



Book Review

Michael Nest

Coltan

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011. 220 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7456-4913-3

Reviewed by: Virgil Hawkins, Osaka University

Coltan, which is the abbreviation of columbium-tantalite, is a relatively obscure metal. It is the political significance that this metal has taken on since the 2000s, rather than its metallurgical qualities, that has prompted the writing of this book. Although certainly less well known than the ‘conflict diamond’, ‘conflict coltan’ is connected with armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Like the conflict diamond elsewhere, the exploitation of coltan is thought to be used to finance the military activities of armed groups. Yet in many ways the metal seems to be rather misunderstood, in terms of its role in the conflict in the DRC, and even in terms of estimations of supply and demand, and its industrial applications. This book serves as both a useful overview and a welcome reality check.

It is these misunderstandings that have led Michael Nest to open the book with a chapter on facts, figures and myths. The metal came to prominence through a series of United Nations-led initiatives and NGO campaigns, and while the latter did serve to raise awareness about the problem, it also led to a certain degree of oversimplification and overestimation of its importance. As campaigns, the ‘no blood on my mobile’, for example, took off and coltan began to become seen as an issue of importance, the notion that there was a global shortage of coltan, and that the DRC had 80 percent of global reserves, were among a number of notions that began to take root, without necessarily having any real basis in fact. Nest deals convincingly with these ‘urban myths’. It should also be noted that in NGO campaigns, portrayals of the applications of coltan encouraged, to a degree, the belief that the mineral was used primarily in the manufacture of mobile phones (manufacturers were targeted accordingly), when in fact it has a much wider range of applications.

Chapter two takes on the issue of production and markets, tracing it from the artisanal mines in eastern DRC to the global market, and to the manufacture of final end products. Chapter three outlines the links between coltan and conflict in the DRC. This is a chapter that one feels could have been dealt with in greater detail, but it is a relatively short book on the whole, and this aspect of the problem is handled in proportion with the others. Advocacy, campaigns and initiatives are the subject of chapter four, and here, the discussion flows smoothly between, and ties together for the reader, United Nations-led initiatives, NGO campaigns and industry

responses. In spite of the fact that some misperceptions were created, the impact such campaigns have had was no small feat, given that the mineral itself had been largely unheard of until that point, and that it makes up such a small and invisible part of the electronic devices that we use. The final chapter deals with the future of coltan politics. The closing message of the book confirms that the book is aimed primarily at activists (at various levels), with the intent being to ensure that those who do attempt to take action, possess adequate knowledge about the issue to be on target and useful .

Overall, the book gives an even and balanced handling of the key issues: the production of coltan (mining practices and property rights), the trade (both domestic and international), and the demand (both the corporate and consumer angles). The manner in which the book is written and the liberal use of useful tables, boxes, figures and other graphics (photos of NGO campaign posters, for example), make it exceptionally readable.

The importance of coltan and its connection with armed conflict in the DRC has declined since its peak in the early 2000s, which may prompt some to question the continued relevance of the book at this point in time. But as a work that succinctly and yet comprehensively highlights the complexities of a conflict-related resource from a variety of important and interrelated perspectives, it surely contains lessons that can be applied to other conflict-related resources, present and future, in the DRC and elsewhere.