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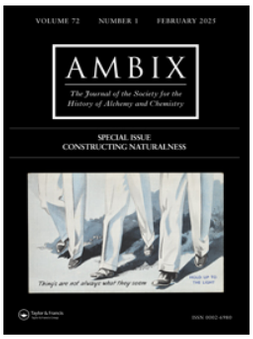

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Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola

By Susan Greenhalgh. Pp. 352, illus., index. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2024. £20.00 (paperback), £90.00 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-226-83473-3 (paperback), 978-0-226-82914-2 (hardback).

Hilary A. Smith

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and comprehensive overview that will appeal to a broad audience interested in the history of fireworks.

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Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola. By Susan Greenhalgh. Pp. 352, illus., index. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2024. £20.00 (paperback), £90.00 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-226-83473-3 (paperback), 978-0-226-82914-2 (hardback).

Susan Greenhalgh's latest book tells a story about the rise, spread, and persistence of what she calls soda science, starting in the 1990s. Soda science is an industry-corrupted type of obesity research whose main tenets are (a) sedentary lifestyles are the primary driver of rising obesity rates, (b) increasing physical activity, not modifying diet, is the best way to counteract obesity's impact on health, and (c) all calories have more or less the same health value, regardless of their source. In soda science, these are fixed assumptions rather than hypotheses to be tested. Moreover, they are assumptions that much research has contested, and they conveniently preclude questions about how sugary drinks contribute to obesity.

Greenhalgh, an anthropologist whose previous work includes books on Americans' obsession with body weight and on science in contemporary China, devotes half of her book to the United States and half to China. She has combed through conference proceedings, journal articles and IRS records to understand the reality behind the anodyne jargon of industry and science and has combined those sources with juicier ones such as personal interviews with the protagonists and private emails among them.

The book introduces a nonprofit called the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), founded by food and drink corporations in 1978 to conduct research they could use to defend their products. In the mid 1990s, when alarm at rising American obesity rates caused activists and public health officials to propose taxing sugary drinks and restricting their marketing, ILSI started work on a weapon of mass distraction: soda science. Part One of the book chronicles its rise and partial fall. First, ILSI funded industry-friendly academic scientists to write a gospel of exercise as an obesity cure and evangelise on its behalf. They published hundreds of journal articles, wrote diet books, created exercise programmes, and spoke at conferences around the world. In the same period, Coca-Cola hired a chief science officer who disbursed millions of dollars' worth of grant funding to obesity-research programmes at favoured universities.

By 2015 Coca-Cola had prodded its scientific collaborators to found a new ILSI-like organisation, the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN), specifically to promote soda science. This time, however, the company had fatally overreached. A *New York Times* reporter published an exposé revealing the funding source and aim of the GEBN, and the resulting outcry forced Coca-Cola to retreat, not only abandoning the GEBN but also eliminating their chief science officer position and obesity-research grants. ILSI, which had been doing soda science unremarked for two decades, also came under increased scrutiny and consequently moved away from obesity research within a few years.

Lest the reader conclude, however, that investigative journalism and activism defeated soda science, Greenhalgh shows in Part Two that it made an even greater impact in China, where it continues to inform policy today. Starting in the late 1970s – coincidentally when ILSI was founded – China became especially vulnerable to corporate science. Under its

new leader Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese government made marketisation, scientisation and globalisation explicit aims; collaborating with an organisation like ILSI checked all those boxes. Neglect and underfunding of public health research also left prominent scientist-officials such as Chen Chunming, who established ILSI's China branch in 1993, scrounging for support and grateful to find deep-pocketed allies in Western food corporations. The importance of *guanxi* (personal connections) in policymaking contributed, as did Confucian virtue ethics, which protected leaders such as Chen from questions about how they allocated funding. And, crucially, government control of the media made a *Times*-style takedown impossible.

The result was that corporate science made remarkable inroads in Communist China. ILSI-China's offices were cosily ensconced in the headquarters of the Chinese CDC, and the organisation's leaders had direct access to health officials at the highest levels. ILSI and Coke-funded scientists spread the gospel of exercise to China and shifted official obesity-related discourse and action away from dietary restriction and toward physical activity.

Journalists and activists have been calling out corporate influence on nutrition guidelines for years, of course, and Greenhalgh credits their work. But her approach is subtler and more illuminating. Rather than dismissing this sort of research as "junk science" that lies outside the bounds of legitimate scholarship, she reminds us that *all* science "reflect[s] the interests … of its makers and of the institutions and contexts in which it is made." Product-defense science differs mostly in "the kind and intensity of the interests that shape it." (31). Similarly, the motivations of the "quasi-corporate scientists" she follows were not qualitatively different from the things that drive other academics. The companies were not plying them with bribes, as far as one can tell, but offering more conventional benefits such as opportunities to headline international conferences, expand their professional networks, distinguish their labs and support more postdocs and grad students. The scientists' emails to each other and to Coca-Cola's science officer hint that they also enjoyed knowing that someone cared about their work and griping with an in-group against a common set of adversaries. Pretty mundane pleasures, really.

Moreover, the science they were being nudged to promote was not obviously harmful. As the book repeatedly emphasises, physical activity does improve health, even if it doesn't reverse obesity. Many of the scientists involved seem to have seen it as a panacea. Coca Cola was not asking them to prove that sugary soda is *good* for you, and ILSI had a reassuring, if toothless, set of ethical guidelines that promised to insulate the science from the influence of corporate interests. All of this may have made the arrangements seem morally acceptable. They were not; Greenhalgh's assessment, though nuanced, is unsparing.

Soda Science is not just a vivid exposé, though it is that. It is also a toolkit. Greenhalgh equips the reader with a more-precise vocabulary for describing scientists' roles (e.g. quasi-corporate scientists), organisations such as ILSI (product-defense nonprofits), and the effect of a funding source on a scientist's thought process (incentivised reasoning). In an appendix, she summarises her core concepts and research methods to empower readers to undertake their own investigations.

Anyone who cares about science, integrity, and global capitalism should read this book, accessible and clearly written as it is. One hopes it will find its way into the hands of undergraduate and graduate students, scholars, officials, and concerned citizens. Once it does, if even a fraction of its readers take up Greenhalgh's invitation to follow her lead, who knows what more we might learn?

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