



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

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To cite this article: Hervé Corvellec (2017): Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water, by Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race, Journal of Cultural Economy, DOI: [10.1080/17530350.2017.1328368](https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2017.1328368)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2017.1328368>



Published online: 25 May 2017.



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BOOK REVIEW

Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water, by Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2015, 288 pp., £25.21 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-262-02941-4

Focusing on one of the most ubiquitous objects on earth, *Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water* presents us with a history of ‘the movement from drinking from the tap to drinking from the bottle’ (p. xiii). The main character of this history is the plastic bottle, but Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race show that many helpers have contributed to turning water in plastic bottles – ‘plastic water’ – into the omnipresent, even iconic, artefact it has become.

This book introduces us to some of these helpers. We first meet Polyethylene Terephthalate, better known as PET. The standard stories attribute its invention to the obstinate individual efforts of Daniel Wyeth, a DuPont engineer. Yet, as the authors suggest, this invention is probably due to a multitude of factors and processes ‘from technology transfers, to failed trials with other plastics, to diverse government regulations controlling everything from packaging safety standards to patents’ (p. 9). Once disciplined and stabilised, the material qualities of PET were instrumental in transforming water and the relationships between water and consumers. Transparency is one of its key characteristics: ‘Light passed through it in much the same way as it passed through water, generating an effect of fluidity and shimmering purity’ (p. 22). So, ‘[i]n reaching for the PET bottle of water, the consumer apprehends a bottle as translucent as the liquid, a bottle that appears to simultaneously flow and contain, that seals in purity with the unbroken protection of a cap’ (p. 12). What consumers may not realise, though, is that by reaching for the PET bottle, they are also reaching for an industrial complex that goes from the petroleum industry to mass distribution, through the chemical industry and producers of beverage filling machines.

Other key helpers have been brands of still mineral water, such as Evian, Vittel, or Perrier. The focused attention of the French state to the mineral qualities of these brands and the concomitant development of spa tourism had already turned water into a ‘market thing’ (p. 34). Drawing on this heritage, the plastic water industry could infiltrate consumer’s lives by associating bottled water with qualities of purity, health, and convenience – but also safety.

Other helpers have been the scientific concept of hydration, the social practice of permanent sipping, and corresponding ‘thirsty subject’: ‘the subject who is led to drink water in particular ways’ (p. 53). Emerging from exercise science where fluid loss is a major concern, the scientific discourse on hydration eased the emergence of sipping on the go, into what the authors call ‘a technology for making up personhood’ (p. 53). Health advertisements let a biomedical discourse on individual responsibility for continuous self-monitoring of health meet an increasingly mobile consumption lifestyle. Whereas an advertisement for Evian-les-Bains, circa 1914–1915, associated the drinking of spring water to a social indoor practice for men in straw boaters and women in crinolined dresses (Figure 2.2, p. 38), a contemporary ad in the healthy-living magazine *Medibank Australia Magazine* illustrates the question ‘Are you hydrated enough?’ with a thirsty woman in a training outfit drinking straight from a bottle (Figure 3.1, p. 60).

In Part II of the book, Hawkins, Potter, and Race take us on an Asian tour, demonstrating how these helpers have made possible a global normalisation of plastic water. The first stop is Bangkok, where water in plastic bottles is to relieve an ontological anxiety about tap water. It is

difficult to separate this ontological anxiety from other factors that bear on drinking water practices and purchasing habits, such as class aspirations, taste and distinction, performing modernity, personal commitments to maintaining health and well-being, choices in caring for others in the household, and convenience.

And a key point is that '[t]he desires to avoid illness, demonstrate health, and improve one's social status are interdependent concerns that mutually constitute the "quality" of drinking water' (p. 81). No single factor, but a dynamic of material qualities, local contingencies, behavioural trends, medical concerns, and commercial routines explain the diffusion of plastic water. The affordances of plastic bottles are not fixed; they evolve and become adapted to the concerns of whoever participates in plastic water arrangements. At the same time, plastic water interferes with (which is not the same as eliminates) other consumption practices and modes of provision of water, such as tap water or returnable glass containers.

