The South Rises Yet Again: Wal-Mart and the Post-Civil Rights Consumer Empowerment Movement

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Abstract

Absent from critiques of Walmart is an analysis of the meanings that consumers with a long history of social and political disenfranchisement at the local level attach to this global retail giant. For black Southerners, Walmart carries meanings extending far beyond the price of goods and services, the convenience of one-stop shopping, and the opportunity for employment. Walmart's charitable contributions to and partnerships with African American organizations and institutions that raise the global profile of African American culture makes the global retailer a more attractive alternative than local business establishments with a history of limited support for African American community-based initiatives.

Introduction

Wal-Mart Incorporated is the nation's largest retailer. In the South, it has replaced the old country store, which once stood at the center of small towns and rural communities. Critics of the global retailer often valorize local businesses like the country store as the "mom-n-pop" anchor of *Main Street*. For example, in its response to the closure of Wal-Mart in Sumter County, Alabama in 2005, *The Huntsville Times* refers to Walmart's actions as "Unsavory." Wal-Mart "drove out its competitors, but felt no real responsibility to continue to serve its customers." Critics like the *Huntsville Times* demonize the big-box retailer, casting it as an evil empire destroying the local business establishment that had historically served the best interest of the community. However, absent from this critique of globalization run amok is an analysis of the meanings that consumers with a long history of social and political disenfranchisement at the local level attach to old country stores, and by extension, Walmart.

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The Problems with Country Stores and Local Businesses

"Localism had not been a handmaiden of justice in the segregated South," concludes historian Bethany Moreton in her book *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (2009, p. 266). Like Moreton, labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein (2009) examines the development of the retail industry in the United States. In *The Retail Revolution: How Walmart Created a Brave New World of Business*, Lichtenstein claims that "[i]n 1830, seven out of ten influential Bostonians were merchants; likewise a tiny New York trading elite owned most of that city's wealth in the mid 1850s" (p. 12). He asserts that "[t]he Civil War ended the reign of these merchants and their Southern confederates, heralding a Gilded Age America ruled by a new class of iron masters, meatpackers, and railroad barons" (p. 13).

Arguably, the power that southern confederates wielded did not dissipate with the fall of slavery. In 1865, upon regaining ownership of lands confiscated by the United States government, southern plantation owners reorganized their real estate holdings into smaller tracts and rented them to millions of black and white farmers. While the vast majority of landless farmers were white and worked small landholdings, landless African American farmers were relegated to landholdings that were similar in size, structure and organization to the plantations from which enslaved Africans were liberated. Geographer Charles Aiken (1998), author of *The Cotton Plantation South: Since the Civil War*, argues that the myth that the southern plantation apparatus vanished when enslaved Africans were liberated emerged in the 1880s. According to Aiken, both scholars and journalists interpreted agricultural census data showing a decrease in the size of farms and a corresponding increase in the number of farms as evidence of the rapid decline in plantation agriculture. Aiken proposes that this change more aptly describes the continuity between large-scale commercial farming before and after the abolition of slavery in the United States. That is, the increase in the number of small family farms signals the institutionalization of a plantation economy rather than the emergence

of a system of commercial farming dominated by independent yeoman farmers, as Lichtenstein suggests. These new farm operators did not own the land they cultivated (Reynolds 2002).

Country stores stood at the center of the southern plantation economy. Collectively, they were the financial artery of the rural South for much of the 20th century. "The growth of share and cash tenancy," states Aiken, "was facilitated by the widespread development of town and country merchants from whom renters could obtain their annual furnish" (1998 p. 34-35). Growing exponentially during Reconstruction, country stores sprang up in the center and on the periphery of southern plantation towns and were the sole source of credit for sharecroppers, regardless of race. Wendell Paris, a veteran civil rights organizer laments, "the plantation establishment used the country store all the way up until the 1970s." Plantation owners used the country store to develop what Paris called "a weak mind, strong back economy."

Country stores offered the household and farm supplies that poor rural consumers needed but could not afford without the credit country stores extended to them. In *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, historian James Cobbs (1992) argues that rural business establishments, which included country store merchants, transformed one of the riches agricultural regions of the United States into the home of the poorest of the nation's poor. The stock market crash of 1929 brought free market capitalism to its knees, as many southern towns faded into the sunset along with the country stores in them. In *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* historian Harold Woodman (1968) asserts that country store merchants who rented land and houses to tenants farming in retribution tended to survive the financial crisis. Those with little land or few dependable tenants to farm their land often perished. Country store merchants who survived the financial market crisis adapted to the decrease in demand for consumer credit by becoming more desperate in their business practices. This desperation turned the quaint little country store into a cold hard cog in the regional growth machine. Citing the 1934 study "Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation," sociologist Gunnar Myrdal argues that the goods that sharecroppers and tenant farmers purchased were "often 'marked up'" with annual interest rates "no less than 37 percent" (1944 p. 247).

