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ARTICLE

Bottled Water

The pure commodity in the age of branding

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Abstract. Bottled water has become a pervasive global business, and bottled water consumption continues to increase rapidly, particularly in countries where clean potable tap water is available at very low or no cost. This article discusses the ways the rich cultural meanings of water are used in marketing and branding, and the forms of consumer resistance that oppose bottled water as a commodity. The contrast between tap water and bottled water can be seen as a reflection of a contest for authority and public trust between governments and corporations, in a context of heightened anxieties about risk and health. The article concludes that bottled water is a case where sound cultural logic leads to environmentally destructive behavior.

Key words

advertising • consumption • environment • marketing • risk

NEW YORK, NY, 19 May 2003: Bottled water rivals beer, coffee and milk in volume. In 2003, bottled water is poised to surpass its competitors to become the second most popular commercial beverage in the U.S. If current trends continue, with bottled water growing strong and carbonated soft drinks moving slowly, bottled water could overtake soft drinks by the end of the next decade. (Beverage Marketing Corporation, 2003)

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Table 1: Global bottled water market: Per capita consumption by leading countries 1998–2003(P)

2003		Gallons per capita	
Rank	Countries	1998	2003(P)
1	Italy	35.9	48.1
2	Mexico	29.2	41.5
3	France	29.5	39.1
4	United Arab Emirates	28.1	38.1
5	Belgium–Luxembourg	30.7	35.1
6	Germany	26.4	33.1
7	Spain	25.1	30.2
8	Switzerland	23.8	25.4
9	Lebanon	16.2	25.3
10	Saudi Arabia	18.9	23.3
11	Cyprus	17.2	22.8
12	Austria	19.8	22.7
13	United States	15.3	22.6
14	Czech Republic	15.4	22.2
15	Portugal	17.2	20.6
	Global Average	3.9	6.0

(P) Preliminary

Source: Beverage Marketing Corporation

The world bottled water market represents an annual volume of 89 billion litres, and is estimated to be worth US\$22 billion.¹

Desalinated deep-sea water from Kona (Hawaii) is the state's fastest-growing export with demand soaring in Japan. Super-cold water sucked up from thousands of feet below the Pacific Ocean's surface is being marketed as healthy, pure, mineral-rich drinking water. Koyo USA Corp. already is producing more than 200,000 bottles a day and says it can't keep up with demand in Japan, where it sells 1.5-liter bottles of its MaHaLo brand for \$4 to \$6 each. 'We couldn't ask for better sales,' spokesman John Frosted said. 'At this point, we can't make enough. We have no surplus.' (Associated Press, 2004)

INTRODUCTION

Years ago advertising executives could jokingly praise an expert by saying that he or she 'could sell ice-cubes to Eskimos'. Now that kind of feat,

getting people to pay for things that they already have in abundance around them, for which they have no manifest need, has become commonplace. Today marketers recognize that goods have magical powers that have nothing to do with 'needs', and they have become magicians who transform mundane and abundant things into exotic valuables.

Bottled water is an exceptionally clear example of the power of branding to make commodities a meaningful part of daily life. Of course, brands are not themselves empty bottles, filled with magic by the all-powerful tools of advertising and marketing. As many recent theorists and critics have shown, brands have a history and cultural life that makes them more than puppets; each brand is a collaborative construction by many parties. Water, because it is so ubiquitous and mundane, exposes the complexity of this collaboration particularly well.

Water also has a special symbolic status in the world of goods, because it is like air, an absolute necessity for survival. Public struggles over water purity and the cost of water go back well into the 19th-century, when British citizens groups began a long campaign to make the provision of clean and cheap domestic water a public service. The notion of water as a human right was constantly asserted in fiercely fought political campaigns that furthered by an emerging notion of citizens as *consumers* with rights that the government must protect in the face of private companies out for a profit (Trentmann and Taylor, 2006). Water has remained a volatile issue, tugged back and forth across the rocky terrain in between being a pure free public good, and a commodity like any other, to be bought and sold for a profit. During the last 20 years, as neoliberal economic policies and conservative philosophies of the market have become more dominant, the privatization of water has become a material and symbolic political issue that has sparked protest and popular movements in developing countries like Bolivia, as well as in wealthy liberal democracies like Canada.

Bottled water brings this issue to the foreground. In poor countries it represents the failure of the government to provide basic public services to citizens, while for the wealthy it has often come to represent waste, environmental destruction, the corruption of children by marketing, and the bankrupt absurdity of mass-consumer society as a whole (see Clarke, 2004). The most visible irony is that at the time when a vast organized public and private effort, at the cost of trillions of dollars and euros, has given most Europeans and North Americans clean, cheap and safe drinking water in their homes, these same people go out and buy their drinking water in shops, at a price higher than an equivalent amount of beer, soda or even gasoline.

