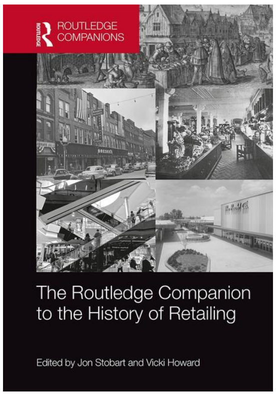

The Routledge Companion to the History of Retailing

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Big-box stores

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BIG-BOX STORES

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Introduction

A twenty-first century urbanite in the developed world can choose from an array of retail formats: slightly faded but still elegant downtown department stores; no-frills dollar stores where everything costs a dollar or less; family-owned and – operated specialty stores that have been in business since the middle of the last century; and discount mass merchandisers operating out of huge single-story rectangular windowless buildings.

Various formats have been associated with different levels of popularity and dominance. Today the big-box store is clearly the dominant retail format in the United States and has made significant inroads into other formats. Among the companies that operate big-box stores there is one that stands apart from the rest. That company, Walmart Stores, Inc., is the nation's biggest retailer (measured by sales, among publicly held companies, *Fortune 500*, 2017), the nation's biggest company (*Fortune 500*, 2017), the world's biggest retailer (*Fortune Global 500*: 2017) and the world's biggest company (*Fortune Global 500*, 2017).

As a result of its economic dominance and the fascination which that has for many people, Walmart has become the subject of a large, multifarious literature, making it difficult to disentangle Walmart and the general phenomenon of big-box stores. The perspective taken here is that Walmart, as the world's biggest company, deserves more attention than other retailers, but in the final analysis Walmart and the other big-box retailers are more alike than different.

I begin with some basic information about Walmart and the other leading big-box retailers. I then provide some historical context, emphasising the period from 1945 to the present and noting the possible effects of neoliberalism, globalisation, technological change, suburbanisation and sprawl. I describe the development of the big-box format, interspersed with the story of Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, and his rise to retail supremacy.

A note on terminology: "Format" is used inconsistently in the literature. Sometimes it is used somewhat narrowly to refer to the material aspects of a store such as its size, shape and placement. Other times it is used more broadly to refer to the entire integrated complex of characteristics – both material and immaterial. I will use it in the latter sense.

What has changed over time? The most salient change, visible to the naked eye, is 'the growth of large national retail chains . . . coupled with a dramatic decrease in the share of retail activity accounted for by small single location or "mom-and-pop" stores' (Jarmin et al., 2005).

Also, stores selling general merchandise (i.e., Walmart, Target, etc.) have gotten larger and the companies that operate these stores are now mostly chains. Industry concentration is now the rule.

Size has brought with it many problems. The actions of Walmart and to a lesser degree other big-box stores have sparked controversy, including local disputes over the siting of superstores, the treatment of the retail workforce and the desirability of Walmart as a contemporary paradigm for the organisation of work and consumption in America.

Retail formats and contexts

Opening his first discount store, Walmart Discount City, in the small town Rogers, Arkansas in 1962, Walton drew on previous innovations. Discounting is a strategy in which 'retail establishment[s] . . . operate on very low margins in order to offer merchandise at prices well below the recognized market level' (Ostrow and Smith 1988). Vance and Scott (1994) suggest that the roots of discounting reach back to the 1930s when supermarkets enthralled customers with their 'inexpensive locations, long hours of operation, and brash advertising' (24). They distinguish three retail formats coming out of the Great Depression: department stores, chain stores and variety stores. Big-box stores like Walmart can be seen as taking elements from each: they are large like department stores; they are standardised chains (or multiples); and they emphasise low prices like variety stores. Managed properly – get the goods cheaply, keep costs down, turnover inventory frequently – discounting could be very profitable. Sam Walton excelled at this strategy and others followed. As of 2018, almost all of the large general merchandise stores operate on the discounting model.

The spread of big-box stores is closely linked to demographic change after World War II. Millions of Americans moved from the central cities to the suburbs where they participated in an auto-centric way of life. This is a high-consumption lifestyle involving shopping centres, malls, and driving. The government's hand was quite visible: suburban home loans guaranteed by the FHA and VA, the financing of shopping centres aided by changes in tax laws (Hanchett 1996) and roadbuilding paid for by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. Big-box stores like Walmart are even more car-centric than the shopping malls of the postwar period. Generally not integrated into a shopping mall, they tend to stand-alone in a type of retail agglomeration known as a power centre, where every customer must drive from store to store.

