

Objectivity and Action: Wal-Mart and the Legacy of Marx and Nietzsche

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ABSTRACT

Using their manifestations in two contemporary philosophers, Richard Rorty and Terry Eagleton, I examine the philosophies of Nietzsche and Marx with respect to objectivity and achieving desired social transformation. Focusing specifically on the Wal-Mart Corporation's popularity among the U.S. poor, despite their highly questionable business tactics and benefits to society, I examine both the validity and use-value of claiming objective superiority over Wal-Mart and other enemies of an egalitarian society. I argue that, at this time, vehemence concerning factual and moral superiority must give way, at least temporarily, to an awareness of the unavoidable power of brand marketing. Subsequently, I propose that the Left learn from the image-manufacturing of Wal-Mart and demonstrate more shrewdness in marketing its causes to the general public.

The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. – Marx¹

How is it that despite devoting considerable energy to building a rock-solid case in favor of radically reordering society along egalitarian lines, leftists in the U.S are so completely unable to provoke discontent directed at the probable sources of injustice? Why instead have those who deny even the existence of systematic inequality and instead scapegoat already oppressed individuals (here and abroad) for the undeniable plight of so many continue to amass followers? What are those on the left to make of this incongruity between what appears to be their objective factual and moral superiority and their utter incompetence in transforming this into a political advantage? Using this country's widespread infatuation with Wal-Mart as an example, I will analyze how this question is addressed in the debate between two dedicated members of the intellectual Left, Terry Eagleton and Richard Rorty. Drawing on the legacies of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche respectively, Eagleton and Rorty draw decidedly different conclusions about the nature of knowledge and its role in facilitating social transformation. Though my project is anything but comprehensive or conclusive, my goal is to glean from their arguments a starting point for further investigation into how these two contemporary thinkers, and the two distinct intellectual traditions that they draw upon, can be applied today to the task of gaining the mass support needed to create a more equitable and just society.

The Wal-Mart Corporation currently sits atop the Fortune 500, a position warranted by its raking in of 288 billion dollars during the 2004 fiscal year (AP). This is the fourth consecutive year that Wal-Mart has held this position, and their financial strength continues to trend upward. While Wal-Mart's success is unquestionable, their business tactics and overall effect upon society certainly is not. Despite their enormous profits, incredible job creation, and cut-rate prices on consumer goods, there are many who claim that these supposed measures of success both ignore Wal-Mart's ruthless treatment of their employees and fail to take into account data that paints a much broader and less rosy picture of Wal-Mart's impact on not only its employees and customers but society as a whole. One example of these highly critical depictions of Wal-Mart, appearing in the December 16, 2004 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, was Simon Head's article entitled "Inside the Leviathan". In the article, Head levels a wide-range of charges against the corporate giant, including the accusations that Wal-Mart pays many of its employees a salary that keeps them near or even below the poverty line, frequently wages highly illegal psychological war against its staff to prevent higher standards from being demanded, and often places a financial burden on the American tax payers by relying on them to ensure that its own worker's basic needs are met.

Wal-Mart responded to these allegations by taking out a two-page ad in the *NYRB* in which Wal-Mart President Lee Scott, though failing to even attempt to refute most of the claims made in article, accuses the journalist of

erroneously portraying Wal-Mart and its effect on society, the result, Scott claimed, of Head being “blinded by ideology” (6). Interestingly, the charge of ideology championing over credible analysis is used against Wal-Mart itself by another Wal-Mart detractor Bill McDonough, organizing director of the United Food and Commercial Workers union. McDonough states that, “My issue is not with Wal-Mart frankly, my issue is with the ideology of Wal-Mart” (*Swanson*), by which he means the contradiction between Wal-Mart’s claims to be beneficial to their poorly compensated employees and the treatment they actually receive from the corporate-giant.

Clearly, in both Scott and McDonough’s use of the term, ideology is meant to imply a misrepresentation of reality, the triumph of subjective interests over objective truth. Scott sees Head as letting his personal political interests interfere with a truthful analysis of Wal-Mart and McDonough believes that Wal-Mart’s financial interests, not what is actually taking place, dictates their self-evaluation.

The argument between Head/McDonough and Scott is not decided according to who most accurately conforms to objective reality, for it is not they themselves who can singly handedly achieve their respective ends of either destroying/altering Wal-Mart’s activities or promoting the retail giant’s unfettered dominance. Instead, the final arbiters of this dispute are the people on whom Wal-Mart’s very existence is predicated: low-income Americans.

