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Facets of Power: Politics, Profits and People in the Making of Zimbabwe's Blood Diamonds

Sarah Katz-Lavigne

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middle class as consumers of gadgetry, communications and social networking emerge explicitly in the case studies for Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania, and are subtle but evident in the other three cases. There are leads here to fill a whole other book, but it would have been pertinent to draw out the implications of this seemingly common factor across middle classes and, more importantly, what the emergence of the so-called fourth industrial revolution means for the evolution of the middle class and transformative behavior in Africa. At the very least, one might speculate what the impact on the African middle classes might be if African countries do not have the option of following the East Asian route to development, where mechanization with cheap, mostly unskilled labour, has played a major role.

These points are more than quibbles but less than fatal flaws in what remains a compelling and well curated collection of papers. The two divides in the great middle class debate will continue, with one side grumbling that the term “middle class” has become the tool of “policy and market analysts”, as Carola Lentz does (25), and the other dismayed that the discussion is largely within the purview of academic social scientists and their accompanying skepticism and jargon. This book will not bridge the divide but it is a step in the right direction, a worthy addition to the landmark Africa Now series of books produced by Uppsala’s Nordic Africa Institute and Zed Books.

Notes

1. The titles of two papers by Nancy Birdsall (2010, 2015) epitomize this view – “The (Indispensable) Middle Class in Developing Countries; or, The Rich and the Rest, Not the Poor and the Rest” and “Does the Rise of the Middle Class Lock in Good Government in the Developing World?”
2. See, for example, Berry (2014).

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Facets of Power: Politics, Profits and People in the Making of Zimbabwe’s Blood Diamonds, edited by Richard Saunders and Tinashe Nyamunda, Harare, Zimbabwe, Weaver Press and Johannesburg, South Africa, Wits University Press, 2016, 215 pp.

Facets of Power aims to provide multiple strands of understanding and analysis about the situation at the Marange diamond fields in Zimbabwe, linking national political struggles to local poverty, and the global diamond industry to local clandestine networks. At a time when the

debate surrounding so-called “conflict minerals” continues to rage, this book provides new insight into the limitations of the binary of bad rebels and good, but weak governments around which the “blood diamonds” concept initially developed. The book packs a remarkable amount of content into a restrained 215 pages and commendably relies on local scholarship, experience, and knowledge about Zimbabwe. One of the book’s greatest strengths is its rich empirical analysis and wealth of detail about the inner workings of both the Kimberley Process (KP) in Zimbabwe and the illicit and illegal trade in diamonds from the Marange fields. The book highlights the importance of multiple levels of analysis even for seemingly localised dynamics of conflict and violence, demonstrating that the Marange diamonds are not the cause of Zimbabwe’s political turmoil, but rather a reflection of its failure to ensure meaningful political transition over the years.

The book’s main contribution to current debate and analysis around the “conflict diamonds” issue is its recognition that much has changed since the KP’s early years as an initiative to address the issue of rebel groups in Sierra Leone and Angola using diamonds to finance campaigns against elected governments. The book highlights how Zimbabwe’s unaccountable government successfully deploys “soft” tools, like persuasion, as well as violence to maintain access to revenue flows from the country’s natural resources. The book convincingly shows the limitations of the KP in addressing these human rights dynamics, which do not fit neatly into the “blood diamonds” scenario, and reveals how KP representatives have been reluctant or even unwilling to address human rights issues. The book’s key takeaway is that “new thinking, regulatory criteria and enforcement measures [are] needed to combat the changed dynamics of conflict” (34). Having established this, the most interesting question raised in the book then becomes: who are the “winners” and “losers” from diamond smuggling practices? Only in-depth research and analysis of the kind that this book provides can yield this crucial information, which rejects the simple policy solutions that donors have often sought.

These lessons can and should be used to inform the conflict minerals debate that has sprung up around other types of minerals and elsewhere, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The book makes a convincing case for expanding the definition of blood diamonds or (more broadly) conflict minerals. Yet more discussion and analysis would have been useful, for example on the possible pitfalls of extending the conflict minerals regime to the point of potentially harming ordinary people who rely on artisanal mining for survival (as the book argues, artisanal mining in Marange did produce some local benefits, at least initially). In Zimbabwe, as the book makes clear, these dynamics are not new and are not a product of the diamonds themselves (though the book’s title, focus, and dramatic cover image may leave some readers with a different impression); rather, the diamonds reflect the broader political difficulties and instability that have plagued Zimbabwe for decades.

While the book is explicitly focused on Zimbabwe and makes little claim to broader lessons for other resource-rich countries on the African continent, or for other countries where the KP (or similar international agreements) is applied, the book would benefit from situating its findings and analysis within the broader context of the significant body of research on natural resource governance and securitisation in Africa, including in countries with similar governance and security dynamics, such as the DRC. The chapter entitled “Holding Ground: Communities, Companies and Resistance,” for instance, raises several questions in its conclusion about community and civil society engagement around Marange that many other scholars have investigated, including within the corporate social responsibility and free, prior, and informed consent-related literature. Other literature that could yield useful context includes research on the impact of efforts to formalise artisanal mining and on the growing involvement of industrial mining companies in areas previously dominated by local miners.

The book offers a nuanced perspective from a range of angles, while making its overall position clear. Nonetheless, certain issues remained unresolved, including the question of whether formalisation is genuinely desirable in Zimbabwe. Does formalisation require industrial exploitation of

mineral deposits? Does greater securitisation and the fencing-off of areas like Marange constitute progress? Must greater physical security for the local population entail a trade-off in the form of reduced economic security? The book should be commended for its range of views and rejection of easy answers. Yet a more detailed conclusion would have added value for a book that addresses so many complex themes and issues, including the question of whether international initiatives like the KP can adapt to and evolve with developments like those at Marange (including the rapid growth of new global markets), or whether the KP will continue to bring a veneer of legitimacy to serious violations of human rights. Would expanding the scope of the KP to include issues such as revenue transparency constitute an unacceptable level of “mission creep” in a context in which other initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative have been created to address these issues?

Ultimately, and unsurprisingly, the book raises more questions than it answers about what can be done in Zimbabwe, where the interests of powerful actors inside and outside government are perceived to be diametrically opposed to the interests of the wider population. These debates are taking place not just in Zimbabwe, or indeed Africa, but worldwide, in an age of growing inequality. This book makes an important contribution to academics’ and policymakers’ understanding of the dynamics that underpin the networks of public, private, and security actors (national and international) that collaborate in the extraction of high-value resources and their sale on world markets, while local communities and artisanal miners face impoverishment and shoulder a disproportionate share of the physical risk.

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