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ABSTRACT

The differences between slavery now and then are less important than the historical links that bind them, links in an awful chain of bondage that bind the history of the transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the resurgence of slavery in Africa today. As this article illustrates, nowhere is this truer, both in historical and contemporary terms, than in the Congo. The links binding the Congo to the history of human bondage were first forged in the crucible of early modern capitalism and they have been made fast by the proliferation of “free market reform” today, which despite the fundamentalist cant of its advocates, has hardly proven to be a force of human liberation; instead, placing the last 500 years of the Congo region in global context, we can see how capitalism has proven to be the world’s greatest purveyor of human bondage. The article concludes with an argument that the reconstruction of civil society in the Democratic Republic of Congo after decades of war, dictatorship, and neo-colonial rule depends crucially on the continued success of an already impressive Congolese abolitionist movement. Without making an end to slavery, once and for all, civil society can hardly prosper in a country where slavery has historically brought about its destruction.

INTRODUCTION

There are many Orwellian ironies of the neo-liberal order. One is that “free market reforms” have contributed to the resurgence of slavery in our own day. Such a situation brings to mind another chilling irony, that we are still struggling to abolish slavery in a post abolition world. Estimates of the world’s total enslaved population vary widely; on the low end, the United Nations’ International Labor Organization works with a figure of twelve million while Kevin Bales, a leading scholar of modern slavery, puts the number at twenty seven million.¹ Despite the significant differences between the two figures, taken together, they really tell the

¹ Kevin Bales, *New Slavery: A Reference Handbook* (Denver, CO: ABC-CLIO, 2004), p. 4; also see Bales’ reflections on the methodological difficulties in developing modern slavery statistics in “The Challenge of Measuring Slavery,” *Understanding Global Slavery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 87-111. For the ILO’s statistics, see their website: http://www.ilo.org/global/Themes/Forced_Labour/lang--en/index.htm. According to the ILO estimate, 80% of the enslaved are women and children. [add new report from Jim Stewart]

same story: that slavery remains an undeniable and pervasive feature of global capitalism.

Slavery today is not the same thing that it was on the plantations of the early modern Atlantic world, where bondage was legal, racial, expensive, and perpetual; today, slavery is illegal and non-racial; moreover, slaves are cheap. In Bales' famous reckoning they are even "disposable," there being no vested interest in the present for masters in maintaining an enslaved person beyond the often short period in which their labor is in demand.² But the differences between slavery now and then are less important than the historical links that bind them, links in an awful chain of bondage that bind the history of the transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the resurgence of slavery in Africa today.

As this article illustrates, nowhere is this truer, both in historical and contemporary terms, than in the Congo. The links binding the Congo to the history of human bondage were first forged in the crucible of early modern capitalism and they have been made fast by the proliferation of "free market reform" today, which despite the fundamentalist cant of its advocates, has hardly proven to be a force of human liberation; instead, placing the last 500 years of the Congo region in global context, we can see how capitalism has proven to be the world's greatest purveyor of human bondage.³

This article explains the persistence of slavery in the Congo today, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) through a global, historical perspective that takes into view the central part played by the Kingdom of Kongo in the early modern, transatlantic slave trade. The focus shifts next to the persistence of slavery in the Congo after abolition during the region's imperial occupation ca. 1884-1960. The article then moves on to a discussion of the

² Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

³ Although historians in the past have debated whether or not new world slavery was a capitalist institution in the early modern period, most now agree that it was, and not just in British North America but all over the Americas north and south. Scholars have largely relegated the planters' rhetorical pretenses to paternalism to the world of self-justifying discourse rather than reading them as realistic reflections of the economy of the plantation complex. For older arguments against the capitalist nature of new world slavery, see Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). For varied interpretations of capitalism's direct relationship to slavery in the early modern Atlantic, see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944); David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross, 2 vols.* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1974); Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (New York: Verso, 1997); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000); Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Tropical Babels: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006).

resurgence of slavery in the DRC today and its links to the neo-colonial order of corrupt Congolese elites, multinational corporate interests, and global economic institutions that now govern the nation. The article concludes with an argument that the reconstruction of civil society in the DRC depends absolutely on an internal abolitionist movement that has already begun the crucial work. Without making an end to slavery, once and for all, civil society can hardly prosper in a country where slavery has historically brought about its destruction.

The transatlantic slave trade and the enslavement of Africans in the Americas should be understood as a holocaust occasioned by the inaugural epochs of global capitalism and European empire building. Twenty million people, the number of Africans ensnared for the transatlantic trade (ca. 1480-1880), became human sacrifices on an altar of murderous avarice. Of this number, scholars think perhaps half died en route to the coast, where captives were kept in baracoons on the beach or in massive, fortress-like compounds called slave “castles” or “factories.” European governments invested in these impressive strongholds, such as the Portuguese built castle at El Mina (present day Ghana).

Others were maintained by joint-stock companies, the antecedents of today’s multi-national corporations. The Royal African Company, for example, headquartered their trade at Cape Coast Castle (present day Sierra Leone). These private, state-chartered entities were governed by elected boards of directors who oversaw capital intensive commercial and colonization projects around the world, financing the ventures by selling shares in them to large groups of investors to spread risk and maximize potential profits. From the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries, slave trading joint-stock companies and private investors from Holland, Britain, Denmark, France, Spain, Portugal, the United States, and their colonial dominions legally commissioned slave ship captains to purchase their human “cargos” in these coastal marts before setting sail for European colonies in the Americas.