What makes a store a big-box? From a physical point of view, we have in mind a building that is very large, single-story, windowless, monochromatic, rectangular, with acres of parking – a Walmart. The spread of this format is tied to sprawl – low density development. Local land ordinances often codified these settlement patterns and promoted sprawl. Sprawl consumes huge amounts of land, makes driving virtually mandatory, and is implicated in poor health. By the 1990s, sprawl had become a key issue for national level organisations such as the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the National Trust for Historical Preservation (Halebsky 2009). Big-boxes, according to their critics, are the epitome of sprawl because they are rarely sited downtown and consume large tracts of land themselves.

Big-box stores are often part of a global corporation. Currently perched atop the Fortune 500, Walmart has ranked first or second every year since 1999. The company operates 5,443 stores in the US and 6,363 abroad to generate total world sales of $485,873 million, about four times the corresponding amount for Costco, Walmart's closest competitor. Walmart divides its operations into three segments. Walmart US comprises the domestic operations that remain the heart of the Walmart empire and account for 64% of total sales in 2016 (*Walmart Annual Report 2017; Walmart 10K Report 2017).* Walmart has stores in every state. Walmart International operates stores in Africa (326), Argentina (107), Brazil (498), Canada (410), Central America (731), Chile (363), China (439), India (20), Japan (341), Mexico (2411) and the UK (631), which collectively generated 24% of total sales. Sam's Club is the third pillar of the Walmart empire. There are 660 Sam's Clubs, Walmart's version of a warehouse club, which produced 12% of total sales.

Walmart's unheralded emergence as a discounter in 1962 in a small town in the northwestern corner of Arkansas, followed by its rise to the heights of corporate power and influence may appear to be the result of Sam Walton's keen business sense and knack for discount retailing. Walton's success and that of other big-box retailers, however, is best understood when placed in a larger neoliberal context. During the 1970s, a small but determined group of intellectuals, including Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, began applying neoliberalism to the policy questions of the day. President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher were enthusiastic about neoliberalism, which they understood as a necessary reaction against the evils of big government, excessive taxation and unjustified regulations.

The rhetoric of Walmart fits comfortably with the spread of neoliberalism, especially with respect to organised labour. The Walmart culture, as analysed by Copeland and Labuski, is antithetical to unions. Its extreme hostility towards unions continues to be an obstacle to organising retail employees (Lichtenstein 2010; Ortega 2000; Warren, 2011). The proliferation of right-to-work states, whose stronghold is the South where Walmart originated, is evidence of this antagonism. In every state all the workers at a unionised workplace are entitled to the benefits specified in the union contract, regardless of whether they actually join the union or not. In non right-to-work states those who do not join the union must pay an amount equal to union dues. What this means in practice is that unions in right-to-work states are weakened financially, sometimes fatally, because they have a legal obligation to support all employees while receiving dues or an equivalent amount from only from a minority of workers. This sets up a free rider situation in which many workers covered by union contracts opt not to join the union. Thus, unions in right-to-work states are weakened financially. Most of the southern states have become right-to-work states.

Walmart's rise was in part the result of the United States' larger transformation from an industrial to a service economy. When Walton began discount operations in the 1960s, the US still manufactured an enormous amount and variety of goods. As the number of Walmart stores increased the company's purchasing power increased, as evidenced by Walmart's demand that manufacturers sell to Walmart at lower and lower prices. Moreover, as the number of Walmart stores increased the potential advantage of selling to the company increased as well. Realising that it had the upper hand, Walmart pushed its suppliers to cut their prices. Each year Walmart demanded more price cutting, until it became apparent that the only way an American company could meet Walmart's demand was to move its factory to someplace with cheaper labour. This might mean moving to a low-wage right-to-work state. If that was not sufficient the company might have to move its manufacturing to a maquiladora in Mexico. And if that failed the remaining alternative was to move production to China, which had a booming manufacturing sector built on exactly this sort of situation.

Logistics, information technology and Walmart

The rise of the big-box stores coincides with the development of information technology. In some instances, an older invention provided the necessary groundwork for the far-reaching changes that eventually occurred. Self-service, which began in 1916 at a Piggly Wiggly food store in Tennessee, was a prerequisite for discounting. The lowly shopping cart ("trolley") is another example. However, the universal product code (UPC) was a key contemporary technological development which benefited Walmart. Originally developed by (and for) supermarkets, "the bar code" was first used in an actual commercial transaction in 1974. Once it had been established as a viable technology, Walmart and the other large retailers forced it on all their larger suppliers. It sped up checkout and improved inventory management (Leibowitz 1999). The UPC also enabled retailers to collect detailed point-of-sales (POS) information almost instantly, thereby revealing exactly what merchandise was selling – and what was not.