Wal-Mart has accomplished its astronomical growth rates by tapping into a market that, while historically always one of the largest, has rarely been seen as fertile ground for high profit margins: the poor. But for Wal-Mart the poor serve as both a huge reservoir of low-wage workers and simultaneously as their primary customer base. As a recent article in the *The Nation* noted, this reliance on the poor means that their “business model...really needs to create more poverty to grow” (*Featherstone*). And it does. By monopolizing labor and retail markets, both in the U.S. retail end and in the areas of production overseas (and also, it should be noted, by breaking numerous labor laws), Wal-Mart is able to keep worker compensation and retail prices low. This allows them to essentially farm low-income people for profits. While many concerns, protests, and lawsuits have arisen in response the very people who Wal-Mart most directly harms at the same time serve as an incredibly powerful and dedicated group of supporters. Repeatedly, in communities across the U.S., the poor clamor for the opening of Wal-Marts, labeling those who protest as rich elitists who don’t want the poor to have access to jobs and low-priced goods. This occurs in spite of considerable evidence showing that the opening of Wal-Marts destroys local economies, lowering the standard of living for already struggling citizens.

The embracing of Wal-Mart by those who it blatantly harms is not an accident. Wal-Mart devotes considerable attention towards painting an image of itself as a community pillar with a corresponding interest in promoting community and family values and generally improving the lives of those whom it touches. Small locally owned “Mom & Pop” businesses (those which in many cases actually embody the non-bottom-line driven goals that Wal-Mart falsely claims to possess) may be forced out of business by the arrival of Wal-Mart but their gargantuan replacement has successfully painted themselves as simply a bigger better version of an old-fashioned good thing. Opponents of Wal-Mart, like Head, refute Wal-Mart’s glossy, anecdotally laced, public relations/advertising claims by amassing facts, figures, and credible analyses that exposes Wal-Mart as insincere and hypocritical, casting all but its wealthy supporters as horribly duped. But while the case against Wal-Mart gets factually stronger and stronger Wal-Mart keeps winning, the clamor by the poor for Wal-Mart loudly continues.

Given the disparity between the forceful based-on-fact indictment of Wal-Mart and its popular perception, the ongoing debate among some on the Left over the existence and use of universalities and objective moral grounds is as unsurprising as it is highly relevant. The question is how best to battle Wal-Mart and other seemingly blatant enemies of economic, social and political equality. On what grounds and with what kind of tactical approach can/should the attack on the Wal-Marts of the world be waged? Can, and should, the agenda of increasing social, political, and economic equality be furthered without reliance upon claims of objective factual and moral rightness? Or, conversely, are there indispensable advantages to vehemently asserting truth claims, regardless of whether it appears to be effective in gaining support for important causes?

One such dispute over the validity and use of truth claims in political strategy took place between the Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton and the popular postmodern pragmatist Richard Rorty. Their argument instigates, interestingly enough, with Eagleton’s defense of the very term utilized above for diametrically opposite ends by both McDonough and Scott in their respective arguments: the concept of ideology. In *Ideology: An Introduction* Eagleton defends the crucial importance of the concept of ideology to opponents of society’s structural inequality, denouncing those who seek to discredit its philosophical validity and its usefulness (193-220). To properly understand why Eagleton feels so compelled to defend a concept that by his own admission is plagued both by ambiguity and a multiplicity of often incompatible definitions (as is clearly demonstrated above) it is necessary to elaborate briefly on the role of ideology within Marx’s cultural theory.

According to Marx the economic base of society is the primary determinate of all other social formations. The economic base refers to the mode of production—the ways in which people relate to each other and society as a

whole through their productive activity—and to the tools, ways in which the tools are used, and the people available to operate the tools that are used in society to produce things. The economic base generates other social formations which Marx calls the superstructure. Within the superstructure fall all other social activities, including politics, art, religion, philosophy, morality, and so on. Their particular nature is determined by the particular mode of production present within that society. The social activities that operate within society are predicated upon certain assumptions and frameworks that dictate what and how people think. These assumptions and frameworks are, according to Marx, ideologies. Another way of putting it is that ideology is how society thinks about itself, its social consciousness. Ideology itself represents the "production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness," all that "men say, imagine, conceive," including such things as "politics, laws, morality, religion, [and] metaphysics [...]" (154). Put in a very general way, ideology determines what people believe and thus can act upon.