Moreover, local business establishments across the South used the country store as a mechanism of social control to reinforce the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority. In his analysis of the records of

southern country stores, historian Thomas Clarke (p. 160) concludes that African Americans experienced "a marked degree of whiteness . . . . There was white meat, white gravy, white bread, and white shortening for the table, white supremacy at the polls and white gloves for the pall bearers at the grave side," states Clarke (p. 160). The 1955 brutal murder of 14-year old Emmett Till who allegedly flirted with a white woman inside a Mississippi country store, served as a warning to African Americans that the ideology of white supremacy and the social practices constitutive of white male privilege drove both the economy and the criminal justice system in the South. J. J. Breland, the Princeton graduate who headed the defense team representing the men tried and acquitted of Till's murder, asserts, "hell we've got to have our Milams and Bryants to fight our wars and keep our niggahs in line" (Whitfield 1988, p. 54-55). In sum, country stores were part of a larger system of disenfranchisement and oppression over which Walmart now represents a vast improvement.

Undeniably, the price of goods and services, the convenience of one-stop shopping, the opportunity for employment, and the power to manipulate the supply chain collectively contribute to Walmart's global domination of local retail markets. However, both the economic empowerment of the rural poor and the political empowerment of African Americans contributed to Walmart's rise to power. The economic empowerment of poor people coupled with the political empowerment of disenfranchised African Americans significantly weakened the control that southern country store merchants had on the rural financial market. African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers were consistently denied credit. Cobb writes "banks refused to loan money to blacks, referring them instead to a merchant" (1992 p. 154).

Earlier successes of the civil rights movement in urban centers like Birmingham and Montgomery inspired African American sharecroppers to put their plantation homes on the line in return for the vote. Sensing the determination of African Americans who refused to leave southern plantations, civil rights strategists helped advance the human rights of rural Black southerners by shifting resources from urban centers to rural counties like Sumter, Alabama, a political stronghold for the plantation establishment in Alabama. As legal scholar Brian Landsberg (2007) points out in *Free at Last to Vote,* Sumter County is an ordinary black belt county. It is ordinary in the sense that African Americans are the overwhelming majority there. According to the 1960 census, 81 percent the 21,000 residents of Sumter County were Black. It is also ordinary in the sense that county officials colluding with the local business establishment used the

threat of displacement to prevent black citizens from registering to vote.

In 1967, with the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement Colored People (NAACP), an organization that sociologist W. E. B. DuBois helped establish, black sharecroppers organized in Sumter County churches and then deployed nonviolent resistance towards one of the most egregious symbols of white supremacy in the county, the statue of the Confederate soldier standing on the front lawn of the county courthouse. Almonia Burrell, a Sumter resident who attended civil rights rallies in 1967, states emphatically in an interview, "Lord, they be treating us so bad, they treated us so bad. That's why I started 'ticipating." Approximately two years after *Bloody Sunday*--the day on which Selma police and Alabama state troopers used batons, attack dogs and tear gas to stop civil rights activists from marching from Selma to Montgomery--African American citizens like Burrell and others living on Barnes Rogers' plantation went to register to vote at the Sumter County courthouse in Livingston. They were sharecroppers farming in retribution, but they were also consumers who had requested from Rogers their rightful share of the USDA cotton price support subsidy and deferred acreage payment.

Like his father before and son after him, Rogers was a country store merchant and the mayor of Gainesville, a town 20 miles north of Livingston. Rogers gave the Burrell family and the families of approximately 40 activists 48 hours to vacate the Rogers family plantation. Evicted families had lived on the Sumter plantation since Reconstruction. While some families moved in with local relatives, others migrated to Chicago. The NAACP assisted others in their move to lands owned by Tuskegee University. Adding insult to injury, Rogers leased these plantation properties to Hammermill Paper Company. The company planted pine trees up to the doorsteps of those remaining on the plantation in their dilapidated houses. Hammermill left no land open for even a small home garden and tenants paid two sets of rent, one to Rogers for the house and the other to Hammermill for the land (Ashmore 2008).

