

## Necessity and Desire: Water and Coca-Cola in India

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Sailin' 'round the world in a dirty gondola.  
Oh, to be back in the land of Coca-Cola.

—"When I Paint My Masterpiece," BOB DYLAN

What could be better than making your living by selling a product  
that makes billions of people happy?

—ROBERTO GOIZUETA, Coke chairman and  
chief executive, 1981-1997

As an iconic brand and company, Coca-Cola has been the subject of complex emotional investment for countless people across the world for more than a century. Whether *happiness* adequately captures the full range of these investments, as Roberto Goizueta seems to suggest, is no doubt a matter for debate. Less debatable is the notion that Coca-Cola has become the enormously successful global corporation that it is by cannily exploiting forces from a domain commonly regarded as culture. Most obviously it has done this through its legendary advertising campaigns. But as the brief quotation from the Bob Dylan song suggests, precisely to the extent that Coca-Cola became iconic it also increasingly became available for independent cultural representations in a variety of registers. Sometimes these representations abet Coca-Cola's self-representations; at other times they challenge them.<sup>1</sup>

More prosaically, however, Coca-Cola has been an enormously successful global corporation—indeed, arguably one of the corporations that pioneered the very idea of a global corporation as we understand it today—by making a number of beverage products out of mundane raw materials (such as water) that it markets around the world. In doing so, as we see in the case of its bottling plant in Plachimada, India, examined in detail below, it finds itself confronted by the rival needs of people not made quite so happy by its products. For all its exploitation of the rarefied domain of culture to sell its

products, Coca-Cola's business practices have more earthly—even polluting—material consequences. For all its efforts to cater to its customers' desires for happiness, it finds itself all too often directly implicated in trampling over the legitimate necessities of others.

A cultural history of Coca-Cola, then, should not only register the enormous iconic force of the global corporation in the domain of culture but should also consider the material consequences of its business practices and the resistance these practices have spawned, as illustrated by the Plachimada struggle. This cultural history needs to proceed in several directions simultaneously. As we shall see, one such direction is the problematic distinction between needs and desires.

#### NOTES ON A RESISTANCE STRUGGLE

In 2000 Coca-Cola opened a bottling plant in Plachimada, in Kerala, India. At first the villagers welcomed the bottling plant for its potential to generate jobs. By 2002, however, the relationship between Coca-Cola and the villagers had soured, pitting them in a struggle with each other that has reverberated around the world. At issue has been the groundwater that Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Limited (to give the Indian subsidiary of Coca-Cola its full name) has been mining for its bottles of beverages. Within two years of the plant's opening, the villagers noticed a severe depletion of the groundwater in the region and concluded that Coca-Cola was over-exploiting the groundwater. In April 2002 they started picketing the plant. Coca-Cola responded to the villagers' actions by sending one truckload of water each day to the two most affected villages, a move the villagers saw as totally inadequate. Since that beginning the struggle has grown and gone through many phases, and has raised troubling questions about global corporations and rights over water.

These events in Plachimada have elicited numerous reports from individuals and organizations and have been widely covered by the Indian press. In support of the struggle, *Down to Earth*, the online journal of the New Delhi-based Center for Science and Environment (CSE), has regularly archived and disseminated information and analyses about both the background and the evolving situation. Outside India, CorpWatch and India Resource Center, two nongovernmental organizations based in California that monitor transnational corporations, have played a similar role.

As the information available from these sources makes clear, the confrontations between Coca-Cola and the villagers have escalated steadily over the years, drawing in more and more parties. Initially, complicating matters somewhat, many of the employees of Coca-Cola, threatened with loss of

employment were the plant to close permanently, were ranged against the farmers of Plachimada.<sup>2</sup> However, the initiative quickly passed to the villagers of Plachimada, and the standoff would seem to have—though there can be no certainty about this yet—ended in their victory. In March 2004 the local governing body, the Panchayat Board, which had issued the original license to the Coca-Cola bottling plant, refused to renew the license and forced the plant to suspend operations. In 2005 news reports suggested that the courts of the state of Kerala, where Plachimada is located, might be amenable to closing the Coca-Cola plant permanently based on the principle that local communities should have the ultimate control over the area's resources.<sup>3</sup> At the time of this writing, conversations with activists close to the struggle indicate that Coca-Cola is exploring moving the plant, although this action has not yet been taken and Coca-Cola has also asserted that such a relocation is possible only under certain conditions.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the plant remains closed.

This resolution of the Plachimada struggle in favor of the local communities—at least for the moment—was not without its ebbs and flows, its many lines of contestations, its vexatious and contradictory political impulses. Evoking the complexity involved, C. R. Bijoy of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, in his useful review of the Plachimada struggle written in October 2006 for the *Economic and Political Weekly*, asks,

Why is Plachimada struggle unique? Is it because it is a struggle against the world's most well-known brand—Coca-Cola, the symbol of US imperialism? Or a struggle of primarily the adivasis, the symbol of "primitiveness and backwardness"? What made this poorest and assetless section stand up more than those peasants whose farms have been affected? How were they able to turn around the unhelpful panchayat, the antagonistic political parties, the skeptical media and "development"-obsessed state government from hostility to solidarity?<sup>5</sup>

The adivasis (otherwise known as "tribals" and commonly regarded as the descendants of the indigenous people of India), better-off peasants, local governing bodies, political parties, media, state and national governments, multinational corporations—in divergent ways all these entities were involved in the Plachimada standoff. In reviewing the Plachimada struggle, Bijoy poses a fundamental question: How is it that the least privileged in Plachimada (the adivasis) were able to force an outcome favorable to themselves? His answer is that the Plachimada struggle was able effectively to articulate a dire choice—"What is the primary use of water—domestic,

irrigation, or industrial? Which is superior—water for survival or water for profit?” (4332). Thus, he suggests, the anti-Coca-Cola struggle successfully highlighted the real stakes in Plachimada. Contrasting this was Coca-Cola’s lackadaisical approach to the complaints against it. Underscoring this approach, Amit Srivastava of the India Resource Center declared, “Coca-Cola needs to stop treating the issues in India as a public relations problem.”<sup>6</sup>

Clearly the questions Bijoy poses indicate that the Plachimada struggle cultivated various channels of contestation—grass-roots mobilization, resorting to mechanisms of redress available in local and state-elected administrative bodies, solidarity work from sympathetic national and international organizations, the publicizing of the issues through various news media. Using these means, the Plachimada struggle has managed successfully to recruit support for, as well as disseminate widely, its compelling articulation of the mismatch of competing claims: villagers’ claims on the water beneath their feet for agricultural purposes and daily use versus the claims on that water by a large multinational corporation headquartered on another continent for the consumption of luxury products by people living far away. As a site of struggle against Coca-Cola, Plachimada is not unique even within India (Mehdiganj and Kaladera readily come to mind), but it has become the most potent symbol of the grim nature of the choice posed by the activities of this most famous of global corporations between the necessity of some people and the desires of others.

A few statistics convey the existential reality behind this clash between necessity and desire. Every liter of beverage produced at Plachimada requires about 4 liters of groundwater. When the bottling plant was in operation, activists assessed that about eighty-five truckloads, each containing 550–600 cases, left the bottling plant daily. Each case contained twenty-four bottles of 300-milliliter capacity. Accordingly, the activists claim, the plant used about 1.4 million liters per day, more than twice that claimed by the company. (No surprise that Coca-Cola contests these figures.) In addition, the sludge distributed gratis by the plant as nourishment for cultivated land was found by a British Broadcasting Corporation report to contain toxic heavy metals.<sup>7</sup> The Plachimada controversy, therefore, concerns not just competing claims over groundwater, but it also raises urgent questions about the pollution caused by massive beverage bottling operations.

Furthermore, Plachimada is not the only water controversy in which Coca-Cola has become mired in India. In recent years Coca-Cola has entered the exploding Indian bottled-water market through its Kinley brand. Studies in 2003 by the CSE caused public furor when they showed high levels of toxic chemicals in bottled water, including Kinley. The studies revealed

that chemicals—the residue of pesticides and insecticides—were present at levels many times higher than the European Union norms for bottled water. Like other corporations cited in the study, Coca-Cola was forced to defend its Kinley brand publicly. It both challenged the CSE’s findings and maintained that India had not enacted appropriate legislation providing guidelines. This defense, however, missed a crucial point; the issue was emotive rather than legalistic: Why, some commentators in the media asked, did the Coca-Cola Company not regard the health of Indians with as much seriousness as the health of Europeans? The controversy caused by the CSE study goaded the Indian government into specifying norms for bottled water, which went into effect on 1 January 2004.<sup>8</sup> But the controversy has not gone away. Questions continue to be raised about the safety of the bottled water—and, indeed, bottled beverages in general—being sold in India.