Eagleton's summary of ideology states that ideological structures are composed primarily of "ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation" (30). By positing that ideology operates by "distortion and dissimulation" Marx, and by extension Eagleton, is claiming that there is a definite reality at work camouflaged behind layers of ideology. Applied to an analysis of the popularity of Wal-Mart, Eagleton, it is likely, would posit that it is an objective fact that Wal-Mart exploits poor people. Moreover, when someone denies that this is the case, when for example a low income Wal-Mart supporter states that they are "for the little man/woman...So I say stand up and get a Wal-Mart" (*Featherstone*), they are objectively incorrect. The reason that the poor fail to realize their own oppressed state is because they have been seduced with elaborate falsifications that make it seem natural that they are mired in poverty while the Waltons live in the lap of luxury. Reversing the mindset of the pro-Wal-Mart poor, according to Marxists like Eagleton, requires raising the awareness of their oppression including its systemic source. This means giving them "an unmystified understanding of their oppressed social condition" (211). Once aware of the objective truth of their situation and the objectively atrocious consequences of allowing this sort of unequal arrangement to continue they would, according to Eagleton, logically pursue their liberation.

Identifying ideological structures and their origins is, therefore, a crucial component for Marxists such as Eagleton in the quest to reorder society along more egalitarian lines. This is particularly important, he argues, during this critical time in which the world is "witnessing a remarkable insurgence of ideological movements" (xi). These "ideological movements" are predicated on deceiving people about the true nature of reality. Whether it is religious fundamentalists convincing their followers that heaven comes to those who wait in suffering (or hurriedly bring about their own demise), or clever marketing executives convincing poor Americans that Wal-Mart (as well as the entire economic system required for its existence and prosperity) is natural and good, objective truth is being buried in favor of horrific lies. This is why Eagleton is so perturbed that some insist that ideology is an empty and useless concept. He alleges that there are a large number of left-wing intellectuals who irresponsibly insist on declaring the concept of ideology, and with it the very idea of an objective reality, "is now obsolete" (xi), thus robbing the Left of its ability to effectively critique and therefore change social conditions.

Richard Rorty, inarguably one of the leftist-"traitors" Eagleton is referring to, does indeed question the validity and use of ideology precisely because he questions the very existence of an objective material reality. It follows that if objective reality doesn't actually exist then distorting or misrepresenting it is impossible. Therefore, everything is ideology: it encompasses everything, distinguishes nothing, and is completely superfluous. To understand the ground upon which Rorty counters Eagleton it is important to understand the basis for Rorty's dismissal of an objective reality: the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche directly challenges the defining of ideology as ideas that via distortion mask reality by denying the very existence of a maskable reality, proclaiming, "it is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations*" (*Portable* 458; emphasis in the original). Nietzsche viewed the whole attempt at securing knowledge and establishing morals in the larger context of the struggle for existence and power. This denies the Marxist definition of ideology, which declares that only certain discourses are interested in power relations. Furthermore, according to Nietzsche the very notion of truth is fictional; there are only more or less useful propositions for survival and gaining power. Not only can reality not be known, there is no such thing as objective reality. Therefore, to base a worldview, in this case Marxism, on a hidden or "outside" reality is not expounding Truth but merely an opinion, a perspective.

Nietzsche comes to this conclusion through his analysis of knowledge, which he contends is nothing other than a human construct void of any relation to an objective reality. Human knowledge has no relation to reality because humans, Nietzsche argues, cannot escape thinking and communicating metaphorically via language. Words, the building blocks of language, are inherently metaphoric due to the metaphoric nature of perception itself: "To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor" (*Philosophy* 82). Even physiologically, then, a metaphoric process is occurring. Words are an external

representation of a physiological phenomenon; the word does not refer to any actual object in the world but rather an experience within the subject. But even inferring that the nerve stimulus is indicative of an actual external object is erroneous according to Nietzsche. He argues that, “the further inference from the nerve stimulus to cause outside of us is already the result of a false and unjustifiable application of the principle of sufficient reason” (*Philosophy* 81). In other words, it is a leap of faith to link a sense perception with a definite external reality when we have no “outside” means of verifying whether or not our claim is true. Moreover, Nietzsche rejects the notion that the creation of metaphors, image or sound, due to nerve stimuli is even a reaction. This would imply some necessary causal relationship between stimuli and the creation of metaphors. Instead, Nietzsche insists that the act of word/metaphor formation is thoroughly a spontaneous, artistic endeavor: “the speaker is an *artistically creating* subject” (*Philosophy* 86; emphasis in the original). While Nietzsche calls metaphor creation man’s fundamental drive, (*Philosophy* 88) he is also contending that this act and its subsequent products, doesn’t move in accordance with some system of objective logic but rather with the individual’s aesthetics: words are works of artistic expression elicited from unique individual experience.