The illegal transatlantic slave trade continued until close to the end of nineteenth century. Regardless of legal questions, joint stock company directors and private merchants took care to calculate the potential profitability of a slave trading venture; they did so in part by anticipating the number of captives who would die en route from Africa to the colonies, subtracting this portion from the number of survivors they planned to sell at an expected price. As historians have discerned, 13%-20% of the people below deck would perish over the course of the Middle Passage. Mass murder, as the white and black abolitionists of the past first told the world, was literally built into the profit-maximizing equations that drove the transatlantic traffic in bodies and souls; but mass murder in the slave trade did not end with the Middle Passage. Approximately two million more Africans died during the “seasoning process,” the period when migrants tried to adjust to the

climate and their new lives in the colonies and later, the Empire of Brazil and the United States of America. But for new arrivals from Africa, seasoning also served an important economic purpose, when masters tried to separate human beings from their humanity by using violent terror to “break them” into slaves, although they rarely succeeded to the extent they desired.

In colonies like Jamaica where sugar profits were so high, the death dealing nature of new world slavery became particularly apparent, as planters discovered that it was more profitable to work their slaves to death and buy new ones instead of giving slaves enough food, shelter, and rest to prolong their lives and productivity. As a result, for the nearly two centuries that Jamaica served as a British sugar colony, its enslaved population did not reproduce itself naturally until emancipation. It’s hardly an overstatement, then, to say that throughout the early modern period, the Atlantic slave system evolved into a very efficient killing-machine that produced exponential profits, and did so with such rapidity that it became integral to the financial, commercial, and productive innovations that generated the global expansion of early modern capitalism.⁴

As historians of Africa have long known, from the start, the Kingdom of Kongo occupied center stage in the history of the transatlantic slave trade, providing the opening scene for an awful drama that would eventually span six centuries. In the late 1400s, Kongo’s leaders forged strong ties with the Portuguese forces that colonized Angola. The ties were based primarily on Roman Catholicism and a profitable if not problematic trade in slaves that Kongo’s King, Afonso I, tried unsuccessfully to regulate in 1526.

Afonso wanted to set the terms of the trade to his advantage and to secure basic liberties for his subjects, to prevent them from being illegally enslaved for Portuguese traders to sell abroad; the Portuguese knew, however, that they could always tap into the underground market supplied by illicit Congolese slave traders. Even though they eventually exercised the upper hand in the relationship, the Portuguese did cultivate close diplomatic and commercial ties with the Kings of Kongo, as their cooperation became indispensable to the expansion and profitability of the nascent Luso-Atlantic empire. Slave trading with the Kongolese supplied the cheap labor that would make for high profits in the sugar plantations that enterprising Portuguese settlers had founded in new colonies off the coast of present day Gabon in Sao Tome (1485) and across the southern Atlantic in Brazil (1500).

⁴ John K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Linda M. Heywood, “Slavery and Its Transformation in the Kingdom of Kongo: 1491-1800,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-22.

The commercial network of sugar and slaves that connected the Kingdom of Kongo to the rise of the Luso-Atlantic held immense significance in world history. For much of the early modern period, Brazil functioned as the sugar emporium of the global economy, a status that made it a contested colonial region, one that the Portuguese would defend from the onslaught of Dutch armies, the British navy, and pirates of all nations. With such wealth to be made in such an enormous tract of colonial space, it should not surprise that Brazil would receive approximately 85% of the Africans who survived the Middle Passage. Peering into the foul holds of the slave ships that brought these unfortunates into a land of bondage, we would find that most of the captives destined for Brazil came from Angola and the Kingdom of Kongo.⁵

With such a central place in the history of the slave trade and, concomitantly, the rise of European empires and the expansion of the global economy, the Kingdom of Kongo invariably suffered from the ill-effects that the trade had in every African region where it operated. But due to the Kingdom's preeminent place in the Atlantic system, its people suffered with atypical intensity from the dysfunctional impacts that the slave trade left in its bloody and grasping wake. Endemic military conflicts with colonial Portuguese regimes in Angola and a devastating forty year civil war in the late seventeenth century depopulated the Kingdom and set it on a course of destructive political discord and economic dissipation. As a result of such civil instability, the Kongolese eventually succumbed to economically dependent relationships with the Portuguese and other European empires, a paradigm for foreign domination that would continue to plague the country throughout the eighteenth century and into the next.⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Kingdom's weakened position made it ripe for external political control and economic exploitation. Kongo's decline coincided precisely in time with the West's ascent as a global hegemon, which had been hastened by the advent of an industrial capital order financed in part from the capital accreted from centuries of colonial slavery and slave trading in the Congo.

In contrast to the rise of Europe's industrial empire, the Congress of Berlin confirmed the Kongo's decline in 1884, when the Kingdom was dissolved into the

⁵ John K. Thornton, "The Origins and Early History of the Kingdom of Kongo," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* vol. 34, no. 1 (2001), pp. 89–120; Ann Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982; Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1500-1835* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Edgar Conrad, *World of Sorrow: The African Slave Trade to Brazil* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

⁶ John K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Linda M. Heywood, "Slavery and Its Transformation in the Kingdom of Kongo: 1491-1800," *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-22.

