

The Spiral of Absurdity

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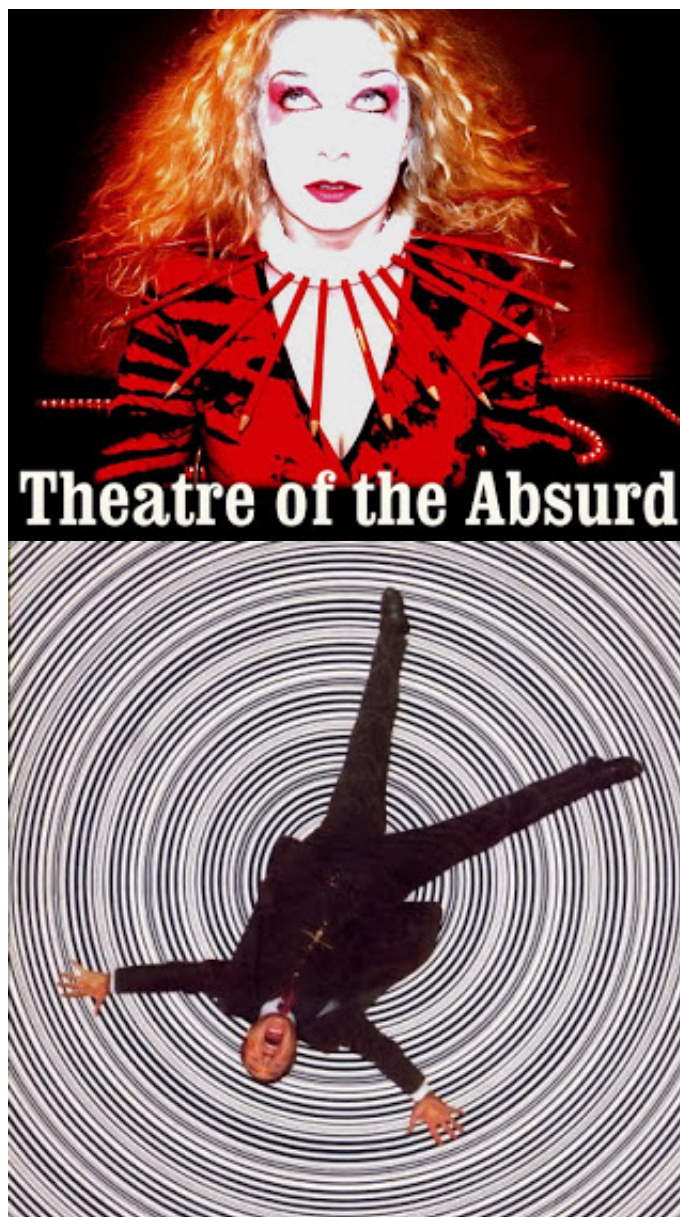
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by Maggie McNeill

Modern man must descend the spiral of his own absurdity to the lowest point; only then can he look beyond it. - Václav Havel

For several years now, I've been pointing out examples of the increasingly-bizarre claims of "sex trafficking" hysterics; regular readers have watched the claimed numbers of "sex slaves" rise along with their supposed number of clients and their pretended income, while at the same time their "average age" has dropped and the imagined abuses to which they are subjected have become ever more horrifying. It is the natural tendency of rumors to grow in absurdity, and moral panics only collapse when the myths become too ridiculous for the average person to believe any longer; every time a claim ratchets up to a new level more people become skeptics, and the process continues until the number of True Believers drops below the critical mass required to sustain mass hysteria. Every new inflation of the myth is therefore a good thing, because every one hastens the day when the whole thing collapses.

