set the stage for suggesting that Wal-Mart’s game, and the game of the tendencies of late capitalism it represents and advances, is about more than merely profit. While driven primarily by the profit motive, Wal-Mart reveals a power that is at the vanguard of imprisoning temporality itself and saturating life with new forms of control. Lest we be accused of hyperbole we want to make clear we are seeking to map the limits or utopian dreams of the broader tendencies Wal-Mart represents, rather than the “finished product” or social reality as it actually exists. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) notes, neoliberalism and the valences of globalization it drives are utopian diagrams of corporate rule: programs, desires, but not (yet) realities. We want to identify the utopian (or, really, dystopian) aspirations expressed in Wal-Mart’s practices as indicative of a few broader tendencies in global capital.

Exception Management

A 2004 New York Times report informs us that, within Wal-Mart’s massive private computer network resides an astonishing galaxy of information: data mined from consumers, profiles of local and global consumer behaviours, statistics and codes on global supply chains, key information on corporate strategy, various codes of conduct for employees and security personnel, employee files and health-insurance information, numerous statistical systems studies on efficiency and formulae for growth and expansion (Hays 2004; Westerman 2001). Wal-Mart’s data-centres actively track over 680 million distinct products per week and over 20-million customer transactions per day, facilitated by a data system which can handle over 570 terabytes of data, second in capacity only to the Pentagon (Marquard 2007, 23-25; Petrovic and Hamilton 2006, 133)^{xiv}. Information is culled for aggregate statistics about consumer behaviour as well as information which will facilitate the allocation of human and non-human resources to warehouses, stores and ports throughout Wal-Mart’s vast network. Limited information is also made available to Wal-Mart’s ostensibly independent suppliers so that they can better adjust production to meet ever-fluctuating consumer demand, a flexibility for which the supplier must pay. Wal-Mart’s massive data collection and sharing apparatus is facilitated by the largest privately owned communications network in the world (Bonacich and Hardie 2006). The New York Times report continues that among Wal-Mart’s most recent “data driven weapons” of unbridled global expansion is something the company calls “*predictive technology*,” an obsessive and

paranoid^{xv} method of processing its jealously hoarded data to automatically predict and enable a preventive intervention against any aberration to the hyper-efficient functioning of Wal-Mart's global supply chains and retail ecologies. The objective of this dataphilia is to increase the speed and responsiveness of the network, a desire recently fed by Wal-Mart's demands that all suppliers install Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags in all commodities to be sold at the store that the company might better track their ever fluctuating inventory (Marquard and Birchard 2007, 24-25). The effect is dramatic: Wal-Mart has a turnaround rate between 2-3 times as fast as the retail standard (Lichtenstein 2006, 13), restocking stores twice per week as opposed to the usual twice per month (Bonacich and Hardie 2006, 172), and completely restocking its vast empire the equivalent of once every 40 days (Marquard and Birchard 2007, 25). Some 70 percent of goods are sold from Wal-Mart's shelves before the supplier is even paid (Bonacich and Hardie 2006, 176-178).

But the data fetish behind predictive technology also intimates something more of Wal-Mart's temporal obsessions. In a moment of chilling clarity, Wal-Mart's then Chief Information Officer (CIO) tells the New York Times reporter that problems in the process of systemic normalization are referred to as "exceptions," and that hyper-technology is essential for what they term "exception management." "We keep watching everything," she says. "We are pretty near real time. We can tell people that they need to go do something, and we are within hours, depending on the event" (Hays 2004). The peculiar grammar of this Freudian slip alerts us to a particularly frightening realization: the corporate "we" seeks to approach "real-time," seeking to fulfill an eternal dream of power: zero latency between will and fact, sovereign edict and subjective response. It is unclear who the "people" Wal-Mart tells "to go do something" are. Nor does she specify what "something" is or could be. Hays (2004) speculates that "the 'event' may be a truck's failure to drop off or pick up something, or the delivery of a load of shoes missing their mates. It could be the absence of an important product in a store's backroom, or in the distribution center that serves that store. Or it could be an act of nature like the hurricanes that descended, one after another, on Florida and other parts of the Southeast this year." Further, the CIO says "*we are* within hours"—the verb here is "to be"; They proclaim themselves to be effectively auto-ontological: Wal-Mart does not "do," but "becomes" as a response to events. Wal-Mart, to a certain extent, can be understood not merely as a "firm" with various holdings and contracts but as a fluctuating and protean assemblage of relationships and interventions, a *dispositive* proper and one whose key concern is the compression of the time under its watch to reduce any potential moment outside its control to the merest interval.

The language of "exception management" will remind those familiar with recent trends in critical theory of arguments that sovereignty comes "to be" through its ability to create a sovereign, internal exception. Giorgio Agamben's (1998, 2005) reformulation of Foucault's notion of biopolitics speaks to the foundation of modern sovereignty, whether configured as a despotic autocracy or pluralistic democracy, on the ability to define a "state of exception" and denude certain figures within its borders to the nauseating spectre of *bare life*, a purely biological existence: a social death of the very worst. Michael Hardt and Antonia Negri (2000 and 2004) have argued that the spread of a new, fully capitalist form of biopolitics, the politics of lived reality itself, has characterized the rise of a transnational form of sovereignty, Empire, whose logic is, similarly, one of global "exception management." This exception management is based on developing intelligent networked systems to identify, isolate and surgically intervene in spaces and processes dissonant with the overall operations of the neo-imperial order. The aim of biopolitics, following Foucault, is not merely to create broader social discipline but to make a politics of life itself, to incorporate the biological and the everyday into the fold of emerging forms of power (Foucault 2003)^{xvi}. We understand Wal-Mart as a key part and a microcosm of this process.

The above quotation from Wal-Mart's CIO indicates that the logic behind Wal-Mart's power is one of "risk management," a logic which has been ably traced by Randy Martin (2007) who notes the

way it plays out in various moments of global power from the worlds of finance to the Pentagon. The transformation of qualitative *uncertainty* into quantitative and calculable *risk* represents, he argues, a fundamental shift in the logic of power only fully possible in a moment of rapid global flows of information and the power of digital cognition. Such a transformation has broad implications. For one, it brings all activities within a range of computerized data. Human, corporate, military and state strategic action is increasingly determined by protocols, models and codes developed by complex collaborations between increasingly esoteric pseudo-disciplines and intelligent machines. Second, it transforms the tenor of legitimation of these institutions from the promise of some broader social good to a promise to accurately manage risk (the moral vacuity and market logic of corporate statements on “sustainability” and “social responsibility” are good examples). Martin catalogues how, under the banner of the “ownership society” and other neoliberal euphemisms, the American government was at the forefront of innovating new means of categorizing populations between those economically and socially valuable “risk-takers” (who appropriately managed their life and reaped the rewards or suffered the consequences of their actions alone) and the abject “at-risk” (whose poor choices or fate have rendered them needful of invasive, if austere, intervention). Finally, the *episteme* of risk management shifts the tendency of intervention. While in a prior moment a crisis was dealt with through operational overhaul, today’s risk-managers seek to contain and neutralize problems with extreme accuracy, not to overcome crisis but to “surf” the tsunami of “creative destruction,” a sport, no doubt, of giants. Martin explains how on both Wall Street and through the Pentagon’s “Revolution in Military Affairs” (and increasingly on the terrain of everyday life) the logic of risk-management has encouraged “surgical strikes” at the source of problems. Wal-Mart too aims at this minimalist interventionism, engridding the world through the computerized calculus of risk and response, coordinated from Bentonville. Underperforming stores are remotely and automatically commanded to realign labour schedules. Delayed shipments trigger contingency algorithms in the global supply chain. And unruly labour or negative media attention are dealt with through pre-designed protocols and teams deployed from Bentonville. Despite its autobiographical representation as a humanized business, Wal-Mart is a hyper-efficient machine built on the instant apprehension and meticulous management of global risk.

