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Scrutinising Big Soda

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It is hard to believe the reverence that Coca Cola once inspired. Who recalls the television advertisement with young people singing in all earnestness, “I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony/ I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company”? That was in 1971, a time when the multinational corporations that sell sugar-sweetened drinks—Big Soda—were on a meteoric global rise. Within a few decades, when I travelled to fragile, impoverished corners of Africa to write about disease and nutrition, I would find bottles of Coca Cola kept cold in a bucket of water even if there was nothing else to drink. The soda was so loved in Mexican households that Christmas was not Christmas without Coca Cola on the table, I was told when I visited while writing a book about obesity, and there was even talk of a priest who substituted it for communion wine.

How things have changed. Soda consumption started to decline during the late 1990s in the USA and carried on falling as people began to tune in to the public health messages put out by health authorities, campaigners, and the media. Obesity became an increasing public health concern. As early as 2003, WHO proposed limiting sugar on health grounds. High-profile fights by US local government in New York City, with a ban on supersized cups in 2013, and in Philadelphia, with a 2017 beverage tax to control youth soda consumption, grabbed public attention. In March, 2016, the UK Government implemented a tax on sugary drinks. The soda industry was steadily gaining pariah status. Soda drinks were no longer refreshing but the most dangerous source of sugar in our diet. In 1972, British nutritionist John Yudkin's warnings about the sweet stuff in his book *Pure, White and Deadly: How Sugar's Killing Us and What We Can Do to Stop It* had largely fallen on deaf ears, but by 2015 US

academic and campaigner Marion Nestle could declare that health was triumphing over sugar, in *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)*.

The companies were not prepared to sit back and take the massive loss in profits, of course. For many years, they would resist the evidence that their soft drinks were causing harm. Possibly the bosses believed that. Susan Greenhalgh's new book *Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola* leaves you thinking that the scientists they funded might well have done so too.

Greenhalgh's book is a painstaking academic exercise using interviews, internal emails, and other source documents to trace the evolution and impact of what she terms “soda science”, funded by corporations. Her argument is “that corporate science *is distorted* and at the same time *is (a kind of)* science”. Obviously, that makes it harder to debunk. The early part of her book discusses the development of this corporate science under the umbrella of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), founded in 1978 by Alex Malaspina, who for three decades worked for Coca Cola and became its Senior Vice President. In 1995, ILSI set up a new programme focused on the causes of and solutions to obesity. ILSI was funded by hundreds of member companies. “Its members included a veritable who's who of the global leaders in the ultraprocessed-food-and-beverage industry, from Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Dr Pepper Snapple to Heinz and Hershey's, Kellogg and Kraft, Mars and McDonald's, Nestlé and Proctor and Gamble, all with big stakes in the obesity issue”, writes Greenhalgh. Some, including Coca Cola, Mars, and Nestlé, have now severed their ties with ILSI. ILSI Global describes itself in 2024 as “a global, nonprofit federation dedicated to generating and advancing emerging science and groundbreaking research to ensure foods are safe, nutritious and sustainable, and that they improve planetary and human health and well-being in the 21st century”. Greenhalgh scrutinises the history of ILSI and alleges, however, that back in the 1990s, its “primary mission was to create science to meet the needs of the food industry”.

In *Soda Science* Greenhalgh discusses two US-based scientists who were involved in ILSI's obesity research in the late 1990s and early 2000s: James O Hill then at the University of Colorado, who was trained in physiological psychology and had a big reputation in the obesity field, and Steven Blair, of the University of South Carolina, a physical education expert who passionately believed in the importance of physical activity for human health. Greenhalgh describes how both championed physical activity as the main antidote to obesity, although Hill also recognised that it was necessary to tackle the food people ate. Coca Cola, of course, has always nurtured a healthy active image: the company has financially supported every Olympic Games since 1928; its theme for the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games is “Celebrate Everyday Greatness”.

Whether ILSI should take the credit or not, it is still popularly believed that exercise can help people lose weight, on the basis that if you burn off more calories than you take in, the pounds will disappear. Unfortunately, the human body adjusts to fight weight loss for fear of starvation and our ‹oli slows. Many dieters have the miserable experience of reaching a plateau, where excess p ce

drop off as they did in the first weeks of cutting down. For many people it is a real struggle to lose weight. The numerous fad diet books do not help and nor does the obesogenic environment. The 2007 UK Government-commissioned Foresight report identified how consumption of high energy density foods and sugary drinks played a part in the soaring prevalence of obesity. That report did not put the onus solely on the individual to keep their weight down and highlighted a “complex multifaceted system of determinants”. Governments around the world have since been forced to recognise that the sugar, salt, and fat-laden junk foods marketed to people in supermarkets, takeaway restaurants, and food outlets are among the drivers of overweight and obesity and their health consequences in diabetes, heart disease, and cancers. But no government has found it simple to tackle this issue in a world where the ultraprocessed food and sugar-rich drinks all around us have been made seductively tasty, available, and cheap, and manufacturers have been adept at arguing, wrongly, that all calories are equal.