Because water is such an abundant substance – which *falls from the sky for free* – critics of marketing have no trouble finding absurdities and contradictions when water becomes a valuable consumer good. Survey after survey shows that bottled water is generally no safer or purer than what comes from the tap.² Though people claim they can easily taste the differences between tap and bottled waters, in blind tests many are unable to – especially because sometimes the liquid sold in bottles *is* tap water. In some places the tap water consistently wins in blind tasting against bottled brands, and local water authorities have taken out trademarks to keep citizens from bottling and selling what comes from their tap. Clearly taste is not the main motivation behind the continuing inexorable increase in the bottled water trade.³

Transformed from a public good into a branded commodity, water easily enters the international circuit of trade in beverages. Each year, about a quarter of the 89 billion litres of water bottled worldwide are traded internationally, often over thousands of kilometres (World Health Organization, 2003). A large part of this trade is reciprocal – meaning that, for example, the USA exports bottled water *to* Sweden, and it also imports bottled water *from* Sweden. Furthermore, rich countries like the USA import substantial amounts of water from poorer places like Mexico and India, countries hardly known for their high standards of water purity. Some countries have even specialized in water export; for example the Pacific island nation of Fiji, which has capitalized on its image as a ‘virgin ecosystem’ far from polluting civilization, now sells over US\$90 million worth of water a year.⁴

As bottled water has grown from relative obscurity to a major industry, it has acquired all the social and legal armamentarium of a global presence, modeled closely on other food and beverage industries, including trade shows, industry associations, newsletters and other trade press.⁵ There are international certifications, standards, and terminology to divide bottled water into legal types.⁶ Water producers also follow the models of other expensive beverages, by seeking to establish hierarchy and value through competition and connoisseurship. There is an annual International Water Tasting, which awards medals (Berkeley Springs, 2006). ‘Water Bars’ have opened in Paris and Tokyo, the major fashion cities, where people can line up and pay US\$5 for a glass of exotic water served by a professional water sommelier (Tokyo Food Page, n.d.). There are also cooking classes that teach you how to match particular waters to the right foods, and advisors who will tell you what kind of glassware is best.⁷ And of course, new brands have proliferated, like flowers in the desert after a rain.

The juxtaposition of a thriving trade in commoditized water, alongside a widespread public perception that water is a public good, a necessity of life that people deserve as a right rather than a privilege, raises some very intriguing questions. The controversies and discourses generated by these two clashing systems of value expose a conflict over *market* and *non-market* (often seen as 'moral') values that has been a continuing theme in western (and non-western) cultures since the origin of capitalism, and possibly since the origins of markets and trade.⁸

Recent criticism of water as a market commodity links the two issues of multinational corporations buying and controlling water supplies, (including dams, aquifers, and municipal systems in developing countries), and the proliferation of bottled water (Clarke, 2004; Roddick and Biggs, 2004; Shiva, 2002). While it is reasonable moral rhetoric to contrast the abundance of the rich with the thirst of the poor, there are many reasons to consider the phenomenon of bottled water separately from that of rural water supply in poor countries. The corporations themselves consider them to be two distinct industries, and very few multinationals are heavily involved in both. Furthermore, while the provision of basic household water services can be debated through economic logic of cost and benefit – deciding what kind of system is most reliable and efficient – no cost/benefit analysis makes much sense out of the global trade in bottled water (Friburg and Mattias, 2003). Bottled water is a form of *cultural* consumption, driven by everything from status competition to a belief in magical curing, in short the full complex cultural terrain explored by the recent generation of scholars of consumption and marketing.⁹

The rest of this article will focus on bottled water as a commodity, on the way water is embedded in historically grounded cultural meanings which have become raw material for both marketers who want to sell bottled water, and those who would resist it. I will then present some examples of ways consumers resist and appropriate the meanings of bottled water, suggesting that because water is such a universal substance, it always raises moral and ethical issues. My goal is to show that while cultural branding has successfully turned water into a consumer good, to the point where it is ubiquitous and widely accepted, it has not ended moral debate about rights and inequality. The stark imbalances across the globe in access to basic clean water, and the continuing high death rates in many places from water-borne disease make this an issue that will not go away. In concluding, I argue that the progressive expansion of water as a commodity is as much the result of a failure of governments to fulfill public obligations, as it is due to the craftiness of the marketers of bottled water.

HISTORY, NATURE AND CULTURAL MEANING

Both those selling water in bottles, and those for whom water is a universal right portray water as a substance that comes from nature. Water is more than a symbol of the natural world; it is usually seen as the very substance of the natural world. Nature, after all, has been likened to a popular secular religion in the West (Dunlap, 2004). In western Europe there are deep historical roots for the idea that water has magical power to heal and confer vitality, power rooted in sacred springs and wells that were seen as sources of spiritual knowledge and wisdom (Strang, 2004: 98). The power of water to connect people to the power of nature was transmitted through the contagious magic of baptism, libation, bathing and drinking, both in pagan and Christian traditions.