Congo Free State, with its former territory divided between France, Portugal and a personal fiefdom governed by Belgium's King Leopold II. By 1908, Leopold's personal domain had become a Belgian colony. While officially abolished under British pressure earlier in the nineteenth century, slavery and slave trading in the Congo continued well into the twentieth century, conducted tacitly under the direction of the Belgians and other interested Europeans with cooperation from local elites. Indeed, slavery, sometimes under the guise of contract labor, persisted in a variety of forms until independence. As the research of African historians has proven, slavery cannot be separated from the history of how the Congo's modern infrastructure, both civil and economic, came into being.⁷

While revolutionaries led by Patrice Lumumba and others managed to wrest nominal independence from the reluctant Belgian government in 1960, real independence has been hard in the making. The DRC has struggled to achieve true autonomy due to internal divisions and often violent, foreign intervention. Genocidal conflicts afflicted the country and those that bordered it when the region was caught in the cross-fire of a Cold War proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although that polarizing struggle for global domination ended in the late twentieth century, the DRC's geopolitical importance –and appeal to outside interests, hardly ended with it.

The nation found itself torn again in the 1990s by civil strife and wars with its neighbors, Rwanda and Uganda, whose own conflicts had spilled across their borders and into the DRC, where they raged on at an incredible, even stupefying human cost. Taken together, these post-Cold War conflicts killed upwards of five million people, causing some critics, rightly dismayed by the world's indifference to the violence, to call the collective carnage the "African world war."⁸

Historically, the wars of the 1990s/2000s arose from circumstances similar to those that undermined the Kingdom of Kongo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the same, devastating effects. Now as then, relentless, destabilizing political violence has left behind a vacuum of governance that compromises the state's role as sovereign actor, to the extent that it essentially becomes impossible

⁷ Wyatt MacGaffey, "Kongo Slavery Remembered by Themselves: Texts from 1915," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* vol. 41, no. 1 (2008), pp. 55-76; Samuel Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo Basin, 1880-1940* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994); William J. Samarin, *The Black Man's Burden: African Colonial Labor on the Congo and Ubangi rivers, 1880-1900* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1989); John Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial labor policy, private enterprise, and the African mineworker, 1907-1951* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Adam Hirsch, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009).

⁸ David N. Gibbs, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: Mines, Money, and U.S. Policy in the Congo Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (New York: Zed Books, 2002); Thomas Turner, *The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth and Reality* (New York: Zed Books: 2007)

to prevent warring political factions, both domestic and foreign, from taking control of large swathes of territory within the state's jurisdiction.

In 1884, European powers assembled in Berlin began filling the vacuum of governance in central Africa by staking their respective claims to the Kongo at the imperial conference table, guided by the diplomatic wizardry of Otto von Bismarck, which proved salutary in Europe but lethal in Africa. The Europeans would be helped in their "scramble for Africa" by corrupt and self-serving Congolese who found that their own opportunity for advancement lay in the subjection of their countrymen. A little over a century later, the heirs to Bismarck and company, the world's neo-colonial powers and the global economic institutions that they dominated, would fill a new political vacuum in central Africa. And once again they would enjoy the imperative cooperation of corrupt, Congolese elites.

Led by the world's most powerful nations, multi-lateral economic federations, and multi-national corporations, a neo-colonial order has largely commandeered control over the DRC's affairs through the implementation of neo-liberal "reforms." Foreign interests have achieved this influence in ways that resonate with Africa's imperial past. Take, for example, the alleged "antipoverty" policies of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund; like the measures of nineteenth century empires, its policies are allegedly designed to lift African nations out of poverty; but like the empires of old, the IMF's policies have created more poverty than they have alleviated in the Congo.⁹

But war has worked better than words, as it always has for imperialists with designs on the Congo, who in a tradition that stretches back to the early modern period, continue to orchestrate, foment, and exacerbate political tensions in the region. To secure their own economic interests in exploiting the DRC's rich mineral and forestry resources, nations and corporations have manipulated, bribed, and otherwise collaborated with the warring factions battling each other in the country's catastrophic civil wars; such meddling has also worked to perpetuate the fighting between the DRC and its neighbors, most of which continue to be fought within the DRC itself, the site of unrelenting warfare for the last half century. Beyond foreign manipulation of DRC politics, foreign investment and economic

⁹ For the IMF and poverty reduction, see the following from the "Overview" section on the institution's website: "The IMF works to foster global growth and economic stability. It provides policy advice and financing to members in economic difficulties and also works with developing nations to help them achieve macroeconomic stability and reduce poverty." <http://www.imf.org/external/about/overview.htm>.

development in the DRC, constrained as it has been by endemic war, has come perversely at the expense of the majority of the country's people.¹⁰

Over the last two decades, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank have partnered with the DRC ostensibly to attract foreign investment and to commercially integrate the nation into the global economy. According to their rhetoric, these organizations have advised the DRC on governmental economic policy and have used various forms of financial aid to re-organize and rejuvenate the economy and the government's relationship to it, supposedly to make the DRC an autonomous, diversified, competitive force fully integrated into the international market.

Markets previously closed by national tariffs were thrown open to Congolese goods as the DRC opened its own borders to products previously restricted by protective trade measures. IMF loans were intended to finance improvements to the DRC's economic infrastructure, improvements which ranged in scope from road building and electrification to increasing the nation's hi-tech capacities. Investment could also be industry specific, and funds were directed to Congolese mining and commercial agriculture and forestry.