Plachimada and the bottled water controversy are two episodes involving a global corporation operating in what these days is euphemistically termed an emerging market. In different ways, they highlight issues having to do with water as an essential element for human survival. If Plachimada exposes the fragility of the water environment in which large industrial bottling plants operate, the controversy over bottled water uncovers equally urgent questions about the safety of water at the point of consumption. These are events in a fraught and still unfolding multifaceted politics of water in the context of globalization. Coca-Cola has, as will become clear below, an intimate and complex relationship to water at many different levels. As such, it is an especially appropriate example through which to explore the fate of water in a world increasingly dominated by global corporations. In this context, a cultural history of Coca-Cola has a specific contribution to make. It is one fruitful way to explore how water as symbol encounters water as material reality, and how the politics and the economics of water in a globalizing world are not separate from its cultural resonances.

#### THE COMING POLITICS OF THIRST

Water is not only a vital biological and economic necessity, but it is also a cultural symbol of peculiar emotive force. The unique place of water in the lives of human communities has led to a number of recent books responding from various perspectives to the developing threats to its availability.

In *Blue Gold*, Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke review the approaching global water crisis in detail and find it the result of the explosion in fresh water use for personal, household, industrial, and agricultural uses.<sup>9</sup> According to them, “Available fresh water amounts to less than one-half of one

percent of all the water on earth. The rest is sea water, frozen in the polar ice, or water stored in the ground that is inaccessible to us" (5). Patterns of water consumption, they argue, are dangerously wasteful and exploitative of this finite supply. "Put in economic terms," they write, "instead of living on fresh water *income*, we are irreversibly diminishing fresh water *capital*. At some time in the near future, we will be fresh water *bankrupt*" (15). However, we will not all be bankrupt to the same extent and in the same way. "By the year 2025," they predict, "the world will contain 2.6 billion more people than it holds today, but as many as two-thirds of those people will be living in conditions of serious water shortage, and one-third will be living with absolute water scarcity. Demand for water will exceed availability by 56 percent" (24). Fresh water, long regarded as essential for life as well as taken for granted, is in the process of being made scarce.

Michael Klare's *Resource Wars* provides the geopolitical context to this looming crisis in water resources.<sup>10</sup> *Resource Wars* argues that global conflict in the twenty-first century will increasingly be over rapidly diminishing vital resources—"in some cases," he says, "exceeding the world's capacity to exploit new resources or develop substitute materials" (18). "Of the various materials that fall into this sensitive category," he goes on, "the most significant are oil and water. Both are critical for the functioning of modern industrial society, are being used in ever-increasing amounts, and most importantly are likely to be in insufficient supply to meet global requirements by the middle of the twenty-first century" (19). He cites the observation of UNESCO Director-General Klaus Toepfer in 1999 that "the most bitter conflicts of the near future may be fought" over water (141-142).

Klare's broadly geopolitical argument is supplemented by Vandana Shiva in *Water Wars*.<sup>11</sup> Shiva suggests that it is not sufficient to view the conflicts over water (already present and sure to intensify) as "simply traditional wars, fought with guns and grenades"; they are also "paradigm wars—conflicts over how we perceive and experience water" (ix). "Everyone agrees that the world is facing a severe water crisis," she writes. "There are, however, two conflicting paradigms for explaining the water crisis: the market paradigm and the ecological paradigm. The market paradigm sees water scarcity as a crisis resulting from the absence of water trade. If water could be moved and distributed freely through free markets, this paradigm holds, it would be transferred to the regions of scarcity, and higher prices would lead to conservation" (14-5). But the market paradigm is "blind," Shiva notes, "to the ecological limits set by the water cycle and the economic limits set by poverty": "[t]he water crisis is an ecological crisis with commercial causes but no market solutions" (15).

In the eyes of activists like Barlow, Clarke, and Shiva, the water crisis is the result of market-oriented policies emanating from the "Washington consensus," the name given to, as Barlow and Clarke note, "a model of economics rooted in the belief that liberal market economics constitute the one and only economic choice for the whole world. Key to this 'consensus' is the commodification of 'the commons.' Everything is for sale, even those areas of life, such as social services and natural resources, that were once considered the common heritage of humanity" (xii). The privatization and commodification of water—the transformation of water into a commodity for sale by assigning it a price—is a typically Washington-consensus solution, according to Barlow and Clarke. For the institutions of the Washington consensus, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, water is "a *human need*, not a *human right*. These are not semantics; the difference in interpretation is crucial. A human need can be supplied in many ways, especially for those with money. But no one can sell a human right" (xii). A human right can be made the object of ethical or political demands; a human need is not vulnerable in the same way. A human *right* is beyond negotiation in a way that a human need is not.

The deepening crisis over water is perhaps the most dramatic example of a process Joshua Karliner has called the "corporatization of the planet." In *The Corporate Planet*, he writes: "As the world sails into the new millennium, there is no doubt that transnational corporations are at the helm, piloting and propelling global geopolitics and the process of economic globalization. Indeed, many corporations have more political and economic power than the nation-states across whose borders they operate" (4-5).<sup>12</sup> The number of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the world, he notes, increased from seven thousand to forty thousand between 1970 and 1995. This phenomenal expansion of the power of the TNC is, of course, linked to the Washington consensus, or "neoliberalism," the more common term Karliner employs. "In our increasingly globalized economy," he observes, "fewer and fewer fruits of growth are channeled through government to meet people's basic needs. Instead, while corporate profits soar, ever weaker governments have less and less resources to devote to social issues such as health, education and environment, relegating them to the brutal whims of the 'free market'" (44). And so, Karliner might point out, the water requirements of the farmers of Plachimada are given less priority than those of the Coca-Cola bottling plant under a neoliberal regime.

The precise degree to which the rise in influence of the TNC has led to the weakening of governments is a matter of debate. While an increase in the influence of transnational corporations in recent years is incontestable,

the corollary to this development is not always a weakening of governmental power. Sometimes TNCs act in concert with strong governments, and at other times they act against them. The relationships between various transnational corporations and nation-states remain dynamic and evolving in the contemporary world. Yet it is not necessary to subscribe to the fashionable, if over-generalized, theory of the disappearing nation-state to agree with the central and more important thesis that Karliner advances: that more and more economic activity is being routed through transnational corporations, leading to the increasing commodification of the “commons”—definable, in the words of Barlow and Clarke, as “a shared inheritance or rights” belonging “to all people” (87).<sup>13</sup>

The enclosure of the water commons for private profit and the global water crisis are both directly related to this ongoing process of the corporatization of the planet. Both take myriad forms across the globe. In India, water scarcity has become increasingly urgent. In one sense, this water scarcity is part of a broader ecological crisis. As early as 1993, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha noted in their authoritative study, *This Fissured Land*, that “the country is living on borrowed time. It is eating, at an accelerating rate, into the capital stock of its renewable resources of soil, water, plant and animal life” (3).<sup>14</sup> More recent reports corroborate this assessment. With regard to groundwater, a 2006 report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that “in parts of India groundwater tables are falling by more than 1 metre a year, jeopardizing future agricultural production.”<sup>15</sup> The crisis is now significant enough to have warranted the 2007 Expert Group Report titled “Ground Water Management and Ownership” commissioned by the national Planning Commission of India.<sup>16</sup> This 2007 report notes that India has 16 percent of the world’s population but only 4 percent of the total available fresh water. Like the UNDP report, it finds that groundwater is being rapidly depleted in many parts of the country. It points out that 28 percent of the blocks (administrative units) of the country “are now semi-critical, critical or over exploited.”<sup>17</sup> The reasons for this crisis are many, according to the report, but an important cause is what has been seen until recently as a right to unlimited extraction of water by an individual or, in the case of the focus in this essay, a corporation. Citing the Coca-Cola Plachimada case, the report notes that the Kerala High Court has recently asserted the duty of state and local governing bodies to restrict the extraction of groundwater in the interests of ecological sustainability and the public at large.<sup>18</sup> Thus the Plachimada struggle has played its part in bringing renewed attention within India to the legal and economic environment within which access to water can be guaranteed.

It is instructive that Coca-Cola should be the corporation at the center of this struggle within India over the right to water. Unlike the French global corporation Vivendi, for example, Coca-Cola is not a major transnational corporation devoted primarily to the ownership, management, and delivery of water resources to consumers for profit. Nevertheless it is a significant presence in the bottled water trade, and, even more crucial, it is an enormous consumer of water for its millions of bottles of beverages. If not by the management of entire natural and artificial water storage and delivery systems, then, bottle by individual bottle, Coca-Cola, too, is engaged in the exploitation and enclosure of the water commons.

