

CONSUMER UN-FRIENDLY

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I was at Wal-Mart today when something became very clear to me: No single location encompasses in a microcosm our consumption-based society in such a distinguished manner as Wal-Mart. Not only is it the consumer center of many a neighborhood and small town, but Wal-Mart has a social dynamic of its own, which becomes apparent if you happen to pay close enough attention. I don't know if this really counts as an epiphany, but if you're interested in what society is evolving into, you don't need to venture much further than your neighborhood Wal-Mart.

Walk into a Wal-Mart late at night, and you will find perhaps a few consumers, but plenty of stockers and warehouse workers, moving pallets of packages around and setting the aisles with products. Stand amidst this activity for a moment, and try to envision a Wal-Mart store as a living, breathing entity. Wal-Mart employs thousands of people, generates billions in revenue, and in some cases operates with such enormous clout as to influence government policy and the dynamics international commerce. In 10,000 years, if human civilization continues to exist, there is a strong possibility that Wal-Mart will continue exist as well, in some shape or form. Wal-Mart is definite and tangible and real in a way that you and I are not.

On a more personal scale, you can find both regular and organic fruits and vegetables at Wal-Mart. You can indulge in your choice of light, low-fat or fat-free carcinogenic lard. You can choose whether to purchase the small, regular or family size potato chips, or splurge and get the variety pack. You can find the name-brand Eggo waffles right next to the generic Great Value waffles, and even the packages look similar. Just like the people that work and shop at Wal-Mart, the products come in all varieties, packages, shapes and sizes, but a lot of them are basically the same.

When an individual chooses a product for consumption, it may often seem like a decision made on a whim, but there is actually a complex value-judgment process at work. The constant bombardment of advertisement, overt and filtered through the media, create a sense of need and familiarity. After watching Leggo My Eggo commercials on every morning of every day for 16 years, I now perceive Eggo waffles as the "normal and popular" choice for a standard breakfast staple and select Eggo on a regular basis, even though Great Value waffles, which are located right next to the Eggo waffles in the freezer, are comprised of basically the same ingredients and are offered at a lower price. Great Value doesn't advertise, so I'm not familiar with it and I assume nobody else is, either. The above example also translates well with name-brand and generic fruit juices,

candies, potato chips and especially cereal, so don't feel limited to just waffles.

These types of modality and value judgments constantly influence our everyday decisions. Of course, I have one of those weird super self-conscious personalities that is tweaked to be keenly aware of every detail that's going on around me, or maybe I just noticed because she was directly in front of me, but as I was walking toward the front of the store with my Eggos (and a loaf of potato bread, if you're keeping score), another shopper, who happened to be female, happened to (not) subtly visually undress me as she passed by. It wasn't the full-on, Vince Vaughn, *Wedding Crashers* eye-fuck, but it was close.

Anyway, what I really noticed was that after her corneas caressed by person from head to toe, her glare lingered, for just an additional moment, on my shoes. Then it struck me, she was making one of those perceptual value judgments. Does this mean that my Nikes define me as a person, that somehow the swoosh on the side indicates my refined tastes, discriminating personality and financial success? Definitely not, because anyone can walk into a store and buy a pair of Nikes. But if there weren't such mechanisms in the human brain, advertising wouldn't be such a driving factor in the capitalist marketplace.

And to be honest, aren't we a shoe-obsessed society? As a child, nothing determines social status and value more concretely than outward appearance, starting from the bottom up. Anyone who has ever played pickup basketball on the playgrounds can tell you that a player's skill level can easily be guessed by examining what kind of shoes he's wearing: Scrubs wear generic sneakers, and real players wear basketball-specific name brand shoes with some kind of gimmicky spring or transparent air pocket or flubber. This is a universally-accepted fact.

So people make judgments about you based on how you look and what you wear. This is nothing new, and of course, people have caught on. A variety of counterculture styles have developed in specific response to the mass-marketed cookie-cutter style palettes circulated by clothing manufacturers. The irony is that all the counterculture styles eventually become assimilated into the mainstream, allowing people to label you even more specifically, as goth, emo, metrosexual, or gay. So not only can I purchase my value-defining products at Wal-Mart, I can simultaneously receive judgment from others regarding my value, as determined by the products I buy. Thanks, Wal-Mart!

Such is the social dynamic with every publicly peacocked feather in our caps, from our jobs to our cars to our clothes to our kids and the clothes we put on our kids. And with the new generation of eco-friendly products, there's a new dimension of pretentiousness added to the madness, for not only does my solar-powered hybrid Mercedes demonstrate

my superfluous disposable income, I'm also doing my part to cut fossil fuel consumption, reduce emissions, and save arctic wildlife; I'm the better-adjusted, more successful, socially-conscious and evolved human being.

And just to add another dimension of irony, isn't Wal-Mart really at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to consuming mass quantities? Members-only warehouses might be considered more exclusive, not to mention luxury department stores like Barney's, where few can really afford to shop. Others might eschew luxury items for more "down to earth" groceries, and choose a store like Trader Joe's out of some diluted notion of social conservation. But the joke is on you, because Joe the organic pot farmer doesn't exist. [Trader Joe's](#) is owned by [Theo Albrecht](#), a German billionaire. So next time you think it's worth spending your \$12 for the [Sundried Tomato and Olive Bruschetta](#) in the glass jar because the money is going to help some hippie organic farmers in a remote village in Oregon, think again. Corporations own everything. Theo's grandchildren thank you.

Perhaps the more important question is, does all of this really mean anything? And I want to warn you, the answer might very well be no, so by all means, don't feel burdened to continue reading any further. But if you really want to think about the point of buying organically-grown fruit instead of regular fruit, or buying eggs from free-range hens instead of caged hens, and you think there's really a metaphoric lesson in doing so, that somehow one group of people might be more evolved than the rest of us because they respect the hens' right to be free, then I might remind you that the eggs you're eating could have grown to be chickens, too.