Language ceases to be individual, spontaneous and artistic, when, “from boredom and necessity, man wishes to exist socially and with the herd... [and so] a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things” (*Philosophy* 81). The original words, which were created from unique individual experience, must give way to concepts:

Every word instantly becomes a concept precisely insofar as it is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual experience to which it owes its origin; but, rather, a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things (*Philosophy* 83).

Social language, because it necessarily refuses exceptional, individual words in favor of totalizing, socially-binding concepts, fosters the illusion of objective truth. Once language has deteriorated into social language it unconsciously subjects its users to the fallacy that truth is accessible through language when, in fact, truth is nothing more than the conventional use of language itself.

So pervasive is this falsification within the subjects, the users, of language that Nietzsche describes the process by which language conceals its origins and nature in terms of a monumental and continuous act of forgetting:

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force...[T]o be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors...Now man of course forgets that this is the way things stand for him. Thus he lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously...[A]nd precisely *by means of this unconsciousness* and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth (*Philosophy* 84).

Only by forgetting, according to Nietzsche, can man believe he is grasping, or even striving towards, truth: towards knowledge of things-in-themselves.

Accordingly, power lies not in the ability to most thoroughly uncover/discover and thus possess truth for this is impossible; it doesn’t exist to be uncovered/discovered and possessed. Rather, power is to be found in the ability to create truth, to exercise prowess in furthering illusions that are useful in achieving desired ends. Man has never been interested in knowledge, in truth, for its own sake, but merely in its consequences: “[Man] is indifferent toward pure knowledge which has no consequences; toward those truths which are possibly harmful and destructive he is even hostilely inclined” (*Philosophy* 81). It is an elaborate deep-seeded illusion that our ideas, beliefs, morals, self and species conceptions are derived from reality and are in any way objective. Instead, Nietzsche contends, like the various mental capacities responsible for their creation, our constructed concepts are nothing more than “the means by which weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves—since they have been denied the chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with the sharp teeth of beasts of prey” (*Philosophy* 80).

It is upon this Nietzschean view of truth that Rorty bases his argument against Eagleton. He refutes the distinct position that Eagleton grants the concept of ideology—as referring to values with direct implications upon power relations—because, like Nietzsche, Rorty unabashedly prescribes to the notion that Eagleton negatively attaches to Rorty’s ilk: “there are no values and beliefs *not* bound up with power” (*Ideology* 7). For Rorty it is the persuasive power of an idea that makes it “true”, not the “truth” of an idea that makes it persuasive. Rorty presumably would agree with Eagleton that poor people are exploited by Wal-Mart, but he fails to see the validity or inherent advantage in claiming that it is objectively true that this exploitation exists. Instead, Rorty, following Nietzsche,

views these claims, like claims of any kind, as entirely subjective. Importantly, he emphasizes that this doesn't make these claims any less valid for lacking an objective foundation since all claims are subjective and thus on non-metaphysically equal grounds. He is simply refusing to grant privilege to certain claims, to give them inherent superiority over others, due to the perception that their in closer proximity to an objective reality because, as Nietzsche stated, "There is only perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing" (*Genealogy* 92). In the absence of an objective reality on which to ground arguments, Eagleton's claim that Wal-Mart's victims are being mystified only "point[s] to a difference between our wants and interests and somebody else's wants and interests, not a difference between somebody else's wants and the way the world is independent of anybody's wants and anybody's discourse" (*Postmodern* 97). This is a horrifying proposition for Eagleton. He fears that by rejecting the existence of an objective reality "there can be no way of countering an objectionable political case by an appeal to the way things are in society, for the way things are in society is just the way you construct them to be." He feels it of vital necessity to possess an immutable foundation upon which to stake epistemological and moral claims, an outside arbiter to determine whose asserted reality and values are truly (or more) correct. He indignantly asks the followers of Nietzsche, "if what validates my social interpretations are the political ends they serve, how am I to validate these ends? Or am I just forced back here, aggressively and dogmatically, on asserting my interests over yours, as Nietzsche would have urged?" (205). Rorty's answer is, predictably, a resounding, "Yes, you are so forced" (*Postmodern* 98). Forced if what is desired is the actual manipulation of the social environment, not merely an entirely internal sense of self-righteous martyrdom. Applied to the example of Wal-Mart, what Eagleton fails to realize, Rorty would likely contend, is that if he cannot convince others of his rightness, if he cannot persuade the poor that they would be better off resisting Wal-Mart, it is irrelevant whether or not his view of Wal-Mart's activities is true in any objective sense even if objectivity was possible.