Further, not only does the manufacture of the products of the Coca-Cola Company depend on the availability of enormous quantities of water, but the very notion of a beverage company such as Coca-Cola is inseparable from the practice of ingesting water in times of thirst by human beings from time immemorial. The history and fate of Coca-Cola are intimately entwined with water not only economically but culturally and ideologically as well. To make this evident, a review of the history of the company—especially its cultural history—is clearly in order.

#### A REAL HISTORY OF AN UNREAL THING

The story of Coke has been told in a number of book-length studies whose titles are both deceptive and instructive: Mark Pendergrast’s *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Unauthorized History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It*; Frederick Allen’s *Secret Formula: How Brilliant Marketing and Relentless Salesmanship Made Coca-Cola the Best-known Product in the World*; and Constance Hays’s *The Real Thing: Truth and Power at the Coca-Cola Company*.<sup>19</sup> The iconic status of Coca-Cola comes through clearly in these titles, though, not surprisingly, none of these books makes a thoroughgoing critique of the ideology on which the iconicity depends. The last title—written after a decade of turmoil within the company—offers, however, a closer look at intrigues and financial shenanigans than do the other two.

We learn from these books, exemplary of a veritable industry of writing about Coca-Cola, that the company began in 1886 in Atlanta during Reconstruction as the invention of a former Confederate cavalryman named John Pemberton. Allen describes Pemberton as a man who “liked to dabble with patent medicines” (18). Carbonated drinks already had the reputation of being medicinal; Coca-Cola drew on this preexisting belief in putting itself forward as therapeutic. Hays suggests that the widely perceived “lift” provided by Coca-Cola came from the sugar, the caffeine, and the “trace amounts of coca, extracted from the plant used to make cocaine” (101).

In 1888 Asa Candler bought the formula from Pemberton, and it was he who turned Coca-Cola into the most successful soda pop brand in the United States. First sold through soda fountains, a combination of circumstances motivated Candler to explore the possibility of selling Coca-Cola as a bottled beverage. The innovation led to an astounding explosion in consumption of the drink. The bottlers of Coke were separate from the Coca-Cola Company, which restricted itself to producing the concentrate syrup needed to make the beverage and to nurturing and promoting the brand. "The Coca-Cola Company's syrup sales ballooned from 214,008 gallons in 1898, the last year Coke was served only at fountains, to 3,486,626 in 1909," Hays observes (25). Around 1901, because of changing attitudes toward cocaine, Candler removed it from the formula. "In later years," Pendergrast tells us, "he repeatedly denied, under oath, that the drink had ever had cocaine in it" (91). Pendergrast also suggests that the removal of the cocaine from the increasingly mass-marketed drink was prompted partly by public hysteria over "negro coke fiends" attacking whites (84). However, the company successfully weathered the furor resulting from this all too predictable conjunction of race, drugs, and economics. By the time the Candlers sold their company to a group of bankers in 1919, they were among the richest families in the United States.

Through the succeeding decades, under the leadership especially of Robert Woodruff, known as "the Boss," the Coca-Cola Company grew phenomenally. Woodruff, who came from the family behind the bankers to whom the Candlers had sold the company, exercised extraordinary control at Coca-Cola for many decades in various capacities. Pendergrast writes: "For over sixty years [beginning in the early 1920s], the charismatic leader would guide the soft drink's fortunes, making it the world's most famous product" (159). Woodruff guided Coca-Cola through the Depression and the Second World War. After the war, he oversaw its expansion into foreign markets, based on simple arithmetic—counting, says Allen, 2 billion mouths worldwide against 130 million within the United States (267). As Pendergrast, Allen, and Hays make abundantly clear, until his death in 1985 Woodruff was the real power in the Coca-Cola Company.

When it was time, Woodruff himself selected his successor, appointing as chairman and CEO in 1981 Roberto Goizueta, who had come to the United States as a refugee from Castro's Cuba. Hays, whose book is the most recent of the three, offers the most complete account of Coca-Cola under Goizueta, whom she describes as a legend in his own right. Woodruff, of course, had successfully turned Coca-Cola into a global brand, but the foreign-born Goizueta consolidated Coca-Cola as a global company and

made a name for himself as a corporate leader on Wall Street. Hays suggests that his legendary status in the corporate world—"people treated him more as a pontiff than a chief executive," she writes (68)—was mainly the outcome of the way he had taken a company built on a century-old brand name and made it as exciting as a fresh, new start-up. Under Goizueta, the company became enormously popular and profitable on Wall Street, Hays says. Yet this popularity and profitability was a mirage, the product of clever financial and legal arrangements between Coca-Cola's concentrate business and the erstwhile independent bottlers over whom the Coca-Cola Company had begun to assert greater and greater control. Under these arrangements profits tended to flow to Coca-Cola, and losses to the nominally independent bottlers. At the heart of the real thing were unreal financial and accounting practices. Under Goizueta's successors, during the nineties, this unreality began to catch up with the real thing—by the time of the publication of Hays's book in 2004, Coca-Cola was very much out of favor with Wall Street and reeling from a series of setbacks.

The relentless pursuit of profit that led to shady financial practices also fostered an evangelism regarding their product among generations of Coca-Cola executives. Again, Hays: "So complete was their obsession that these men"—the executives—"were tormented by the way Coca-Cola remained a distant also-ran to other beverages in many parts of the globe. It was not just a matter of vanquishing Pepsi-Cola; it was also about beating back drinks like coffee, tea, milk, and water" (6). In thrall to this astonishing desire to "beat back" even water, one executive, Goizueta's successor Doug Ivester, touted the health benefits of Coke on a tour of Africa: "Fluid replenishment is a key to health, and when you have a population that has appropriate fluid intake, what you find is they have a lot less kidney problems and kidney disease" (quoted in Hays, 293). Despite its diuretic qualities, it would seem, Ivester dreamt of Coke as a valuable hydrating agent in Africa. But the real situations in which Coke would appear in this guise—of an indispensable, if grotesque, essential of life itself—is brought out by Barlow and Clarke in *Blue Gold*. "In the maquiladora zones [of Mexico] near the U.S. border," they note, "clean water is so scarce that babies and children drink Coke and Pepsi instead" (59–60).

Notwithstanding this evangelical promotion of its soda pop, Coca-Cola was forced, in the nineties, to look beyond pop to new territory. "Coca-Cola was the centerpiece of the Coke empire," Hays writes, "but by the summer of 1998 Doug Ivester was trying to introduce a product most alien to traditional thinking at Coke. That product was plain water—the very thing Coca-Cola had striven for decades to replace as a drink" (246). What could have prompted such a break with the company's past history? Certainly the

move into the bottled-water market would seem to have been driven by a judicious appraisal of the changing drinking habits of consumers, who were becoming more health-conscious. Far from thronging to Coke as a valuable hydrating agent, they were beginning to wonder about its sugar and caffeine. Studies began to emerge linking Coca-Cola and other soda pops to obesity and tooth decay.<sup>20</sup> The health of children and adolescents was publicized as being especially at risk. And so—as if persuaded of the limitations in promoting Coke as a hydrating agent in the pursuit of profit, as if attempting now to exploit the very materiality of water where once a usurpation of its status as a thirst-quencher had seemed sufficient—Coca-Cola took the plunge into bottled water.

In this relentless pursuit of profit—as purveyor for more than a century of products, often the same ones, touted variously as medicinal potions, recreational fizzes, hydrating agents—Coca-Cola has been dogged by controversy. Whether it is the cocaine content of its original drink, the racial makeup of its workforce, unethical financial dealings, or water exhaustion at Plachimada, the good-times image the company promoted has often worn thin. Especially damaging have been the repeated reports of Coca-Cola's connections to repressive regimes in Latin America. The most famous of these cases concerns Guatemala, where unionization attempts in a Coca-Cola bottling plant in the seventies and eighties were met with such a whirl of assassinations and violence that an international campaign involving church groups, human rights organizations, as well as trade unions sprang up to counter it.<sup>21</sup>

More recently the Colombian food and beverages union SINALTRAINAL made similar allegations that Coca-Cola has intimate links to right-wing death squads. Beginning in the late 1990s SINALTRAINAL has spearheaded a worldwide campaign to publicize the alleged human rights abuses of Colombian bottlers associated with Coca-Cola. The campaign has included a lawsuit filed in July 2001 in a U.S. District Court in Florida under the Alien Tort Claims Act. According to a report made at the time by Garry Leech, the lawsuit “accuses the Coca-Cola Company, its Colombian subsidiary and business affiliates of using paramilitary death squads to murder, torture, kidnap and threaten union leaders.”<sup>22</sup> In March 2003 a U.S. judge declared that “the Colombian bottlers have a case to answer” but let the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola company itself off the hook (as reported by *Green Left Weekly*).<sup>23</sup>

