



Small Towns and Big Business: Challenging Wal-Mart Superstores

Stephen Halebsky

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During the 1990s, a new type of controversy began occurring across the United States: controversies over the siting of superstores, also known as big box stores. In these disputes, which often involve Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, local citizens mount organized opposition to the proposed siting of a superstore in their town or neighborhood. Opponents criticize Wal-Mart superstores for putting local independent merchants out of business, siphoning money from the local economy, providing substandard jobs, disrupting residential neighborhoods, contributing to the "McDonaldization" of society, inducing sprawl, destroying downtowns and Main Streets, and undermining local uniqueness and small town charm. More generally, these David-and-Goliath controversies represent particularly stark examples of the conflict of interests between local communities and large corporations that have become common in contemporary society.

Small Towns and Big Business uses fieldwork and archival sources to comprehensively examine these controversies and the underlying issues. While Wal-Mart is usually able to site its stores at its preferred locations, in some cases local opponents have been able to thwart its plans. Using detailed case studies of anti-superstore controversies in six small cities in five states, Halebsky employs a comparative-historical approach to construct an explanation of how some of these local social movements managed to prevail against Wal-Mart. This explanation is then extended to provide the basis for a model of the general conditions under which local communities may be able to constrain unwanted corporate action. Thus, this is both a study of social movement outcomes and an investigation of community-corporate conflict. *Small Towns and Big Business* provides insight into the potential of the local state to control large corporations, the inherently problematic nature of corporate retailing, the possibilities for resisting McDonaldization, and the fate of local anti-corporation acts.

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