It becomes clear that Eagleton and Rorty are not really arguing about the same thing. Eagleton is not simply being a fundamentalist sticking blindly to a superstitious belief in objectivity, nor is Rorty a shameless ends-justify-the-means pragmatist who believes in nothing except achieving his aims. Even if he isn't aware of it, Eagleton is just as much a pragmatist as Rorty, he simply believes that when it comes to obtaining his goal of a more equitable world Marxism offers the best (the most true) account available for why the world is in the sorry state that it's in and thus how this situation might be improved. Rorty, on his part, is every bit the epistemological fanatic that Eagleton is, his truth just is, paradoxically, that there is no objective truth. Like the rest of us, particular beliefs on the subject of objectivity aside, Eagleton and Rorty both believe in the reality of certain things even if they can't prove them in a truly objective sense. Even Nietzsche admitted, "even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine" (*Portable* 450). The difference between Eagleton and Rorty, then, is essentially nothing more than a difference in ends and means, not a philosophical one at all since minus objective reality philosophy loses its distinction as holding a privileged relation to reality. Neither can objectively prove their rightness nor needs to in order to achieve their respective ends. Rather, both are left to the task that everyone is faced with, namely convincing others to adopt their subjective viewpoints in order to achieve the ends that they desire. In this sense we are all pragmatists of a sort, the question is what we wish to acquire and how we set about to obtain it.

Hence, the entire Eagleton/Rorty argument over the existence of objectivity is inseparable from their larger struggle to obtain certain ends over others. In this case, it is a dispute over the grounds upon which leftist political and social movements base themselves and the strategies that these grounds subsequently demand. In effect, what are being debated are the merits of certain rhetorical strategies for competing with the rhetoric of those whose interests run counter to theirs. It is therefore of crucial importance to pinpoint the rhetorical strategies utilized by Wal-Mart and their ilk since it is their construction of reality that Eagleton and Rorty are competing against.

While some on the Left may be troubled by the subjective rhetoric versus objective reality issue, Wal-Mart certainly isn't. As mentioned previously, Wal-Mart has conducted a public relations campaign whose focal point is not, as Eagleton would have it, on utilizing truth claims but instead on almost pure rhetoric. It is unlikely that questions are raised inside of Wal-Mart's marketing department as to the objective truth of what their advertising campaigns imply since this is not their goal, making money is. To accomplish this goal Wal-Mart sings the praises of its low-prices, vast selection, and substantial job creation, in short its practical value to the consumer. But this is only a small part of Wal-Mart's larger strategy of creating an image(s) for its customers, an image that can be bought by the consumer simply by shopping at Wal-Mart. Rather than focus exclusively in the practical benefits of their product, the validity of which could actually be verified by the consumer, Wal-Mart has instead shifted its marketing focus toward embedding desirable connotations in their corporate name, their retail stores, the products they sell, and in those who shop and work there. Wal-Mart ads flatter their consumers implying that they see through marketing gimmicks and instead shop at Wal-Mart exclusively because they value their low prices,

selection, and community outreaching. In doing this, Wal-Mart implies that it is altruistic, honest, and family oriented, a friend of the common individual and a supporter of the return to the nostalgic promised-land that is small-town America.

Not only do these connotations give the consumer a reason to support Wal-Mart, they also offer the opportunity for the individual to inject oneself with certain desirable attributes such as intelligence, individuality/non-conformism, and moral virtue merely by supporting/embracing Wal-Mart. Conversely, there is the implication that those who denounce Wal-Mart are deemed to be void of/opposed to these attributes. The marketing of connotations makes Wal-Mart highly resistant to the sorts of verification generally considered objective and thus trustworthy (an example being data from respected sources that demonstrate Wal-Mart's lack of nearly every value that they claim to uphold) because trusting Wal-Mart casts a more positive light upon those who trust it than upon those who do not: advantage Wal-Mart.