Since June 2004 the chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola has been Neville Isdell, described in his biography on the company's Web site as “a native of Ireland.”<sup>24</sup> With an extensive background in Coca-Cola operations around the world (Africa, Australia, Europe, and Asia), Isdell was brought out of

retirement to helm the troubled company as it responded both to the Colombia and Plachimada controversies and to competition from business rivals such as Pepsi.<sup>25</sup> The controversies have led to potentially devastating actions by university students in the United States to eject Coca-Cola products from campuses.<sup>26</sup> These attacks on Coca-Cola from a variety of directions have been worrisome enough to merit statements and rebuttals carefully archived on the company Web site. Thus, under Press Center, the Web site presents two speeches by Isdell on water and sustainability in Asia as well as its response to a recent (January 2008) report by The Energy and Resource Institute (TERI) on Coca-Cola's bottling operations in India largely absolving Coca-Cola of the charge of overexploiting water.<sup>27</sup> In its response to TERI, Coca-Cola neglects to mention that Plachimada, the most controversial of its bottling plants, was not included in the report because the plant is currently not in operation. Nor—not surprisingly—does it mention that activists in India have challenged the TERI report.<sup>28</sup> In the prominence given both to Isdell's statements on water conservation in Asia and to the TERI report, the Coca-Cola Web site reveals the urgency of the controversy unleashed by Plachimada.

In India Plachimada is but one episode in a history of controversy. Coca-Cola entered India in the fifties when its local bottling franchisee was, Allen informs us, Yadavindra Singh, the Maharajah of Patiala: “Known around the world for his work as a diplomat, Olympic sportsman, and philanthropist, the maharajah lived in a cream-white castle the size of Buckingham Palace, with a 10,000-volume library, two square miles of tended gardens, a private army, and a hunting preserve stocked with partridge and wild boar” (312). In 1977, however, Coca-Cola was forced unceremoniously to exit India because of its refusal to submit to the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act promulgated by the first non-Congress Janata Party government in New Delhi. This regulation act pushed the company to dilute its equity stake in its Indian subsidiary to 40 percent, a requirement the company was averse to fulfilling. Rumors at the time suggested that the company was concerned about control over the secret formula for Coke.

The history provided by the Indian subsidiary on its official Web site during visits in June 2005 fails to mention these details, noting only that “after a 16-year absence, Coca-Cola returned to India in 1993.”<sup>29</sup> Nor does the official Web site reference the controversy in Plachimada in Kerala—or in other Indian states such as Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where the company has come into similar conflict with local communities. Instead, on the strength of the company's daily donation of two tanks of water and the digging of a bore-well, Plachimada is indicated in a list of philanthropic

“Citizenship” projects in which Coca-Cola is involved.<sup>30</sup> (It should be noted that these visits to the Indian subsidiary’s Web site were early in the growing controversy over Plachimada.)

In an apparent attempt to further underscore the company’s benefits to India, the Web site also notes that, “during the past decade, the Coca-Cola system has invested more than US\$1 billion in India” and that “Coca-Cola is one of the country’s top international investors.”<sup>31</sup> This unvarnished assertion of investor interest, however, contrasts with a review of the history of investment by Coca-Cola (and Pepsi-Cola) in India made by V. Sridhar, who wrote in *Frontline* in 2003: “The two quintessential United States-based multinationals’ operations in India in the last three decades represent a case study of how India’s industrial policy and regulations have been first dodged, then flouted and finally bent, to shape them according to the fancies of these companies.” Sridhar concludes that Coca-Cola’s activities especially reveal “the company’s unwillingness to come under public and shareholder scrutiny in India.”<sup>32</sup>

Present in force in places as far from one another as Colombia and India, Coca-Cola has been a global company for some time now; correspondingly, Coke—the product at the root of its operations—has been a commodity bought and sold globally. Around the time Pemberton was inventing Coke in Atlanta, Karl Marx was delineating in London the unique characteristics of the commodity as an object produced for exchange. In the first volume of *Capital* he observed the fetish character of the commodity, how the commodity obscures the authentic history of its production—the real social relationships and labor arrangements underlying its production—and manifests itself as an autonomous object in its relationship with other seemingly autonomous commodities.<sup>33</sup> Inevitably, however, Marx tells only part of the story with regard to a commodity like Coca-Cola at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the age of the corporate planet, the fetishism of such commodities has become ever more complex, ever more distended. They are not only the products of transnational arrangements of labor and capital; they are also potent links in the dizzying and ever ramifying currents of global commodity culture. Perhaps no commodity exemplifies this development more than Coke, which has found wide representation around the globe not only through various company advertising campaigns but even through works of art. In these representations, we find a potent exploration of the peculiar amalgamation of necessity and desire in the corporate history of the real thing, of how, in the marketing practices of global corporations, necessity can both be opposed to and become confederate with desire. They, too, can be seen as clues to the cultural history of Coca-Cola.

#### “LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF THIRST”

Borrowing from the American Declaration of Independence, a 1926 ad for Coca-Cola declared, with an insouciance that would seem appropriate to the Jazz Age, that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of thirst” brought people together at all the places where Coca-Cola was served.<sup>34</sup> In her book, Hays suggests that the alignment of Coca-Cola with the national values of America was carefully nurtured by the company. The advertising language has just the right tone of jaunty affirmation of these values—neither disrespectful, nor overly solemn. Nor does it neglect to advance the familiar notion that Coca-Cola is a good hydrating agent. Desire and necessity, taste and hydration—Coca-Cola is the answer to both. Such would seem to be the self-evident message of the advertising language.

Nevertheless, is there not in the language, discernible to the attentive reader, a certain unintended ambiguity? Is the pursuit of thirst to quench it? Or is it, rather, to produce it? The permanent—or even relatively long-term—eradication of thirst would seem to be detrimental to the profit-making interests of Coca-Cola. Indeed, the true function of the advertising language would seem to be the very *incitement* of a thirst that can only be quenched by recourse to the actual beverage. Coca-Cola’s true pursuit would seem to be of a regular and routine production of thirst as much as an equally regular and routine removal of it. Incitement and eradication, production and removal: the one succeeds the other in Coca-Cola’s pursuit of profit. Together they constitute one manifestation of the repetitive cycles of commodity enterprise—a repetition that finds a rather vivid and objective figuration in the millions of identical Coca-Cola aluminum cans and glass bottles.

Perhaps it is the very success of (especially) the millions of bottles of beverage as commodities—their shape and emblem soon famous around the world—that led Andy Warhol to use them in his art. Two Warhol works from 1962 are representations of Coca-Cola bottles. *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, oil on canvas, depicts scores of Coca-Cola bottles—a subset of a much larger, perhaps numberless collection extending beyond the bounds of the canvas—stacked tightly on seven shelves. Some bottles are empty, some half-full, and still others intact. In contrast, the second work, *Coca-Cola*, is a single Coca-Cola bottle transfigured by gold-leaf bands and collage. The two works would seem to oppose each other—the second offering viewers a bottle transfigured to uniqueness, and the first depicting numberless identical bottles, differing only (and that, too, not always) in the amount of fluid each contains. But is not the very point of the second work, with its individual bottle transformed by art, to foreground the sameness of every other bottle in the “real”



world of the commodity? Warhol once noted, "A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All Cokes are the same and all Cokes are good."<sup>35</sup> Both paintings, it would seem, by reference to the ubiquitous Coca-Cola bottle, illuminate the repetitiveness of a commercial and industrial society founded on an exaltation of the commodity. This, after all, is the thematic home turf for the Pop Art movement of which Warhol is widely regarded as the founder.

To the elaboration of this Pop Art, Warhol brought his intimate knowledge of the world of advertising. In the 1960 painting *Advertisement*, the interrupted, half-erased words and images both mimic the defacement and disfiguring to which real advertisements are susceptible and direct attention to their incitement of desire (for reshaped noses or Pepsi-Cola or strong arms). Like the commodity it serves, an advertisement may be transitory, but this very transitoriness is intimately linked to the pervasiveness of the language of the commodity, its ubiquity, and to the effectiveness with which modern society has been schooled in it, so that we comfortably provide the missing text and images to the painting. The painting is incomplete and disjointed on the canvas but not in our heads. As Warhol recognized through his artistic representations, Coca-Cola has played no mean role in the development and dissemination of this all-encompassing language and culture of the commodity.