One unanticipated and far-reaching result of these changes was a radical restructuring of the relationship between retailers and manufacturers. As retailers acquired enormous amounts of information about their customers and their shopping habits, they came to realise that now they knew more about their customers than the manufacturers. Retailing had been viewed as a necessary but prosaic intermediary between manufacturers and their customers. It had always been assumed that the manufacturers knew what their customers wanted and what they would pay for it. But when the retailers figured out how to use the data they had collected, they began to call the shots: the outcome was an historic reversal of fortune.

Manufacturers and retailers normally maintained an arms-length relationship based on separate interests and proprietary data. Walton, wanting to increase turnover, proposed to give certain large manufacturers access to some of Walmart's data in exchange for more timely replenishment of merchandise. This was accomplished through EDI (electronic data interchange), a system developed for this purpose. When a store ran out of an item a production order would be initiated automatically, enabling the manufacturer to take the steps necessary to get the product back on the shelf as soon as possible with as little paperwork and as little human intervention as possible. EDI is now used across the industry. It was Walton's genius to see that both manufacturers and retailers could benefit from this arrangement.

Another innovation that increased efficiency is the reconfigured warehouse, known now as a distribution centre. In traditional distribution most new merchandise spent some time warehoused before it reaches its final destination. To have salable goods just sitting in a warehouse, however, is costly for the owner of those goods. A Walmart distribution centre, by contrast, is not intended to be a place where goods are simply warehoused. Rather, it is meant to keep goods moving on their way to the store or stores that will be their final destination. As described by Abernathy *et al.* (1999: 63), a Walmart distribution centre 'consists of bays for inbound and outbound trucks, an automated, fast-moving conveyer network' and a sophisticated information system to control movement from receiving to shipping docks. The purpose of this arrangement, known as cross-docking, is to minimise or eliminate time spent in warehouses.

Containerisation – the practice of using identically shaped, stackable, interchangeable containers to transport merchandise to and from seaports, train depots, and truck terminals – is another advance that aided the big-box stores. The "box" is now the standard method for transporting large amounts of goods throughout the world (Levinson 2016). The increased use of the box has led to the enlargement of the container ships that move the boxes across the waterways of the world (Cudahy 2006).

These advances are associated with store size and company size in various ways, often involving economies of scale and scope. As a general proposition, expensive technology and big-box retailers have a mutually beneficial relationship: big-box retailers are better able to afford sophisticated software and hardware; in turn, this software and hardware allow the big-box companies to order, stock, and keep track of a greater number of SKU (stock-keeping units), which allows big-box stores to appeal to more people. A Walmart supercenter, once established, can sell many different products and services. This is an example of an economy of scope. A large retailer can spread the cost of sophisticated-but-expensive data processing equipment over a large number of transactions at many stores. This is an example of an economy of scale. The most important corollary of increasing size is that large of retailers – those large enough to buy a significant percentage of a supplier's output – can demand to pay for manufactured merchandise at a per unit price below what small retailers pay.

Globalisation of big-box stores

While Walmart may appear to be a singular behemoth, it has counterparts in Europe, notably Carrefour in France and Tesco in the UK. Outside the United States, large boxy stores that sell food and non-food items are known as hypermarkets (this term is used rather loosely). According to the standard account, the first true hypermarket was built in 1963 at Sainte-Genevieve-des-Bois, near Paris, by Marcel Fourneier, Jacques Defforey, and Deni Defforey, who were affiliated with Carrefour. There is evidence, however, that the first European hypermarket was actually built in 1961 in Bruges by the group GB-Inno-BM (see *Brussels Studies*.)

The big-box phenomenon is no longer peculiar to the United States and can be found around the world now. What Walmart and the other boxes – big, medium and small – have in common is a commitment to the rationalisation that stalks the history of retailing. It is evident in the various advances in information technology, in the transformation of distribution from supplier- to retailer-driven, and in the careful attention given to choice of retail formats. The modus operandi associated with big-box stores has become the most common form of contemporary retailing. In spite of the impressive size of stores, the rationalisation of retailing is not complete, and that incompleteness is most easily seen if we take a global view of big-box stores.

