American mass merchandising developed in tandem with mass production, and for much of the twentieth century branded goods helped manufacturers dominate the power structure of distribution. Wal-Mart was not the first amazingly dominant retailing firm, nor the first retailer to depend on cheap labor, nor the first to threaten local businesses, nor the first to tout its low prices, nor the first to give rise to substantial opposition. Yet it has challenged that power structure in new ways that reflect on both the commerce and the culture of American consumption.

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