

Amanda Ciafone, *Counter-Cola: A Multinational History of the Global Corporation*. Oakland: University of California Press. 2019. Pp. xiv, 409. Paper \$29.95.

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Through the in-depth study of a single organisation, the Coca-Cola Company, Amanda Ciafone uncovers and explains some fundamental dynamics in the evolution of capitalism in the last hundred years. Less in the business of producing drinks than in the one of orchestrating the franchising of bottling production across the world, the Coca-Cola Company exemplifies, writes Ciafone, key characteristics that we have learned to identify with contemporary, global capitalism, such as the commodification of culture, the financialization of the portfolio of activities and the commercialization of knowledge. “The Company made stuff while staying out of the business of making stuff” (p. 5), writes Ciafone before setting to explain how it does that in the following 300 pages. More ominously, the Company has been a trend-setter in outsourcing production; securing tax-havens for its profits; locking national and regional bottlers in restrictive contracts, which also controlled the way the commercialised the product; condoning or even supporting the browbeating of organised labour, and externalising to the local communities the health and environment costs of its business.

The strength and originality of this book is that it analyses these phenomena through perspectives external to the United States: the immersive studies of Coca-Cola’s activities in Colombia and India, two of its most controversial markets, where the Company’s reach in the national life and local communities has been significant, as well as the grassroots opposition to its cumbersome presence. Coca-Cola is after all a “global system” (p. 6), a multinational corporation that conducts most of its business and makes most of its profits outside of the United States, having perfected over time a model that minimizes the risks of doing so. In a compelling chapter on the branding strategy of the company, Ciafone reconstructs the gradual shift in positioning the brand -- the most valuable of the Company’s assets -- from a signifier of Americanness to a symbol of “corporate globalism” (p. 140), in which the fizzy drink represents the commonality among all people. By the early 1970s the Company was well on its way to accomplish this shift, as captured by its iconic advert, “I’d like to buy the world a Coke”, set in a “de-nationalised” field, and including a cast of sixty-five actors from twenty countries, lip-synching the famous anthem -- a global chorus.

Coca-Cola’s brand identity underscored peace, harmony and the commonality among different people, all united in imbibing a fizzy drink, but Ciafone’s research in Colombia and India, building on primary sources as well as existing literature, tells a different story. In the South American country, the Company’s corporate decisions intersected with the context of paramilitary violence and civil war of the 1990s. When Coca-Cola bottlers in Colombia responded to competitive pressure and the narrow margins of profitability established by the Company by making their workers more precarious, with short-term, part-time or outsourced jobs, the latter organised and fought back. Bottlers were legally independent companies but the

demands of labor “flexibilization” originated with the Company, which made key financial investments in bottlers. Colombian union leaders and militants were repressed by the threat of paramilitary violence and in fact more trade unionists were killed in Colombia in that period than in any other country of the world. In effect, bottlers hired paramilitaries as an instrument of labor management and acted in concert with them to terrorize activists. Back at home in the United States, the Company could avoid any legal responsibility for such actions by pointing to the franchise system that it had created and the nominal notion that the bottlers were independent entities that made their own decisions.

In India, where the government had induced the Company to leave between 1977 and 1993, its return came to signify for many activists the dispossession of the environment of poor rural communities that hosted the bottling plants for the benefit of the Indian middle classes that bought into the message of global consumerism. The Company exploited the water commons (the overall footbring of half a liter of Coke is 35 liters of water if one considers its ingredients as well as processing) to funnel it in the creation of a soft drink for sale. The irony of shortage of drinking water in contrast to the abundance of Coke fuelled protests and was captured in the iconic photo by Sharad Haksar, “Thirsty”, of a dry hand pump and a line of empty water pots against the backdrop of a Coca-Cola billboard (p. 248). The nation-wide battle led to substantial victories, such as the closing in 2004 of the Plachimada plant in Kerala.

Within a backdrop of continuous challenges to its business model, Coca-Cola set to protect its principal asset: being the most globally recognised brand. The last part of Ciafone’s book walks the reader through the Company’s attempts to contain these challenges through a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy, again exemplifying a discourse of ideological justification of capitalism that has become key to the neoliberal logic in recent decades. The irony, much evident in the case of Coca-Cola, is of course that CSR is proposed as a market-based solution for problems that capitalism has produced in the first place (p. 298).

Ciafone’s *Counter-Cola* is a compelling book that builds perceptively on previous studies, such as Bartow J. Elmore’s *Citizen Coke* (2015), whose focus was more on the extractive strategies and negative external impact of the Company, but goes further in explaining the strategic distinctiveness of the company in merging material and immaterial production, the latter by far its most remunerative one. In doing this the Company inspired, shaped and prefigured the shift to cultural and financial capitalism that characterizes the twenty-first century.

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