Viewed at the global level it is easy to see that whether a store is a big-box store is ultimately secondary to whether it pursues a strategy that is highly rationalised. Being highly rationalised is usually taken to result in a modern way of doing business and a modern way of life. According to the rhetoric, rationalised retailing is modern retailing and is taken to be superior. The traditional is ultimately displaced by the modern.

HP & S argue that the big retailers have become so powerful that they "make the market" for many of the commodities that constitute contemporary society. HP & S don't present a normative argument but simply assume that the highly rationalised big-box format will ultimately dominate all consumer goods markets, and that is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Put differently, the future will be dominated by "modern consumer markets" (101). A very brief look at a few aspects of globalisation highlights the extent to which rationalisation exerts its force.

There are various reasons for venturing abroad. One reason is the saturation of the home market. This applies especially to Walmart, which has saturated many areas in the South and Midwest. Zook and Graham (2006: 20) report that '96 percent of the US population are within 20 miles' of a Walmart. Another reason is the increased difficulty in obtaining the necessary approvals from planning authorities to build large stores outside of Main Streets and similar local venues.

During the 1960s, the French authorities encouraged suburban living, which included big-box stores. By 1980, there were 541 hypermarts in France. Threatened by this, small shopkeepers and their supporters led three "direct action campaigns" (Cliquet 2000: 186) against the big chains. The number of small independent retailers continued to shrink. Planning restrictions on size and location of retail development are more formidable in Europe than in the US.

To increase sales Walmart must now open stores in cities, in other countries, or both. Walmart has been doing this since 1991 when it began a joint venture with a Mexican company to operate a wholesale club in Mexico City (Walmart 1992). There are differences within Europe. In Germany, for example, there is a culture of searching for the lowest price, while in England convenience and the personal touch of the smaller independent stores are still highly valued. Fernie *et al*. observe that 'Germany has a strong discounter culture, reflected in its large number of hypermarkets and discounters' (Fernie *et al*. 2015: 230–231.)

Walton expanded his empire by carefully building new stores along the front lines of the existing stores, instead of setting up new stores in locations far removed from current operations. He first expanded into areas and markets that were closer geographically and culturally. The big European-based retailors have used this strategy too. Thus, 'the UK favor Ireland. . . ; France target Spain; Germany target Austria; Japan target Hong Kong and Singapore; Australia target New Zealand; and the USA target Canada and Mexico' (Fernie *et al*. 2015: 34). Walmart has pushed thus strategy about as far as it will go, such that the company now has 410 stores in Canada and 2,411 in Mexico (*Walmart 2017 Annual Report*: 63).

This rather conservative strategy is perhaps not surprising given the number of failures (politely called "disinvestment") experienced by the world's leading retailers. Walmart, for example, gave up and pulled out of Germany. It also tried and failed in Argentina, Brazil, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Japan. [Wang (2011)] examines the growth of various retail formats in China over the last twenty years.

Reactions and controversies

Ostensibly nothing more than a place to purchase toothpaste, milk, and other banal commodities, big-box stores have become integral to life in the modern world, while arousing intense debate on a wide range of issues. What is perhaps most striking are the stark differences between the various parties in these debates, many of whom evince little interest in understanding the concerns and arguments of the other side.

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing today, big-box retailers have encountered organised resistance by local citizens to the siting of its stores. Walmart has been the most frequent target of ire, but not the only one. There are many reasons behind these "site fights". One is the simple fact that the big-boxes have gotten bigger, in part because they have added full-sized supermarkets to their full-sized discount merchandise stores. The general trend, with the US in the lead, is for more and more of the landscape to become covered by big-box stores and their even bigger parking lots.

As Sam Walton opened stores farther and farther away from his patch of "Walmart Country" (Moreton 2009: 8) in northwest Arkansas, he encountered local residents who were knowledgeable about Walmart's record in regard to unions and labour, to alleged gender bias, to the problems faced by American manufacturers, to Walmart's effect on downtown and local merchants, and did not want a store in their town or city. Also, as the big-boxes have exhausted small town and suburban locations, they have started to venture into the large cities where they have not received the same welcome as they did in some small towns.

When Sam Walton first encountered resistance he seems not to have taken it too seriously and famously said that

> today we have almost adopted the position that if some community, for whatever reason, doesn't want us in there, we aren't interested in going in and creating a fuss. I encourage us to walk away from this kind of trouble because there are just too many other good towns out there who do want us.
>
> (Walton 1992: 182).