On top of this long tradition, we can identify another historical layer of meaning that emerges from the scientific project of defining and measuring water, and the modernist industrial theme of 'control of water' as the mastery or conquest of nature (Hamlin, 2000). Heroic films about the damming of great rivers and the taming of floods expressed the power of industrial society over untamed nature. Modernism imposes human will (and governmentality) on nature by channeling, damming, chemical treatment, purification and organized distribution. Because today bottled water can draw on both traditions, it has the unusual capacity to disemically carry and transmit the magic and power of nature *and* modern technology at the same time. In a world where floods and tidal waves still prove the imperfection of human control over the natural power of water, every bottle of water is a visual metaphor for control and at the same time a reminder that without water, people cannot exist.

Part of the cultural meaning power of water is rooted in the geographic and class associations of early brands of mineral water, which carried the prestige and magical healing power of famous spas to the dining tables of the rich and sophisticated. These spas in turn were founded at the sites of ancient springs and wells which people had visited for centuries to be blessed, healed and fortified. Perrier® and Vichy, both associated with spas, are now brands so venerable that they have themselves been embedded in cultural meanings, associated with healing and the tables of the elite. They have even become generic synonyms for any kind of mineral water, like Kleenex® for tissue and Coke® for cola drinks. Once they achieving this generic status, their mystique could be mobilized, so they retain their authenticity even detached from place. These old brands led the way in transferring the magic of springs and pools from original 'natural' sites to spas, national companies and then global corporations. They still draw on

the power of nature, but their value is now bolstered by the certificates and scientific testimonials on their labels.

In the early age of branding, individual trusted agents were able to use their own names as the magic that could guarantee quality and efficacy. Thus in 1826 the Quaker John Horniman personally warranted the quality of the first packaged teas ever sold in England by putting his name on each package after it was sealed (Rappaport, 2006). While 18th-century products were known mostly by their place of origin (Burgundy wine, Yorkshire ham, China tea), in the 19th-century the same products required a personalized agent to carry them from producer to market (e.g. Libby's meat, Huntley & Palmer biscuits). It is noteworthy that water was never personalized this way, retaining its connection to the source, suggesting that water's powers still came from nature, rather than from its agent. This may be why most waters continue to be sold by reference to places and natural origins (e.g. glaciers, springs, islands, states), instead of by personal brand names. There are no successful personally branded celebrity waters, or highly technological 'artificial' waters.¹⁰

Most water advertising and labeling today uses images from nature, especially the mountains that formed the first major object of romantic European nature-worship in the late 18th- and early 19th-centuries (Löfgren, 1999). The predominant color for labels is blue, and bottles are almost always transparent – you never see water in brown bottles. But this form of nature is still, like medicinal waters with their long lists of minerals, mediated by scientific artifice. A typical example is an advertisement for RealPure®, which says its water is 'straight from the source at Real Pure's state-of-the-art plant atop a natural spring.'¹¹ A 1999 report by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) gleaned a list of keywords used by water brands on labels or in marketing, of which some of the most common were 'pure,' 'pristine', and 'natural.'

Some have argued that nature has recently become a kind of 'super commodity', that provides a kind of connection between consumers and producers that has largely been lost in the confusion of industrial capitalism (Descola and Paalson, 1996). But there are clearly many aspects of nature (and water) that resist commodification, and it is just this resistance that makes Perrier water bottled at the ancient source, or Lourdes water in a tiny vial, or fresh spring water from a mountain freshet different from the generic stuff flowing from the tap. At the same time, while most consumers in rich countries may enjoy the *thought* of pure water flowing in a mountain stream, most would be terrified to actually *drink* it without some kind of purification.

Ultimately this ambivalence about nature may relate to unresolved and longstanding conflicts in western cultures about technology and the body. Thompson and Troester, for example, identify two main healing traditions in the West, a Gnostic one that addresses the utopian possibilities of technology to transform and heal nature and the body, and a romantic one that sees the machine as a danger because it cuts people off from nature (2002). While the two are philosophically and logically opposed, in practice most people deploy and use elements of both in their daily lives and health practices. In this sense, each one calls its opposite into play, and people work in the dynamic space between the poles.

Bottled water lies in the middle of this intersection. If nature is dangerous, technology makes it safe. Generic reverse osmosis water is 'pure' because it has passed through a machine. The technology is protecting you from a wild and dangerous nature. For the romantic, water is pure because it comes straight from nature. Technology is a danger, and the way to ensure health is with natural water. Evian® and other waters with nature themes are romantic water, while the purified and manipulated commercial waters are safe and healthy because the nature has been stripped out of it – and in some cases improved and put back in, combined in a controlled and scientific way (it is common for water manufacturers to remove minerals during purification, and then put some back in again since water without minerals tastes 'flat' or even bitter to most people).

The purity of water is the key trope in both ideological moments. Purity means two very different things, but the use of the word allows a semiotic compromise, and projects a crucial ambiguity to diverse audiences. We should not forget also, that purity is a prosaic and generic reassurance for those who do not care where their water comes from, and have no interest in its meaning.