Predictive technology, then, represents a new form of corporate perception based on the ability to survey and virtualize intended to manage the increasingly broad scope of Wal-Mart’s diverse interests based on the principle of risk-management^{xvii}. Wal-Mart lusts after the complete knowability of all its operations. In one way, Wal-Mart is achieving an enlightenment in the Western sense: a full self-awareness, a complete modernity (in-the-momentness), albeit in a way foreseen by Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* when they argued that modernity has no moral project and can result equally in liberation or domination (and, more worryingly, the confusion of the two). In the same vein, Wal-Mart is developing a new form of perception, a new super-human sense of “sight” proper to a global corporation (see LaCavalier 2008). Its ability to “see” its supply chain, its retail locations, the movement of its assets and people and everything in between at a glance, to perceive the processes of capital accumulation-in-motion, represents a form of super-human aesthetics feared in Walter Benjamin’s (1969) meditations on the potentials of mechanical representative technologies: a somatics based on and serving only profit and control, available only to machines of accumulation which come to dominate society. This new aesthetics is powered by and powers the policing of time, the fascistic desire for perfect order without interruption or latency or, perhaps more horrifically (as George Orwell showed us in *1984*), an order in which a little bit of disorder is already factored in, predicted, and accounted for.

This properly corporate epistemology is aimed at the efficient perception of risk, a spectrum of refracted information whose apprehension and manipulation demands complex computerized technology and extreme internal discipline. This epistemology, in turn, allows Wal-Mart to operate within and through a network ontology. In other words, Wal-Mart’s data empire and informatics

regime is not merely an advance on earlier modes of retail supply-chain management. It is a qualitatively new moment which allows Wal-Mart and the form of corporate power it represents and articulates to act broadly spatially (coordinating diverse points throughout the globe) as well as intensively temporally (in the temporalities of its supply chain as well as everyday life).

Networks should not imply equality and it is the privilege of Wal-Mart to use its massive momentum and gravity to seek out and exploit those nodes of greatest inequality within overlapping global systems. As James Hoopes (2006, 85-88) points out, while the rhetoric of the day holds that information technology will lead to the empowerment of small, independent micro-businesses and the decline of massive firms, Wal-Mart's intensive internal discipline has allowed it to use new technologies to dramatically increase its size and market share. Nor has new technology provided the promised flattening of hierarchy or diffusion of control. If anything, this technology has intensified Wal-Mart's strict hierarchical organization where the head-offices in Bentonville can remotely conduct surveillance and intervene in all their global operations. As noted earlier, Wal-Mart "squeezes" its suppliers, forcing them to in turn put pressure on the local sources of resources and labour. These differential costs of production, as Massimo De Angelis (2007) makes clear, are the result of local industry's ability to exploit local populations and labour laws. Wal-Mart is, among other things, a network of these local forms of exploitation. It is crucial to note that these local forms of exploitation can rarely be separated from the histories of colonialism and, in particular, how these legacies course through broader structures of inequality like gender, race, class, nationality, ethnicity and caste.

Numerous critical scholars who have striven to define what constitutes network power (Castells 1996; Chiapello and Boltanski 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000 and 2004; Terranova 2004) agree that it is not defined by pure might or sheer economic clout (although these remain important) but rather by a more cunning art of managing flows of information and activity, mastering speed and connection, synchronizing nodes and creating new networks. Unlike older corporate logics which sought ever-greater vertical and horizontal integration, a virtualist principle sees all connections as ephemeral and tenuous, momentary passages between two points the distance between which is largely immaterial (see LaCavalier 2008 on how Wal-Mart comprehends its supply chain, logistics network and even employees as a colloidal, virtual, and immaterial substance). Advantage is gained in networks through the exploitation of differentials between nodes (in fiscal 2007, Wal-Mart made at least \$1.5-billion simply on "favourable exchange rate differentials", according to the company's annual report of the same year) and mastering connections.

While it remains a massive corporate behemoth, Wal-Mart's "identity", for lack of a better word, is intimately linked to a network ontology. Wal-Mart "sees" itself, at least in an ideal sense, as more of a light and swift *force* or *logic* than a hurtling giant of a corporation. Its own internal rhetoric of spiritual and individual service, its designation of its employees as "associates" to be managed by their "people division" (Lichtenstein 2006), its ubiquitous references to a business model of one-to-one straight dealing, and its effective reliance on slogans and principles of personal responsibility are not only a cynical gloss over a deeply hierarchical, totalitarian and top-heavy corporation. Rather, these platitudes help Wal-Mart imagine itself in ways that make it better at virtualizing its power and controlling networks, facilitated by its understanding of itself as something that is at its core immaterial, spiritual or collaborative. Al Normal (2007) reports on the byzantine and counterintuitive calculus of "performance metrics" by which Wal-Mart both reflects upon its own operations and "proves" itself to be a socially and ecologically responsible firm. This statistical and econometric wizardry goes beyond simple obfuscation. Rather, it is part of Wal-Mart's evolving sensory feedback loop which allows it to understand and respond to the networks it inhabits based on principles of externalizing costs and managing risk.

Depotentialization

As part of this network power, it is fair to say Wal-Mart has no definite borders. It is a global manifestation of an evolution of an accumulative logic which seeks to bring various aspects of human experience around the world under a soft but powerful form of control. Rather than being borderless it is perhaps more appropriate to call it a *border-machine* in that its aim is, in some key respects, to transform social life. Where the border was once the physical limit of sovereign control today, as Étienne Balibar (2004) points out, it has transcended its territorial valence to appear throughout society as a technology of intensive social control through economic and legal segregation and surveillance.

The most important aspect of this recoding of social life is the general way in which Wal-Mart is a crucial cause and effect of a rampant form of consumerism that has been widely commented on. For Zygmunt Bauman (1999), for instance, consumerism represents the new modality of belonging and citizenship in a world where late capitalism has stripped bare the social fabric, suffocated the public sphere, and created ubiquitous individualization and alienation. It is telling that more Americans of the age of majority have shopped at Wal-Mart than have ever voted (Sasseen 2008). Beneath many of the criticisms of Wal-Mart listed above is a deep-seated ethical and aesthetic disgust at the shelves of barely differentiated commodities aimed at helping us live fundamentally disconnected lives in an increasingly apathetic and banal society. This criticism echoes that of the Situationists, the tumultuous French artist/activist circle whose work helped shape the revolts of the late 60s in that country. For Guy Debord, among the group's only consistent members, the commodity, capital's material manifestation, has assumed a new form in an age of consumerism, becoming "spectacle" (Debord 1994). Drained of any reference to an original "use value" commodities existed simply to be had and to be disposed of, an always-already insufficient plug for a hole in the social fabric the commodification of life had itself created (Plant 1992). Crucially, for Debord and his circle this process was not merely about the abundance of things but the experience of time: the killing of time, the way time became homogenous, frozen and deadened in the society of the spectacle. In a world where human connection and creativity are increasingly subordinated to or expressed through the prism of the commodity not only did the time of labour and production fall under the rule of the commodity, so too did the time of re-creation and re-production (see also Adorno 1991). The spectacle, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, aims to "concretely and deliberately organize environments and events in order to *depotentiate life*," (2000, 78 – emphasis ours) to fundamentally arrest the play of human creativity and the possibility of creating alternative futures. While Debord never gave up the factory as a site of struggle, his circle began developing strategies for confronting the evolution of capitalism into spectacle on the terrain of daily life, experimenting with tools taken from avant-garde art movements like free-association, wandering the city, pastiche and *bricolage* to defy the regimentation of temporal existence. While in practice these experiments tended towards the esoteric, intellectually elitist and politically caustic, the Situationists represented a cogent criticism of the temporal gilded prison of a capitalist society of commodities.