Critics as varied in their sensibility and preoccupations as Frederic Jameson and Arthur Danto recognized the importance of Warhol's work. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson calls Warhol "the central figure in contemporary visual art" (8).<sup>36</sup> Like Danto, Jameson recognizes the intense scrutiny Warhol brings to the commodity through his artwork. Nevertheless Jameson is unable to find in this scrutiny "critical or political statements" on the culture of the commodity (158). In this aspect, Warhol's art proves itself an example of postmodernism. Danto, on the other hand, finds in Warhol's paintings of Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell soup cans an approach to contemporary reality "rich with meaning": "Warhol's intuition was that nothing an artist could do would give us more of what art sought than reality already gave us" (186).<sup>37</sup> Jameson bemoans the lack of political intent in Warhol, whereas Danto finds in the very lack of political intent a peculiar intentionality. There is no need, for my purposes here, to adjudicate between Jameson and Danto; it is sufficient to note that the varied critical responses Warhol's art has elicited recognize the potency with which it identifies the world of the commodity.

In making Coca-Cola central to an exploration of the world of the commodity, Warhol underscores Coca-Cola's almost unrivaled status as an iconic

corporate brand in the history of commodity culture. His works become what may be called artistic meta-reflections targeting Coca-Cola's discursive self-presentation, thereby targeting the elaborate machinery of advertising by which Coca-Cola instigates desire. As the lines of separation blur between advertising and art, commodity culture and high culture, the two Warhol representations of Coca-Cola bottles direct attention to the interplay between necessity and desire—in advertising and in themselves. What is the place of desire in the Warhol representations? Is the desire in them/for them distinct from the desire evoked by the countless representations of Coca-Cola bottles in advertisements (on which, indeed, the art works are parasitic)? And, if so, how so? If the bottom-line necessity of the profit margin is channeled into Coca-Cola's advertising campaigns, what form of necessity, if any, do we find in the Warhol art? What is the place of the notion of necessity in the (Kantian) purposive purposelessness of the art world? By confronting the world of advertising with the ostensibly separate domain of art (an ostensible separation that is undone in the very confrontation), the Warhol representations interrogate both. In the process, the cultural history of Coca-Cola—not just the political economy of its operations but also its economies of desire—is indexed.

The exemplary commodity character Warhol saw in Coca-Cola was also discernible to others, more incisively. "I get good advice from the advertising world," the British punk rock group The Clash sang ironically in "Koka Kola": "Koke adds life where there isn't any."<sup>38</sup> Later in the song, they describe "Koka kola advertising and kokaine / Strolling down the broadway in the rain." The culture of the commodity is a culture of addiction—repeated and helpless consumption: desire becomes necessity—in which Coca-Cola stands directly implicated. The addiction need not be understood only as a chemical dependence on the sugar or the caffeine or, in the original formula, cocaine; the dependence—and here is where advertising plays its crucial mediating role—is also cultural and ideological. Coca-Cola's bottle had become (long before Andy Warhol and The Clash) a potent hieroglyphic for transnational commodity culture (and associated notions of modernity, American-ness or cosmopolitanism): "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thirst." The associations, repeated to the point of addiction, are available not only to American consumers of Coca-Cola but have spread across the globe along with the bottles and cans of the beverage. And so, when The Clash addresses the tragic predicament of the "Amerasian" child abandoned in Ho Chi Minh City in "Straight to Hell," they lecture, "Lemme tell ya 'bout your blood bamboo kid. / It ain't Coca-Cola it's rice." The West is Coca-Cola, the East is rice, and the latter will always desire the

former while being reciprocally betrayed. This representation of the East-West dynamic in the song, though vexing on many other levels, is largely accurate in uncovering the multiple meanings that have come to adhere to Coca-Cola in a transnational context. By the power of addictive association, if nothing else, Coca-Cola has come to represent, as the lyrics by The Clash recognize, "America the desirable" to the rest of the world.<sup>39</sup>

For The Clash and similar bands, a critique of the culture of the commodity from the perspective of what Dick Hebdige has analyzed as an oppositional subculture of working-class white ethnicity cannot simply remain external—something to be described and skewered in song lyrics.<sup>40</sup> Because of The Clash's aspirations to a politics of opposition, the band's progression from obscurity to megastar status as one of the most widely heard and highly regarded punk rock bands of the 1970s and the 1980s required a difficult navigation of the treacherous currents of transnational commodity culture. Testifying to this difficulty is the band's tumultuous relationship with its recording label, CBS, itself a transnational corporation to rival Coca-Cola. Dick Hebdige observes in *Subculture*: "During the Clash's famous performance of 'White Riot' at the Rainbow in 1977 when seats were ripped out and thrown at the stage, the last two rows of the theatre (left, of course, intact) were occupied almost entirely by record executives and talent scouts: C.B.S. paid for the damage without complaint. There could be no clearer demonstration of the fact that symbolic assaults leave real institutions intact" (160). America is the commodity's truest home, and songs by The Clash repeatedly critique both commodity and America even while feeding on them. Such feeding may not preclude critique, but the resulting tension is not so easily resolved. "I'm so bored with the u . . . s . . . a . . .," The Clash sang in one of the most well-known punk rock anthems ever, "But What Can I do?"<sup>41</sup>

When it comes to as potent and as carefully nurtured a brand name as Coca-Cola, it is futile to insist on an unremitting separation of advertising from art, of commercial signification from cultural representation. This is not only because of the usual "cultural studies" arguments regarding the contingent definition of "culture" within specific historical conjunctures, compelling though they are. Coca-Cola itself—as if to underscore these very arguments through its corporate practice—has continually fudged the lines of distinction at stake here. Thus the company's advertising campaigns often draw unabashedly on the potent energies of "art." In the thirties and forties Coca-Cola called upon the artistic talents of Norman Rockwell and N. C. Wyeth for its advertising campaigns. At other times it has made use of a variety of pop music icons. More recently, in India, it enlisted the

histrionic skills of Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan (most well known internationally for his starring role in *Lagaan*) for a series of skits (the innovative "Thanda Matlab Coca-Cola" TV advertising campaign).<sup>42</sup>

The most memorable of these comic skits—perhaps half a dozen have aired on TV over the last few years—was made hard on the heels of the controversy referred to above over the toxic content of soda and bottled water marketed in India. In it, Aamir Khan plays a Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) intellectual incensed by news of the presence of toxic chemicals in the soda. On an outing with his family to a restaurant, he refuses to order Coca-Cola, until to win the argument with his wife he decides to test the soda himself. As bottles of soda arrive at his table, he proceeds to rapidly gulp them down one after the other, thus confirming the irresistible taste certainly, but apparently also the superior quality, of the soda. The skit concludes with the Bengali intellectual attesting sheepishly to his wife's good sense—Coca-Cola is indeed safe and tasty.<sup>43</sup>

This skit, like its companions in the series, trades in cultural stereotypes; the "intellectual" is portrayed as a paragon of political dogmatism—how very Bengali some viewers were no doubt beguiled into thinking—who is given his comeuppance (albeit through the delightful experience of downing numerous bottles of Coke) by lived experience. Simultaneously the Bengali intellectual is portrayed as effeminate and not modern, as easily evident from his clothes, thus locating him outside a world of positive associations deemed desirable by Coca-Cola. Carefully aligning itself with modernity has been a consistent aspect of Coca-Cola's long cultural history, seen not only in its own advertising campaigns but also in independent representations. In this context—aside from the advertising, art, and music already discussed here—we might mention the utterly reprehensible South African film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which trades rather shamelessly on Coca-Cola's association with modernity. In the film, an empty Coke bottle becomes a modern marker of externality to a society depicted as primitive. Africans, primitive and innocent or else violent and revolutionary, are juxtaposed to good-hearted, white protagonists who represent a sensible modernity.<sup>44</sup>

As noted, such modernity is initially denied the Bengali intellectual in the Aamir Khan skit, though by the end the matter has become more complicated: the Bengali intellectual is sucked back into the regime of modernity by being, literally, overcome by desire. As he downs bottle after bottle, the pleasure derived from drinking Coca-Cola is so great that his susceptibility to political brainwashing (as the commercial would have it) is vanquished. In this respect, Coke may be seen to appear benign. At the same time, however, the commercial evokes, even if unwittingly, the specter of

addiction—so powerful is the experience of drinking Coca-Cola that the hapless intellectual has no option but to give in to it. Desire becomes necessity. The central trope in Coca-Cola's business model as a pioneering global corporation producing what is called, with disarming candor, *consumer products* stands revealed—desire is necessity, necessity desire. To participate in this consumer lifestyle, as the cultural history of Coca-Cola itself readily makes evident, is to be in the vanguard of history, which is why Coca-Cola has been so successful in appropriating for its products associations of cosmopolitanism and modernity.

