

The Naked Anthropologist

Dr Laura Agustin on Migration, Trafficking and Sex

Kristof and the Rescue Industry: the Soft Side of Imperialism

3 February 2012 in [trafficking](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [2 comments](#) | [print](#)

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(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/imperialism.jpg>)

During a prolonged stay in New York recently I realised that Nicholas Kristof looms very large to many people, while to me he is only one of many annoying members of the Rescue Industry, albeit an egregious one. In the article I published last week about imperialism for [Counterpunch](#) (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/01/25/the-soft-side-of-imperialism/>) Kristof was the obvious choice for main punching bag. [The piece was picked up](#) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/kristof-and-the-rescue-industry-the-soft-side-of-imperialism/>) by the *NYTimes Examiner* as an Op-Ed, where they added a funny photo.

Numerous people have written to express particular outrage that Kristof's **Facebook game should be like *FarmVille*, with women taking the place of farm animals, to be looked after.** Others wrote to say the word *smarmy* was just right to describe him. It turns out he's not such an unquestioned celebrity Rescuer after all.



(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/CounterPunch2.jpg>)

Kristof and the Rescue Industry:

The Soft Side of Imperialism (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/01>)

[/25/the-soft-side-of-imperialism/](#)) (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/01/25/the-soft-side-of-imperialism/>)

by LAURA AGUSTÍN, 25 January 2012, *Counterpunch*

Reasons abound to be turned off by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof. He is too pleased with himself and demonstrates no capacity for self-reflection. He is too earnest. He claims to be in the vanguard of journalism because he tweets. He is said to be Doing Something about human suffering while the rest of us don't care; he is smarmy. He doesn't write particularly well. But most important, he is an apologist for a soft form of imperialism.

He poses for photos with the wretched of the earth and Hollywood celebrities in the same breath, and they are a perfect fit. Here he is squatting and grinning at black children, or trying to balance a basket on his head, and there he is with his arm over Mia Farrow's shoulder in the desert. Here he is beaming down at obedient-looking Cambodian girls, or smiling broadly beside a dour, unclothed black man with a spear, whilst there he is with Ashton and Demi, Brad and Angelina, George Clooney. He professes humility, but his approach to journalistic advocacy makes himself a celebrity. He is the news story: Kristof is visiting, Kristof is doing something.

In interviews, he refers to the need to protect his *humanitarian image*, and he got one Pulitzer Prize because he "gave voice to the voiceless". Can there be a more presumptuous claim? Educated at both Harvard and Oxford, he nevertheless appears ignorant of critiques of Empire and grassroots women's movements alike. Instead, Kristof purports to speak *for* girls and women and then shows us how grateful they are. His Wikipedia entry reads like hagiography.

Keen to imply that he's down with youth and hep to the jive, he lamely told one interviewer that "All of us in the news business are wondering what the future is going to be." He is now venturing into the world of online games, the ones with a so-called moral conscience, like [Darfur is Dying](http://www.darfurisdying.com/) (<http://www.darfurisdying.com/>), in which players are invited to "Help stop the crisis in Darfur" by identifying with refugee characters and seeing how difficult their lives are. This experience, it is presumed, will teach players about suffering, but it could just as well make refugees seem like small brown toys for people to play with and then *close that tab* when they get bored. Moral conscience is a flexible term anyway: One click away from Darfur is Dying is a game aimed at helping the Pentagon improve their weapons.

Kristof says his game will be a Facebook app like FarmVille: "You'll have a village, and in order to nurture this village, you'll have to look after the women and girls in the village." The paternalism couldn't be clearer, and to show it's all *not* just a game (because there's actual *money* involved), schools and refugee camps get funds if you play well. A nice philanthropic touch.

Welcome to the Rescue Industry, where characters like Kristof get a free pass to act out fun imperialist interventions masked as humanitarianism. No longer claiming openly to carry the White Man's Burden, rescuers

nonetheless embrace the spectacle of themselves rushing in to save miserable victims, whether from famine, flood or the wrong kind of sex. Hollywood westerns lived off the image of white Europeans as civilizing force for decades, depicting the slaughter of redskins in the name of freedom. Their own freedom, that is, in the foundational American myth that settlers were courageous, ingenious, hard-working white men who risked everything and fought a revolution in the name of religious and political liberty.

Odd then, that so many Americans are blind when it comes to what they call humanitarianism, blissfully conscience-free about interfering in other countries' affairs in order to impose their own way of life and moral standards. The Rescue Industry that has grown up in the past decade around US policy on human trafficking shows how imperialism can work in softer, more palatable ways than military intervention. Relying on a belief in social evolution, development and modernization as objective truths, contemporary rescuers, like John Stuart Mill 150 years ago, consider themselves free, self-governing individuals born in the most civilized lands and therefore entitled to rule people in more backward ones. (Mill required benevolence, but imperialists always claim to have the interests of the conquered at heart.) Here begins colonialism, the day-to-day imposition of value systems from outside, the permanent maintenance of the upper hand. Here is where the Rescue Industry finds its niche; here is where Kristof ingenuously refers to "changing culture", smugly certain that his own is superior.