The Walmart Alternative

In *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, Robert Weems (1998) posits that two basic assumptions inform African American consumer activism. First, consumption is a set of social processes by which individuals construct a sense of self and community; and second, political and economic empowerment are two sides of the same coin. When Walmart opened in Livingston, Alabama in 1980, local white-dominated business establishments and civic leaders

expected African Americans to support local commerce, although the local establishment gave only nominal support for African American community-based initiatives. Local civil rights activists challenged these expectations in Sumter and elsewhere by organizing boycotts of local businesses.

Consumer boycotts in Port Gibson, Mississippi (1966-1969) and Livingston, Alabama (1979) illustrate how the post-civil rights consumer empowerment movement facilitated the expansion of Walmart's operations in the South. African Americans in Port Gibson and Livingston had long been underserved in the areas of health, education and employment. Consumer boycotts commenced after local activists in both areas failed to gain support from county officials for community-based initiatives designed to assist an impoverished African American community. The Port Gibson consumer boycott began in 1966, and by 1969, twelve white merchants filed suit in Mississippi Chancery Court seeking injunctive relief and damages against the local chapter of the NAACP, the Mississippi Action for Progress and a number of local grassroots organizers.

In Livingston, African American county residents boycotted the public schools *(Minutes of the Sumter County Board of Education Meeting*, March 2, 1979). John Vodicka (1980), a freelance journalist covering the boycott writes, "whites openly refer to Sumter County public schools as 'the nigger schools' and send their children to private, segregated academies." By the end of the boycott, the five-member school board consisting of three whites and two blacks agreed to hire more African American administrators in the public school system, including a black principal at either of the two junior high schools in the county.

In 1981, however, Congressman Richard Shelby ordered a federal grand jury investigation of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. According to the 1982 Department of Agriculture report, "Black Farmers in America: The Pursuit of Independent Farming and the Role of Cooperatives," this investigation came at the request of white government officials claiming that the Federation used federal funds for political purposes. The federal grand jury reviewed nearly 40,000 cancelled checks and 22 boxes of records confiscated from the FSC Research and Training Center. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) also interrogated more than 200 people living in five different states. In his article "Political Mobilization in Sumter County," Michael Clemons maintains that after a two-year investigation, the Department of Justice under Ronald Reagan concluded, "the conduct of the persons under scrutiny does not warrant prosecution" (p. 666). The investigation, writes Clemons, "was a concerted effort by

local, state, and federal officials to discredit the organization and reduce its effectiveness" (p. 665).

Mounting a legal defense against the local establishment drained the coffers of the Federation (Bethell 1982; Clemons 1998) and the NAACP (Umoja 2002). In a call for support for the NAACP, *The Nation* states that "Unless the NAACP can raise several hundred thousand dollars immediately, it will be unable to post the extortionate bond that the legal system of Mississippi requires for an appeal of a judgment against the association of $1,250,699 arising out of a local business boycott by the black community of that small town, starting ten years ago." The Mississippi Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Port Gibson merchants. Attorneys for the plaintiffs argued that boycott organizers employed unlawful force, violence and threats against customers who would otherwise shop at the establishments that were boycotted. The United States Supreme Court subsequently overturned the Mississippi Supreme Court ruling in 1982, but the legal battle depleted the financial reserves of the NAACP (Umoja 2002).

African Americans and the Post Civil Rights Consumer Empowerment Movement

To counter claims that it consciously participates in labor practices that unfairly disadvantage women and people of color and to refurbish its image as a company that cares about working class and poor costumers, Walmart is currently engaged in a public relations campaign to reinforce an image of Walmart as a champion of civil rights. This elaborate marketing campaign involves collaborating with African American organizations and institutions working to make the stories of enslaved Africans and Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers accessible to a global audience.

The current impulse to popularize the legacy of enslaved Africans and their descendants and to show how this legacy informs contemporary social life is rooted in the work of prominent public intellectuals like Dr. Cornel West, Professor of Religion and African American Studies at Princeton University. In his 2001 debut CD entitled *Sketches of My Culture*, West takes the popular music genre hip-hop and uses it to give voice to the enslaved Africans who survived the *Middle Passage* and the black disenfranchised sharecroppers who traveled to the ghettos of South Side Chicago seeking employment opportunities in and around Black urban slums. West confesses in a statement published November 2001 in the *Washington Post*, "I don't fool myself and think I'm a hip-hopper or nothing, '[t]he black musical tradition is the most precious tradition, and

just to be a small part of it is a great honor.'" He states that his music is "a message of pride in oneself and black history to people who may not get into Harvard or pick up his books."