On another level, the ambiguity of the concept of purity allows the water drinker to be both the subject and object of technology, since on one hand the purity of nature protects the drinker from dangerous technology, and on the other the drinker's agent wields advanced technology to purify nature or at least assure its purity. The protean quality of technology allows it to play different roles in different stages of bringing product to consumer – concealed at some time backstage, at other times brought directly onto the front stage. There is a cycle here, just like the ratcheting effects seen in other areas of consumer culture. The romantic and the rational actually feed off one another, so that too much of one leads to refuge in the other, technology to nature, back and forth over and over. Consumption is the answer to the movement in each case and

setting, as nature and culture both do and undo each moment of movement.

PURITY OF THE BODY, PURITY OF THE HOME

The other side of thinking about how bottled water has come to represent nature and purity, is the equally important question of how public water has come to be seen as dangerous and dirty. One way to think of it is through a structuralist and symbolic analysis like that of Mary Douglas, who initially studied food taboos. If we think of the house and home as extensions of the body, personal and intimate, then anything that crosses the boundary between the public world and the house is potentially dangerous and impure. Douglas says that the moment of greatest danger is when food crosses boundaries into and out of the body, or when substances cross the threshold from the public world into the private space of the home (Douglas, 1966). Food and waste can also become liminal, and therefore capable of betrayal and corruption, so they must be regulated. Public drinking water, coming from anonymous sources through the hands of unknown agents, has just this disruptive potential for the body.

We can move this same analysis to the social level of the relationship between the home and the community. Utility lines are potentially transgressive connections between private and public, bringing materials in and removing waste. In research on California electricity customers, we found that all public utilities, including water and gas are seen by homeowners as intrusions into private space that carry unnamed dangers (Wilk and Wilhite, 1984). People focused many of their anxieties about dependency, pollution and potential catastrophe on the flow of power into their houses. Many who we interviewed thought wistfully of a life 'off the grid' as a utopian existence free from greedy power companies and their nuclear dangers. At the time water was taken for granted, but now it too has become problematized, contested in much the same way. Utility lines connect the intimate world to the welter of unknown powers that inhabit a world of commerce and government. The more hostile and dangerous people perceive that world to be, the more attention they focus on the flow of power and material in and out of their homes. We see this reflected in the great attention and moral significance given to what scientists and risk analysts consistently find to be vanishingly small risks from power lines, piped water, impure food and waste disposal.

NEW CULTURAL HORIZONS

Given all the rich meanings and associations, and the manifest social and ideological dangers presented by water, how do companies actually sell water in the marketplace? They have built on the positive historical meanings of water, but they have also appealed to other aspects of body and identity which rival the importance of the cultural realms of risk, health, and nature. Most obvious of these are social distinctions of wealth and class, which have after all been used for centuries to sell European bottled waters in restaurants around the world. Now there are much finer gradations of price and perceived quality, from unbranded generic bulk water in large refillable containers and mass-market treated tap-waters sold by large soft-drink companies, through the 'mid-market' and onward to more expensive and exotic 'premium' brands. The basic social distinctions of age and gender are also reflected in the marketing of water for male athletes, water 'specifically formulated for a woman's special needs', and brands for children (vitamin-fortified Kid Fuel® in small blue bottles for boys and pink for girls) and active teens.

Health as a cultural realm in the West is also an arena for the conflict between nature and science, and while some waters advertise their natural sources, others make health claims based on scientific additives. In the USA there are now several brands like Physique Power Water, 'enhanced with "nutraceuticals"'; there are also vitamin waters, nicotine, aspirin and caffeine waters, sports water, 'smart' water, a 'diet' water called Skinny, and even a special water for pets. Some of these products make extravagant claims, like 'eVamor® alkaline artesian water', which 'works to neutralize acid and delivers antioxidants and minerals that burn fat' (ad in *Beverage Industry News*, May 2003).¹²

Cross-cultural studies by anthropologists have found that in a wide variety of cultures, rare substances with distant, exotic origins are especially powerful, and are often the source of medicines with extraordinary powers to affect the body (Helms, 1988; Taussig, 1987). While globalization has broken down the effects of distance to some extent, its power still adheres to water from distant places, such as icebergs and glaciers, and there are still rare additives including ancient air bubbles from deep inside glaciers and flakes of gold.

Modern consumer culture is full of devices that maintain the exclusive, exotic and mysterious nature of goods to enhance their value. To understand some of the richness and variety of value-enhancing exoticizing modes, I asked a roomful of about 25 marketing professionals, professors and graduate students in a major US business school to think of new ways

to sell water. Within 15 minutes they produced a long list that included the following:

- water from each of the great rivers of the world;
- meltwater from named glaciers, or assorted waters from sets of glaciers in a region, which become more expensive as the glaciers get smaller;
- cave waters, including water from the deepest, longest, darkest, etc.;
- great underground aquifers – in the USA many have heard of the great Oglala aquifer;
- carbon-dated and fossil waters, for example water that last fell to earth 6 million years ago;
- oasis water – from the famous deserts such as the Sahara, Gobi and Kalahari;
- water gathered from particular named storms and hurricanes, with the potential for collection sets, or keeping special vintages;
- water from the childhood homes of movie stars, the water that made them who they are today;
- kinky waters – from the island of Lesbos for example;
- waters of the seven continents;
- waters for different parts of the body – stomach, skin, hair water;