In the formation of the 21st-century anti-trafficking movement, a morally convenient exception is made, as it was made for military actions in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. The exception says *This Time It's Different. This time we have to go in. We have to step up and take the lead, show what real democracy is.* In the name of freedom, of course. In the case of trafficking the exception says: *We have achieved Equality. We abolished slavery, we had a civil-rights movement and a women's liberation movement too and now everything is fine here.*

With justification firmly in place, the US Rescue Industry imposes itself on the rest of the world through policies against prostitution, on the one hand, and against trafficking, on the other. In their book *Half the Sky*, Kristof and co-author Sheryl WuDunn liken the emancipation of women to the abolition of slavery, but his own actions –brothel raids, a game teaching players to protect village women – reflect only paternalism.

It may be easier to get away with this approach now than it was when W.T. Stead of London's *Pall Mall Gazette* (<http://www.attackingthediabol.co.uk/pmg/tribute/>) bought a young girl in 1885 to prove the existence of child prostitution. This event set off a panic that evil traders were systematically snatching young girls and carrying them to the continent – a fear that was disproved, although Stead was prosecuted and imprisoned for abduction.

In contrast, in 2004 when Kristof bought two young Cambodians out of a brothel, he took his cameraman to catch one girl's weepy homecoming. A year later, revisiting the brothel and finding her back, Kristof again filmed a heartwarming reunion, this time between him and the girl. Presuming that being bought out by him was the best chance she could ever get,

Kristof now reverted to a journalistic tone, citing hiv-infection rates and this girl's probable death within a decade. She was not hiv-positive, but he felt fine about stigmatizing her anyway.

Then last November, Kristof live-tweeted a brothel raid (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/the-conceit-of-nicholas-kristof-rescuing-sex-slaves-as-saintliness>) in the company of ex-slave Somaly Mam. In "One Brothel Raid at a Time" he describes the excitement:

Riding beside Somaly in her car toward a brothel bristling with AK-47 assault rifles, it was scary. This town of Anlong Veng is in northern Cambodia near the Thai border, with a large military presence; it feels like something out of the Wild West. (*New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/opinion/sunday/kristof-fighting-back-one-brothel-raid-at-a-time.html>))

There's the cavalry moment again. A few days later Kristof boasted that six more brothels had closed as a result of the tweeted raid. Focused on out-of-work pimps, he failed to ask the most fundamental question: Where did the women inside those brothels go? The closures made them instantly vulnerable to trafficking, the very scenario Kristof would save them from.

Some Rescuers evoke the Christian mission directly, like Gary Haugen of the International Justice Mission, which accompanies police in raids on brothels. Or like Luis CdeBaca, the US Ambassador-at-Large for Trafficking, who unselfconsciously aligns himself with William Wilberforce, (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/ambassador-cdebacas-incoherent-explanation-of-trafficking-and-slavery>) the evangelical Christian rescuers claim ended slavery – as though slaves and freed and escaped slaves had nothing to do with it. CdeBaca talks about the contemporary mission to save slaves as a responsibility uniquely belonging to Britain and the US.

Kristof positions himself as liberal Everyman, middle-class husband and father, rational journalist, transparent advocate for the underdog. But he likes what he calls *the law-enforcement model* to end slavery, showing no curiosity about police behavior toward victims during frightening raids. Ignoring reports of the negative effects these operations have on women, and the 19th-century model of moral regeneration forced on them after being rescued, he concentrates on a single well-funded program for his photo-ops, the one showing obedient-looking girls.

Kristof also fails to criticize US blackmail tactics. Issuing an annual report card (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/tip-trafficking-in-persons-the-no-methodology-report>) to the world, the US Office on Trafficking presumes to judge, on evidence produced during investigations whose methodology has never been explained, each country according to its efforts to combat human trafficking. Reprisals follow – loss of aid – for countries not toeing the line. Kristof is an apologist for this manipulative policy.

To criticize the Rescue Industry is not to say that slavery, undocumented migration, human smuggling, trafficking and labor exploitation do not exist or involve egregious injustices. Yet Kristof supporters object to any critique with *At least he is Doing Something*. (<http://www.lauraagustin.com>)

[/the-conceit-of-nicholas-kristof-rescuing-sex-slaves-as-saintliness#comment-6150](#) *What are you doing to stop child rape?* and so on. This sort of attempt to deflect all criticism is a hallmark of colonialism, which invokes class and race as reasons for clubbing together against savagery and terrorism. The Rescue Industry, like the war on terrorism, relies on an image of the barbaric Other.

It is important not to take at face value claims to be Helping, Saving or Rescuing just because people say that is what they are doing and feel emotional about it. Like many unreflective father figures, Kristof sees himself as fully benevolent. Claiming to give voice to the voiceless, he does not actually let them speak.


Instead, as we say nowadays, it's all about Kristof: his experience, terror, angst, confusion, desire. Did anyone rescued in his recent brothel raid want to be saved like that, with the consequences that came afterwards, whatever they were? That is what we do not know and will not find out from Kristof.

Discussing *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe said Conrad used Africa

as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril... The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. (*Things Fall Apart*)

The latest sahib in colonialism's dismal parade, Kristof is the Rescue Industry at its well-intentioned worst.

–*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*

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William Thirteen on [3 February 2012 at 18:56](#)

excellent work, Laura!

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Laura Agustín on [4 February 2012 at 00:51](#)

thanks, william. it was satisfying to get the focus off sex and onto the main point!

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