The plan was to bring the DRC's infrastructure up to levels high enough to help the nation's economy function more efficiently by attracting additional investment from rising economic powers such as China and from corporations, especially those in need of scarce minerals vital to a variety of industries that ranged from heavy manufacturing to electronics. Foreign investment dollars would also upgrade the technological infrastructure of mining, forestry, and commercial agriculture, again as a means to enhance the DRC economy from within while also profiting economic interests without. The gap, however, between these stated plans and their realization has been painful.¹¹

The pain stems from the insistence of the IMF, World Bank, WTO, corporations, and national trading partners that the DRC commit itself to a free market revolution. The revolution would be won through "structural adjustments," or the conditional reforms which the DRC would undertake to receive the promised developmental loans and access to foreign markets. According to the dogma informing the structural adjustment programs, economic growth in the DRC

¹⁰ Stephen Jackson, "Making a Killing: Criminality and Coping in the Kivu War Economy," *Review of African Political Economy* vol. 29 (2002), 516-536; "No justice in Canada for Congolese massacre victims as Canada's Supreme Court dismisses leave to appeal," November 1, 2012, GlobalWitness.org [<http://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/library/No%20justice%20in%20Canada%201%20Nov%202012.pdf>]; *Coming Clean: How Supply Chain Controls Can Stop Congo's Mineral Trade Fueling Conflict: A Report by Global Witness* (May 2012), pp. 1-36 [http://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/library/Coming_clean.pdf]

¹¹ Bernard Logan Ikubolajeh and Mengisteab Kidane, "IMF-World Bank Adjustment and Structural Transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Economic Geography* vol. 69, no. 1(1993), pp. 1-24; Ngaire Woods, *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and their Borrowers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

and across the global south had been hampered not because of years of imperial exploitation, elite domestic collaboration, and violent, genocidal authoritarian rule propped up by the United States. Instead, the nation's economic woes stemmed from corruption and political instability that flowed from a bloated public sector.

After independence, so the narrative went, post-colonial governments stifled their economies through myopic, nationalist policies that rejected the natural wonders of the free market. Support for collective bargaining rights, minimum wages, pensions, tariffs to protect home industries, agricultural subsidies to keep prices high for the nation's farmers, a progressive tax system and partial or full nationalization of select industries to fund education, national parks, healthcare, clean water, modern sewage systems, electrification, and infrastructural improvements, all of these had bloated the public sector and frightened off foreign investors, keeping the nations of the global south from reaching their destiny as fully integrated members of the global economy. Now, insisted the powers of the new global economy, unfettered capitalism rather than a mix of the state and the market would better guarantee the original promise of liberty and prosperity held out by the colonial liberation revolutionaries of the mid-twentieth century.¹²

The free market revolution imposed on the DRC by outside forces thus forced the nation to literally reconstitute itself according to the principles of free market dogma, which meant drastic cuts to public spending and curbs on the power of organized labor. Structural adjustments of this sort were designed to ensure that the IMF, the World Bank, the nations of the WTO, and multi-national corporations that they could secure their loans at a disproportionately favorable rate and maximize profits by investing in the DRC, where labor costs had been forcibly slashed in order to create a "business friendly" environment. The DRC was hardly alone in being subjected to such terms, which became common all over the global south. But again, just as the Congo's exceptional value in the slave trade left behind an exceptionally devastating legacy in the age of industry and empire, so has the DRC's value in today's global economy guaranteed that the nation would suffer more than most under the auspices of neo-colonialism.¹³

In the DRC, two decades of structural adjustments have failed to produce real and sustained economic growth for the vast and overwhelming majority of the Congolese people, who have experienced an intensification of the already harsh

¹² Irfan Nooruddin and Joel W. Simmons, "The Politics of Hard Choices: IMF Programs and Government Spending," vol. 60, no. 4 (2006), 1001-1033; Baqir, Rodney Ramcharan and Ratna Sahay, "IMF Programs and Growth: Is Optimism Defensible?" *IMF Staff Papers*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2005), pp. 260-286.

¹³ Michael Goldman, *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2003); *Fair Trade for All: How Trade Can Promote Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Richard Peet, *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank, and WTO* (New York: Zed Books, 2003); Jan Joost Teunissen and Age Akkerman, eds., *Helping the Poor? The IMF and Low-Income Countries* (New York: FONDAD, 2005)

material conditions that they have endured within the context of protracted political violence. Perhaps the best way to measure the impoverishing effects that the neo-colonial free market revolution has had upon the Congolese people is through the Human Development Index (HDI).

Created by the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen, HDI gauges the human effects or lived experience of the social inequalities and inequities created by the dominant, capitalist organization of the global economy. Sen combined several key indicators to calculate a nation's HDI: average life expectancy, literacy rates and years of education, and per capita income as derived through a nation's Gross National Income. The constituent members of the United Nations are then ranked according to these calculations and are placed in four groups: Very High Human Development, High Human Development, Medium Human Development, and Low Human Development.

The latest HDI figures published by the U.N. in 2011 reveal that twenty one of the top twenty five nations in the Very High Development category hail from the West--Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea being the outliers. The bottom twenty-five placed in the Low Human Development category are all African nations, most of them in the sub-Saharan region.