One can only wonder what the Situationists would have made of a space like Wal-Mart which, in many ways, goes beyond their worst nightmares of the spectacle. The massive megastores which provide almost all of life's needs and wants (the two now almost inexorably confused) and dominate communities represent, we argue, instantiations of a moment of capitalism that goes beyond the logic of the spectacle in the same way its disciplinary aspects go beyond the logic of the panopticon. Indeed, it goes beyond precisely because, in addition to using technology and globalization to exacerbate the power of the spectacle and surveillance, it brings the two together in profound ways.

Wal-Mart's spectacle begins each morning with the motivational chant/pledge in which all employees must participate. It is most hyperbolically exemplified in their stadium-meetings complete

with collective games for the tens of thousands of managers and associates flown in from around the world, a star-studded line-up of A-list musical acts, and celebratory cheering (Lichtenstein 2006, 16-20), a sort of evangelical Nürnberg rally at Disneyland. Wal-Mart's American nationalism, often understood as cynical given its reliance on Chinese and other foreign sweatshops and its role in undermining small American business, draws upon tropes of self-made men, opportunity, and moral dignity to master a spectacle which ties civic freedom and responsibility to the freedom to consume (Giroux 2004; Lichtenstein 2006, 16-20).

But Wal-Mart's spectacle goes beyond pageantry. Rather, it represents a movement to saturate lived temporality. In the same way that, in many "post-"colonial locales, Wal-Mart's factories are the only source of employment, in many Northern jurisdictions Wal-Mart is virtually the only retail location left standing. In both cases, communities are made reliant on the firm and its presence overdetermines their political, economic and social future. But Wal-Mart's control is deeper than this "company town" model, a model on which it builds in profound new ways. At the over 3,500 rural Wal-Mart stores in the United States the firm is effectively the only place to acquire books, music, magazines and other forms of culture and information (Gogoi 2007b). Wal-Mart's "philanthropy" is crucial to local sports-teams and cultural events making it an integral part of the community and hedging against the risk of collective community antipathy.

In her analysis of the spiritual and cultural aspects of the Wal-Mart empire, Moreton (2007, 118) explains that "the postmodern economy does not rely on consumers alone but must metabolize new human concerns – reproducerism, a service ethic, a desire for transcendence, a yearning for individual significance within a communal endeavour." For Moreton, Wal-Mart's hegemony in the "heartland" of the U.S. Sun-Belt is not merely due to their near monopolistic hold on retail markets but also their links to forms of evangelical religion they help fund and promote. The wedded image of the humble entrepreneur Sam Walton with a notion of Christian "servant leadership" is promoted from megachurch pulpits, employee and managerial manuals, and the university and college curricula Wal-Mart sponsors. Moreton explains that this "Bentonville Consensus" which joins post-Fordist management and organization to postmodern Christianity is a potent ideological and discursive concoction based on values of male leadership, patriarchal and pro-business community solidarity, American global hegemony, and a virulent new strain of the protestant work ethic which further elides structural inequalities.

Wal-Mart's "soul" is an educated one, the product of decades of the firm's involvement with Southern universities and colleges to train a new generation of global managers (Trunick, 2006). This process started with the Walton's sponsorship of the inter-campus group "Students for Free Enterprise" through scholarships, a group from which they cherry-picked junior executives and managers and which developed a missionary-type approach to spreading free-market ideology around the world (Moreton 2007; Lichtenstein 2006).

As mentioned earlier, this "soul" is not merely a means of glossing underlying inequalities and hierarchies but also a key means by which Wal-Mart auto-ontologizes. Employees at Wal-Mart are encouraged to understand themselves not as stratified workers and managers but as equal "associates" who judiciously "invest" their time in the Wal-Mart family for personal and professional dividends. This neoliberal recasting of labour subjectivity seeks to erase or make upspeakable the very real lines of power and privilege within and beyond Wal-Mart by rendering everyone as equally privileged "risk-takers" whose lack of success is their own fault, to whom Wal-Mart owes no allegiance except that which they earn and to whom Wal-Mart is a beneficent teacher, mentor and spiritual guide (Moreton 2007).

Another area of Wal-Mart's deep penetration of everyday life is its increasing interest in health-care and pharmaceuticals (Freudenheim 2008). Wal-Mart stores in the United States are today built to house medical clinics. As of 2008, at least 80 clinics had been constructed with plans to expand or co-

brand up to 2,000 by 2015 (Gogoi 2008b), making it one of the United States's leading health-care providers. Health products and services made up 9 percent of Wal-Mart's sales in 2007, making it among its most profitable segments. Wal-Mart's interest in health-care stems in part from the health benefits it manages for its 2-million employees using state-of-the-art management techniques to keep health costs low such as keeping worker medical records in its massive databases (Jana 2008) and hiring younger, healthier workers (Greenhouse and Barbaro 2005). Indeed, so integrated are health and medical data into its predictive technology that Wal-Mart recently announced a partnership to corner the market on digital medical records in the United States and beyond (Lohr 2009). Wal-Mart's temporary decision not to stock emergency contraceptives (Bianco and Zellner 2003) is indicative of its (patriarchal) cultural and bio power, especially in areas where their leverage over suppliers and economy of scale has enabled their \$4 prescription program to close out most smaller competitors. Wal-Mart's financialization of biopolitics has taken the form of taking out life insurance on even its most disposable employees through plans which reward the retailer (not the workers' families or dependents) in case of untimely death, so called "dead-peasant" policies which leverage laws aimed at allowing firms to protect themselves from the debilitation or death of senior managers into a net (tax-free) profit for high-employee-turnover mega-employers (Crenshaw and Brubaker 2002; Schultz and Francis 2002; Sixel 2002)^{xviii}.

Wal-Mart's biopolitics is evocatively demonstrated by its power over the American foodscape and the global supply-chain of agricultural production it takes to stock its thousands of super-market-equipped locations (Patel 2007). Paul Roberts (2008) points out that 21 cents out of every dollar used to purchase food in the United States is spent at Wal-Mart (see also *Super 50* 2006). By expanding aggressively into the global food market, Wal-Mart has become not only the United States' largest grocer and one of the world's largest supermarket chains, it has — because of its unmatched management of workers, consumers and the market signals which determine what they buy — positioned itself as a pioneer of the "pseudofoodscape." Beyond the company's recent specious claims to social and environmental responsibility based on its stocking of local foods and organic options (Burritt 2009), Wal-Mart continues to predicate its strategies to dominate the food chain on the sale of low-cost, high-energy, but nutritionally deficient "pseudofoods:" which, according to Anthony Winson (2004), provide an ever increasing rate of profit due to the high levels of addictive sugar and other additives, as well as the outlandish portions offered in processed and pre-packaged food items. In addition, Wal-Mart, like most grocery retailers, has been found to inflate prices, especially of healthful foods, in lower-income areas (see Migoya 2008).

This control over foodscape is part and parcel of Wal-Mart's spread throughout ever more spaces of life and its deep penetration into almost all forms of human togetherness and local community. In a recent interview (LaCavalier 2007) the chief architect in Wal-Mart's planning department explains how the corporation seeks to replace public space, imagining their stores as neo-agoras. Prototypes for Wal-Mart Villages are on the horizon where residential units will sit atop supercentres. Wal-Mart has even devised ways to be an intimate part of the rehabilitation of inner-city neighbourhoods, a hub of life activity in areas vacated of its wealthier inhabitants by the lure of the big-box suburbs.