Some of the group's suggestions were already on the market, for example water for particular sports such as football and tennis, event-waters labeled for a wedding, a funeral, or a special gathering, patriotic water (popular in the USA after 9/11, and personalized water with your name or the name of your organization or company on the label. Since the time I performed this experiment, I am sure some of the others have appeared, because new water brands and products are entering the USmarket at the rate of about eight per month, compared with five per month for soft drinks.¹³

The most intriguing thing about this list is that almost all of them depend on very old forms of value which would have been familiar to 16th-century Europeans, the ancient Greeks and Romans, and many of the ancient and contemporary cultures discussed by Taussig and Helms in their work on the powers of exotic goods (1987). Each one in some way manipulates *distance*, either increasing or decreasing it in geography, time, or social proximity. Geographically, value adheres to places far away (deserts), or those that represent the consumer's own imagined location (USA, hometown). Fossil water from the distant past stretches time, in contrast to the immediate present represented by water from a particular wedding. Personal water is the 'zero point' of social distance, while water associated with celebrities or royalty maximizes the social gap. Taussig has argued that the values of

exoticism that are being used here are based on the universal propensity for humans to build value around relations of mimesis and alterity, identity and difference (Taussig, 1993). This in turn can be linked to Simmel's much earlier distinction between identity and individuality (see Wolff, 1950).

Another principal at work here is McCracken's well-known 'Diderot Effect', where objects are formed into sets, with the implication that a complete set (seven continents) has much more value than the total of all its parts. Buying one of the set can then easily lead into an exploration of the entire group, and this can even build upwards into 'sets of sets' or higher ranked sets, in the progression well known to those who study collecting. Again this is an ancient principal in human relationships with material culture that probably pre-dates the market; ancient Mayan nobles seem to have collected 'sets' of pottery from particular artists and workshops.

None of these principles that give value to water is specific to water as a commodity, or even to market societies, the West, or modern times. But all of these meanings have today been captured by commodities, and as such they are all antithetical to any ideal of water as a free good, a natural right and therefore the absolute opposite of a commodity. This is the contradiction that leads to resistance to any kind of bottling, branding, labeling, advertising and selling of water in commodity packages. This points out that in some ways, it's the wrapper, the label and the packaging that elicits resistance, not the water itself. This may be why there is so little protest over the long-standing practice (in the USA at least) of selling large refillable plastic containers of purified water to businesses and homes for 'coolers.' Here the water is a commodity, but it has its own specialized container, very much *unlike* the bottles and cans that other 'drinks' are sold in. Water only becomes transgressive and elicits resistance when it is sold like any other beverage. The point of the resistance is exactly that water *is not* like any other beverage.

RESISTANCE

Market failure may or may not be evidence for resistance. Though industry publications tout the high rate of new product introductions, the silent implication of each announcement is that the vast majority of these products die within their first year. In 1999, the top ten brands controlled 67.4 percent of the US market, with the rest shared out among a changing array of about 900 other players.¹⁴ Unfortunately, we cannot tell if the disappearance of many brands and products is a clear signal that some kinds of water are acceptable and others are not. Many consumers never have the opportunity to choose from a vast array of waters because of corporate

concentration and consolidation in the industry, and narrow retail channels where shelf space is limited and expensive. Large retailers develop close relationships with a few brand suppliers, who can meet their demands for just-in-time delivery, product tracking and small profit margins. Because of exclusive distribution contracts, it is impossible to find more than one or two brands of water in many businesses, schools, universities and restaurants in the USA and Canada. The consequence is that most Americans only know the names of three to four brands of water, and of the people who drink bottled water, only 25 percent actually have a single favorite brand that they look for.¹⁵

Therefore, most consumers never have the opportunity to express resistance by choosing, for example, a fair-traded water, an ethical water, a green water or a water that donates money from each bottle to build potable systems in poor countries. For many other commodities, such as coffee and organic vegetables, consumers can 'vote' in the marketplace *against* what they dislike, and *for* the preferred options at the same time. But water in some ways disenfranchises the consumer-citizen of the modern 'consumer's republic' (Cohen, 2003). You can only make an almost invisible choice 'against' by drinking tap water; the only way to announce publicly that you abhor bottled water is to carry a refillable plastic bottle around, and even this can be ambiguous and impractical. The vote 'for' bottled water in contrast is conspicuously all around us in the daily litter of empty bottles and cans, and in the hands of people walking on the street. Even the possibility of drinking tap water in protest is becoming more difficult, as there are fewer and fewer public and workplace drinking fountains in the USA. This decline in itself is a visual alarm, for some, of an eroding belief in water as a public good, values often symbolized by the public fountain.

