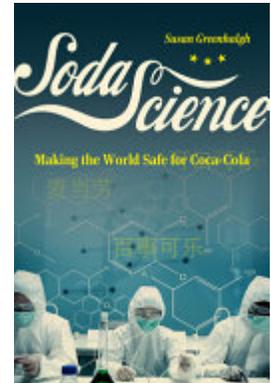


Susan Greenhalgh. *Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 364 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-83473-3.



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Consequences of Corporate Science for Global Health

Susan Greenhalgh's provocative new monograph, *Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola*, is a groundbreaking ethnographic examination of how Coca-Cola, one of the world's largest and most influential corporations, manipulated scientific research, public health policy, and consumer behavior to protect its commercial interests. Greenhalgh, a distinguished anthropologist and science studies scholar, coins the term "soda science" to describe corporate-driven research funded by the soft drink industry that aims to obscure the link between sugary beverages and the global rise in obesity.

Based on over a decade of research conducted between 2013 and 2023, *Soda Science* investigates Coca-Cola's efforts to infiltrate scientific discourse and regulatory frameworks in two major markets: the United States and China. Greenhalgh's in-depth analyses reveal how Coca-Cola managed to

shift public understanding of obesity through strategic funding of research and partnerships with policymakers. The result is a deeply troubling picture of how corporate interests can dominate scientific and policy frameworks, typically at the expense of public health.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Greenhalgh focuses on the rise of soda science in the United States. Coca-Cola's strategy here centered on promoting "energy balance" theory—a paradigm that posits that obesity results not from excessive caloric intake, but from an imbalance between calories consumed and energy expended through physical activity. Greenhalgh meticulously traces how Coca-Cola funneled substantial resources into research supporting this theory, even as the scientific consensus pointed to sugary beverages as a major contributor to obesity. By funding scientists and public health professionals

who were willing to promote energy balance science, Coca-Cola effectively diverted attention away from the health risks of its products.

Greenhalgh's ethnographic approach shines in this section as she reveals how the company used its financial clout to build a network of researchers who were incentivized to shift the public health conversation away from the dangers of soda consumption. One key takeaway here is the sheer scope of Coca-Cola's influence, which extended far beyond research grants to include public relations campaigns, media outreach, and strategic partnerships with health organizations. This extensive network allowed the company to legitimize its preferred narrative about obesity for decades, even as independent researchers continued to point to the powerful role of sugary drinks in weight gain and chronic disease.

The book's second part shifts to China, a market that became critical for Coca-Cola in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By this time, Western consumers had grown more health-conscious, and soda consumption had begun to decline. China, with its massive population and burgeoning middle class, represented an enormous growth opportunity for the company. Greenhalgh's decades of experience studying China, particularly the far-reaching effects of the country's harsh population policy, make her especially well positioned to examine how Coca-Cola adapted its strategies there.

Greenhalgh's analysis of Coca-Cola's influence in China is particularly striking, as she uncovers how deeply the company managed to insert itself into the country's scientific and policymaking institutions. Through sponsorship of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) and related organizations, Coca-Cola framed China's obesity epidemic in a way that downplayed the role of sugary beverages. The corporation promoted the idea that obesity was a *uniquely* Chinese problem—one that should be addressed mainly through changes in physical activity. Greenhalgh documents how

this framing allowed Coca-Cola to stave off regulatory measures, such as soda taxes and mandatory product labeling, that almost certainly would have threatened profits.

The impact of this manipulation is stark. Greenhalgh details how between 1982 and 2019 rates of overweight/obesity in China soared, with adult overweight/obesity rising from 5.5 percent to over 50 percent, and child and adolescent overweight/obesity increasing by over 400 percent from an estimated 8.8 to 37.9 percent. These statistics testify to devastating public health consequences of Coca-Cola's interference in China's scientific and policy arenas. The corporation's inordinate impact defining scientific and lay understandings of obesity is still seen in the fact that energy balance science continues to shape official thinking and policy on chronic disease to this day.

What sets *Soda Science* apart from other critiques of corporate influence in science is the depth of Greenhalgh's investigation. Her multistaged ethnographic approach, which combines interviews with experts, analyses of public and private documents, and informal data collection, enabled her to produce a comprehensive account of the practices through which soda science made its impact. Particularly impressive is her use of confidential email exchanges between Coca-Cola executives and academic collaborators, obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. These emails provide a rare glimpse into the behind-the-scenes strategizing that went into shaping scientific and public perceptions of obesity.

Another notable aspect of Greenhalgh's work lies her ability to present complex ideas in a way that is accessible to a broad audience. While the book is meticulously researched and conceptually rigorous, it is also highly readable. Greenhalgh avoids academic jargon, making the text approachable for readers who may not be familiar with science studies or corporate influences in public health. This accessibility makes *Soda Sci-*

ence a valuable resource not only for scholars in anthropology, sociology, science studies, global studies, and public health but also for policy-makers, activists, and the general public. The two appendixes offer detailed information on Greenhalgh's methodology and working concepts and hypotheses to help guide other researchers who wish to investigate corporate-funded science and its effects on public policy; they make the book an excellent teaching resource as well.

Overall, *Soda Science* is a critical contribution to a growing body of literature on corporate influence in science and public health. Greenhalgh's compelling narrative not only exposes the tactics used by Coca-Cola to protect its interests but also serves as a broader warning about the dangers of corporate-funded science. By shining light on how global corporations like Coca-Cola can shape scientific research and public policy to serve commercial rather than public interests, Greenhalgh has produced a work that is both timely and essential. This book is a must-read for anyone concerned with the intersections of science, policy, and corporate power in the modern world.

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