The DRC ranks last in Low Human Development and thus last in the entire world, with an HDI of .286, although its former imperial overlord, Belgium, sits comfortably within the Very High Human Development section, ranked eighteenth worldwide with an HDI of .886. Statistics can be very abstract measures of human experience, but when placed within the framework of indicators designed by Sen, not only do we get a sense of the urgent humanitarian crisis in the DRC, we see how it came into being through a deep history predicated upon the exploitation of the people of Africa, and particularly those of the Congo region, a history that today's neo-colonial powers have inherited to their advantage as the heirs of their imperial predecessors.¹⁴

The structural adjustment regime has not elevated the standard of living in the DRC; what it has elevated is the national debt, so much so, in fact, that the government's first priority is now paying off that debt; it does so, of course, with the tax revenue that it used to use to secure the welfare of its own people, who are now suffering more than the people of any nation in the world. As many scholars, activists, and politicians have noted, the DRC's debt problem underscores how the logic of free market capitalism applied through social policy, meaning gutting government spending on things that improve peoples' quality of life, has worked

¹⁴ See the following tables and indices, taken from the 2011 HDI reports, on the UN Human Development website [<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>]: 2011 Report Table 1 - Human Development Index and its Components; Table 2 - Human Development Index trends, 1980–2011; Technical Notes; Human Development Statistical Tables; FAQs about the Human Development Index (HDI)

undoubtedly to the disadvantage of African people and, indeed, people all over the global south. For instance, in 2008, the DRC's external debt stood at 93% of GDP, 150% of exports, and 501% of government revenue. The DRC's total publicly-guaranteed external debt (or PPG) stood in 2009 at \$13.1 billion; of this total, \$7.1 billion has been borrowed from bilateral creditors; the rest is owed to multi-lateral institutions such as the IMF (\$4.4 billion) and foreign banks or commercial creditors (\$1.5 billion). The nation is already \$4.9 billion in arrears in paying off these loans, which caused the IMF to suspend "interim assistance" in 2006.¹⁵

Now prey to exploitative powers abroad to solve its debt crisis, the DRC has been forced into a servile position of economic dependency only two generations following political independence, this despite the fact that the nation ranks as the world's richest in terms of the value of its natural resources.

One of the most disturbing, far-reaching impacts of the DRC's new era of economic dependency is that it threatens the de facto political independence the nation achieved in 1960. The draconian debt repayment schedule demanded by the IMF structural adjustment regime provides a clear example, as it compelled the DRC government to relinquish control over its own fiscal policy, thus forfeiting a crucial dimension of its sovereignty. The debt repayment plan and the attendant cuts to public spending proved such a colossal failure in terms of alleviating poverty, reducing political corruption, and improving standards of living that the IMF moved toward a policy of debt relief in 2010.¹⁶

In 2011, in the midst of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, the DRC's GDP grew by 6.5%, a more than impressive feat that, all things being equal, should mean more wealth in the hands of more of the Congolese people. But as we know, free market fundamentalism and domestic corruption have ensured little in the way of equity, most particularly in regard to the dignity of human life, when one considers the disparity between the HDI rankings of nations in the global south and north.

But while it suffers from the world's lowest HDI, the DRC is a very wealthy nation when measured by the economic worth of its natural resources; indeed, within this context, the DRC is perhaps the wealthiest nation on earth. The value of the DRC's mineral reserves alone has been estimated at an incredible value of

¹⁵Mark Plant (IMF), Dominique Desruelle (IMF), Carlos Alberto Braga (ADA), and Sudhir Shetty (IDA), and the Staffs of the International Monetary Fund and the International Development Association, *Joint IMF/World Bank Debt Sustainability Analysis 2009: Democratic Republic of Congo* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund and International Development Association, 2010), 71, 72.

¹⁶ "Democratic Republic of the Congo: Staff Report for the 2012 Article IV Consultation," International Monetary Fund, 5-59. Debt relief, however, has not come with the restoration of sovereign budgetary control to the DRC government. The report cited here calls for increasing budgetary cuts, which if past practice is any guide, will come in the way of reductions in health and education spending, which will hardly improve living standards.

\$24 trillion.¹⁷ Wealth of this magnitude should guarantee the DRC's economic independence, not the reverse. How its national wealth was used to regenerate an era of foreign domination can only be explained by the colonial dynamic driving the neo-liberal order that has come to organize and dominate the global economy. Diamonds, copper, gold, silver, and tin have been mined for centuries in the region for their value in luxury and manufactured goods, although now their extraction in the DRC feeds a supply chain organized by multi-national corporations that stretches around the world.

The DRC ranks fourth in terms of value among the world's diamond producers, a value that will grow along with the demand for diamonds which continues to increase in nations with expanding middle classes such as Russia, India, China, and Brazil. The nation produces about 1/6 of the world's supply of cassiterite, the ore necessary to produce tin, which now is used to create circuit boards as well as a host of other manufactured goods. The DRC has 80% of the world's reserves in cobalt and is its largest producer; the mineral can be found in products that range from dyes, to rechargeable batteries, to jet engines. Cobalt and copper are often found in the same deposits, and the DRC also ranks among the top producers of copper, the value of which is magnified by its versatile applications in construction, plumbing, the wiring of electrical, heating, and cooling systems, and manufacturing machinery. The amount of copper wire in many cars can be stretched for close to a mile. But while older industries benefit from the DRC's rich mineral reserves, the explosion in the production and demand for hi tech electronics have brought the nation today to a place in the global economy rivaling that held by the Kingdom of Kongo during the early modern era.¹⁸

Hi tech electronics have revolutionized not only our capacity to transmit and receive information over time and space, they have also revolutionized consumer society around the world. Billions of people who have enough disposable income and many of those who do not, now use cash or credit to purchase consumer items like cell phones not as luxuries but as indispensable necessities. The same might be said about personal computers, laptops, and electronic tablets and notebooks. The invention of such consumer necessities has created a new and ever-growing demand for a host of new electronic goods, some of which barely existed even a

¹⁷ Conflict Diamonds: World Bank African Region Working Paper Series, vol. 13 [<http://www.worldbank.org/afr/wps/wp13.pdf>]; Damon Van der Linde, "The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Future of Cobalt Mining," *Cobalt Investing News* (November 10, 2010) [<http://cobaltinvestingnews.com/121-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-and-the-future-of-cobalt-mining>]; Facts About Copper: United States Geological Survey, June 2009 [<http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/mcs/2009/mcs2009.pdf>].