This type of marketing strategy is not exclusive to Wal-Mart but is, according to Douglas B. Holt an Assistant Professor at the Harvard School of Business, the primary type of mass marketing taking place today. He contends that the popular Adorno/Horkheimer "culture industry" model is no longer completely applicable in its original form. According to this model, "marketers are portrayed as cultural engineers, organizing how people think and feel through branded commercial products" (Holt 71). This cultural model proceeds from the premise that first and foremost corporations are able to "seduce consumers to participate in a system of commodified meanings embedded in brands" (71), to buy into the marketed assumption "that social identities are best realized through commodities" (71) While Holt wholeheartedly agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno that corporations have successfully sold consumers on the basic premise that commodity consumption is the source of meaning acquisition, he argues against their claim that corporate "cultural authority" necessarily dictates largely homogenous individual tastes and overall consumer passivity. Instead, Holt claims that 1960s' counterculture gave birth to both awareness and disdain for corporate authored meanings culminating in a shift in marketing and cultural practices to what he dubs "Postmodern Consumer Culture."

According to this model, consumers revolted against the overt marketing of fixed meanings and instead asserted their personal sovereignty from corporatism:

[It] reflected a passionate, reflexive concern with existential freedom. The revolution was to be a personal one, and it happened by treating the self as a work under construction, the authenticity of which was premised upon making thoughtful sovereign choices rather than obeying market dictates (82).

But instead of weakening the strength of corporatism this consumer revolution actually made the marketing of commodified meanings even stronger. This is because "consumers did not reject branded goods in toto. Rather, only brands that were perceived as overly coercive lost favor" (82). Personal sovereignty, therefore, means merely being a crafty consumer of meanings, not the wholesale rejection of this perverted means of self-construction. Thus, consumer culture is able to absorb even the attacks upon its premise of commodified meanings simply by creating brands that these more savvy consumers can construct anti-corporate meanings from. Therefore, Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that consumer culture defanged political opposition by structuring it as a taste became even more true as the market created avenues for even disgruntled "anti-consumer" consumers. This means, according to Holt, that "the consumption style of stupefying passivity theorized by Horkheimer and Adorno is a failure of the system" (88). Instead, the market thrives on the promotion of anti-systemic consumers, "since the market thrives off the constant production of difference [on] the most creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices" (88). Even those who identify themselves as anti-capitalists bent on attacking the very idea of commodified meanings are friends of the system because they too cannot escape the primacy of self-identification in relation to the marketplace. Our current brand-oriented consumerism does not author our specific individual meanings; it just demands that whatever these individual meanings are, they are achieved exclusively through commodities.

Against this type of opposition Eagleton's defense of objective reality is clearly an inseparable part of his goal, not because he has an obsession with its abstract existence. As a Marxist, Eagleton must insist on explicitly linking societal conditions to underlying economic relations. Attempting to convince low-income supporters of Wal-Mart that the retail behemoth is actually their oppressor without also convincing them that Wal-Mart is only a symptom of the much larger and more pervasive problem of capitalism (and its corresponding psychology) is in the long-term a fruitless venture. For even if everyone becomes convinced that Wal-Mart is totally uncool and seeks to destroy it, as Holt would agree, unless they also seek to destroy capitalism altogether nothing really will have changed. All the consumer is doing is switching the brands that they define themselves in accordance to, the equivalent of switching brands of lotion while leprosy consumes the entire body. What needs to be done, in Eagleton's eyes, is the relentless expounding of the truth about Wal-Mart as well as the economic relations that its existence is predicated upon.

True, receptiveness to this sort of rhetoric has not been very good, especially within the U.S., but the chance of success does not necessarily dictate the value of the approach. Eagleton isn't necessarily denying that certain leftist goals can be realized by playing by the dictates Wal-Mart and the capitalists, it's just that these goals are not really accomplishing what on the surface they are believed to be. Because even if seemingly successful, playing the compromising reformist game with Wal-Mart often means lending the achievements of things such as minimum wage and labor legislation, gender wage equality, and fair hiring practices a rhetorical value that far exceeds actual social improvements. Thus, these supposed accomplishments can even serve to further entrench the horrible economic system by promoting the belief that there are no longer things such as class warfare, sexism, and racism simply because those around us can all consume in relative equality. Again, the problem comes back to the problem of our brand-oriented consumer culture. Since it necessarily co-opts and channels all meaning into consumable brands it removes the ability to market the true elimination of the primacy of brands in self-constructionⁱⁱ. Eagleton, therefore, believes that one must resist the temptation to mimic the enemy's tactics and instead continue to paint the whole picture regardless of its current lack of receptiveness.