Commodity enterprise, Americanization, cosmopolitanism, modernity—by now, in the age of neoliberalism, these notions have grown irretrievably interconnected and become crucial components of globalization. As the readings above suggest, Coca-Cola is exceedingly expressive of this interconnectedness—indeed, so expressive that the cultural history of Coca-Cola might begin to stand in for the very cultural history of globalization; so expressive that “coca-colonization,” a term that has entered the Oxford English Dictionary, has come into common usage to suggest a negative appraisal of the hegemony of American values, lifestyle, and commodities around the world.

It seems to me that the acute awareness of these very negative associations of Coca-Cola leads the company to launch the “Thanda Matlab Coca-Cola” kind of advertising campaign, apparently aimed at distancing Coca-Cola as a commodity from its American associations by invoking more regional forms of cultural discourse about Bengalis—or Biharis or Gorkhas (to cite two other examples from the series). Thus the official Web site insists:

While the Coca-Cola Company is a global company with some of the world's most widely recognized brands, the Coca-Cola business in India, as in each country where we operate, is a local business. Our beverages are produced locally, employing *Indian citizens*, our product range and marketing reflect *Indian tastes* and lifestyles, and we are deeply involved in the life of the local communities in which we operate. (Italicized words are in bold on the Web site.)<sup>45</sup>

I have no desire to assume the insincerity of the different regional subsidiaries of Coca-Cola in their attempt to adapt their products for their specific markets, but surely there is such a thing as protesting too much? Worth noting is that the company itself continues to be headquartered in Atlanta, where the secret formula is kept secure.

Furthermore, notions of modernity and cosmopolitanism, albeit apparently delinked from American associations, remain key factors in marketing Coca-Cola successfully anywhere in the world. In India, too, Coca-Cola, while gesturing toward regional specificities, has no desire to be defined primarily by them. And so it is that the smug knowingness with which the advertisement skits described above are suffused—we know all about those Bengali intellectuals, do we not?—undermines the very regional resonances being evoked, postulating instead a viewer who is able to resist being pinned down in just these ways. Also worth noting: whether or not every drinker of Coke around the globe is aware of its American antecedents, Coke surely heralds a consumption-driven lifestyle first perfected on American terrain. So long after the “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thirst” ad, does Coca-Cola really still need to refer directly to America in order to evoke America?

Today the ways in which the relays between “commodity” and “America” and “modernization” come to be organized in the various locations of the globe are myriad and, as should be evident from the foregoing analysis, often contradictory. But each manifestation involves a transmutation of necessity into desire, and desire into necessity. Coca-Cola offers one potent example of the manner of the transmutation. Robert Woodruff, the legendary Coca-Cola executive, once declared that he wanted to put Coke “within an arm's reach of desire.”<sup>46</sup> But where does desire end and necessity begin? In its long history, the Coca-Cola Company has continually attempted to disturb the line separating the one from the other. Is Coke simply a carbonated drink? No, it is a medicinal potion. Is it something you drink only when you are feeling tired? No, it is a drink fit for all social occasions. Is it mainly a fun drink, then? No, it is an answer to thirst, even a vital hydrating agent for desperate Africa. And must the company itself remain only a purveyor of brands of refreshing soda pop? No, it will set out to refresh and hydrate more directly, through bottled water.

Through a complex switching back and forth between water and Coke as consummate drinks, between hydration and taste as justifications for its existence, the Coca-Cola Company has sought to make itself both necessary and desirable, indispensable and fun. In the process it has appropriated, at different times and in different ways, the trappings of America, cosmopolitanism, and modernity. In these appropriations Coca-Cola has often astutely enlisted the talents of various artists, musicians, and cultural icons. In its turn, the very success of Coca-Cola has also made it the object of various other representations in visual art, music, and film which sometimes echo Coca-Cola's self-representation and sometimes criticize it. As might be expected, those that imitate leave unquestioned Coca-Cola's self-representations, and

indeed redeploy them for their own consonant ends; on the other hand, the critiques struggle to look beyond the self-representations of Coca-Cola. At issue in these representations and counter-representations is a contest over the cultural history of Coca-Cola.

#### THE NECESSITIES OF SOME AND THE DESIRES OF OTHERS

A review of representations and self-representations of Coca-Cola shows how the global corporation has endeavored to present itself as both necessary and desirable, and that in this endeavor it has used a host of associations that have marked it indelibly. The unsympathetic representations, such as by The Clash, register the negative associations Coca-Cola has acquired. A critical cultural history of Coca-Cola can complement an exploration of these representations and counter-representations by reference to the global corporations' depredations in sites such as Plachimada. Indeed, Coca-Cola's manipulations of necessity and desire invite such a turn in the direction of a more conventionally defined politics. In those politics—the politics of Plachimada, for example—necessity and desire appear in other guises. In the view of the villagers of Plachimada, the activities of the Coca-Cola bottling plant have drastic effects on their access to something widely accepted as a basic necessity for life—adequate quantities of safe water for personal and agricultural uses. Not an evocation in a clever marketing campaign or corporate press release, necessity is registered here, one might say, at a more basic existential level in terms of the unavoidable requirement for a sustainable community (as opposed to a luxury). Thus, where for Coca-Cola necessity and desire is conceived with regard to *consumers*, activist opposition to global corporations such as Coca-Cola challenges this conception, trying, as the brief review below will show, to uncover the multiple ways in which global corporations are singularly disinterested in the true necessities of human beings.

There was a time, in the view of Richard L. Grossman and Frank T. Adams, when corporations were considered directly accountable to the communities where they operated. In *Taking Care of Business*, they detail the process by which corporations in the U.S. have steadily become ever more independent of citizens' control.<sup>47</sup> "Corporations cause harm every day," they write. "Why do their harms go unchecked?" Initially corporations were controlled and constrained by their charters of incorporation, granted them by state legislatures. Grossman and Adams write, "The U.S. Constitution makes no mention of corporations. Yet the history of constitutional law is, as former Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter said, 'the history of the impact of the modern corporation upon the American scene'" (3). Accordingly

judicial processes over the last two centuries have steadily granted corporations more and more immunity from liability for their actions. The result has been a steady erosion of democracy. In contrast, Grossman and Adams insist, "our sovereign right to decide what is produced, to own and to organize our work, and to respect the earth is as American as a self-governing people's right to vote" (18). They argue that citizens should use the charters granted to corporations to conduct their business to take back control over corporations and keep them accountable to citizens. This return to original principles will require judicial as well as legislative challenges on the part of citizens.

Grossman and Adams confine their argument to the national context of American corporations, directing attention to the judicial and legislative processes through which corporations' powers might be constrained and their harms remedied for the benefit of citizens. But what can be said of harmful corporate behavior in distant parts of the globe? Although there are nation-specific laws to which corporations—such as Coca-Cola in India—can be held accountable, transnational corporations also enjoy layers of legal, physical, and financial protection difficult to breach from any one location alone. The global corporate accountability movement—the movement to hold transnational corporations accountable for their actions—is still in a nascent stage. Any attempt to hold transnational corporations accountable across national borders will have to rely on broader notions than citizens' rights. Along with nation-specific judicial and legislative challenges, the corporate accountability movement will have to strengthen and coordinate transnational solidarity actions, such as the student anti-sweatshop movement in the United States.

The international labor movement also has an important contribution to make here. In general, unions and other labor organizations have been critical of transnational corporations, berating them for lowering labor standards, but have found it difficult to organize against them. Sometimes, as initially in Plachimada, workers have found themselves aligned with the global corporation against opponents because their jobs depend on it. In *Globalisation and Labour*, Ronald Munck observes that the labor movement began with an internationalist perspective in the nineteenth century, fragmented into nationalist camps after the First World War, and then may, in more recent years, be returning to internationalist perspectives.<sup>48</sup> But this return, which targets global corporations in particular, must reject a narrow workplace-focused trade unionism for a broad-based labor movement that recognizes that workers have multiple identities and that these can be useful in organizing them as workers.

Reciprocally a broad-based campaign for workers' rights that sees itself in alliance with other progressive formations such as some religious groups and human rights groups can bring pressure on a global corporation much more effectively. Munck gives the example of a campaign against a Coca-Cola factory in Guatemala City during the eighties:

Attacks on the Coca-Cola Union leaders by state violence, with management complicity, led to an effective campaign by the relevant International Trade Secretariat, the IUF, then led by Dan Gallin. After failing to achieve negotiations with the company, the IUF called for a tourist boycott, which was supported by Amnesty International and other human rights organisations. The objective of the international campaign was to secure recognition of a genuine trade union at the Coca-Cola plant and to remove the threat of violence and intimidation by the management and the state. (152)

Munck's term for this kind of a broad-based internationalist labor initiative is "social movement' unionism" (154). Such labor initiatives attempt to organize not only workers but also their families and friends, not only at factories but also at churches and temples, not only where the workers labor but also where they live. It tries to learn from the movement-oriented political activism of the sixties and later in organizing at multiple sites and through multiple channels while keeping its focus on labor issues. Maintaining a focus on labor issues does not preclude unions from participating in diverse social justice campaigns (such as on gender, environmental, and health-care issues) and from allying with organizations devoted to similar causes—indeed, the very point of "social movement unionism" is to engage in such collaborations. Since labor issues are at the center of the operations of global corporations, any transnational campaign to resist the abuses of global corporations such as Coca-Cola will want to include the power of unionism.