Indeed, Wal-Mart has already largely succeeded to replace public space in many jurisdictions. With the retreat of collective projects and the welfare state comes the narrowing of space which is shared in common (Giroux 2004). Wal-Mart, as a site where one can do an increasing proportion of the increasingly commercialized social tasks of life, has become among the few collective spaces left, especially in areas where neoliberal restructuring and suburban planning have done away with safe parks, community centres, and main streets. Criticisms of Wal-Mart which cite the nearly daily incidence of violence and social mischief (shootings, kidnappings, lockdowns, robberies) at the firm's stores (a catalogue of which is readily available from any news search - see also *Crime at Wal-Mart*

2006) fail to place these incidents in a broader context where Wal-Mart stands at the forefront of a movement to commercialize what little remains of the public sphere, a process which is an intimate part of the rise of a culture of endemic precarity, fear, disconnection and existential poverty of which these incidents are symptomatic.

Wal-Mart's attempts to become synonymous with local community are diverse. They have recently rolled out a new online classifieds service, capitalizing on the success of free sites like Craigslist and Kijiji to propose Wal-Mart as the material site and cultural guarantor of informal exchange between people (Talley 2008; Zmuda, 2008). While the system relies in part on culling classified content from local newspapers (Matlin 2008), it has the effect of diminishing local paper sales, further eroding local community. We have already mentioned Wal-Mart's mobilization of Customer Action Networks to defend Wal-Mart from its critics (Podsada 2008).

Nor can Wal-Mart's success be separated from the endemic poverty it has helped create and on which it preys as a "discount retailer." Despite decades of economic growth, median family incomes in the United States have failed to rise proportionally and rural poverty has exacerbated. The explosion of consumer debt as a result has been well charted. Wal-Mart has recently begun making inroads into the financial sector, beginning with pre-loaded consumer cards (which allow loyal customers to deposit their paycheques directly to the firm at a fraction of the cost of other cheque-cashing services) to wire-transfer services (again, at a fraction of the cost of the competitor) to credit-cards and consumer credit offerings more generally (*Wal-Mart steps up efforts* 2008; D'Innocenzo 2009; Gogoi 2007c; Palmeri 2008). Legally denied the right to start its own bank in the United States in 2007, Wal-Mart has developed partnerships with other financial institutions and has started banks in Mexico where the banking lobby is less powerful. Wal-Mart's objective in this regard is to capitalize on a huge market of the "unbanked" or "underbanked" American working-poor and chronically indebted. While on the one hand Wal-Mart legitimately promises to use its vast financial momentum and geographic ubiquity to undercut exploitative pay-day-loan, credit-card and bank credit programs, the imbrications of a heavily indebted society in Wal-Mart's financial panopticon is worrisome. It indicates once again Wal-Mart's growing power over time: not just the time of consuming or working, but the financial time in between. It is conceivable, even likely, that Wal-Mart workers who are also customers could enter into a virtual "company store" relationship with the firm, depositing their meager pay into their in-store accounts, potentially to primarily repay debt or interest. While the passing of the myth of consumerist financial freedom is nothing to be mourned, the imprisonment of temporality, the incarceration of life in such a paradigm, is perhaps among the clearest examples of Wal-Mart as a panopticon of time. Further, Wal-Mart's financial services are a key site of further individualized data collection. Indeed, Wal-Mart has promised to use their financial services to provide "financial literacy" to wayward or "at risk" consumer-citizens to train them to appropriately manage risk (*Wal-Mart steps up efforts...* 2008) at moment when a massive financial collapse is being blamed on consumers rather than the engines of financial speculation and the post-modern accumulation they serve. This promise of mass education into a neoliberal, biopolitical "care of the (financial) self" speaks volumes of the intersection of Wal-Mart's commercial, economic and cultural power.

In weaker economies, Wal-Mart both produces and preys upon poverty and debt to exploit the cheapest, most precarious workers around the world through their network of sub-contractors, partly a result of a "race to the bottom" of indebted post-colonial nations who, forced by international institutions and global financial flows to repeal earlier models of economic development, engage in a desperate search for foreign investment (see De Angelis 2008 for a cogent reading of this process). Wal-Mart's ability to both produce and prey upon poverty speaks to the way its scope goes well beyond skimming off the top of social prosperity but instead is an intimate and inseparable part of the

political economy of hopelessness and debt on the international, national, and global stages, a machine calibrated for technologically refined global accumulation by dispossession (see Harvey 2003).

It has long been Wal-Mart's practice to drop largely prefabricated architectures into communities only to evacuate them completely when they have parched the local economy dry, leaving nothing but husks eerily stripped of all brand identifier yet all too recognizable—so-called "dark stores" (*Big-box blight* 2007; Karjanen 2006, 159; LaCavalier 2007). "Living" (i.e. active) stores are all too real but are, crucially, partly virtual, saturated with surveillance and overcoded with routines and codes. Decades of systems-research have been invested in designing the layout of the store to hasten traffic, encourage consumption and impulse purchasing, enable rapid security response, and generally lubricate and intensify the flow of commerce within the space. From the emotional connection with the solicitous greeter at the door to the way in which products are arranged so as to encourage associative purchasing to the streamlined checkout process, little is left to chance in the homogenized space of Wal-Mart. More accurately, chance is already factored into the system.

Such techniques are by no means new, having long been in practice in the super-market sector, partly under the banner of "atmospherics:" the development of sumptuary microclimates (Patel 2007, 215-252; Petrovic and Hamilton 2006, 112-113). But Wal-Mart's acute attention to detail has led to a Taylorization not only of work (Adams 2006; Rosen 2006) but also consumption within their stores. Plans are in the works to introduce television advertising throughout the stores with flat-screens hanging from the ceiling along-side the ubiquitous video cameras (Neff 2008), a stark example of the way the firm brings together surveillance and spectacle. Wal-Mart's apparent lack of interest in store aesthetics is misleading. Each Wal-Mart is, to be glib, a corporate work of art, an intricately and painstakingly designed ecology which mobilizes the latest surveillance technology, consumer research, and logistics feedback mechanisms to make the entire location into a hyper-efficient retail machine.

Much of the work of enforcing the firm's hyper-efficiency falls to local managers who, as the "Faces of Bentonville" on the ground are themselves under surveillance from head office using the latest technology. This to ensure they meet or exceed ever increasing quotas for sales and labour efficiency, often leading to extreme stress and attempts to cut corners around labour laws (Greenhouse 2004a; Rosen 2006). Numerous lawsuits against Wal-Mart for unpaid overtime have their source in managers' desperate to meet the demands of head-office (Lichtenstein 2006, 26-28). This is combined with a largely informal and non-transparent system of promotion and discipline, and a rhetoric of personal responsibility and corporate paternalism which uses techniques of "coaching" and public shaming to terrify managers through intimidation (Rosen 2006, 256-257). The result, according to the business press, is seething apathy and resentment among employees towards the firm (Gogoi 2007a) although within a cultural politics of resignation, individualism and consumerism (of which Wal-Mart is both a product and an engine), this antipathy rarely emerges as constructive or collective revolt.