¹⁸ Conflict Diamonds: World Bank African Region Working Paper Series, vol. 13 [<http://www.worldbank.org/afr/wps/wp13.pdf>]; Damon Van der Linde, "The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Future of Cobalt Mining," *Cobalt Investing News* (November 10, 2010) [<http://cobaltinvestingnews.com/121-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-and-the-future-of-cobalt-mining>]; Facts About Copper: United States Geological Survey, June 2009 [<http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/mcs/2009/mcs2009.pdf>].

decade ago. None of these items can be made, however, without minerals that are relatively rare, except in the DRC.

The DRC is often ranked first, holding at least 64% of the world's reserves in tantalum; tantalum is the mineral which is refined into coltan, which has become one of the most valuable substances in the global economy due to its importance in the production of hi tech electronic goods. Coltan, cobalt and other high demand minerals mined in the DRC thus supply the global supply chain with the solder, resistors and capacitors and additional items required to make cell phones, PCs, laptops, iPads, Kindles, and a multitude of other electronic products that have become staple goods in the global economy. Their price, and hence their value in the DRC, will continue to climb as a function of growing world demand, although another severe recession may stunt such expansion.¹⁹

Why the DRC remains poor despite being the first and most vital link in a global supply chain that has increasingly profited multinational corporations remains a complex question. Part of the answer lies in the fact that the state has not been able to establish effective rule in the Kivu provinces of the eastern DRC, where most of the mining industry is located, as rebel groups and armies from Rwanda and Uganda have battled the state for control of this territory since the mid-1990s. Corruption within the DRC government also prevents its people from realizing the potential benefits of the nation's mineral resources. But beyond all else, the neo-liberal organization of the global economy ensures that the DRC will remain poor in the face of its natural wealth, as its policies have ensured that the DRC's mineral wealth is exported on a global supply chain that has been organized, at its expense, for the benefit of others.²⁰ In sum, to use a telling metaphor, the neo-liberal genesis of the current neo-colonial moment has transformed the body politic of the DRC into the bond slave of foreign masters; at the same time it has returned many of the nation's people to a state of literal slavery.

Bond slaves are those who serve masters due to the debts that they or their families have accrued. Many bond slaves, historically and in the present, have inherited their condition from their families due to debts that stretch generations into the past. Using inherited bond slavery as a metaphor works well to characterize the DRC's neo-colonial relationship with its foreign creditors and

¹⁹ The Democratic Republic of the Congo: Major Challenges Impede Efforts to Achieve U.S. Policy Objectives; Systematic Assessment of Progress Is Needed" GAO-08-562T, March 6, 2008 [<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08562t.pdf>]

²⁰ Conflict Minerals and the Democratic Republic of Congo: Responsible Action in Supply Chains, Government Engagement, and Capacity Building (BSR: May 2010) [http://www.bsr.org/reports/BSR_Conflict_Minerals_and_the_DRC.pdf]

exploiters. As we have seen, the historical roots of this relationship run deeply into the past.

The civil wars that plagued the Kingdom of Kongo were inextricably entwined with the domestic discord that arose as a function of the Kingdom's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, discord that was in part manipulated by foreign powers. The Kingdom's subsequent decline allowed it to be overtaken by European imperial powers in the late nineteenth century, with all of the attendant under-development and exploitation that accompanied the extraction of the region's wealth at the expense of its people and for the benefit of their colonizers and the Congolese elites who abetted the process. Slavery within the Congo tacitly expanded in this age of empire and industrial capitalism, even though the European powers who profited from it had agreed to abolish slavery in their Atlantic colonies only a generation previous. After colonial liberation in the mid-20th Century, a new generation of corrupt, U.S.-backed Congolese elites led by Mobutu Sese Seko allowed their nation to be pillaged and politically manipulated by the West in return for a share of the spoils. The neo-colonial/neo-liberal order of the twenty first century, using a language of civilizing progress that paralleled the discourse of older generations of external exploiters, has continued, again with the help of domestic mercenaries, to rip out the wealth of the country, literally from under the feet of its own people, using their own labor to do so in a way that keeps them poor while enriching those from beyond its borders and a few within them. But now, the Congolese people work to pay taxes to their own government so it can pay back loans to foreign creditors so that the latter may, in effect, continue to perpetuate the neo-colonial cycle of exploitation initiated after the end of the Cold War.

But linking slavery to the present condition of the Congolese people involves more than a metaphorical flourish, because real slavery flourishes in the DRC today and does so again as part of the nation's long-term historical inheritance. The political instability and relentless war fostered by internal corruption and external exploitation have now made the eastern DRC, especially the mineral-rich region of the Kivus, one of the worst modern slavery sites in the world, not the least because the minerals mined there have such immense value in the global economy.

As a result, the DRC, rebel factions within the country, and their armed allies who have invaded the country from Rwanda (the FDLR) are all battling for control of the Kivus and the wealth that can be found there. These groups, including the DRC national army (FARDC) have no interest in bettering the lives of the people they claim to represent; instead, they enslave them to harvest the rich resources of the province. In some cases, the tantalum, cobalt, copper, cassiterite

and other materials are sold by corrupt DRC military and civil officials straight out of the country where they enter the global supply chain.