There was a perfect example of this just over a week ago, but the path to it began back in 2001 with the publication of Estes & Weiner's "The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico". In this farrago of breathless nonsense they claimed that somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000 "children" (a category that to the authors includes both adolescents and adults below 21) were currently "at risk" for "sexual exploitation". Their idea of "risk factors" included things like having access to a car and living within a short drive of either the Canadian or Mexican border, and their definition of "sexual exploitation" included stripping, consensual homosexual relations and merely *viewing* porn. In fact, they considered "sex trafficking" to be the rarest form of exploitation; in 2011, Estes estimated the number of legal minors actually abducted into "sex slavery" as "*very small...We're talking about a few hundred people.*" But by that time, his "estimate" had taken on a life of its own: in the course of ten years "all people under 21" became "children", "at risk" became "currently involved", "having some sort of sexual contact with older people" morphed into "coerced prostitution", "at any given time" grew into "per year", and the estimate was usually quoted at the high end. By 2011 we were seeing nonsense like "*100,000 - 300,000 children between the ages of 12 and 14 years old are victims of the child sex trade in this country*" or "*100,000 American children are...sold into a life of sex slavery every year*", and by last year it was usually something like "300,000 children at an average age of 13".

But in November, this meme underwent the strangest metamorphosis yet. Texas congressman Ted Poe, eager to boast of the power of government to destroy people's lives, stated not that there were 300,000 sex trafficking *victims* per year, but rather 300,000 sex trafficking *prosecutions* per year...quite a different claim. And, I might add, an unwise one; while the usual nonsense is supported by hand-waving about how "trafficking is a hidden crime" (therefore we don't need to prove any of our statements about it), prosecutions are official proceedings for which records are kept. Had the news media in this country not degenerated into the slave-parrots of government this would have immediately been fact-checked, but instead the opposite happened; on Friday the 22nd the *Dallas Morning News* published an editorial which repeated Poe's error, further distorting it to "*In Houston alone, about 300,000 sex trafficking cases are prosecuted each year.*" It proved one of the tipping-points I mentioned in the first paragraph, something so absurd that no rational person could believe it. And as a result, even people outside the sex worker rights sphere took note and wrote about it. The story was first mentioned on Twitter by Dr. Laura Agustín, and I pointed out that the number is 1/7 of the population of Houston. The next morning Amy Alkon published a column on it:

...[including] uncaught...[sex traffickers] on top of the 300,000...suggests that a vast segment of Houston's population...maybe 25 percent...is engaged in...sex trafficking...a Bureau of Justice Statistics report...[states that there were only] 2,515 suspected incidents of human trafficking... between January 2008 and June 2010...Hey, *Dallas Morning News*...should we send over a math teacher and the Jaws of Life to help pull your staffers' heads out of their asses?...

Walter Olson soon linked that post, and then Texas criminal defense lawyer Mark Bennett blew the claim to smithereens:

...according to Texas Office of Court Administration statistics, 2,650 new felony cases...and 5,819 new misdemeanor cases were filed in Harris County in 2012...So the total of *all* new cases...is nowhere near the 300,000 sex trafficking cases asserted by the *Dallas Morning News*. According to the Harris County District Clerk's website, there hasn't been a prosecution for sex trafficking in Houston since 2010. But when people say "sex trafficking," they may mean "compelling prostitution." There have been *two* compelling-prostitution cases filed in Harris County this year. Not 300,000. Two...

On Sunday, the *News* “corrected” the story, but I’ve become more diligent lately and had already secured the screengrab I linked above. Then on Monday, *Techdirt* made sure it got national attention:

Editorials written in support of legislation are prone to conjuring up hysterical...numbers...But the... writer should at least make sure the numbers being used don’t immediately prompt incredulous laughter from any reader with a couple of functioning brain cells...[the claim] that Houston prosecutes nearly 900 sex traffickers a day...365 days a year...has since been removed...

The article extensively quotes Bennett’s analysis, including a reference (and links) to yours truly; it also links Alkon’s post. I’d have been happier if an even bigger media outlet picked it up from *Techdirt*, but one can’t have everything.

Of course, this is just one incident, and it isn’t even on most people’s radar. But the good news is, *it doesn’t have to be*. Because it isn’t an *isolated* incident; it’s part of a trend which will be producing many more equally-egregious idiocies in the coming year. Every one of them will wake up more people, and soon every one will lead to articles like the ones above. And in about three more years by my prediction (and I see no reason to revise it yet), the bubble will implode and the busybodies will all move on to worrying about the next big bogeyman.

Would you blow your whistle on kleptocrats? Do you have a news tip, firsthand account of political corruption, or reliable information about a government foul-up? Please send your scoop to Basil Venitis at venitis@gmail.com for publication in <http://venitism.blogspot.com>

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