Walmart is an active participant in the NAACP *Economic Reciprocity Initiative (ERI)*. With the *1985 Fair Share Initiative* (FSI) and the subsequent *1996 Economic Reciprocity Initiative*, the targets of African American consumer activism shifted from locally owned businesses to national and multi-national corporations. With both consumer empowerment initiatives, the NAACP urged corporations to reinvest part of their revenue in organizations and institutions that empower African American consumers. Former President of the NAACP, Rupert Richardson explains, "In recruiting new companies . . . the NAACP stresses that the *Fair Share* agreements have a positive effect on the company's bottom line, in addition to helping African American communities." The *Economic Reciprocity Initiative* focuses more intently on corporate accountability and differs from earlier NAACP consumer empowerment initiatives in that it provides a tool for measuring "corporate America's financial relationship with the African American community."

A crowning achievement of the *Economic Reciprocity Initiative* is the *NAACP Consumer Choice Guide.* The NAACP encourages companies generating at least 5 billion annually to participate in an online survey. Data from the survey are summarized and presented in the *NAACP Consumer Choice Guide*. The guide includes information on 43 companies representing five industries: automotive, financial services, general merchandising, lodging and telecommunications. NAACP focuses on employment (workforce diversity, recruitment efforts, and employee benefits); marketing and communications expenditures; supplier diversity; community reinvestment and charitable giving. Each participating corporation is ranked for overall performance as well as for its performance in each area listed above (Table 1).

Table 1. 2008 NAACP Consumer Guide Grading Scale

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D	F+	F
4.00	3.99-3.75	3.74-3.50	3.49-3.00	2.99-2.75	2.74-2.50	2.49-2.00	1.99-1.75	1.74-1.50	1.49-1.00	.99-.75	.74-.50	.49-0

Table 2. 2008 NAACP Consumer Guide General Merchandising Report

	Walmart	***Macy's***	***Kohl's***	***Nordstrom***
African American Employment *Including workforce, board membership, employee recruitment, and employment benefits*	B- (2.85)	C+ (2.62)	C- (1.81)	C- (1.81)
Marketing Communications *Includes spending on African American media and targeting of African community*	C (2.25)	D (1.25)	B+ (3.5)	F (0.00)
Supplier Diversity *Includes diversity program and spending with African American vendors*	D+ (1.50)	C (2.25)	F+ (0.50)	D+ (1.50)
Community Reinvestment *Includes CRA support and investment and development*	B (3.25)	C+ (2.50)	D+ (1.50)	B (3.00)
Charitable Giving *Includes giving to African American organizations that target the African American community*	A (4.00)	A (4.00)	D- (0.75)	F (0.00)
Final Grade	C+ (2.50)	C (2.32)	D+ (1.60)	D (1.35)

Walmart received the highest overall score (2.50 = C+) for general merchandising retailers. It also has the highest ratings in *Employment*, *Community Reinvestment*, and *Charitable Giving* (Table 2). According to the *Consumer Choice Guide*, companies received an "F" (*JC Penny, Sears and Roebuck, Dillards* and *Target*) if they refused to respond to the 2008 NAACP's invitation to participate in the *ERI.*

In his address to the NAACP Annual Convention in 2008, Dennis Hayes, Interim President and CEO of the NAACP, explains that the primary objective of the NAACP is to ensure that disempowered people

receive the respect accorded any human being and that they be understood. Respect and understanding, he posits, leads to "change that is lasting." Hayes goes on to caution national and multinational corporations to respect African American consumers and to work harder to understand Black America. Haynes boasts that the NAACP has prompted Walmart to reconsider its policies regarding diversity, fair wage employment and health care insurance for employees. He states that " [w]hile they continue to do the things they must do to become more perfect and pleasing to all, we believe that sharing our views with them have resulted in changes." Walmart addressed these concerns, according to Hayes, by adopting a new health care plan, appointing two African Americans to the organization's board of directors and hiring an Executive Chief of Diversity, Ester Silver-Parker, a member of the NAACP Board of Trustees.

Walmart has also collaborated with Tavis Smiley, contributing $14 million to the Tavis Smiley Productions' *America I Am: The African American Imprint* museum exhibit. The *America I Am* exhibit opened in Philadelphia on January 15, 2009 and features a collection of cultural artifacts arranged to tell a story about America through the struggles and victories of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the United States. "We know the narrative of Ellis Island and the immigrants coming to New York," states Smiley, "But there's another story." Echoing Smiley's sentiments, Edward Rothstein writes in his January 2009 *New York Times* review of the exhibit, "the history of America and the history of America's blacks are inseparable. They are so intertwined as to become aspects of a single identity in which neither strand can be considered in isolation." The editorial board for the *American I Am exhibit* includes Cornel West and John Fleming, President of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASAALH), an organization established in 1915 to support the Black History Week, and subsequently, Black History Month.