In other cases, the produce of the mines is shipped out of the nation into Rwanda where it is sold to foreign concerns who also pay bribes to even more corrupt officials so that they may pass a careless eye over illicit documentation that purports that the mined material has been extracted according to international standards. Sometimes bribes mask the fact that no documentation exists at all.

But whatever way these conflict minerals leave the DRC, the chances are that they have been mined by slaves. The fact that slaves do the lion's share of the work in the Kivu mines, as we will see, is certainly no secret, which makes the corporations that purchase the minerals and refine and manufacture them along the global supply chain directly complicit in continuing the long, sordid, historical relationship between the proliferation of global capitalism, slavery, and the Congo region.²¹

Studies undertaken in November 2009, June 2010, and July 2010 in conjunction with the modern abolitionist NGO Free the Slaves (FTS) have presented insurmountable evidence that slavery has once again become a plague on the civil society of the Congo region. For the purposes of clarification, the group defines slavery as the condition where a person is "forced to work, under threat of violence or coercion, for little or no pay, and [is] unable to walk away." FTS has found that slavery is "endemic" in the mines of the Kivus, particularly those controlled by military forces, either those under command of the DRC or by rival factions fighting to dominate the region. FTS has identified five typical forms of slavery that flourish there.

In the first, slavery at gunpoint, soldiers terrorize people into leaving their homes and villages and force them into the mines, where they work as miners, carters, and sorters. Sometimes such coercion takes the form of *salongo*, the tradition by which local leaders could claim a day's labor from members of the community; in the case of FARDC, soldiers force people in the Kivus into slavery through an adaptation of this tradition, which, due to exploitative innovations, had already fallen into ill repute during the Mobuto regime, when it faced widespread resistance.²²

A second form of slavery, debt bondage, or bond slavery, has also made its mark. Since little economic opportunity exists in the Kivus or elsewhere in the nation, people voluntarily seek their fortunes in the industry. Armed forces or private companies supply tools, money, and food to such people on terms

²¹ *Coming Clean: How Supply Chain Controls Can Stop Congo's Mineral Trade Fueling Conflict: A Report by Global Witness* (May 2012), pp. 1-36 [http://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/library/Coming_clean.pdf]

²² The Congo Report: Slavery in Conflict Minerals (Free the Slaves, June 2011), p. 13 [FreetheSlaves.net].

calculated to keep them in debt. Hailing from straitened circumstances, the people accept the terms, especially those who have come some distance in search of work to support their families. Those in this situation know they are bound to remain in the mines until they pay off the debts, although their captors have made this extremely difficult or next to impossible to do. The debts can range from \$100 to \$1000; 37% were held by debts that exceeded \$500, not an easy sum to repay in a nation with a per capita income of \$210, the second lowest in the world.²³ Bond slaves can also be sold, although allegedly only their “contracts” are being sold; but as common sense tells us, contracts are not sold without the workers, who have been essentially enslaved.

A recent study, not conducted by FTS, found 90% of the workers in the Bisie tin mines had been enthralled by debt bondage. Bond slavery in the DRC is not limited to the mines themselves, or other violently exploited, physical labor. Even mine managers and businessmen have worked as bond slaves.²⁴

Sexual slavery, the third form, has also spread through the Kivus, largely through the kidnapping of women and girls by soldiers, who under the pretense of marriage, effectually secure a license for serial rape. Sexual slavery thrives in the pubs surrounding mining sites, where girls, sometimes before they’ve reached the age of puberty, are inveigled from distant locales under false pretenses of legitimate work.²⁵

The fourth form of slavery in the DRC is penal slavery, actually abetted by the judicial system instead of being deterred by it. In the provinces of the Kivus, people are brought up on real or manufactured charges by corrupt law enforcement officials and in tribunals run by one of the military forces that rule over the area. In whatever “court” these unfortunates find themselves, they are tried, convicted, and sentenced to work in the mines.

Finally, in the fifth form of slavery, children are kidnapped and forced to serve as soldiers, and are often compelled to fight against their own relatives and neighbors, or to oversee their enslavement at gunpoint. It should be noted that these categories of enslavement are not mutually exclusive. A peon, or a person sent to work against their will in the Kivus through a false criminal conviction can find themselves deeply in debt after being forced to pay for their tools and their keep while working in the mines. The peon thus becomes a bond slave. Turning

²³ Background Note: Democratic Republic of Congo, U.S. Department of State (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2823.htm#econ>).

²⁴ The Congo Report: Slavery in Conflict Minerals (Free the Slaves, June 2011) , pp. 11, 13, 15 [Freetheslaves.net]; Nicholas Garrett, Walikale: Artisanal Cassiterite Mining and Trade in North Kivu. Implications for poverty reduction and security, CASM report, June 2008, p. 45, [http://www.resourceglobal.co.uk/documents/CASM_WalikaleBooklet2.pdf].