More active voices against bottled water can easily be elicited. I surveyed my 'Global Consumer Culture' class in the fall of 2005, most of whom were 18 and 19 years old, and asked them 'do you ever buy bottled water?' and if they said no, I asked them to explain why. About 34 percent of the class never bought bottled water, and the reasons ranged from outrage at the price ('it's a rip-off') and preference for other beverages, to environmental critiques of the use of plastic, and objections to profit-making by large corporations ('why should I give more money to Coca-Cola?').

Resentment and suspicion is also expressed on many websites and blogs, where hate and ridicule is aimed at bottled water and the unthinking or deluded people who drink it.¹⁶ The whole idea of paying for water is offensive to many people on political, ecological, and economic grounds, providing a rich field for dark humor and satire, well displayed in places

such as the 'dehydrated water' website, or the one which advertises water from the planet Mars.¹⁷

This emotional response towards water as a commodity helps explain the satisfied tone of many of the reports and comments on Coca-Cola's unsuccessful launch of Dasani® brand of water in the UK in March of 2004. The water was recalled because of a high level of bromate, a chemical that would probably do little harm to drinkers, but the real focus of most news stories was the 'discovery' that Dasani water was no more than filtered London tap water (hardly a secret since it is the general industry practice). It was clear that the press and their audience enjoyed the unmasking of a large corporation, suggestive of corporate corruption and public delusion, confirming the feelings of mistrust, of being exploited and manipulated that are so common in consumer culture. This dramatic frame of 'the brave individual challenges the huge corporation', reminiscent of the David and Goliath story, is often imposed on current events, particularly the activities of anti-globalization, anti-Wal-Mart, anti-McDonalds, and animal rights protests.

SAFETY AND RISK

It is clear that anxieties about bottled water are related to a whole family of consumer emotions and movements in capitalism. We should not forget that capitalism has met with principled moral resistance in many times and places, including Luddites smashing factory machines in 1811, colonial Vietnamese peasants driving merchants and moneylenders from their villages (Scott, 1976), and the Salvation Army marketing 'ethical' matches that did not cause phosphorus poisoning to workers in 1891 (Emsley, 2000). These were protests over the decay of a 'moral' economy of public goods, grazing the commons, and customary obligation, in the face of the conversion of common land into private property. The idea that bottled water may represent a form of resistance to the relentless commodification of the world pursued by capitalist industry, poses an alternative to Beck's well-known concept of the 'risk society' (1992). If we follow Beck's logic, consuming bottled water is an attempt to deal with a generalized fear of the 'uncontrollable human-generated hazards' that characterize late modernity. Tap water, then, represents the human interference with nature that poses 'new and extreme hazards to life'. The bottle is a reassurance that one small piece of nature has been protected from the hovering danger of chemicals and microorganisms.

Governments regularly advise citizens to stockpile bottled water before hurricanes or to plan for emergencies, and travelers are warned not to drink

from local water supplies. Huge amounts of bottled water were stockpiled before the Year 2000 non-event, and public panic over terrorist attacks and anthrax were marked by frantic rushes that cleared shops of their supplies.¹⁸ The scientific literature seems to reinforce Beck's thesis, since it focuses almost entirely on health and purity concerns with bottled water, with the implicit goal of answering a totally unsolvable riddle about whether tap water or bottled water is 'more pure'.¹⁹ The bottled water industry certainly believes that public fear over the safety of tap water is the major force driving their industry, and they often contrast the 'purity' of their product with the 'danger' from public supplies (Magiera, 1994; Olson, 1999).

Despite this constant barrage of fear-inducing rhetoric about water purity, the general population, at least in developed countries, has remained quite ambivalent about the healthiness of tap water, and skeptical of the power of bottled water to make them safe. One national survey in the USA found that water safety was the primary issue for only 35 percent of bottled water buyers (another 35 percent cited a desire to substitute water for other drinks, and 7 percent thought the taste was better (American Water Works Association Research Foundation, 1998: 19–20). A study in Canada similarly found that taste, not safety, was the major motivation for drinking bottled water (Levallois et al., 1999).

Part of the problem for water-drinkers is that they are caught between public and private sectors, each arguing that they are best capable of providing safety. Each casts aspersions on the other as a way to promote their own product. But the conflict is not symmetrical. While governments are in the business of assuring the public of their ability to monitor and test the public water supply, bottlers encourage us to put our faith in a corporate entity, which is disciplined by the market. By offering us a safety that tap water cannot, bottled water further reinforces our mistrust of governments and communities, and erodes the idea that citizenship is the best avenue towards the public good (Trentmann, 2001).

