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Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water, by Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race

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Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water by Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race (MIT Press; 260 pages; 2015)

On January 26, 2016, during the height of public awareness surrounding the Flint, Michigan water crisis, Walmart, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and PepsiCo pledged to “meet the daily needs of over 10,000 school children for the balance of the calendar year” by donating “up to 6.5 million bottles of water [to] help with relief efforts.”¹ In the face of a catastrophe that Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.) decried for contributing to “a crisis of public confidence that should never be allowed to exist in America,”² this corporate generosity was, of course, laudable. Yet it was also emblematic of another dynamic: the ability of private water markets to provide an alternative water source in the face of real or perceived shortcomings in public water provision. And the bottled water industry was quite aware of these implications, as is clear from a Nestlé spokesperson’s statement that “[water quality c]oncerns in places like Flint . . . bring bottled water to people’s attention as a safe and sealed source of drinking water.”³

The injection of bottled water markets into the relationship between citizens and public water provision is at the heart of *Plastic Water* by the erudite Professors Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race. The book explores the multitude of factors that have contributed to the bottle’s rise to ubiquity and provides a thought-provoking survey of the complex relationships involved in giving bottled water each of the various meanings it possesses today. *Plastic Water*’s central argument is that the rise of contemporary bottled water realities is an event best understood by examining the interactions between the material properties of bottled water and the web of social, economic, and political arrangements underlying the societal meaning of water itself. The authors examine these interactions by treating bottled water as an actor deeply involved in its own ever-growing omnipresence and analyze the bottle’s corresponding interference with public water provision in light of this performative capacity. By demonstrating that the context-specific contours of the bottled water event are a function of these arrangements and the role played by the bottle in their development, the authors avoid oversimplification and show that the bottle’s normalcy cannot be attributed to any single factor.

The book is divided into three sections, each exploring a different aspect of the bottle’s rise to ubiquity. The authors first discuss the historical background for bottled water markets, evaluating the roles played by the development of the

1. Press Release, Walmart, Walmart, Coca-Cola, Nestlé and PepsiCo Come Together to Provide Flint, Mich., Public Schools with Water for Students Through the End of the Year (Jan. 26, 2016), <http://news.walmart.com/news-archive/2016/01/26/walmart-coca-cola-nestle-and-pepsico-come-together-to-provide-flint-mich-public-schools-with-water-for-students-through-the-end-of-the-year> [https://perma.cc/7KVT-4T9S].

2. Press Release, Senator Dick Durbin, Durbin, Cardin Introduce ‘CLEAR Act’ to Ensure Safer Drinking Water for American Communities (Feb. 25, 2016), <http://www.durbin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/durbin-cardin-introduce-clear-act-to-ensure-safer-drinking-water-for-american-communities> [https://perma.cc/QP2R-WJQZ].

3. Jennifer Kaplan, *Bottled Water to Outsell Soda for First Time This Year*, BLOOMBERG (Aug. 2, 2016), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-02/bottled-water-to-outsell-soda-for-first-time-with-nod-to-flint> [https://perma.cc/5RMR-CFR6].

polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottle, market branding practices, and the fitness-related concept of “hydration” in the bottled water event. Next, the book examines the meaning of this event in three specific contexts by exploring the bottle’s role in water provision in Bangkok and Chennai and the “shadow realities” of the bottle’s material durability created by bottled water waste in Hanoi. Finally, the book discusses the bottle’s role as a political object, examining the rise of bottled water activism and the market’s reflexive responses to political challenge.

Plastic Water sheds new light on both the mundane object bottled water has become and the meaning of water itself. The authors do not pretend that bottled water practices are sustainable or equitable when compared with public water provision, and indicate that they are themselves disturbed by the bottle’s implications. Despite these reservations, the authors avoid reducing their analysis to a bare criticism of bottled water markets by examining the multiple ontologies, not only of bottled water, but of water itself, thereby raising deeper questions about the societal meaning of this vital necessity. *Plastic Water* convincingly demonstrates that bottled water provides benefits that only emerge in relation to perceived or actual shortcomings in public water provision, ranging from the tap’s inability to satisfy the personalized desire to drink “on the go” to serious deficiencies in state-controlled water infrastructure. In this context, the bottle’s performative capacity is displayed through case studies exploring the bottle’s ability to shape public water provision while simultaneously being shaped by it. This seeming contradiction is most strikingly illustrated by the authors’ analysis of the bottled water market in Chennai, India’s sixth-largest city, which has been plagued by serious deficiencies in its public water infrastructure. Here, the bottle has emerged as an alternative water source that distinguishes itself from public sources through both its perceived safety and its availability. At the same time, its resulting ubiquity has simultaneously exacerbated the problems already present in public water provision by decreasing the demand for an improved infrastructure.

A reader unversed in the technical and theoretical language of the social sciences may find the authors’ prose too esoteric and technical to be easily comprehensible. And the book at times tends towards lengthy, abstract passages that leave the reader relieved to find brief summaries of the authors’ analysis. These issues do not, however, detract from the sagacity of the book’s arguments, and the determined reader is sure to gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities surrounding the ordinary water bottle from the authors’ analysis.

Nowhere is this analysis more relevant to the Flint crisis than in the book’s discussion of the rebranding of bottled water as an “emergency technology” in response to inadequate water provision and access to healthy food faced by indigenous populations in Australia’s Northern Territory. The authors recount how the beverage corporation Coca-Cola Amatil, facing growing criticism related to the health effects of high soft drink consumption rates, attempted to rehabilitate its brand by advocating the choice of water over soft drinks throughout the remote territory. Yet the company’s response—increased advertisement for its own bottled water brands and a decreased presence for its soft drinks in community stores—ultimately promoted only the company itself, rather than the health of these communities, as sales of both its branded waters and its soft drinks subsequently

rose.⁴ Bottled water thus “became a way for the company to promote itself by appearing to support a marginalized and disadvantaged population while stepping in as a nongovernmental actor to supplement an inadequate public system of basic service provision.”⁵

As Professor Hawkins herself explained while discussing the situation in Flint, “[b]everage companies see a state failure as a market opportunity.”⁶ *Plastic Water* offers a perceptive look at the mechanisms that created this state of affairs.

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4. GAY HAWKINS, EMILY POTTER & KANE RACE, *PLASTIC WATER: THE SOCIAL AND MATERIAL LIFE OF BOTTLED WATER* 211 (2015).

5. *Id.* at 209.

6. Joseph Erbenraut, *Here's Another Reason to Be Worried About Bottled Water*, THE HUFFINGTON POST (Aug. 22, 2016), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bottled-water-sales-water-infrastructure_us_57b7729fe4b0b51733a38be4 [<https://perma.cc/Q4SV-NH55>] (featuring an interview with Professor Hawkins).

