


The Naked Anthropologist

Dr Laura Agustin on Migration, Trafficking and Sex

Kristof's seventh-grade sex slave, censorship and colonialism

4 December 2011 in [trafficking](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [14 comments](#) |  [print](#)

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(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/whiteman.jpg>)

Writing on [Nicholas Kristof's tweets](#) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/the-conceit-of-nicholas-kristof-rescuing-sex-slaves-as-saintliness>) about saving sex slaves, I said that the important point to criticise is his boast to have caused the closure of six brothels. Whether you believe that brothels are workplaces or slavery dens, you need to ask what the result will be for those working inside when those sites are suddenly closed down (some answers to that are described in [this video](http://blip.tv/sexworkerspresent/anti-trafficking-cambodia-the-reality-full-version-977233) (<http://blip.tv/sexworkerspresent/anti-trafficking-cambodia-the-reality-full-version-977233>)).

Someone at [In These Times](http://www.inthesetimes.com/) (<http://www.inthesetimes.com/>) wrote about that article of mine, apparently agreeing with my main points, but the post was [taken down the same day](http://www.inthesetimes.com/duly-noted/entry/12336) (<http://www.inthesetimes.com/duly-noted/entry/12336>), [/seventh grader is not a slur naked anthropologist vs. nick kristof/](#), making me wonder if the site owners will not allow *any* criticism of Kristof. Is he such a sacred cow for liberal-leaning news-site managers? Even if they claim to be *independent*, as it says on their website? It seems absurd, what harm did their blogger do?

The writer had called her article '*Seventh Grader' is not an insult: The Naked Anthropologist vs. Nicholas Kristof*, in reference to my comment that it is offensive he would 'refer to a young person in Cambodia with a made-in-USA label like *seventh grader*'. She thought it was silly of me because Kristof writes for a US audience who understand that

12-year-olds belong in seventh grade. But many people understood what was annoying about Kristof's comment, and my guess is he himself likes to think of his work as international, since he at least sometimes lives in Cambodia and writes for the *New York Times*.

The issue here is colonialism, the imposition not just of the words *seventh grader* but of the whole world view behind them, a world in which people who are 12 are said to be school children and nothing else because 12-year-olds are claimed to have the right to absolute innocence, lives in which neither work nor sex have a part. Such a claim is questionable in the USA itself, but to transport it wholesale onto a young stranger in Cambodia, a girl glimpsed in a brothel, is to impose an outside interpretation on that girl and the cultural context she's found in. You may say, based on your belief of what's right in your culture, that she's a *seventh grader*, but you thereby maintain control of someone not in a position to resist, you exploit and victimise her without knowing anything real about her. Kristof says she's a *slave*, therefore she *is one*: is that right?

The writer's note that the [World Food Program \(http://www.wfp.org/\)](http://www.wfp.org/) labels the world's children according to the same system of school grades only underscores that we are dealing with colonialism. I write about the Rescue Industry, but many before me have written about the counter-productive thing that is Aid, particularly the version that sends bags of food to hungry places. There are hundreds of resources for such critiques online, or you can read Barbara Harrell-Bond's [Imposing Aid \(http://www.amazon.com/Imposing-Aid-Emergency-Assistance-Refugees/dp/0192615432\)](http://www.amazon.com/Imposing-Aid-Emergency-Assistance-Refugees/dp/0192615432) or Graham Hancock's [The Lords of Poverty \(http://www.amazon.com/Lords-Poverty-Prestige-Corruption-International/dp/0871134691\)](http://www.amazon.com/Lords-Poverty-Prestige-Corruption-International/dp/0871134691), if you want it in a more popular style. These out-of-date concepts of Helping are oppressive and haven't actually stopped structural hunger yet, but they provide hundreds of thousands of well-paying jobs for folks from richer countries who assume that their way of life is the best, most successful one despite the presence of many grave social problems and conflicts. Again, the issue is the control the coloniser exercises over the colonised.

This is not cant against the USA. Chinua Achebe commented famously in a critique of *Heart of Darkness* that Joseph Conrad used Africa


as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. 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 \(http://www.amazon.com/Things-Fall-Apart-Chinua-Achebe/dp/0385474547\)](http://www.amazon.com/Things-Fall-Apart-Chinua-Achebe/dp/0385474547)

As we say nowadays, it's all about Kristof: *his* experience, terror, angst, confusion, guilt, desire. Those found in the jungle or brothel are objects in a theatrical drama in which he plays the central role. Did anyone saved in those recent brothel raids want to be rescued *as they were, with the results that came about, whatever they were?* That is what we do not know, and as far as I can see, we are not going to find out from Kristof or

In These Times.

I'll talk about the idea of *whiteness* on another occasion.