The whole complex issue of the role of the state in modern capitalism is contained in every bottle of water. On one side, utilities make a moral and political argument about the common good and, on the other, bottlers tell people to look out for their own interests, because governments are not doing a very good job of it. The problem with water is that the only option to trusting government is trusting a profit-making corporation. With a sandwich or a motorcar, the buyer has some hope of gauging quality on his or her own, but with water, danger can be completely invisible. What is truly surprising is the extent to which, even in countries such as the UK, where people still believe their government *should* be responsible for social

welfare (unlike the USA where a majority seem to think government only interferes with the benefits provided by free markets), people are willing to trust the bottle and the label to maintain the purity of nature, the private agent, more than the state agencies or relatively faceless private water companies. With pervasive privatization, people do not know really who is responsible any more for safety. In the USA, for example, McDonalds now has much more rigorous quality control and inspection of beef and other products than the federal government. While that government allows unlabeled genetically modified (GMO) foods into the food chain with little public consultation, McDonalds refuses to buy GMO potatoes or grains. But, of course, why should we trust such a large profit-driven corporation to live up to its promises either?

More than being a symptom of a pervasive 'risk society,' water from taps and bottles raises issues of trust and distrust, of balancing contradictory messages from different parties, and of being caught in the middle between powerful forces with their own agendas and interests. The question for many people is not so much which message to trust, but which one they *distrust the least*, which is a very different kind of judgment, with no wholly satisfactory outcome.

CONCLUSIONS: CULTURAL LOGIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL ABSURDITY

Taking water and putting it in a bottle may be no more than a practical response to new demand; a way of quenching thirst in a world where good clean public water is no longer widely available, where people travel more, and are more conscious of the health effects of drinking sugared and flavored soft drinks. People are also responding, finally, to a barrage of medical advice about their inadequate water intake. Bottled water surely has exactly this prosaic and utilitarian place in our lives. But this kind of explanation has its limits. Why Fiji water instead of Chicago River water? Why not just refill your bottle from the tap every morning (many people probably do, but don't admit it, another puzzle)? Yes, you can train your palate to recognize and rank the tastes of different waters, but why would you want to?

These curiosities are clues that water still has meanings and powers far beyond simple thirst quenching, powers linked to the transformation of 'wild' water in puddles, streams, ponds and rainstorms, into a domestic partial-commodity. Long ago, magicians and priests could transform and manipulate the powers of natural substances; today charismatic celebrities, governments and corporations contend with one another for the same powers. But standing in the middle of the battle is still a thirsty person.

We can decipher the historical and cultural logic, and the various collusions and conflicts between buyers and sellers that make bottled water a plausible, and perhaps even inevitable product of our times. At some level, we can use all the tools of social science to make sense and reason out of bottled water. But in doing so I do not want to lose sight of the ultimate absurdity, the waste and inequality of the bottled-water trade. Here we have a world with acknowledged ecological problems, rising energy prices, and global climate change, where a significant amount of energy and materials are being expended to transport water to places that already have plenty of it, freely available. Then there are the billions of plastic bottles manufactured and then discarded, littering the land and ocean, or being buried in landfills or incinerated at public expense. Here we have a world economy in which more than a billion people do not have access to any kind of regular clean water supply, while another billion are spending huge amounts of money on water that provides only a tiny marginal benefit in their lives. Just a part of the money spent on bottled water each year would be enough to provide clean water systems for many of those who go without.

Of course, we could say the same thing about many of the luxuries and other products consumed by the rich every year. But water provides a particularly clear example of the logic of modern capitalism, which makes sense at one level of analysis, and absolute nonsense at another. If we cannot think our way towards a solution to the puzzle of bottled water, to the tragedy of waste and shortage that it demonstrates, then what hope can we ever have for dealing with sport utility vehicles or other kinds of wasteful and unsustainable consumption? In another era, perhaps, we could ask governments to simply pass laws that forbid or tax bottled water for the common good; to do so today is impractical, and in choosing this course we implicitly endorse authoritarian and anti-democratic government.

As my discussion above shows, however, the mistrust of public water supplies that drives at least some of the bottled water trade is the product of an unclear division of responsibility between private corporations and the instruments of government. Many people no longer trust either one, and suspect that they often collude to deceive the public. If governments were more transparent and open in their regulation and testing of public water, more willing to demonstrate their concern for the public welfare by dramatic action, they might regain some of that trust.²⁰ They would also have to make a major investment in public scientific research to settle the major controversies over the health dangers of minerals and chemicals in drinking water. A similar research initiative could track the real energy and environmental costs of transporting water and disposing of bottles, making

public some information on how the profits of selling bottled water rest on subsidies from nature and the public purse.

But while I would never advocate that we stop putting pressure on governments to take this kind of action, I also recognize that there is an emerging 'third path' through non-governmental organizations that are willing to take action within the spaces provided by the capitalist marketplace (e.g. cooperatives, fair-trade organizations, environmental certification). What about marketing tap water in reusable bottles, with a label that proclaims that every penny of profit will be spent providing safe tap water for poor communities that have none?

Of course, this suggestion for more sustainable forms of water consumption brings us right back to the question of brands and their power, for what is to prevent 'ethical water' from becoming simply another branding ploy? Indeed, I recently visited a local Starbucks and found they were selling bottled water with a label claiming that a percentage of the proceeds would go to help provide water for the poor. This could be seen as evidence to support the view that branding is a form of cultural parasitism, so that every attempt to find non-commercial moral meaning in the world just becomes more grist for commodification (Frank and Weiland, 1997), to the point where even anti-consumption rhetoric becomes a kind of marketing (as in the Media Foundation's 'Black Spot' anti-brand, advertised in *Adbusters* magazine).