The environmental movement provides another important angle of resistance to the excesses of global corporations. In the case of Plachimada, in fact, much of the international solidarity work in support of the villagers' struggles has been done by environmental activists. In addition to the rapid depletion of groundwater resources, the Plachimada campaign has focused on the distribution of sludge produced by the Coca-Cola plant to farmers as manure for fields. Later tests have revealed this sludge to be toxic, and the astounding callousness of Coca-Cola in getting rid of its waste product in this fashion has become yet another point of contention for the farmers. By raising these kinds of issues, environmental activism helps to bridge the

concerns of local communities such as the farmers of Plachimada with the concerns of a larger, even global, public that has been made increasingly aware by the movement itself of the damage caused to the environment by the reckless activities of global corporations. For a certain kind of environmental movement—for there are different kinds—the challenge is, in Joshua Karliner's words, "resolving the twin global crises of environment and poverty."<sup>49</sup> Thus the more enlightened variety of environmental movement tries to balance the demands of the environment with the demands for "development," the process through which impoverished societies set out to eradicate poverty.<sup>50</sup>

However, the primary site of struggle against global corporations remains, in important respects, the local—the community immediately surrounding a particular site of struggle. If the Plachimada struggle has succeeded in its objectives, it is because it has successfully pressed its case in the local governing bodies. Because these bodies have the authority, at least in the case of Plachimada, to license and revoke the plants' license, they are especially vulnerable to pressures from grassroots mobilization owing to their proximity to affected communities. Of course, laws differ from country to country and, indeed, from region to region within a country. Furthermore, even if laws are amenable, circumstances might not be. It hardly needs reminding that the success at the local level in Plachimada—which even now remains tentative and temporary—cannot necessarily be repeated everywhere. Nevertheless local governing bodies offer important opportunities to movements aiming to hold global corporations accountable. Strengthening and making use of the instruments of local democracy, as indeed Grossman and Adams also argue, can often be the most effective way to bring pressure to bear upon a particular issue. Although such action may only be able to target one small part of a global corporation's vast operations, it can win real victories. The global corporation as a whole may remain insulated behind the barriers of national and international boundaries, but a specific part of its operation may become vulnerable to local actions. The lesson here would seem to confirm an already well-known one—the necessity to complement global strategies of resistance with local ones.

The corporate accountability movement, the international labor movement, student activism, the environmental movement, and local democracy movements—these are only five of a variety of ways in which global corporations can be, indeed need to be, challenged. Global corporations are powerful, large and multifaceted organizations impacting human beings in myriad ways. To be challenged successfully on a specific issue, they need to be approached along many different lines of contention. Different movements

with different immediate concerns need to coordinate their activities. An important development enabling such coordination is the World Social Forum (WSF), which provides a valuable opportunity for activists in different movements from around the world to meet. The WSF began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2000 as a counterweight to the World Economic Forum (of leaders in mainly business and government spheres worldwide) held annually in Davos, Switzerland. After three meetings in Porto Alegre, the WSF moved to India for the 2004 meeting.

The 2004 Forum in Mumbai made it possible for various groups from across the globe opposed to Coca-Cola to exchange information and pledge support to one another, illustrating through this specific instance the role of the WSF as a catalyst for global activism. Events aiming to bring attention to water issues and Plachimada were organized in India both before and after the Forum. The People's World Water Forum was organized in New Delhi before the WSF in Mumbai, and after the Mumbai event concluded a group of Indian and international activists concerned about water issues—including Maude Barlow, Vandana Shiva, and the French anti-globalization activist José Bové—made a well-publicized visit to Plachimada to attend a World Water Conference organized by the local panchayat.<sup>51</sup> The strategy here was clear: as the *Frontline* article covering the event noted, the intention was “quick-linking” the Plachimada struggle to “anti-globalisation efforts world-wide” (39).<sup>52</sup>

The Plachimada struggle has shown a remarkable ability to sustain itself through various linkages at the local, national, and international levels. A few months after the post-WSF World Water Conference, Medha Patkar, a leader of the historic struggles around dam building in Western India, made an equally publicized trip to Plachimada. “Our struggle is not against the workers of the company,” she declared while there. “These workers who are part of the class struggle of every working man should join the fight against the multinational companies who exploit natural resources, a common property of the locals.”<sup>53</sup> Through these kinds of exchanges with various levels of anti-globalization struggle ranging from the global to the national, the local Plachimada struggle has tried to match the superior scale and reach of a large global corporation like Coca-Cola. Such exchanges are not unique to the Plachimada struggle; similar linkages have been forged in the struggles against Coca-Cola in Guatemala in the seventies and eighties and currently in Colombia. As corporate globalization has grown ever more sophisticated and potent, able to yoke together apparently contradictory impulses from a variety of sites, activism, too, has tried to globalize itself, to offer an alternate vision of “globalization from below” (to echo the title

of the book by Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, and Brendan Smith).<sup>54</sup> It is safe to say that the linkages the local struggle successfully established with other levels of the globalization-from-below form of resistant activism played useful sustaining and publicizing roles.

Plachimada is now one of the sites around the world where the limits of a global corporation's freedom of action is being tested, where a global corporation's pursuit of profit is coming up against a community's access to something as basic as water. Who has what rights here? Indeed, should the language of rights even be applicable to corporations? Can corporations have rights in the way individuals do? Barlow and Clarke would argue that they cannot. Reciprocally, if every human being has an inalienable right to water, what kind of limit does that place on the corporation? “Rights,” Amartya Sen has written, “are entitlements that require correlated duties. If person A has a right to some X, then there has to be some agency, say B, that has a duty to provide A with X.”<sup>55</sup> Within this understanding of rights, widely endorsed now, what remedies are available in a situation like that prevailing in Plachimada? And how can these remedies be enforced in the case of a global corporation such as Coca-Cola (or, far more dramatic, in the case of Union Carbide in Bhopal)? These are a few of the questions confronting the various movements aiming to contain and cease the harmful behavior of global corporations like Coca-Cola.

In Plachimada, Coca-Cola has run into opposition as a global corporation intimately engaged with water—both as natural element and cultural symbol. As a profit-pursuing American global corporation with a brand name perhaps unrivaled for its associations of cosmopolitanism and modern living, Coca-Cola uses water both as a raw resource for the manufacture of its products and a cultural resource for their sale. But even as Coca-Cola has responded to the alleged desire of Indians for its specific brand of refreshment and hydration, it has left Plachimada parched of such a basic necessity as water. Kobe Steel executive Takyua Negami believes that “the corporation's activities are a shadow of the people's desire. If the people don't want to spend more, then there are no sales. . . . It's the people's desire which gives the corporation its room for growth.”<sup>56</sup> What Negami leaves unstated is the ways in which global corporations manipulate and redefine “desires.”

This manipulation and redefinition takes place, as I hope my analysis has shown, primarily in the domain of culture. Accordingly, cultural histories of global corporations—that is, delineations of the histories of global corporations as cultural entities through both their own and alternative representations—can bring the light of critique into this shadowy world of corporate desires. Global corporations such as Coca-Cola play fast and loose with the

distinction between necessity and desire in their pursuit of profits, leading to crises such as the one in Plachimada. Cultural histories offer opportunities to understand the processes by which they do this and, learning from a politics of opposition to global corporations, to offer different approaches to the notions of desire and necessity. What is the desire of the villagers of Plachimada? What is their necessity? By revealing Coca-Cola's manipulations of the notions of necessity and desire, I hope my cultural history of the global corporation has made it possible to pose these alternative questions in meaningful ways, and thus contribute to the myriad struggles around the globe to hold corporations accountable for disregarding the necessities of some for the desires of others.

#### NOTES

The complete lyrics of the song quoted in the first epigraph can be found at <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/masterpiece.html> (accessed 6 July 2008). The second epigraph is quoted in "Does Coke Need a Refill?" *New York Times Sunday Business* (27 May 2007): iff.