Walmart also collaborates with Beyonce Knowles, whose image is on the cover of the June 2009 issue of *Forbes Magazine* along side the caption: *Inside Beyonce's Entertainment Empire*. According to *Forbes*, "[t]he 27-year-old songstress turned actress turned global brand found time to release a double album (I Am ... Sasha Fierce), star in two films (*Cadillac Records* and *Obsessed*), perform at both the Academy Awards and a presidential inaugural ball and embark on a 110-date international tour. She also added *Crystal Geyser* and *Nintendo . . . DSi* to a lengthy list of endorsement deals that already included *American Express . . .* , *L'Oreal* and *Samantha Thavasa* handbags." The Walmart-Beyonce partnership

brings *The Beyonce Experience,* a set of music, film and live performances featuring Beyonce Knowles, to millions of Walmart shoppers across the globe. Through *Walmart Soundcheck Productions*, Walmart shoppers can get *The Beyonce Experience* on the internet as well as on the televisions strategically positioned in the 8,000 + Walmart Stores globally. *The Beyonce Experience,* and consequently media products attached to it, promotes the narrative that immigrant entrepreneurs exacerbate the feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy that black men experience as a result of racism, and black women are capable of achieving the American dream independent of black men.

Knowles is also the executive producer for the film *Cadillac Records*, which is in many ways identical to the film-musical *Dreamgirls.* Jim Crow segregation, the civil rights movement and the economic empowerment of black women in the male-dominated entertainment industry are thematic backdrops for both films. Both films examine the relationship between the organization of black cultural production and black economic empowerment. In *Cadillac Records*, Beyonce plays the living legend Etta James, a light skinned black woman whose talents are unappreciated by the white mainstream. In *Dreamgirls,* Beyonce plays a marginally talented light-skinned black vocalist whose Eurocentric features make her more appealing to white audiences than her more gifted dark skinned childhood friend whose vocals capture the depth and breadth of the African American blues tradition.

The core argument advanced in both *Dreamgirls* and *Cadillac Records* is that white liberals who duped white youth into believing that white people created the Blues and Rock and Roll appropriated black culture. Both films argue that liberal racism operates to undermine the entrepreneurial drive of African Americans. Whereas in *Dreamgirls,* liberal racism is inherent in the repressive welfare state, in *Cadillac Records,* it is embedded in the logic of the immigrant entrepreneur who naively equates the African presence in the Americas with the Ellis Island immigrant experience. Moreover, *Dreamgirls* focuses on the period 1960s and early 1970s and black urban entrepreneurship in post-World War II America. *Cadillac Records* examines the organization of black cultural production during the 1950s and early 1960s and attempts to show how the 20th century southern plantation served as a catalyst for *Rock and Roll*.

Conclusion

Walmart's partnerships with and charitable contributions to African American organizations and institutions that raise the global profile of African American culture makes the global retailer a more attractive alternative than local business establishments with a history of limited support for African American community-based initiatives. Nelson Lichtenstein points out in *The Retail Revolution: How Walmart Created a Brave New World of Business*, that this support comes when Walmart is attempting to win the favor of African Americans in areas where labor unions have enjoyed strong support from black consumers. Like Moreton and Lichtenstein, Gereffi and Christian (2009) warn that changes in the way Walmart does business is a strategic effort to silence critics of the retailer. "Walmart may have started in a rural mountain town in Arkansas," posits Gereffi and Christian, "but its reach, influence, and continued growth have touched individuals and groups from workers in the Pearl River Delta of China, to farmers in Chile, truckers in Mexico, and consumers in Brazil" (p. 586).

Nonetheless, through partnerships with Walmart, African American organizations and institutions make visible the legacy of the country store and the consumer empowerment movement that includes Rosa Parks and Montgomery bus boycott. The relationship between African American consumers and the plantation South is central to the development of neoliberal democracy. Yet, it is a relationship that is largely unexamined in sociological discourse on globalization, neoliberalism and Walmart. Sociologists with a public research agenda and a focus on Walmart must examine new media, go global and seek to change Walmart from within, as Gereffi and Christian recommend. They must also be mindful to include the cultural narratives of African American consumer empowerment as they engage international sociologists in comparative research on workers in the Pearl River Delta, farmers in Chile, truckers in Mexico and consumers in Brazil.

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