The people of the Ozarks had been active in the anti-chain store movement of the 1920s and early 1930s. Walton, however, was able to neutralise any potential populist threat to his stores by reconfiguring the once-radical culture of the Ozarks into something Moreton (2009) calls "corporate populism" (p. 50).

The announcement that Walmart is planning to come to town often sets off a spirited debate. Walmart and its representatives claim that the new store is desired by the overwhelming majority of local residents who will benefit from low prices, jobs and increased tax revenue. The protestors respond by arguing that two of these three benefits are illusory. Regarding jobs, they argue that the situation is essentially a zero-sum game in which an increase in the number of jobs at a new Walmart will eventually be offset by a loss of jobs elsewhere (i.e., at those stores which will eventually be forced to close). And the same for tax revenue: the increase in income or sales tax from a superstore will be offset by the taxes not paid by other stores, some of whom will eventually go out of business. The protestors also note that the profits generated by the store will be sent back to Bentonville and thus not spent or invested locally. Besides raising doubts about jobs and tax revenue, the opponents often elaborate a series of problems associated with superstore.

A store occupying 180,000 sq. ft. is simply out of scale with everything else in a small town (except other similar stores) (Evans-Cowley 2006). A new Walmart in a typical small town instantly becomes the biggest building in town and is radically incongruent with other local buildings. While huge stores provide retailers with economies of scale, they do not satisfy basic human needs for intimacy and familiarity.

Unless required to meet some specified standard of architectural design, a new superstore will be "architecturally uneventful", in the words of architect John Rohe. Early big-boxes tended to be plain, windowless and monochromatic, with "unimproved" interiors. Recently built stores tend towards a cheap version of postmodernism. Writing in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Dunham-Jones notes that whereas 'downtown department stores were constructed of high quality materials and built to last, Wal-Mart's treatment of its stores and employees as . . . disposable assets . . . exemplifies corporate strategies of flexible accumulation' (Dunham-Jones 1997).

Big-box stores tend to be built in low density zones several miles from downtown ("Main Street" or "High Street"), which means they contribute to the sprawl that has become a nationwide concern. Walmart and the other big-box retailers place their stores where they do because of cost and efficiency: land outside of town is cheaper and single-story buildings can more efficiently accommodate the frequent truck deliveries that are an essential part of the big-box format.

Big-box stores inevitably draw some portion of shoppers away from downtown. This matters because a thriving downtown functions as the civic, social, political and commercial enter of a town. If too many merchants desert downtown, the ramifications can be severe: up to and including the eventual collapse of downtown. One can see evidence of this all over the US.

The local merchants are invested – literally and figuratively – in the local community and have a long-term commitment to it. They tend to be active in their communities to a greater extent than the average resident. A new Supercenter may pose an existential threat to the independent merchants in a small town (Jarmin *et al*. 2005; Peterson and McGee 2000; Stone 1995; Stone *et al*. 2002).

In Europe, by contrast, local planning authorities have been more concerned with the adverse effects of commercial development outside downtown. The shortage of land and its concomitant regulation has been an impetus for large European retailers such as Carrefour to expand outside their national borders.

The local supporters of a proposed new big-box often speak about "modernization". They contrast the small, local independent merchants, who are portrayed as plodding, insular, and old, with the imagined big new store in its big new building. To the big-box supporters the newness and the size are *ipso facto* modern. The meaning of being "modern" is not explained; it is assumed to be superior to whatever is not modern.

Along with the hundreds of siting controversies that have occurred across the country, what has landed big-box stores on the front pages of the nation's news media is their treatment of workers. In Walmart's early days Sam Walton promoted a pseudo-egalitarian approach in which workers were referred to as "associates". As the company grew the personal touch began to disappear and the conflictual nature of employment in the retail industry came to the fore (Adams 2006; Seligman 2006; Lichtenstein 2010; Ortega 2000; Rosen 2006; Bair and Bernstein 2006; Copeland and Labuski (2013). Labour issues at big-box stores – with Walmart as the most visible offender – include employees forced to work off the clock, workers locked in stores during overnight shifts, lack of affordable health insurance and inadequate wages (Copeland and Labuski 2013: 43).

As part of their strategy to minimise costs most of the American big-box stores have taken an extremely hostile stance towards unions. When the butchers at a Walmart in Texas voted to be represented by a union the company quickly discontinued all butchering at all stores. When workers at a Walmart in Canada voted to be represented by a union Walmart promptly closed the entire store. Today there are no unionised retail workers in any Walmart stores in the United States or Canada.