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1. In the Bob Dylan song, the land of Coca-Cola is a counterpoint to the European land of Botticelli masterpieces. Is this an ironic contrast between (contemporary American) low culture and (older European) high culture? Perhaps, though it is not immediately evident in which direction the irony moves.

2. See <http://www.indiaresource.org/campaigns/coke/2004> (accessed 5 June 2004).

3. *The Hindu* (Web edition), <http://www.thehindu.com/2005/03/26/stories/2005032612920100.htm> (accessed 27 March 2005).

4. Conversation with C. R. Bijoy of the People's Union of Civil Liberties, 5 January 2008.

5. C. R. Bijoy, "Kerala's Plachimada Struggle: A Narrative on Water and Governance Rights," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 October 2006, 4332-4339, quote at 4332. Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.

6. See <http://www.corpwatch.org> and <http://www.indiaresource.org> for histories and mission statements for the two organizations (both accessed 6 July 2008). For the quote from Amit Srivastava, see "Communities Reject Coca-Cola in India," 10 July 2003, <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=7508> (accessed 12 August 2004).

7. For the figures and other information provided in this paragraph, see the following two *Down to Earth* articles: [http://www.cse.org.in/fu16.asp?foldername=20020815&filename=spr&sec\\_id=31&sid=1](http://www.cse.org.in/fu16.asp?foldername=20020815&filename=spr&sec_id=31&sid=1); and [http://www.cse.org.in/cover.asp?foldername=20031215&filename=anal&sec\\_id=7&sid=9](http://www.cse.org.in/cover.asp?foldername=20031215&filename=anal&sec_id=7&sid=9) (both accessed 6 February 2008). Also see the documentary *Stolen Water* (produced, written, and directed by Prasanth and Daya, Shift Focus, 2003).

8. A few months after its report on bottled water, the Center for Science and the Environment released a study showing similar levels of toxicity in bottled soft drinks. Once again, Coca-Cola and Pepsi attempted to evade the issue. One of the foremost English-language newspapers in India, *The Hindu*, editorialized, "The

responses of the two companies to the new findings have been less than responsible." See *The Hindu* (Bangalore), 8 August 2003, 10.

9. Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke, *Blue Gold: The Battle Against Corporate Theft of the World's Water* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2002). Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.

10. Michael Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001). Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.

11. Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2002). Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.

12. Joshua Karliner, *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997). Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.

13. Barlow and Clarke, *Blue Gold*. For a sampling of the debate over the status of the nation-state today, see, for example, Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

14. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Oxford India Paperbacks series (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

15. See UNDP India press release at <http://data.undp.org.in/hdr2006/Final%20Press%20Release%20CO.doc> (accessed 6 February 2008).

16. The complete report is available at [http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/genrep/rep\\_grndwat.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/genrep/rep_grndwat.pdf) (accessed 6 February 2008).

17. See 2007 Expert Group Report, 40. An earlier Planning Commission report on water availability and sanitation is available at <http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/genrep/wtrsani.pdf> (accessed 6 February 2008). This report largely corroborates the findings of the other two.

18. See 2007 Expert Group Report, 17. This finding of the Kerala High Court seems to conflict with another finding in favor of Coca-Cola (see *ibid.*, 24).

19. Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Unauthorized History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It* (New York: Scribner's, 1993); Frederick Allen, *Secret Formula: How Brilliant Marketing and Relentless Salesmanship Made Coca-Cola the Best-known Product in the World* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994); and Constance Hays, *The Real Thing: Truth and Power at the Coca-Cola Company* (New York: Random House, 2004). Subsequent references to these sources are noted in the text.

20. See "Liquid Candy: How Soft Drinks Are Harming Americans' Health," a report by Michael F. Jacobson for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, available at [http://www.cspinet.org/sodapop/liquid\\_candy.htm](http://www.cspinet.org/sodapop/liquid_candy.htm) (accessed 2 May 2005).

21. This campaign is documented at length in Henry J. Frundt, *Refreshing Pauses: Coca-Cola and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

22. The report by Garry Leech is available at <http://www.laborrights.org/press/cokeo72301.htm> (accessed 7 June 2004).

23. The *Green Left Weekly* report is available at <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=10578> (accessed 10 August 2004).
24. See the Coca-Cola Web site: <http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/ourcompany/board.html> (accessed 6 February 2008).
25. "Does Coke Need a Refill?" *New York Times Sunday Business*, 27 May 2007, 1+.
26. See the Killer Coke campaign Web site: <http://killercoke.org/student.htm> (accessed 6 February 2008). This campaign is mainly focused on the Colombia controversy. For a report on how student groups are targeting Coca-Cola for the India and Colombia controversies, see <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/05/05/coke> (accessed 6 February 2008).
27. See <http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/presscenter/> (accessed 6 February 2008).
28. For the response by Coca-Cola, see [http://www.cokefacts.com/PressCenter/news\\_in\\_articles\\_teri\\_report.shtml](http://www.cokefacts.com/PressCenter/news_in_articles_teri_report.shtml) (accessed 6 February 2008). For activist criticism of the TERI report, see <http://www.keralanext.com/news/index.asp?id=1158465>; and [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main37.asp?filename=cro20208Good\\_Water.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main37.asp?filename=cro20208Good_Water.asp) (both accessed 6 February 2008).
29. See [http://www.coca-colaindia.com/about\\_us/abo\\_coca\\_cola\\_india\\_int.html](http://www.coca-colaindia.com/about_us/abo_coca_cola_india_int.html) (accessed 25 June 2005).
30. See [http://www.coca-colaindia.com/citizenship/citizenship\\_rainwater.html](http://www.coca-colaindia.com/citizenship/citizenship_rainwater.html) (accessed 25 June 2005).
31. See [http://www.coca-colaindia.com/about\\_us/abo\\_coca\\_cola\\_india\\_int.html](http://www.coca-colaindia.com/about_us/abo_coca_cola_india_int.html) (accessed 25 June 2005).
32. The article—titled "Playing with Regulations"—in *Frontline*, 13–26 September 2003, is available at <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2019/stories/20030926004603200.htm> (accessed 25 June 2005).
33. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 163–177.
34. Cited in Hays, *The Real Thing*, 86.
35. Quoted in "Does Coke Need a Refill?"
36. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).
37. Arthur Danto, *The Wake of Art* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998).
38. I am indebted to Zhaleh Breen for directing my attention to the references to Coca-Cola by The Clash. The lyrics of the songs discussed here (and elsewhere in the article) can be found at [lyricstime.com](http://lyricstime.com) (accessed 5 February 2008).
39. *USA Today* reports that in protests around the world against the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, American global corporations with especially visible brand recognition have been targeted through boycotts. As one would expect, Coca-Cola has been part of these boycott campaigns. The article cites a report assessing Coca-Cola as the most valuable American brand at \$69.6 billion. See "Anti-war Protesters Take Aim at American Brands," *USA Today*, 4 April 2003, Money Section B, 1+.
40. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1984).
41. "I'm So Bored with the USA"; see n. 37, above.
42. The campaign slogan, in Hindi, may be translated as "Cold Means Coca-Cola." Aamir Khan has more recently aligned himself with progressive causes,

- including protests against the murder of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 and against the dam on the Narmada River in Western India. When questioned about his association with Coca-Cola in 2006, he replied that he was in conversation with the company and was looking into allegations against it. See *Outlook Magazine*, 1 May 2006, 31–32.
43. The full video clip of the commercial can be viewed at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=xuVRCcEEoLA> (accessed 6 February 2008).
44. *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, dir. Jamie Uys. CAT Films, 1980.
45. See <http://www.coca-colaindia.com> (accessed 26 June 2005).
46. Quoted in Hays, *The Real Thing*, 7.
47. Richard L. Grossman and Frank T. Adams, *Taking Care of Business: Citizenship and the Charter of Incorporation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Charter Ink, 1993). Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.
48. Ronald Munck, *Globalisation and Labour: The New "Great Transformation,"* (Delhi: Madhyam Books, 2003). Subsequent references to this source are noted in the text.
49. Karliner, *The Corporate Planet*, 30.
50. The difficulty of achieving this balance or even articulating it coherently should not be underestimated. The challenges are diverse, and include the ways in which nimble transnational corporations have themselves signed on even if only notionally to the idea of an environmentally sensitive development, thereby siphoning off some of the energies of the environmental movement.
51. See "Scarce 'Blue Gold'" and "Resistance in Kerala," *Frontline* (Chennai), 13 February 2004, 37–38, 38–40, respectively.
52. "Resistance in Kerala."
53. See "Close Down Coca-Cola Plant: Medha Patkar," *The Hindu* (Bangalore), 16 June 2004, 7.
54. Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, and Brendan Smith, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2000).
55. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 228.
56. Quoted in Karliner, *The Corporate Planet*, 178.