²⁵ Congo Report: Slavery in Conflict Minerals (Free the Slaves, June 2011) , p. 17.

this example on its head, if a bond slave flees their debt, they can be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to forced labor. Despite the variety of ways that people can be enslaved, most of those enslaved are young, some very, as low as the age of five, although sixty year olds can be found among the unfree as well. As long as the labor gets done, slavers do not discriminate, reflecting the kind of inequality that exists when the equity of a civil society collapses in the face of the might-makes-right ethos of authoritarian rule.²⁶

The specter of modern day slavery in the DRC becomes all the more haunting once we descend into the mines themselves to comprehend the conditions that exist there. Quoting from a research report filed by Free the Slaves in 2010, we would see that the

“miners...work without even basic equipment or safeguards. [They experience] threats [that] range from landslides, cave-ins of shafts, to asphyxiation. Public health concerns are equally high as a result of poor sanitation and no clean water supply. Common injuries and ailments include: eye injuries; silicosis; conjunctivitis; bronchitis; tuberculosis; asthma; diarrhea; skin lesions; deformed muscle and bone in children due to heavy loads; regular dental problems of abscesses, cavities and lesions; tetanus; fractures and contortions; contusions and severe bruising. Added to those are the impact of extensive drug use, and sexually transmitted diseases. The intense crowding (many enslaved miners are forced to sleep jammed together in the mine shafts) means that infectious diseases are rampant. One informant stated that after four to five years working in the mines the body was “completely deteriorated” and cited spinal column damage and lung damage, conditions worsened by the extreme pollution of air and water and exposure to toxic chemicals.”²⁷

One other horror that does not appear in the above litany would include the systemic rape of children and women who work in the mines or nearby.²⁸

The DRC’s enslavement problem can hardly be solved through the logic or the policies of free market fundamentalism, which have actually helped to create the conditions which leave millions in the nation vulnerable to enslavement. As we have seen, the neo-liberal revolution foisted upon the people of the DRC has

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁷ Findings of Slavery Linked with Mineral Extraction in Eastern DRC, Free the Slaves Research Brief, July 2010, p.1. [FreeTheSlaves.net]. Brackets mine, parentheses in original.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

only impoverished them in the midst of their own plenty; thus, those in the nation, especially in the Kivus, who might go elsewhere in their country to seek economic opportunity really have nowhere to go find it. Far from providing a solution to slavery, free market capitalism has perpetuated it by fostering the economic dependency, domestic corruption, and mass impoverishment that leaves people vulnerable to enslavement and thus makes modern bondage possible.

Conclusion

Ultimately, neither the free market nor international law, nor foreign governments, foreign NGOs and multi-national corporations can remove the scourge of slavery from the DRC. The solution must come from the people of the DRC and their government, working in conjunction with allies from abroad, who will be found aplenty in NGOs such as Free the Slaves. Allies will be scarce, however, among the politicians of foreign governments, the executives of multi-national corporations and their comrades in the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Their rhetoric about and policies requiring “due diligence” in regard to the international commerce in “conflict minerals” can be relegated to meaningless lip service as long as they keep the maximization of profits through free market “reform” as their first priority rather than promoting immediate and essential well-being of the people of the DRC through measures such as debt relief and criminal proceedings against corporations that benefit from the slave labor that produces the conflict minerals themselves.

Organized in coordinated, localized movements as a part of a larger grass roots movement, the people of the DRC can improve upon the work of centuries of abolitionist agitation by bringing a de facto as well as de jure end to slavery in their country; in the process, such work can do much to advance the reconstruction of civil society in the war ravaged nation. Given the violence that continues to rage through the Kivus, such a task seems well-nigh impossible. The case would prove exactly that save for the courage demonstrated by many Congolese who would risk poverty, ostracization, arrest, imprisonment, torture, and even death rather than permit slavery to continue to spread within their society. Those searching for the rebirth of civil society in the Congo will find it within and among these very citizens, who are already organizing in a very impressive and consequential fashion. When FTS undertook its research into slave labor in Kivu mines in 2009 and 2010, it could only do so through the cooperation of the members of the Association for the Development of Peasant Initiatives (ASSODIP) and the Research Center on Environment, Democracy and Human Rights (CREDDHO), Congolese NGOs founded and operated by Congolese people. The mainstay of the data that FTS used to publish its influential report on slavery in the DRC came

from the 742 interviews that the groups conducted in the Bisie, Omate, and Bibatma mining regions. ASSODIP and CREDDHO consulted “local customary leaders, government officials (territorial administration and local security forces), religious and civil society leaders, representatives of professional cooperatives, and artisanal miners themselves.” The information that many of these figures divulged about the practice of slavery in the mines and elsewhere in the eastern DRC was given at great risk, and went far to document to the international community the acute urgency of the problem.

One of the more disturbing realizations to accrue from the work of the Congolese abolitionists was that many of the enslaved as well as their enslavers seemed unaware that the slavery and other forms of abuse practiced in the mines was actually illegal. Such revelations reflect the uphill battle to reconstruct civil society in the DRC, as many of its citizens are seemingly uninformed that every person in the country is by law free and protected by those laws from being enslaved. The work of ASSODIP and CREDDHO takes on even more significance in this respect, as the process of gathering information about enslavement in the DRC can also educate its people that slavery has no rightful place in their presence. Knowledge is power, and the efforts to rebuild civil society in the DRC depend upon this powerful knowledge. Civil society consists of citizens, and no person can be a citizen unless they are free. Therefore, a civil society will never truly flourish until its people understand that their first and most essential right is their own fundamental liberty from enslavement.

Articles 16 and 61 of the 2006 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo forbid slavery, in all of its forms, absolutely. Carried out through the work of local Congolese organizations and fortified by the will of their members, educating the populace about the illegality of slavery and demonstrating how and why it exists among them marks the first step toward real abolition. Through the partnership of foreign NGOs such as Free the Slaves, this work has flourished, which points to a way forward for other modern abolitionists around to follow in their own work in the Congo. Whether we are in the DRC or not, we can all contribute to the cause, but the burden of ending slavery in the country will always remain with the Congolese people themselves, who have another historical inheritance beyond external subjugation and internal corruption, that being the struggle, originating in the independence movement, to build a truly free state in the face of enemies foreign and domestic.