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Reviewed by Bart Elmore

The Coca-Cola Company might regret offering funding for this hard-hitting critique of the world’s largest soft drink firm. Back when media professor and cultural historian Amanda Ciafone was a graduate student at Yale University, she accepted a Coca-Cola World Fund grant managed by the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies that helped her complete what was then her dissertation on the ways in which Coca-Cola contested and assimilated countercultural challenges to its brand. The three thousand dollars she received clearly did little to turn this author into a Coca-Cola ally. In just over three hundred pages, Counter-Cola details Coca-Cola’s dark labor history in Colombia, documents water woes caused by company bottlers in India, and concludes by showing how the firm skillfully diffused contestations to its hegemony through skillful corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that ultimately did little to address underlying environmental problems and labor abuses.

Ciafone is primarily concerned with what she calls the “immaterial foundation” of Coca-Cola’s global empire: the “brands, services, and intellectual property” that made this firm so powerful (pp. 3, 4). In doing so, she positions her book as a departure from my own work, which largely centers on the materiality of Coca-Cola and the ways in which this Atlanta-based firm reshaped global ecosystems in pursuit of natural resources. Focusing mostly on Coca-Cola’s operations in India and Colombia, Ciafone offers illuminating insights into the firm’s international marketing campaigns. Through critical analysis of international print media, she shows how Coca-Cola used glossy advertisements to promote itself as a primer of local development that would bring jobs
and prosperity to host communities. The firm also found ways to assimilate the “values and styles most closely aligned with its challengers” into marketing materials during the “insurgent social movements and countercultures” of the 1960s (p. 146). At the same time, Ciafone notes that the firm used “pattern advertising” to ensure that Coke’s corporate messaging had a similar look and feel across the globe (p. 106). Her point here is that even though Coca-Cola outsourced much of the work of producing the actual products it sold, it tightly managed the “immaterial” assets it sent out through centralized offices.

Venturing into archives that many Coke scholars have ignored, such as the Biblioteca Público Piloto de Medellín in Colombia and the Communist Party of India-Marxist Archive in New Delhi, Ciafone seeks to offer what she calls a “people’s history of the Coca-Cola Company” that shows how local citizens in India, Colombia, and beyond helped to shape Coke’s corporate brand (p. 6). But the key players in this book, whether corporate actors or local activists, come and go, with Ciafone sparing little space for detailed life stories. Rare exceptions include those of James A. Farley, a charismatic politician and executive who led Coca-Cola’s overseas division beginning in the 1940s, and Albert H. Staton, an extremely influential Coke bottler in Latin America. Ciafone offers fascinating facts about these businessmen, but for the most part, readers rarely get backstory biographies of the central figures who developed Coke’s CSR initiatives or the labor leaders and environmentalist activists who fought the firm. Some allowance must be made for the fact that Ciafone had to protect vulnerable sources in Colombia, but in the case of slain union leader Isidiro Gil, more than a page reference would have offered a clearer picture of his labor struggle. *Counter-Cola*, in other words, is filled with theoretical language and is in many ways a people’s history with many faceless people.

Nevertheless, Ciafone’s efforts to show how “capitalism plays out ‘on the ground’” produce many dividends (p. 9). For example, she discovered through interviews with Coca-Cola workers in Colombia that roughly “75 to 85 percent of people working in the Coca-Cola industry in Colombia held temporary jobs” (p. 200). Such statistics help her to illustrate the type of labor “precarity” that helped Coca-Cola bottlers keep overhead costs down (p. 220). Her findings are similarly striking in sections that detail Coca-Cola’s water mismanagement in the Indian village of Mehdiganj. Here she cites an NGO study that claimed Coca-Cola’s bottling plant in the village paid only “$700 for an entire year’s water consumption in 2005” (p. 252). Thus, though Ciafone’s work sometimes rehashes old stories told in other Coke books and includes some unnecessary diversions into jargon-filled passages, it still offers refreshing new insights not found in Coke classics such as Mark Pendergrast’s *For

But despite what the book’s title would suggest, Coca-Cola is not Ciafone’s lone target. Counter-Cola holds that the solutions to international environmental problems and human rights violations lie outside Coca-Cola. In the final chapter, Ciafone indicts “NGOs, governmental and quasi-governmental agencies” for promoting CSR initiatives that allow multinational firms to effectively regulate themselves (p. 283). By accepting CSR as a viable path forward, environmental and labor activists are in effect “asserting the market’s ability to provide solutions to society’s problems, even if [the market] produced them in the first place” (p. 298). In sum, Ciafone’s book about Coke is in many ways a call to look beyond Coke—to avoid buying into the idea that boycotting one business will somehow solve water crises in India or labor troubles in Colombia. It is an important message for business historians and activists alike, who, blinkered by big brands, adopt a language of sustainability that puts private actors rather than public agencies at the center of the struggle to create a more just and equitable economy.

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Reviewed by David Stebenne

James Cortada, a professionally trained historian who worked for IBM for almost forty years, has written a comprehensive history of that firm. In addition to his insider experience, Cortada brings real scholarly expertise, having earlier produced a fine history of the data processing industry prior to computers, as well as other books and articles on related topics. To avoid corporate interference with the content of this new book, Cortada did not start working on it until he had retired from IBM. The good news is that he thereby avoided IBM’s requirement that anyone working there obtain prior approval before publishing anything about the firm. The bad news is that as a former employee Cortada no longer had access to the IBM archives he had used in writing earlier books. He relied this time on the considerable amount of primary and