Rorty's dismissal of Eagleton's objectivity can also be tied to his desired ends; while Rorty agrees with many of Eagleton's criticisms of capitalism he is not a Marxist. Therefore, he doesn't feel nearly as compelled to link his attempts at alleviating specific social problems with the identification and denunciation of an underlying economic structure as does Eagleton. Rorty insists that he rejects Marxism not because he disagrees with its egalitarian aims, but rather because he doesn't feel that Marxism still offers ideas useful for achieving an egalitarian society. Paraphrasing an analogy Rorty drew with religion, people didn't cease to believe that priests were useful because they no longer believed in God, people no longer believed in God because they no longer believed that the priests were useful (*Human Rights* 71). Rorty simply doesn't believe that metanarratives and metatheories like Marxism are particularly useful, at least right now, in working toward general leftist goals. Instead, Rorty is a firm supporter of taking advantage of what is available, making the world a better place, however and to whatever extent is currently possible. He isn't nearly as concerned as Eagleton about the erroneous, self-defeating use of the tools and tactics of the enemy simply because he doesn't see a way out of that problematic at this point in time. Furthermore, Rorty accuses those like Eagleton of adopting a truly self-defeating approach by taking a paradigm shift-or-bust approach that instead of being oppositional is merely inert. In refusing to compromise and instead holding out hope for a hypothetical future in which an environment friendlier to a Marxist/socialist revolution exists, Eagleton's ilk is, at least in spirit, falling prey to a teleological mindset, huddling together waiting for an outside savior to come to the rescue instead of realizing that the only potential saviors are human beings themselves.

This assertion of Rorty's can be tied back to his Nietzschean view of language, specifically the recognition of the crucial importance of linguistic meaning in achieving goals. Neither he nor Eagleton can truly remain outside the branding trap because neither can avoid using language to communicate their desires. The ability to communicate depends on linguistic meanings that correspond, at least roughly, with those of the intended audience. Since language has no inherent meaning, determining linguistic meanings is a social process, not an individual one. Because the consumer's sources of meanings are brands, Eagleton and Rorty's ideas are viewed as a brand(s), whether they like it or not. For opponents of Wal-Mart and capitalism in general, a lack of receptivity is due to the fact that what they are forwarding is currently an unpopular brand not because they remain unbranded. Their uncoolness is due in large part to not only the monopoly of branding per se, but to the resulting monopoly of language definition and thus meanings. For example, while Eagleton may believe Wal-Mart's low-income supporters are anything but free individualists with lots to live for, what being free, autonomous, and living a good life means is bound up with what the Wal-Mart brand offers, not with what brand Eagleton's Marxism does.

According to Nietzsche, and by extension Rorty, by refusing to put aside the insistence on a reality outside of language Eagleton is refusing to acknowledge the social construction of language itself, reality's necessary precursor. Consequently, the meanings tied up in his brand are misunderstood. Hence, the only way Eagleton's approach will get him what he wants is if someone else manages to shift the meanings of language, and subsequently reality, into congruity with his. This justifies Rorty's assertion that it is people like Eagleton, not pragmatists like himself, who are sabotaging the Left's efforts with their unintentional apathy. Instead, he believes that the Left must play within the social reality of brand-oriented consumerism if they wish to have any influence in the social construction of linguistic meaning. Otherwise, unable to influence language, the Left is unable to communicate their message without it being distorted into the reality and meanings authored by their opponents.