–*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*

 (http://www.addtoany.com/share_save?url=http

www.lauraagustin.com/kristofs-seventh-grade-sex-slave-censorship-and-colonialism&title=Kristof%E2%80%99s%20seventh-grade%20sex%20slave%2C%20censorship%20and%20colonialism&description=Dr%20Laura%20Agust%C3%ADn%20on%20Migration%2C%20Trafficking%20and%20Sex)

Tags: [Asia-Pacific](#), [colonialism](#), [development](#), [rescue industry](#), [slavery](#)

14 comments

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Lia on [4 December 2011 at 03:55](#)

Really thoughtful critique.

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laura agustin on [4 December 2011 at 17:55](#)

thank you!

[Reply](#)

Gregory A. Butler on [4 December 2011 at 04:12](#)

Excellent article, Dr Agustin!

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laura agustin on [4 December 2011 at 17:56](#)

and thank you. i hope someone sends it to in these times – responsible journalism doesn't work the way they did.

[Reply](#)

Andrew hunter on [4 December 2011 at 04:28](#)

Did you see this blog post?

<http://keokjay.wordpress.com/2011/11/25/implications-of-insensitive-media-coverage-of-human-trafficking/> (<http://keokjay.wordpress.com/2011/11/25/implications-of-insensitive-media-coverage-of-human-trafficking/>)

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Maggie McNeill on [4 December 2011 at 16:30](#)

Even in the United States, not all 12-year-olds are in 7th grade; I was 12 until two and a half months into 9th grade. Nitpicking? I don't think so. The idea that a 12-year-old *is* a seventh-grader, regardless of her actual grade, life circumstances or maturity level, is no different from the idea that a 16-year-old *is* a "child" due to being as little as 366 days short of her 18th birthday.

Americans tend to adhere to the dangerous concept that labels define reality; the majority of people in this country (including most politicians) believe that to belong to a political party defines one's beliefs, that it's an "all or nothing" package deal like Christian sects. And I've encountered people who make the bizarre argument that the courtesans of history could not have been prostitutes because they were respected while prostitutes are degraded victims. The label (whether "prostitute", "Republican" or "7th grader") is believed to tell those who hear it *everything they need to know* about the individual it is used to refer to.

What I'm trying to say in my long-winded way is, you are absolutely right to zero in on Kristof's use of that term as an important clue to his attitude and aims; it's your gift for seeing things like that (which others often miss) that make your writing such an eye-opener!

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[laura agustin](#) on [4 December 2011 at 18:01](#)

If you look at some hostile comments made on my earlier Kristof article, the one In These Times referred to, you will see how people did not at all understand what was wrong with the label. Perhaps it is what you say, that Kristof must be all right or all wrong, and since he went to fancy schools and writes for the Times, he must be all right – ergo, I must be all wrong. It is a very dull way to look at the world.

[Reply](#)

[Maggie McNeill](#) on [5 December 2011 at 03:10](#)

Dull in the sense of "boring" and *also* in the sense of "obtuse". Trying to dissect an issue with the "all or nothing" knife results in nothing but a bloody mess.

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[Kevin Burctoola](#) on [5 December 2011 at 02:04](#)

good article, Laura Agustin

[Reply](#)

[Joe Macare](#) on [7 December 2011 at 20:16](#)

Someone just brought this to my attention and I want to make clear that the post was not removed deliberately by In These Times for any reason. What happened, believe it or not, is that we switched over to a new version of our content management system (CMS) the same day Lindsay Beyerstein uploaded that post, and in the process the post was lost. Unfortunately Lindsay had written it directly into the CMS so there wasn't even a draft to salvage. We're looking into finding a cached version;

however, we'd also be quite happy for Lindsay to express the same sentiments again.

[Reply](#)

Joe Macare on [7 December 2011 at 21:05](#)

In fact, we looked into this with renewed urgency and managed to restore the post: http://www.inthesetimes.com/duly-noted/entry/12381/seventh_grader_is_not_a_slur_the_naked_anthropologist_vs_nick_kristof/ (http://www.inthesetimes.com/duly-noted/entry/12381/seventh_grader_is_not_a_slur_the_naked_anthropologist_vs_nick_kristof/)

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Pingback from [Pigeonholes](#) « [The Honest Courtesan](#) on [12 December 2011 at 16:53](#)

Windypundit on [12 December 2011 at 17:27](#)

I've been reading Lindsay Beyerstein's writing for years, and she has a history of working with publishers who aren't terribly web savvy. Until recently, the RSS feed on Lindsay's Duly Noted blog at In These Times lead to a feed that didn't include any of her writing. That this was deleted accidentally seems totally plausible.

[Reply](#)

Maxine Doogan on [2 January 2012 at 05:33](#)

It would be fun for me to see 'the onion' spoof him as in exposing him as a pedophile.

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