Writing a book about economic controversies in the early years of the twenty-first century turned out to be a very tricky project. The past several years have witnessed economic events of historic proportions, including a global financial crisis, government intervention in financial firms, and reforms to the nation’s health care market that have perhaps been matched in their unprecedented nature only by the subsequent controversies they engendered. New populist movements have erupted in public life, with the Tea Party clamoring for GOP attention on the right, and left-wing groups hoping to convince Occupy Wall Street protestors that they have really been faithful Democrats all along. How does a book about Wal-Mart debates fit into our current economic landscape?

This book argues that we can use the recent controversy surrounding Wal-Mart to explore how conservative and progressive activists talk about controversial economic issues—with regard to both the nation’s largest retailer and other recent market controversies. When I became interested in studying economic discourse several years ago, the developing national debate over Wal-Mart emerged as a particularly visible and compelling case study. The public discourse surrounding the retailer produced vivid examples of competing arguments for and against Wal-Mart’s often-notorious business practices, which despite their allegedly harmful impacts on workers, the environment, and small retailers, have undoubtedly proved an economic boon for the typical American consumer. I began this research in 2005, tracking closely the developing activities of the organization Wal-Mart Watch, which declared itself to be a novel coalition of community organizations, leaders from various religious groups, and concerned citizens and activists who were united by their desire to pressure Wal-Mart to live up to its potential as a template corporation for the twenty-first century. Although held together by the glue of substantial funding from the Service Employees
International Union (SEIU), Wal-Mart Watch declared its goal to be bigger than simply organizing Wal-Mart’s domestic workers in a union; instead, the group sought to prod Wal-Mart toward greater responsibility as the world’s largest corporation.

As I argue in the pages that follow, the resulting dialectic between Wal-Mart Watch and Wal-Mart Inc. (which would eventually found its own short-lived “advocacy group,” Working Families for Wal-Mart) produced a telling representation of the kind of economic discourse produced on both the right and the left in the present-day United States. Yet this discourse was also created in a particular time and place. Developing in the years 2005 and 2006, Wal-Mart Watch’s mission was conceived during a period in which most Americans believed that the nation’s economic pie was growing only bigger. In the first half of the decade, for instance, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics found that Americans’ net worth increased by almost half, from a median of $87,220 in 2001 to $120,025 in 2007. Of course, this perception of abundance would turn out to be premised on the shaky foundation of the housing sector, with much of this growth in wealth fueled by rising home prices and increasing home equity. Americans’ expanded holdings in financial assets were surprisingly paltry by comparison: The median value of financial assets for households in the PSID, for example, increased by only $2,000 between 2001 and 2007. Moreover, incomes were stagnant for the first part of the decade, with the median rising less than $1,000 between 2005 and 2007.

As is still painfully clear as of this writing, the housing bubble that fed Americans’ illusion of prosperity (and in many cases, practices of living beyond a household’s means through home equity loans that were easily available) could not continue indefinitely, and the string of catastrophes that accelerated in 2008 plunged the entire world into a global financial crisis. The economic context facing groups like Wal-Mart Watch looked radically different, as did the formerly vilified retail behemoth that is Wal-Mart. As unemployment crept into double-digit percentages, Americans watched their retirement investments evaporate, and foreclosures rose steeply with little sign of abatement. A store like Wal-Mart—which had always championed its empowerment of lower- and middle-class American consumers—was well positioned to resume its path to greatness in the name of frugality. Indeed, many of the concessions that Wal-Mart made in 2006 on things like health care (spurred, at least in part, in response to critics like Wal-Mart Watch) would be scaled back in the lean years that followed. Wal-Mart Watch itself would eventually struggle to maintain its identity in the wake of a two-part crisis: unsure, perhaps, of next steps in the wake of having accomplished a
number of reforms in areas like employee benefits and environmental sustainabilty, and facing the unenviable task of maligning the very company that was helping Americans, struggling with basic expenses, to keep food on the table and roofs over their heads.

It struck me as particularly telling, then, that in the final weeks of revising this manuscript I received the following email on March 16, 2012, from the Wal-Mart Watch communications team that had so faithfully filled my inbox for the past seven years:

For years, Walmart Watch has been one of the leading sources for news on how Walmart is impacting our society and economy. Thanks to your support and interest, the struggle to challenge Walmart to improve its business practices and treatment of workers has grown.