China lagged behind the USA and Europe in developing this fast-food culture but has caught up. In China obesity nearly tripled in adults and increased five-fold in young people between 1975 and 2022; around half of all adults are now overweight or obese, and change in diet is a factor. The most interesting section of *Soda Science* details ILSI-China's influence in China's distinct cultural, social, and political environment. Greenhalgh, the John King and Wilma Cannon Fairbank Professor of Chinese Society Emerita at Harvard University, USA, and author of an earlier book on the one-child policy, has an informed understanding of the way Chinese science works and access to key figures. Heading up ILSI-China from 1993 until her death in 2018 was Chen Chunming, described by Greenhalgh as “an extraordinary person”, who was “formidable… articulate and energetic” at the age of 88 years when Greenhalgh met her in 2013. Chen was one of the country's leading nutritional scientists. She had worked in the health ministry, before, in 1982, becoming head of the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, which was afterwards called the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC). “Her scientific reputation would later rub off on ILSI-China, giving its industry-funded science the authority and credibility it needed to be influential”, writes Greenhalgh. Chen, “a state scientist…was also a former high official”. So she was very well connected. With little government funding for nutritional science, Chen and others were expected to seek it from outside. Greenhalgh says she found in her interviews “little wariness of potential harm or risk that might come from corporate funding of science—to health science, to the policies based on it, or to the public's health. Reflecting the wider pro-Western culture of the pre-Xi era, my informants saw multinational firms as largely free of corruption, trustworthy, and, given the shortage of state funding, essential contributors to China's public health work.”

ILSI's “Code of Ethics” states that it does not influence policy, but merely “provides scientific evidence as an aid in decision making”, notes Greenhalgh. Yet in China, ILSI under Chen “created China's two most important policies on the prevention and control of obesity and related diseases”, [illegible] is Greenhalgh, through official guidelines in 2003 and then a nationwide campaign in 2007 [illegible]he

was no attempt to promote taxes, marketing restrictions, or other measures regulating the soda industry".

Greenhalgh's objective is to illuminate the way the food and drink industry has pushed its agenda and to hold companies to account. Pressure from her and others seems to have had an effect, she says, noting that Coca Cola severed all ties to ILSI in 2021 and that ILSI-China has ceased functioning. But, she writes, the food and drink industry continues to promote ultraprocessed food in all major emerging economies. She could have included the smaller economies too. WHO has stepped up its warnings about junk food in small island developing states against a background of climate change, socioeconomic inequities, and the commercial determinants of health. In Barbados last year, which is unable to grow enough fresh food for its people, made worse by an overheating climate, I saw a massive takeaway culture on the streets and supermarket shelves jammed with sugary drinks and high fat and salt products. The Government of Barbados, to its credit, is working towards radical dietary improvement in schools, improving the nutritional value of children's meals and reducing portion sizes, alongside other policies to address obesity and non-communicable diseases. The lesson from Greenhalgh and others is that all governments need to be on the alert and on the case. The food and drinks industry will continue to protect and enlarge its markets. We also know that taxes and marketing and advertising regulation as well as education about nutrition are important. Nobody can get away any longer with claiming that obesity is all about our sedentary lifestyle. Governments, health agencies, and other stakeholders cannot afford an instant of complacency if the tide of chronic diseases is to be turned.

Sarah Boseley is the former health editor of *The Guardian* and author of *The Shape We're In: How Junk Food and Diets are Shortening Our Lives* (Guardian Faber, 2014).

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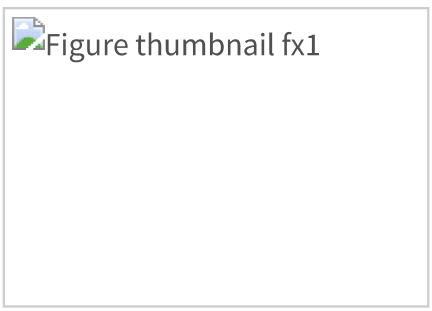

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