This overcoding of Wal-Mart's space is compounded by its massive security apparatus. Surveillance technologies, primarily deployed from visored cameras suspended from the ceiling, which capture all activity through the whole space, ensuring that no action within the store goes unmonitored. Behind these cameras the "loss prevention" teams isolate, identify and deploy to neutralize unusual behaviours. A whistleblower on the firm's special "Threat Research Operations" detailed the lengths to which Wal-Mart will go to attack its critics using tactics including spying, infiltration and heavy surveillance of the firm's internal email and internet systems. While Wal-Mart is cagey about its virtualized security and surveillance operations, recent reports indicate the use to which RFID tags, new development in computer imaging technology, and the technologies of "data warehousing" can be put, purposes of which we can only assume Wal-Mart is at the vanguard. Taking a of frequently stolen, RFID-bearing item off a shelf can trigger automated security cameras to observe whether people within the store meet certain criteria of "suspicious" behaviour (Woyke 2006)

^{xix}. RFID tags can also be used to lock the wheels on shopping carts and track items well beyond Wal-Mart's property (Lacy 2004). They can also enable Wal-Mart to track employees as well as merchandise and to introduce new forms of Taylorist management by studying the speed by which certain operations are completed or the capacity of the special arrangement of stores.

This panoptic security apparatus is a grim reflection of Wal-Mart as an intimate part of rise of the garrison or security state (in the United States especially) and the growing culture of fear generally (see Giroux 2004 and 2005). Wal-Mart's legions of security, loss-prevention and exception management forces represent a considerable proportion of American security industry and the firm employs among the most sophisticated surveillance and data-tracking technology on the market, much of which is derived from or destined for military applications. The firm actively works with U.S. security agencies and has pledged its massive database to the service of the state to track purchases thought to be associated with terrorism (for instance, buying too many prepaid cell-phone at once; see Woyke 2006; Zimmerman and McWilliams 2007). In addition to drawing on former military-intelligence personnel to staff its data-surveillance and security teams, the firm has recently entered into an agreement to create a revolving human-resources door between the American army reserves and its own security forces (*Wal-Mart, Army Reserve link for recruiting, hiring* 2008; Kabel 2007). The firm is a considerable contributor to military-related charities and actively targets the lucrative "military families" market with the assistance of the U.S. Military (Annual Report 2008).

Wal-Mart remains the most popular place to buy firearms (Peters 2008) as well as the plethora of military and combat-themed clothes, toys and other products targeted at men and boys. On a more abstract level, as Moreton (2007) makes clear, Wal-Mart is at the vanguard of advancing a notion of American neoliberal masculinity which is at the core of the self-identification crucial to sustain the war-on-terror as the battle of innocents against a world of insane madmen who, for some unfathomable reason, despise and resent Americans' freedom (to shop at Wal-Mart). It is no coincidence or cynical manipulation that former U.S. president George W. Bush pleaded with Americans to continue to shop in the wake of 9/11 – it was not merely the *financial economy* of the American Empire that needed propping up but its *symbolic economy*, an economy in which Wal-Mart is a crucial player for millions. For all these reasons it is fair to say that Wal-Mart is a *paramilitary organization*^{xx}, part and parcel of the rampant militarization of everyday life, a process which, as Henry Giroux (2006a) points out, is symbiotic with the decay of the public sphere, the spread of consumerism and a pervasive culture of fear and spectacle.

As Cynthia Enloe (2000 and 2007) points out, with militarism comes the complex work of gender. Wal-Mart is not merely an instantiation of new technologies of capitalist discipline but also a telling example of how these technologies always and everywhere rely on patriarchy and gender binaries to be effective. Indeed, Wal-Mart represents a site currently at the vanguard of the constant dialectic articulation of capitalist and patriarchal power. Wal-Mart's labour force, from its Northern superstores and its Southern sweatshops, is highly feminized. Wal-Mart's success in keeping prices low is due in part to its ability to rely upon local structures of patriarchal oppression and privilege to capitalize on these workers social precarity and comparative lack of political and economic power. Two thirds of its North American employees are women, representing at least 70 percent of their hourly (part-time) staff (Rosen 2006, 243). At the heart of Wal-Mart's culture, as Moreton (2007) points out, a soft form of evangelical patriarchy guides the management philosophy emerging out of and contributing to the neo-conservative ideology of the U.S. Sunbelt. Wal-Mart's own records indicate that female employees earned 5-15 percent less than their male counterparts; despite higher performance ratings and seniority, on average only 33 percent of Wal-Mart's managers are women, compared to rates of 56 percent in the company's top twenty competitors (Bianco 2006, 7). Massive lawsuits against Wal-Mart for gender discrimination in promotion are ongoing (Featherstone 2004). The primary shoppers at Wal-Mart are women – indeed, U.S. polling agencies identified lower-middle

-class “Wal-Mart Women” (who shopped at the firm at least once a week) as a key swing demographic in the 2008 presidential elections (Sasseen, 2008) and much of Wal-Mart’s marketing and promotion as well as in-store atmospherics are geared towards female shoppers.

Similarly, Wal-Mart is adept at exploiting and perpetuating the global and local politics of race. From a distance, the flow of labour, wealth and value from non-white workers in the global south to largely white consumers in the global North is staggering, a set of flows both reminiscent and reproductive of colonial and imperial patterns. So too does the discount retailer prey upon the Northern working-poor as both consumers and workers, a deeply racialized category, especially in the United States^{xxi}. Wal-Mart has also recently settled a \$17.5 lawsuit by 23 plaintiffs alleging the firm discriminated in hiring and promotion against African Americans (Shwiff 2009) and is currently contending a lawsuit alleging racial profiling of customers at its stores (Lewis 2005).

In sum, Wal-Mart’s power cannot be fully understood within older frameworks that relegate its power to the realm of the economic. Wal-Mart is a site where culture, economics and politics all meet. More accurately, it represents a place where all are forged into a new sort of power, a concrete and conceptual hinge between various aspects of life in a way which increasingly influences and dominates the times of our lives. Under the sign of maximal efficiency, under the surveillance of a broad set of disciplinary hyper-technologies, and within an archipelago of spaces of confinement and control, we are seeking to define Wal-Mart as a panopticon of time. This is a *dispositif*, a historically specific assemblage of powers, which seeks in multiple ways to shape the sorts of activities and subjects that can or might occur within and beyond its walls, a form of virtual and actual surveillance and a logic of intervention into multiple aspects of both global flows and daily life. The effect and aim is the depotentiation of temporality, the restriction of the play of possibility. It is an example of and a weapon by which new forms of global capitalism expand globally and intensify locally to create zones curiously out-of-time, a virus which infects various social processes and spaces with a deadened temporality.

4. THE PANOPTICON OF TIME

We are suggesting that Wal-Mart be considered the panopticon of time, an architecture at the vanguard of global capitalist development whose purpose is not merely profit but, through profit, the maximally efficient, responsive and protean *imprisonment of temporality*. By temporality we mean more than time as a quantitative measure of human activity. Temporality is the qualitative, lived and felt aspect of time, the tenor of social relations in motion, of social change. A temporality defines what can occur, what sorts of events can follow one another, and how they fit together as a lived reality. Temporality is to time what place is to space. In short, a temporality describes the feedback loop of present and future, the ways the cultural life of the future defines what is thinkable and possible in the present and the ways the present defines the possibility of the future.

For Fredric Jameson (2003), the contemporary moment of globalizing neoliberal capitalism and the “end of history” represents the “wholesale liquidation of futurity” (704), and “a temporal imprisonment in the present” (709). In a world now fully saturated with or open to transnational capital flows, the reigning social imaginary (at least in the global North) is that all prior moments led to our present and no future is possible or desirable beyond this moment. But this “end of temporality” is not merely ideological, it is also affective. The speeding up of life is compounded and given a new dimension by the synchronicity of media, pervasive insecurity and the impossibility of being able to realistically predict the future of one’s life, one’s career, one’s love or one’s friends (Bauman 2003). There is everywhere more and more speed and less and less direction.