Due to this success, Walmart Watch is joining forces with Making Change at Walmart. Making Change at Walmart is a campaign challenging Walmart to help rebuild our economy and strengthen working families. Anchored by the United Food and Commercial Workers, we are proud to join in this coalition of Walmart associates, union members, small business owners, religious leaders, women’s advocacy groups, community groups, multi-ethnic coalitions, elected officials, and ordinary citizens who believe that changing Walmart is vital for the future of our country.

With a new name—and a different source of union-based funding—Wal-Mart Watch has been absorbed and repurposed in a similar struggle to change Wal-Mart in this new economic context. This time, however, its mission is to enlist Wal-Mart’s help to “rebuild our economy and strengthen working families”—a sign of the drastic change in the 2012 U.S. economic context as compared to the previous decade, which witnessed Wal-Mart Watch’s founding and most visible public presence.

One might be tempted to think that at a time in which unemployment continues to hover around 8%, having a job at all may upstage a host of secondary concerns, like whether that job offers affordable benefits. Indeed, most of the official organizations that produced the discourse I study in this book no longer exist in the exact forms I analyze here. Working Families for Wal-Mart was disbanded in late 2007 (when Wal-Mart declared that it could bring the group “in-house” as they were no longer so urgently needed as public ambassadors), and the SEIU-funded Wal-Mart Watch joined forces with its UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) counterpart shortly thereafter (they kept the Wal-Mart Watch name until the latest merger with Making Change at Wal-Mart). Even Wal-Mart Inc. would recast its image as
“Walmart” (with no hyphen and a new, no-smiley-face logo) in the years that followed the period I focus on in this study of economic language.

Yet while the actors may have changed and key organizations evolved, a central argument of this book is that the issues and language raised in the debate over Wal-Mart tap into much deeper, symbolic dimensions of Americans’ political talk and culture. As I argue in what follows, the debate over Wal-Mart is only one case study of a larger linguistic struggle over the deployment of symbolic language in the discourse surrounding economic issues. If anything, the cleavages I analyze in the Wal-Mart debate have become even more visible alongside new controversies concerning corporate bailouts, “Obamacare,” the national deficit, and “class warfare.” The presence of populist movements on both the right and the left, in the form of the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street protests, serve to further dramatize the distinctions I identify in my analysis of Wal-Mart discourse. (For example, Wal-Mart Watch wasted little time in reminding the readers of its blog that it joined in their ire against the 1%, saying, “No list of major corporations and wealthy individuals distorting our democracy would be complete without Walmart and the Waltons.”) Moreover, the example of the Tea Party and OWS illustrate well the enduring cleavages of populism on both sides of the political aisle, as both movements claim to celebrate the “common man” or the “little people” against the oppressive regimes of government (in the first case) and corporations (in the second). In crucial ways, then, such populist movements tap into the same concerns about Americans’ economic well-being that occupied the social movement organizations (SMOs) embattled over Wal-Mart just a few years earlier. Accordingly, most analysts who observe the activities of both sides note that while the Tea Party and OWS have many things in common—for instance, both groups are suspicious of established politicians’ ability to successfully represent and advocate for “the people”—these two movements show little promise of joining in common cause.

These present permutations of economic discourse illustrate in a pointed way the very contours and conflicts that I find to be central in understanding the Wal-Mart debate of the mid-2000s. As such, my hope is that Wal-Mart Wars can serve as a tool for greater understanding of Americans’ economic debates, especially those that resonate with core dimensions of populism—celebrating the hard work and patriotism of everyday Americans, and challenging the presumed elitism and dominance of an allegedly privileged form of “the other.” Through studying the moving target of political language in our present society, I believe that the arguments I develop in the chapters that follow can be essential for bringing about a greater appreciation for the ideas, values, and moral concepts that animate our economic discourse. As
one who must always believe that the future is filled with hope, my deep-
est desire for this book is that it might help to clarify the political discourse
that Americans increasingly find so discordant in public life, which too often
leads many Americans to eschew the political process altogether. Under-
standing our moral language, particularly the language we use to construct
and critique the market, may be a first step forward.