Interferences are clear, even at the second stop: Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. Plastic water participates there in the development of water regimes that 'include inadequate or absent public water infrastructure in many areas, a history of overdrawn local groundwater sources, and a growing popular acceptance of water scarcity as a normal reality' (p. 100), and thus the very organising of water scarcity. In a region with chronic water shortages, the 'performance of abundance' (p. 111) that the 20-litre containers supplied by the town's 270 water bottlers leave out those who cannot afford it, thus 'participat[ing] significantly in the exploitation of groundwater and overdrawn aquifers in this region' (p. 106).

The third stop is Hanoi, where the authors' focus shifts from consumption to disposal. When the water has been drained, the plastic bottle remains as waste. A flourishing recycling industry has transformed the village of Triêu Khúc into one of the 'plastic villages' (p. 118) that characterise this district.

The village is both a plastics enclave and a crucial translation zone in the flows of recovered plastic waste materials moving out of Hanoi to the village, and the flows of reconstituted plastic feedstock or 'new' plastic objects moving out of the village to a multitude of local, national, and transnational sites. (p. 119)

Accumulation meets circulation. The favourite market device of the beverage industry has become piles of accumulated material that await human and mechanical efforts, together with environmental sacrifices, to be dematerialised and re-valourised as recycled plastic brought again into circulation. Like their counterparts in the recycling-scapes that have developed across Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, the recyclers of Triêu Khúc—very young recyclers sometimes, often using only primitive tools—are finally confronting 'the profound blindness' (p. 133) of producers and consumers to the afterlife of plastic bottles. 'Doing value' (p. 139) of used bottles is hard work.

Finally, in Part III, Hawkins, Potter, and Race voice and analyse the ethical concerns raised about plastic water. The nongovernmental organisation Polaris Institute sees in plastic bottles an example of how transnational corporations have secured control over public policymaking, as well as how they have replaced the historical relationship between citizens and public authorities over water with one between consumers and private companies. BRITA GmbH, which sells filters for tap water, advertises that drinking water from plastic bottles is comparable to drinking oil; the Bottled Water Alliance attacks the trend of mobile eating and drinking. The authors of *Plastic Water* see, in such examples, varied efforts to make clear 'externalities of markets, an exploration of all the relationships and interconnections in which the market is embedded beyond its explicit frames' (p. 180). Yet, the authors dissociate themselves from the view that the use of plastic water for cause-related marketing is a deliberate strategy 'designed to obscure the harsh realities of capitalism and its fundamental logic of profit and exploitation' (p. 184). Rather, they consider such marketing schemes as potential 'practices of "ethicalization"' (p. 186) that are reconfiguring water-market assemblages – when water is enrolled as an alternative to high-sugar sodas, for example. Cultivating ambiguity, they land their analysis on an emphasis that plastic water is both a problem and a solution, concluding that, 'in whatever arrangements or forms, bottled water continually provokes normative questions about the sustenance of life and the common good' (p. 223).


The single most important source of theoretical inspiration for *Plastic Water* is Callon's performative stance in economic sociology. Much reasoning springs from such notions as market devices, qualification, and practices of calculation. The outcome is a detailed genealogy of the contingencies

and transience of the assemblages that have made possible, but never necessary, the global spread of plastic water and a redefinition of wasteful drinking. *Plastic Water* allows the reader to assist in the birth and growth of plastic water as an object, a market, a habit, and an issue.

People with a theoretical interest in the making of markets, consumption as practice, practices of valuation and valorisation, relationships of people and material, and, more generally, science and technologies studies, will find in *Plastic Water* a careful illustration of ways in which these theories can be applied and combined for an understanding of the social life of objects. A great strength of this book is the authors' ability to combine varied sources of theoretical inspiration and to explore the rich material collected through varied methodologies. If I were to retain only one thing about *Plastic Water*, it would be how an understanding of the diffusion of an artefact as apparently transparent as water bottled in plastic requires that one deliberately entangle, among other things: calculations, consumption, ethics, geography, globalization, history, infrastructures, marketing, materiality, medicine, minerals, production processes, protests, regulations, risk, science, services, technology, sustainability, trade, and waste. Friend of simple explanations, go on your way.

Funding

This work was supported by Svenska Forskningsrådet Formas [grant number 259-2013-120].

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2017.1328368>