The rise of an eternal episodic malaise is underscored, for Jameson, by profound global socioeconomic shifts which have seen the global political economy increasingly run not on a logic of profit but on the principles of speculation and driven by the representation of financial wealth. The volatility of this new temporality was recently brought home by the ongoing financial crisis and its thickening into a full-fledged global recession (or really, the coming-home of a world-wide hyper-depression which has been brewing in the abject corners of the global economy for decades). This crisis stems directly from the ubiquitous condition of endemic debt with no hope of being able to pay off principle, let alone meet interest payments, a condition which haunts billions around the world whether at the level of the individual or the state (Marazzi 2008). It is a condition of fear, anxiety, entrapment, and objective desperation that signals an imprisonment within a new temporality proper to late capitalism, one where the future is everywhere mortgaged and hedged.

This condition speaks to the claims of recent scholarship that has suggested that we interpret the effect of corporate power in the information and network age as less about the extraction of profit or surplus value and more about developing apparatuses of social control (not to be mistaken for social stability or order – indeed, quite the opposite). While this has always been a theme in the analysis of capitalism it has been among the core theoretical touchstones of the aforementioned “Autonomist” school of Marxist scholarship emerging from the Italian social movements of the 1970s and gaining purchase in the Anglophone world since the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). For the Autonomists generally, the post-Fordist moment represents the actualization of a condition Marx only gestured towards as the *real subsumption* of labour to capital, a moment when capital transcends its limited aims of extracting surplus value and instead becomes invested in saturating all of society with its codes of value (Dyer-Witford 1999). Marx analyzed the *formal* subordination of labour to capital—the way labour forces were created, aggregated into abstract labour power as wages were exchanged for time, transmuted into commodities and finally translated into money (the famous $M-C-M^1$ equation). But he predicted that, at a certain moment of capitalist development, the hegemony capital represented over social value would begin to recode an increasingly greater proportion of social processes and institutions. For the Autonomists, the combined post-Fordist and neoliberal assault on workers and social life which began in the 1970s represented this shift towards *real subsumption* where not only the *time of labour* but all the *time of life* was increasingly subordinated to the immediate or subtle dictates of capital accumulation^{xxii}. Other non-Marxist scholars have echoed these concerns. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993) work since the 1970s often returns to the diminishing “relative autonomy” of various spheres of social life which increasingly have come under the dictates of the globalizing free market from art to family to the state. Bourdieu’s (1999) final work represents an attempt to explain neoliberalism as a logic of infinite commodification. Education theorist Henry Giroux (2004, 2006b) has, in his recent work, shown the ways a neoliberal “public pedagogy” that teaches the wisdom of expanding free-market ideals across society has informed policy and discourse in sectors ranging from schooling to popular culture to the politics of disaster. And a general dissatisfaction with the subordination of all social value to the economic bottom-line underscores social criticism both right and left.

For the Autonomists, the escape of capitalist discipline from the factory, the emergence of a ubiquitous “factory of the social,” has had massive ramifications for how we consider capital’s production of value and its technologies of measure. In Marx’s formulation, during a period of *formal subsumption*, all value was, at its base, labour. Capital’s game was to impose upon labour a measure. This measure was time: the transformation of labour into abstract labour power, regimented and measured by the clock. On a sociological level, this measure was what Marx called “socially necessary labour time” which measured the degree to which the “living labour” of workers could be frozen in the form of a commodity whose circulation with all other socially created commodities on the market through money was the key to capitalist development (Harvey 2006). Marx recognized that

capital's desire to transform as much time as possible into formal work time was key, although he caustically condemned those who limited their political hopes to securing more "free time" to workers. For Marx, the struggle over the *quantity* of work-time was only a way into a broader, more politically radical and revolutionary struggle over the *quality* of human (social) time, a struggle over the fundamental injustice of the foreclosure of *temporality itself* under capitalism.

Like so many of the more abstract, seemingly moral, and deeply (though critically) humanist tropes that undergirded Marx's work, this distinction between time and temporality has largely been swept under the carpet by proponents and critics of his approach alike. But the problem has returned with new vigour in a moment of *real subsumption*. Negri (1991 and 2003) argues that, when capitalist discipline no longer relies primarily on the factory or, more accurately, when factory discipline becomes more broadly social, capital's former technology of measure, (socially-necessary labour time), is thrown into crisis. For capital, value is no longer only produced by the incarceration of workers' time but by the broader struggle over social temporality directly. In other words, capital is increasingly interested in the immeasurable totality of human cooperation, not just the way this totality can be subordinated under the hegemony of the wage. As a result, capital has developed a whole array of new technologies and tools for the control of temporality and the field of struggle has been redrawn. It is not a question of making the world a vast clockwork but rather developing *dispositifs* which locally, specifically, and in ways networked around the world, imprison temporality in ways the subordinate everyday life to the dictates of accumulation. Those dynamics collectively known as globalization, post-Fordism, neoliberalism, the Washington Consensus and so on tend to name processes by which aspects of temporality from health to policy to labour process to culture to community life increasingly come under the dictates of an ever more mobile form of financialized, technologized capital, a capital seeking to imbricate all these processes under its own order of temporality.

In an attempt to explain this process political economist Massimo De Angelis (2007) characterizes the neoliberal order as the transformation of social institutions into a series of interpenetrating panopticons which police each other as they police their inmates. Even where the prime motivation of an institution (like a school) is not profit, he argues that the inter-panoptic regime recodes each social institution or process's priorities on the basis of the principle of measurement, testing and the logic of accumulation, evident in the discursive prevalence and virtue of "investment," "returns," "benchmarks," "efficiency" and "customer satisfaction" in areas of life ranging from arts administration (Gill 2007) to the world of NGOs and charities (INCITE! 2007) to public service and education (Giroux 2007)^{xxiii} to foreign policy (Martin 2007). Social institutions police one another, a process De Angelis speaks of as a "fractal panopticon:" a networked palimpsest of forms of economic and normative surveillance. Wal-Mart, we might say, was forged in this fractal panopticon and is among its most prodigious articulations and engines.

Michel Foucault (1977, 175-228) made clear that the panopticon is both a key emblem and powerful architectural weapon of *disciplinary societies*, a societal form (originating already in the 17th century and coming to full force by the mid-20th) based around a hierarchy of interlocked sites of confinement, all bent on the disciplining of populations and individual bodies into social conformity in the interests of reigning power structures. This was a moment contemporaneous with the development of *formal subsumption*. But Gilles Deleuze (1992, 175-181), expanding on Foucault's work, has suggested that *societies of control* (a form with origins in disciplinary society but emerging near the end of the 20th century with the dissolution of the gold-standard, the rise of what we now call "globalization" and the arrival of digital technologies – in short, *real subsumption*) are more of a biological weapon to spread discipline throughout all of society, invest it in every social interaction, and organize it in networks of interlocking codes which determine access and restriction to material wealth, social privilege, and resources for subjectivation. Deleuze delineates the difference as between

a disciplinary factory, where workers are made to labour against their will by a relatively transparent array of rewards and punishments, and the “control” corporation of the late 20th century, which builds upon and perfects the disciplinary and surveillance technologies of the factory but where workers also are encouraged to identify themselves to the corporate entity and buy into a more subtle system of rewards and punishments. Even workers not duped by corporate sloganeering (like many at Wal-Mart who shrug off its morning rituals) remain embedded in a system of largely economic control and, with the stripping away of the welfare state, increased forced migration, and the decay of the public sphere, have little choice but to entangle themselves in Wal-Mart’s panoptic web. Control, Deleuze argues, becomes an ethereal substance both virtual and real, “a spirit or a gas” that seeps into every corner of society, recoding all social machines, desires and organisms. This new intangible tenor of power goes some way to explaining the relative absence of mass social movements seeking major change. But it also explains why Wal-Mart receives so much negative attention, standing as a rare instantiation of an otherwise nebulous and diffuse global power.

