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<https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adae023>

BOOK REVIEW

Conflict Minerals Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviourism in Eastern Congo

By Christoph Vogel

London: Hurst & Company, 2022, 295 pp., £20.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-787-38706-5.

From around the mid-2000s onwards, Western advocacy organizations adopted a simple yet powerful campaign narrative to explain the persistence of conflict and violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Armed groups were fighting to gain access to and profit from the region's mineral wealth. Western consumers could help alleviate conflict and suffering by pressuring electronics giants such as Apple and Intel to stop sourcing these 'conflict minerals'. In the 2010s, the conflict minerals campaign led to a plethora of Global North policy initiatives and legislation—from the USA and Canada to the EU and the OECD—seeking to sever the link between mining and conflict in the eastern DRC.

Christoph Vogel's *Conflict Minerals Inc.* offers the first book-length appraisal of how transnational initiatives to regulate 'conflict minerals' have influenced conflict dynamics and the daily lives of Congolese in the eastern DRC. For this, Vogel focuses on the industry-led International Tin Supply Chain Initiative (iTSCi), which remains today the most visible and far-reaching initiative exporting 'conflict free' tin, tantalum, and tungsten from the region. His core argument is that iTSCi has produced a range of outcomes counter to its stated objectives. These include 'new modes of corruption, resistance to external regulation, the recycling of wartime elites and a rise in unemployment and socio-economic precarity that has benefited armed group recruitment' (p. 12). This has created, Vogel contends, new processes of marginalization and exclusion, while leading to more, not less, violence.

In developing this argument, Vogel combines critical analysis of the origins and intellectual foundations of the conflict minerals paradigm (Chapters 1 to 3) with around a decade of ethnographic research across the region, drawing primarily on informal discussions, interviews, and observation (Chapter 4 to 6). The evidence base here is compelling, as is the author's longstanding commitment to and familiarity with the country.

Why, then, have conflict minerals initiatives proved counterproductive and inflicted harm on those they were designed to help? For Vogel, the fundamental issue—as the subtitle of the book suggests—is White saviourism, whose dominant frames of understanding are based on 'an epistemic misunderstanding and erasure of the Other' (p. 18). The conflict minerals paradigm, Vogel argues, is based on an Orientalist neo-colonial imaginary of the eastern DRC as a chaotic and barbaric space devoid of history, politics, and complexity. This imaginary misreads the causal driver of conflict in the region—ascribing this to greedy, savage warlords raping women and fighting over access to minerals—and denies agency and voice to those directly involved in and affected by the Congolese conflict. Vogel's view on why conflict minerals initiatives have gone so drastically awry is perhaps best summarized in the closing paragraph of the book's Epilogue, where he cites David Keen's well-known line, 'if you stop listening to those actively involved in a war, you have – in my view – already lost your chance of intervening helpfully'.

It is here, as Vogel draws on a body of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship around White saviourism, that the appeal of the book broadens far beyond mining and conflict in the DRC. As Vogel writes in the concluding chapter, the conflict minerals story ‘echoes developments in other contexts and global policymaking more broadly’ (p. 199), providing ‘a crucial case to rethink not only conflict and intervention, but also postcolonial orders, structural violence and power relations at large’ (p. 200). In this sense, *Conflict Minerals Inc.* should be of interest and use to students, academics, practitioners, and policymakers alike—especially but not only those in the Global North—researching or working on external development interventions designed to improve or better a given situation or context.

If I have one criticism of the book, it is in Vogel’s conclusion, where he pulls back from the force of his own critique in a somewhat reformist calling ‘for better policies, which ... shall lead to better lives’ (p. 209). While the recommendations that future policy moves away from Orientalist tropes and be based on more serious analysis of local context are fully borne out by his preceding analysis, they evade the thornier question of how likely it is that such change will come about. ‘Leave us to fight and the war will end’, runs the French-language title of Justine Brabant’s book on conflict in the eastern DRC. I would have liked more discussion on this possible interpretation of the conflict minerals story, and others like it, which would argue not for better policies, but for less external intervention altogether.

Conflict Minerals Inc. packages a persuasive and highly readable account of how and why the struggle against conflict minerals in the eastern DRC, despite enacting significant legislative and policy change, has not only done so little to achieve its aims, but has also produced a range of outcomes opposed to those intended. I expect the book, in time, to become the seminal account of this troubled period of Congolese history. The scholarly commitment and analytical rigour on which it is based demands our attention.

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