Despite my agreement with Eagleton over the truth of much of Marxism's evaluation of our current social ills, Rorty cannot be ignored. He convincingly argues that the Left should stop their unacknowledged belief that avoiding playing an active part in the construction of reality is actually a step towards its alteration. Instead, he insists that it is sometimes necessary to adopt the rhetorical strategies of their opponents, in some cases openly agreeing with objectionable premises if that is what promises positive resultsⁱⁱⁱ. Given the personal investment the

consumer has in brands it is not advisable to merely point out the exploitive nature of Wal-Mart as this, in effect, is taken as a direct attack on the very individuals who the Left is trying to persuade. Instead, Rorty thinks that the Left must enhance its own brand; it must make itself and its causes cooler than those of their opponents. This in turn encourages the brand-defined consumer to select the interests of the Left as positive sources for self-construction and conversely reject those put forth by exploitative corporations such as Wal-Mart. But it is equally a mistake to dismiss the very legitimate fear that to mimic the opposition is to endorse and partially embody it. There is legitimate reason to believe that anti-consumerism cannot be brand-marketed, that a truly egalitarian society cannot be bought. But neither will it just happen without actively working to change behavior and consciousness either. This is why the positions of Eagleton and Rorty must both be utilized, with larger theories of how society is structured, such as Marxism, providing insight upon the value of local, Rortyesque, actions that promote leftist causes over those that are currently popular.

Rorty himself offers the individual personification of this dualistic approach with his forwarded ideal of the contemporary Western human: the liberal-ironist. Rorty's liberal-ironist fuses elements of Nietzsche's ideal of the artist, one who recognizes the inherent meaninglessness of existence and thus opts to create it at all opportunities without regard to existing morals or conventions, and the loyal citizen of a bourgeois liberal democracy. The result is an individual who, in effect, lives a double life, privately toying with the world of appearances while publicly campaigning for human solidarity and social change while avoiding the disruptive tactic of openly attacking the framework of the existing pseudo-democratic Western society. But this clever character also has another set of traits, as the following passage illustrates:

- (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabularies, she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;
- (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her current vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
- (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself (*Contingency* 73).

The liberal ironist lives every day with the recognition that her truths are not objective, though she no doubt believes them to be true. In short, she lives with a bit of doubt about what she knows and believes. Furthermore, not believing that the world is a certain way, but that everyone is on the same epistemological ground that she is, she refuses to place her beliefs below theirs regardless of their appeals to the way things are. In other words, she has doubts about what others believe too.

Rorty's "ironist" offers a helpful model for combining the dual commitments to theorizing and concrete action within a broad leftist social movement. It may indeed offer a premise under which divergent factions of the Left can put aside differences of ends enough to put together a marketing strategy with the energy capable of making significant improvement to the world in the here and now. Crucial in developing this strategy is to follow the suggestion of Marxist philosopher Frederic Jameson, that mass cultural products often contain utopian elements and therefore should be analyzed for their social hopes and fantasies and the ways in which these fantasies are presented, their contradictions with actually are resolved, and how potentially disruptive hopes and anxieties are channeled into serving the exploitative ends of the products creators. The search for traces of positive content within Wal-Mart's image marketing, accordingly, is a valuable resource for those who wish its demise. The result of this type of analysis may involve, beyond merely pointing out the deceptive nature of Wal-Mart's propaganda, producing cultural products laden with merely subliminal messages that alter or run counter to those that enforce the assumptions that the Wal-Mart brand feeds upon or encouraging consumers to switch to less harmful commodified sources for their self-construction. This type of approach (the cooptation of Wal-Mart) would likely mortify Eagleton and it is truly hard to imagine this approach actually eliminating Wal-Mart's exploitative practices, much less those of the capitalist system as a whole. But it is highly possible to make valuable improvements in the lives of individuals, as, for example, forcing Wal-Mart to treat its employees more fairly would do, and until something better comes along that is a goal worth working towards.

To be clear, my utilization in this paper of Wal-Mart as the antagonist to the Left is not meant to imply that Wal-Mart composes the greatest enemy to freedom and equality present today, or that its marketing approach offers those who oppose exploitative corporations and the capitalist system a Rosetta's stone making possible their elimination and the construction of a far superior alternative society. With that said Wal-Mart's incredible success (success owed in large part to their ability to win the hearts and minds of the American public) suggests that they are an excellent subject for not only a highly critical analysis, but also for insight into ways of capitalizing on the

existent wants and desires of the general public. The former is quite prevalent, the latter is ostensibly, and unfortunately, absent. By positing only criticism the Left is deluding itself into believing that simply pointing out error without offering something positive and attractive can successfully achieve their desires. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard may be correct that “Reality is a bitch” (274) but, true as this may currently be, it doesn’t sell products, ideas, or a better way of life.

ⁱ From “Theses on Feuerbach” (144).

ⁱⁱ For a more positive view of anti-capitalist branding see Lasn, Kalle. Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America. New York: Eagle Brook, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Rorty’s Achieving Our Country. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

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