Like the disciplinary panopticon of the 18th century, we can think of Wal-Mart as not replacing all other forms or sites of power, but both representing and reproducing the logic of the Society of Control or “real subsumption” it emblemizes, a logic which, Foucault (1977, 216) writes, “infiltrates” all other social sites and institutions “sometimes undermining them, but serving as an intermediary between them, linking them together, extending them and above all making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements [...so as to ensure] an infinitesimal distribution of power relations.”

Crucially, the target of power in this formation is the subject or, more accurately, it seeks to critically intercede and subtly but powerfully inform the complex process of by which we come to know and perform ourselves as social beings. Following Althusser, Foucault’s project was one of examining the minute and everyday ways people come to rehearse themselves within the vectors of power and institutional force in which they find themselves. It has always been the objective of power to create certain kinds of subjects to itself, those who will carry out its will and perpetuate the established system, a process which took the form of the proliferation of complex institutions throughout European modernity. It is imperative to note, as numerous scholars do (Federici 2005; Mbembe 2004; Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Said 2003), that these new forms of power were forged in and for the purposes of colonialism and patriarchy as well as within the framework of a broader capitalist development. In any case, what is often lost in more material analyses is the need for systems of power and the social institutions which represent them to work hard at forming subjectivity.

Once this was achieved in the *panopticon of space* (the prison, the hospital, the school, or the exercise yard) in the interests of state sovereignty (for capitalist or fascist purposes) by isolating a subject within a controlled environment. For Foucault (1984), the “docile body” of the drilled soldier, ready to follow orders and fit like clockwork into his regiment, was emblematic of disciplinary power. Now, under the regime of the *panopticon of time*, power seeks to seep into and overcode more and more moments of social interaction, institution, and negotiation. Where, in a moment of *formal subsumption*, capitalist social discipline was organized through the institutional proliferation of panoptic *interiors*, spaces of control and the production of subjects, today’s *real subsumption* is the networked multiplication of panoptic *anteriors* based on the multiple ways temporality is brought under capital’s control.

It is in this sense, the sense that capitalism has come to attempt, through neoliberal policy, post-Fordist economics and new technologies, to directly dominate more and more aspects of everyday life that we seek to define Wal-Mart as a panopticon of time. It is a *dispositif* which brings together and mobilizes structures and institutions of power to instantiate the *real subsumption* of society to the dictates of accumulation, one that increasingly brings into its orbit more and more aspects of daily

life. It is in this sense that we want to suggest that under this panopticon something very disturbing is shared by all those whose lives are touched by Wal-Mart, from the sweatshop worker to the sailor or trucker to the retail worker to the consumer: a fundamental denudation of time, a haunting depotentiation of life. These figures, superimposed on one another, are the new “docile bodies” of a society of control – not docile in the sense of passive but in the sense that their time has been rendered docile. They share a world in which the possibilities of autonomy recede and are replaced instead by a world of panopticons. Under Wal-Mart’s watchful gaze, we are all merely killing time.

CONCLUSION

Depotentiation, at its (impossible) limit, means the absence of any interval in the ways power imbricates us; it names the hegemony of power relations over time. This final dream of sovereignty is of an immanence between sovereign and subject, one in which every latency between sovereign edict and subjective response is predicted and all exceptions (those few which remain) are preemptively managed. Wal-Mart’s musing about doing away completely with clerks (RFID tags and innovations in consumer credit could allow consumers to merely walk out of the store with products and have the costs deduced from their accounts) and creating Wal-Mart villages where the line between consumer time, work time and all other times of life become blurred, speak to its striving towards this sovereign ideal.

Both Adorno (1991) and the Situationists (Plant 1992) insisted that under the new spectre of consumer capitalism there was no such thing as “free time,” that those moments of “leisure” afforded to us are defined not by the presence of freedom but by the absence of work, always in the shadow of the next day’s travails. In the past 30 years, Adorno’s elitist pessimism has come under wide and persuasive criticism for failing to acknowledge individual’s actual agency let alone the fact that, even if in the broader picture does reveal that “free time” is a ruse, it is an important and crucial part of life where people make connections outside the dictates of capital accumulation.

But if Wal-Mart represents a panopticon of time, an institution whose reach into social life exceeds its archipelago of retail outlets, its sub-contracted sweatshops and its world-girdling trade-routes, it may be time to revisit analyses like those of Adorno and the Situationists to see what they can offer us both by way of analysis as well as by way of thinking about effective resistance. In a profound way, the development of Wal-Mart as a panopticon of time raises the stakes of struggle. For if Wal-Mart represents not merely a firm which seeks to dominate more of workers’ time or commodify consumers’ lives but is at the vanguard of a form of capitalism aimed at redefining and incarcerating everyone in a properly late-capitalist (non-)temporality, it is dubious if it can be reformed. Success might mean that Wal-Mart, as a firm, might fall. But another more perfected *dispositif* would rise in its place.

Early indications are that Wal-Mart’s hegemony may be weakening. It forced to pull out of both a German and South Korean expansion in 2007 because of local resistance and so-called “cultural differences” (Wal-Mart Annual Report 2007, 10). The business press has been suggesting that Wal-Mart has lost its strategic direction, reflected by the slight slowing in its rate of growth (*The bulldozer from Bentonville slows* 2007; Bartels 2009; Bianco 2007). Local resistance to Wal-Mart has been increasing and several unionization drives have been successful, especially in Canada. Yet as the financial crisis lays waste to the much-lauded American middle-class, the demand for discount retailers like Wal-Mart will no doubt increase. And as the crisis takes its toll on what few local, independent retailers and vestiges of public space remain, resistance to Wal-Mart may taper off.

While regulation may be able to hold back many of Wal-Mart's most pernicious aspects it will be very difficult to generate the sort of cultural and political mobilization necessary to build the political power to bring about the necessary policy changes in the face of Wal-Mart's siren song of low prices and its ability to perform a devastatingly effective cultural politics. It would take a political power borne not of a vague sense of social justice or fairness (or, worse, a middle-class distaste for Wal-Mart's aesthetics) but of a wholesale rejection of the order of (the end of) temporality Wal-Mart watches over and enforces. And such a movement's demands will never be built from or limited to modest reform.

