

BOOK REVIEW

Christoph N. Vogel. *Conflict Minerals Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviorism in Eastern Congo*. London: C. Hurst & Co, 2022. 224 pp. List of Figures and Tables. Bibliography. Index. \$22.78. Paper. ISBN: 9781787387065.

In this meticulously researched ethnography, *Conflict Minerals Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviorism in Eastern Congo*, Christoph N. Vogel undertakes a multilayered and, importantly, interscalar analysis of the international, corporate-backed humanitarian industry. Focusing on tech companies' tracking of the "3Ts" (tantalum, tin, and tungsten), he examines how corporate and humanitarian actors redeploy colonialist tropes to act on Congo, in the process further disempowering the Congolese at the bottom of the supply chain for Congolese minerals. "Conflict minerals," meaning the institutionalized narrative of conflict minerals rather than the minerals themselves, is the "problem," the history, life, and consequences of which Vogel seeks to unpack. He offers a lively and engaging critique of the follies of corporate-driven humanitarian interventions in Eastern DR Congo, one rigorously grounded in detailed ethnography and punctuated by fascinating case studies that illuminate the unintended consequences of humanitarian interventions, as well as the multiple, interconnected political orders that exist in Congo.

The book's introduction presents the topic and the main thesis of the book—mainly, that an array of international actors with a simplistic and ultimately erroneous understanding of the causes of conflict in the Eastern DR Congo have intervened on what they have mistakenly understood to be the root cause by imposing a new form of colonialism based on Eurocentric assumptions about markets, the state, and Africa. Rather than mitigating conflict, these interventions have often enabled violent actors to flourish under the guise of regulation, while disempowering the workers at the bottom of the supply chain for digital minerals. This chapter introduces the reader to a couple of important concepts, including the political order of state and non-state actors that Vogel refers to as "networked authority," and "White saviorism," which Vogel defines as an Orientalist "episteme" that is

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“[obsessed] with violence, poverty, and despair in Africa” (16). For Vogel, “White saviorism” undergirds an “unholy alliance” of “(neo)colonial frames, digital capitalism, neoliberal interventionism and humanitarianism” (11), and ultimately serves to absolve corporations of responsibility and wrongdoing under the cloak of advocacy.

In Chapter One, “Violent Continuities,” Vogel lays a historical foundation for his analysis of “the problem of ‘conflict minerals’” by presenting what is probably the most concise yet exhaustive explanation of the Congo conflicts that I have ever read, including comprehensive lists and maps of the various armed groups operating in Eastern Congo in recent years. This chapter alone is worth the price of admission. Chapter Two, “Genesis of a Digital Paradigm,” presents a history of mining in Congo, focusing on how artisanal mining became part of a regional war economy, which informed the cliché of artisanal miners “held at gunpoint,” an image that became central to conflict minerals interventions. Vogel uses insightful case studies to show the inadequacy of this cliché.

Chapter Three, “A Civilizing Mission 2.0?,” presents a concise but illuminating history of the evolution of conflict minerals interventions, beginning with local NGO-driven advocacy, moving on to the Dodd Frank Act and OECD guidelines on conflict minerals, then to the emergence of regional certification mechanisms, followed by the eruption of conflict-free validation schemes such as the iTSCi certification system of the International Tin’s Research Institute. Among other things, this chapter shows how the transcendent promise of this tracking scheme operates as a “smokescreen” to conceal more complicated realities.


Chapter Four, “Ethical Monopolies,” shows how the iTSCi tagging scheme works on the ground: iTSCi operates through the certification of certain mines as green, or conflict-free, which means that any minerals not from those mines are de facto unclean and therefore “illegal.” Its implementers also endeavor to create a bounded supply chain pipeline that (unsuccessfully) excludes unwanted actors, places, and minerals from the chain, theoretically absolving end-chain buyers of complicity in conflict while unintentionally creating buyer monopolies that disadvantage lower-level actors.

Chapter Five, “Brokers and Patrons,” is perhaps the most original and ethnographically rich chapter in the book. Focusing on important mid-level mediators in the mineral trade—the negociants, or middlemen, and the “incontournables,” or high-level patron-financiers—Vogel examines the regional networks that make the trade, and the movement of money and goods back and forth in the commodity chain, possible. For Vogel, these networks work in spite of superimposed regulatory efforts such as iTSCi, at once making those regulatory efforts possible and allowing those involved in the trade to break out of the strictures imposed by them.

Chapter Six, “Conflicted Certification,” examines how iTSCi became de facto Congolese law, overriding state law and giving rise to a new corporate and NGO-based mode of sovereignty that eclipsed and coopted the Congolese state. Chapter Seven, “Peace, Ethics, and Congo,” concludes by returning

to the main conceptual themes of the book, including the argument that “single issue” reforms and market-centered peace initiatives ignore the actual causes of violence, create “façade institutions” that allow violence and conflict to continue, and serve the interests of profit-seeking foreign capital, such as the tech companies that rely on Congolese digital minerals.

Conflict Minerals Inc. is an exceptionally detailed, clear, and compelling analysis of the cultural assumptions informing conflict minerals regulations in Congo, the history of their implementation, and the impact of those regulations on Congo. Vogel does an excellent job of showing how neoliberal, market-based, peacebuilding initiatives such as iTSCi ignore and exacerbate local conflicts and inequalities while ultimately serving the interests of tech companies. One thought that occurs to me is that, with respect to Vogel’s description of the history of tracking interventions in Congo, I would have liked to see more attention to the role that foreign mining companies played in promoting and subsidizing the conflict minerals narrative and in implementing the tagging schemes as members of ITRI, the promulgators of the iTSCi certification program. In addition to benefitting and protecting tech companies, schemes such as iTSCi also benefit the foreign mining companies, who have also contributed to the conflict minerals narrative, often in collaboration with iNGOs. These companies use the narrative of conflict minerals and their connections with high level state actors to expunge artisanal miners from the mines that these very diggers have worked and sometimes discovered. All in all, *Conflict Minerals Inc.* is an excellent and engaging political ethnography that should be read by all scholars of resource extraction, Congo and the Congo wars/conflicts, and international peacebuilding, as well as peace, rights, and development practitioners.

James H. Smith 

University of California (Davis), Davis
California, USA

jsmit@ucdavis.edu

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