This dire prediction, however, is logically flawed and is belied by recent history. If branding and commercialization really destroyed everything in its path, there would be no opposition left by now. But resistance to the commodification of water has become much more widespread and popular than ever before. Instead, I would suggest that branding and marketing actually have a symbiotic relationship with anti-commercial resistance and the rhetorics of individuality, family, morality, and religion. Whereas early water brands such as Evian and Vichy gently appropriated existing cultural beliefs about the medicinal power of water from the earth, today's brands make claims as shrill and exaggerated as the messages that predict imminent death by thirst for billions of people. Furthermore, because they are ultimately controlled by corporations, brands can never fully substitute for the kinds of culturally meaningful objects and categories (e.g. nature, health, mountains) they seek to replace. They are part-cultures always seeking to become totalizing and complete, in a way that will always exceed the grasp of marketers.

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Notes

1. This figure comes from the World Health Organization (2003), but estimates vary widely and there are no really accurate figures. *Beverage Industry* published an estimate of \$60.4 billion in worldwide sales in 1999 (Beverage Industry, 1999).
2. Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) testing program (NRDC, 1999).
Of course the International Bottled Water Association, a trade organization, has a response (DWRF, 1999).
3. This can be interpreted cynically as a situation where the rich find their own clean water insufficiently entertaining, while the poor majority of the planet's people still suffer from water shortages and polluted drinking water.
4. Statistics come from Pacific Online, 2002. The Fiji Water corporate website is at <http://www.fijiwater.com/site/index.html>; the promotional video is worth watching.
5. See Bottled Water Web, <http://www.bottledwaterweb.com/>; the International Council of Bottled Water Associations website: <http://www.icbwa.org/>, and the Fine Waters website: <http://www.finewaters.com/default.asp>.
6. See the GE Water and Process Technologies website: http://www.gewater.com/library/tp/1118_The_Thirst.jsp. See the Codex Alimentarius for the international standards: http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index_en.jsp
7. Clancy, 2002. Wine glasses, we are told, are *not* appropriate for drinking fine water! (Fine Waters, 2006).
8. The clash between market and non-market values is a continuing theme in early economic writings, and more recently has been a preoccupation of economic anthropologists, who have generated a massive literature on 'gift' vs 'commodity' circulation. For a summary see Parry and Bloch (1989) and Werner and Bell (2004) and Wilk (1996).
9. This literature is far too large to summarize here; for overviews see Holt (2004), Miller (1995) and Sherry (1995).
10. It might appear that reverse osmosis or desalinated water are exceptions, but in the marketplace both are low-value tap-water substitutes rather than branded high-value products. A good example of natural sourcing to a famous locale is Loch Ness water, announced at http://www.beverageworld.com/beverageworld/headlines/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000673392.
11. This advertisement appears in *Beverage Industry News*, April 2002.
12. Another recent 'diet water' is the Skinny Water widely marketed in the USA as a '100% natural European Artesian water' (<http://www.skinnywater.com/>). PetRefresh is being marketed in Seattle for dog owners who say their pets will no longer drink tap water: <http://www.petrefresh.com/>.

13. These figures are taken from *Beverage Industry News*, 2002. By comparison the rate of introduction of new brands was much higher in alcoholic drinks – 34 new products a month.
14. In 2003 the top ten brands controlled 53.6% of the US market, with the rest shared out among a changing array of about 900 other players (Beverage Marketing Corporation, 2004).
15. Grimm, 2001. Another 42 percent name two or three brands they like – but remember these are people who have already identified themselves as regular bottled water consumers.
16. Almost any web search for information on bottle water will turn up sites that critique bottled water from a number of directions. Just enter ‘bottled water stupid’ into a Google search and see what comes up.
17. For dehydrated water go to <http://www.buydehydratedwater.com/>, and Mars water is at <http://www.iamlost.com/features/mars/>.
18. Some of these events are discussed on the Bottled Water Web news site (<http://www.bottledwaterweb.com/>). See also the marketing of special ‘Emergency Survival Water’ on the SOS Food Labs website for examples: <http://www.emprep.com/sos%20food%20labs.html>.
19. The question cannot be answered because the two are not always alternatives; we can drink out of many public supplies, and even the same brand of bottled water varies over time. No water people drink is truly pure – most people actively dislike the taste of distilled water. So all water has impurities. We also have no way to judge the relative risks played by the hundreds of possible contaminants in samples of tap and bottled water. We do know, however, that the polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles used for water are themselves a source of chemical contamination (Drowska et al., 2003).
20. Researching the quality of the municipal water delivered to my own home in Indiana required many hours of highly technical reading and web searching, and even then I was left unable to tell whether the levels of pollution in the water were dangerous.

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