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END NOTE

- i. We are grateful to Antonio Negri for supplying us with this term in response to a previous version of this paper presented at the *Metastacizing Capital: The Logic of Unbridled Growth* conference held at Brock University (St. Catherines, Ontario) in 2005 at which both he and Judith Ravel gave papers which greatly influenced our thinking. We would like to thank Imre Szeman, Susie O'Brien and David Clark for their useful feedback on various, substantially different versions of this project. We would also like to thank our families.
- ii. Compared, for instance, with massive popular protests and threats of property destruction and civil disobedience in countries like India (see Lakshma 2007).
- iii. GDP figures as reported by the International Monetary Fund *World Economic Outlook* report 2008, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/02/weodata/index.aspx>.
- iv. National employment statistics taken from the International Labour Organization website, based on 2007 data: <<http://labo.rsta.ilo.org/default.html>>.
- v. The exact degree and process of Wal-Mart's deleterious effect on local businesses is a matter of heated debate. The Institute on Local Self-Reliance has recently released an annotated bibliography on the matter (*Key studies* 2008). In general, however, it is not disputed that Wal-Mart's rise and spread across the Americas has been correlated to the decline of independent local businesses in almost every jurisdiction. The matter of establishing causation is, as always, extremely difficult in a complex economy.
- vi. In a 2006 report by the Ethical Trading Action Group of retailers and brands selling to the Canadian market (based on public reporting by those companies), Wal-Mart scored 40/100 largely based on its own internal (and non-transparent) auditing of labour and environmental standards, audits which are rarely verified or corroborated by neutral third-party organization (*Revealing clothing* 2006, 3). It ranked extremely low for working with independent NGOs and labour unions (6). Ranked against other clothing retailers and companies, Wal-Mart came out in the middle over all (8) but near the bottom when the economic scale of the companies was factored in (13). As of October 2008, Wal-Mart claims to do at least 16,000 audits of 9,000 suppliers with a dedicated staff of over 200 people (Gogoi 2008a). In spite of these efforts, the Maquila Solidarity Network, an independent NGO which tracks sweatshop abuses, regularly sends out action-alerts regarding abuses by suppliers to Wal-Mart. See <http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/en/wal-mart>. See also the European Clean Clothes Campaign reporting on Wal-Mart at <http://www.cleanclothes.org/companies/wal-mart.htm>. Wal-Mart's abuses were also detailed in a 2008 tour of Ohio and Michigan by current and former Wal-Mart sweatshop workers, organized by the International Labour Rights Forum (ILRF) and the NGO Sweatfree Communities (Killian 2008). The ILRF has also launched a lawsuit on behalf of factory workers from Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and Swaziland against Wal-Mart based on its allegedly intentional failure to force suppliers to live up to its own standards (see <http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/wal-mart-campaign>).
- vii. Statistics on Wal-Mart's part-time or hourly workforce are open to vast interpretation, see Karjanen (2006, 154-155)
- viii. Much is made in the company's 2007 and 2008 annual reports about their efforts to improve the environmental responsibility of their suppliers and diminish the ecological impact of their super-centres and logistics operations. Such efforts are largely "greenwashing," representing in sum a mere drop in the bucket of Wal-Mart's global ecological costs (*It's not easy being green* 2007). Wal-Mart has recently distanced itself from the adjective "green" (Carlton 2008; Everitt 2008).

- ix. Dozens of comprehensive and thoroughly-referenced websites and blogs now offer this information widely, notably the two union-sponsored sites WalMartWatch.com and WakeUpWalmart.com.
- x. Wal-Mart's thinly veiled contempt for other corporations is infamously emblemized in the austere, homogenized cell-like "negotiation rooms" at its backwoods Bentonville headquarters where all suppliers, large and small, must come to explain how they have cut their prices to the bone so as to ensure their product's continued presence in the pantheon of consumer products the firm carries (Useem 2003).
- xi. For a more glowing analysis which ties Wal-Mart's success to its internal culture and cultural politics, see Slater (2003) and Bergdahl (2004).
- xii. See Cote (2007, 44-45) on the French valences of the term *dispositif* and its difference from the Althusserian *apparatus*. See also Negri 2008.
- xiii. Autonomia is most famous today in the Anglophone world from the work and career of Antonio Negri who spent nearly a decade in jail and another in exile following the state repression of the movement and its intellectuals.
- xiv. To put this in perspective, Google CEO Eric Schmidt estimated in October of 2005 that the world's most popular and, arguably, capacious search engine had, at that time, only indexed a mere 170 terabytes of the internet. See <<http://www.google.com/press/podium/ana.html>>.
- xv. Notably, William Marquand (2007, 95-97) lauds Wal-Mart's "constructive paranoia."
- xvi. It is crucial to note, as Federici (2005) exhaustively documents, that Foucault's notion of "biopolitics" (as well as his general historicization of power relations) is deeply historically and politically problematic. For Foucault, the roots of biopolitics emerge in the 18th century and develop through the 19th through the intertwined evolution of, on the one hand, technologies for the broad control of populations (demography, social policy, eugenics, etc.) and, on the other, a new concern with the "anatomy-politics" of individual bodies (the development of the modern "docile" soldier-body, the taylorization of work). Federici points out that Foucault's theorization fundamentally forgets gender and colonialism. Had he taken these into account he would have noticed that the witch trials of the 15th-17th centuries represented an original moment of both a new politics of population as well as control over bodies - specifically women's bodies. Further, Federici shows that the witch trials represented a fundamental blow against women's power and the fabric of the commons, part and parcel of a process of enclosures and the "primitive accumulation" Marx charted as the birth of capitalism. In a similar way, the terror of biopolitics, the instrumentalization of life itself and the creation of productive bodies was long the *modus operandi* of colonialism and the form of plantation-oriented slavery which characterized the transatlantic slave economy (see also Mbembe 2004).
- xvii. Wal-Mart is also heavily invested in more traditional financial technologies of risk management, largely through its super-market division, an industry long known for its use of financial instruments such as futures and derivatives to hedge against fluctuating commodities prices. In 2007, Wal-Mart's derivative holdings were around \$6.5-billion, slightly more than the entire amount the firm paid in taxes (Wal-Mart annual report 2007, 48-50).
- xviii. Thanks to Judy Haiven for alerting us to this.
- xix. For a free-market libertarian view on the disturbing potential of RFID "spychips," see Albrecht and McIntyre (2006).
- xx. Many thanks to Alyson McCready for this insight.
- xxi. The shocking dearth of research and criticism of Wal-Mart's local and global politics of race was partly remedied by a January 2006 academic and community conference in Chicago: *Wal-Mart, Race and Gender: local controversies, global processes*.
- xxii. While, to a certain extent capitalism has always had at stake in control over the time of life (especially through its necessary, violent and patriarchal interventions into social reproduction

– see Federici 2004) this was largely achieved through the subordination of social life to the wage and other systems of (patriarchal, colonial, legal, discursive) exploitation and oppression. The phase of *real subsumption* represents a moment where new technologies of power have enabled capital to reach even deeper, more precisely, more universally and in some cases more subtly into everyday life. From biometrics to biotechnology, from digital surveillance to new forms of market hyper-segmentation, from the increasing power of digitized finance to the universal condition of debt, from the commodification of community to the lock-down of the communicative commons, there is something qualitatively new about this moment of capital's intervention into life itself.

- xxiii. Notably, the Walton heirs are among the most generous contributors to school privatization lobbies across the United States (Hopkins 2004).

Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition

The Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition was created in January 1998 following the designation of globalization and the human condition as a strategic area of research by the Senate of McMaster University. Subsequently, it was approved as an official research center by the University Planning Committee. The Institute brings together a group of approximately 30 scholars from both the social sciences and humanities. Its mandate includes the following responsibilities:

- a facilitator of research and interdisciplinary discussion with the view to building an intellectual community focused on globalization issues.
- a centre for dialogue between the university and the community on globalization issues
- a promoter and administrator of new graduate programming

In January 2002, the Institute also became the host for a Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada where a group of over 40 researchers from across Canada and abroad are examining the relationships between globalization and autonomy.

The WORKING PAPER SERIES...

circulates papers by members of the Institute as well as other faculty members and invited graduate students at McMaster University working on the theme of globalization. Scholars invited by the Institute to present lectures at McMaster will also be invited to contribute to the series.

Objectives:

- To foster dialogue and awareness of research among scholars at McMaster and elsewhere whose work focuses upon globalization, its impact on economic, social, political and cultural relations, and the response of individuals, groups and societies to these impacts. Given the complexity of the globalization phenomenon and the diverse reactions to it, it is helpful to focus upon these issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.
- To assist scholars at McMaster and elsewhere to clarify and refine their research on globalization in preparation for eventual publication.

To reach the IGHC:
1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, ON L8S 4M4, Canada
Phone: 905-525-9140 ext. 27556
Email: globalhc@mcmaster.ca
Web: globalization.mcmaster.ca



Wal-Mart: The Panopticon of Times

Max Haiven

haivenmf@mcmaster.ca

And

Scott Stoneman

stonemsr@mcmaster.ca

Department of English and Cultural Studies

c/o. McMaster University
1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, Ontario
L8S 4L9