Abstracting from the particularities of each case, what this illustrates, according to labour historian Nelson Lichtenstein, is Walmart's retrograde attitude towards workers. This social policy was put forth in such key pieces of legislation as the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, and is ultimately a reflection of the common interests of the American people as expressed through their elected representatives.

What Lichtenstein finds troubling is that Walmart has become

> the template business setting the standards for a new stage in the history of world capitalism. In each epoch a huge, successful, rapidly emulated enterprise embodies a new and innovative set of new and innovative set of technological advances, organisational structures, and social relationships. It becomes the template economic institution of its time.
>
> *(Lichtenstein, 2006: 4)*

US Steel, A&P, General Motors (GM) and IBM were earlier template corporations (p. 5). GM, arguably the most influential company of the twentieth century, differs from Walmart in a fundamental way: GM strove to maintain profitability and provide a rising income for its employees. Walmart, by contrast,

> takes the most potent technological and logistic innovations of the twenty-first century and puts them at the service of an organisation whose competitive success depends upon the destruction of all that remains of New Deal-style social regulation and replaces it . . . with a global system that relentlessly squeezes labor costs.
>
> *(2006, p 4). (See Coclanis [2007] for a pro-labor alternative to Lichtenstein.)*

In 2001, the McKinsey Global Institute, a consulting firm, issued a report about the relationship between low prices, low costs and productivity growth. The report noted the impressive increase in productivity that occurred in the American economy between 1995 and 2000 and found that a substantial portion of this growth occurred in retailing and, furthermore, that 'Wal-Mart's success forced competitors to improve their operations' (p. 2). This report has led to further study of the economic effect of big-box stores.

Another report, released in 2005 by Global Insight, a consulting firm, claimed that Walmart had saved the typical American household $2,329 (or $895 per person) between 1985 and 2004 (Global Insight 2005: 1). Thus, Walmart's ability to squeeze inefficiency out of every part of the supply chain (the "Walmart effect") actually made the country as a whole more efficient. These views are presented very favourably by Vedder and Cox, who see the Walmart phenomenon as essentially another instance of Schumpeter's "creative destruction" which will eventually make everybody better off. From this perspective outsourcing is good for consumers in the developed world because of low prices and good for the developing countries because they can use their relative advantage (low wages) to accumulate capital which can then be employed in capital goods. What Americans may see as severe exploitation of production workers in China is seen by Vedder and Cox as a necessary phase of the economic development of China. More generally low costs, whether through new technology or low wages, translates into higher productivity, which benefits all Americans, even those who dislike Walmart.

If big-box stores put small independent merchants out of business this is taken to reflect either the inevitable replacement of low-productivity firms by high-productivity firms or simply consumer choice, in the sense that if consumers shop at Walmart then, *ipso facto*, a retail sector dominated by Walmart is what they need.

The critics respond by arguing that whilst low prices on consumer items do offset low wages somewhat, they do little to reduce the costs of housing, health care, insurance, education and transportation, which constitute a larger proportion of expenses for most people than do the sundries at Walmart. The earlier studies generally concluded that Walmart and other stores have had an overall negative impact on small towns and on the lives of Walmart employees. A second round of studies has come up with results that are more mixed in regard to the economic impact of superstores. In regard to all matters moral, aesthetic, political and cultural, Vedder and Cox have nothing to say.

Recapitulation

Big-box stores, virtually unknown before the 1960s, have become the leading retail format in the US. Their lineage is uncertain but they appear to have evolved out some combination of chain stores, variety stores and existing supermarkets. While some locate their ancestors in the early supermarkets, others find theirs in the large department stores that remain a fixture of downtown retailing long after their glory days.

The emergence and growth of big-box stores reflect a number of favourable conditions, including a neoliberal political environment in which labour, broadly speaking, is disempowered. New technology, especially in communications, computing and logistics, has enabled large retailers to gain better control of their inventory, containerisation and the mega-ships designed to carry containers, highly automated distribution centres, and logistics in general.

Global big-box stores are prevalent in North America (US, Canada and Mexico), followed by Western Europe and then Eastern Europe, Asia and the developing countries.

Big-box stores pose various threats to the small towns and suburbs where most have been built. In respect of their format, the critics charge them with being ugly, too homogeneous and clashing with local architectural styles. Because they are usually built in or near small towns but not actually downtown they contribute to sprawl, which entails excessive driving, leading to poor health and increased risk of isolation.

After more than twenty years of contention, big-box stores continue to inspire awe and disgust. The former is primarily based on appreciation for the large number of different types of products available and their low prices.

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