

Open Borders: Now Do You See What We're Missing?

In *Open Borders*, I never claim that immigration restrictions make life in the First World *bad*. I don't try to scare people into supporting more immigration, à la, "Without more immigrants, we're doomed." What I claim, rather, is that immigration is a massive *missed opportunity*. While life is fine the way it is (or was, until a month ago), there is no reason to settle for "fine." If there is a dependable way to dramatically improve our lives, we should seize it.

What then are we missing? The standard and correct answer is: tens of trillions of dollars every year; see Clemens' classic "trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk" article. Allowing human talent to move from low-productivity countries to high-productivity countries greatly enriches mankind. A mind really is a terrible thing to waste. Until recently, though, these tens of trillions of dollars of unrealized gains have been awfully hard to visualize.

Now, human tragedy provides crystal clarity. If you examine almost any American population center today, it doesn't look *bad* – just empty. Enormous economic sectors – restaurants, entertainment, retail, and much more – have suddenly shut down to fight coronavirus. As a result, tens of millions of folks are stuck in their homes, wasting their talents, and contributing little to the world. An optimist would correctly remind us that we're hardly starving, and we have Netflix. Yet an optimist should also gladly acknowledge that *it would be awesome to suddenly recover all that we've lost*. If the virus vanished overnight, a Niagara Falls of missing productivity would be unleashed.

Imagine, though, if we'd never known anything better than what we have today. If you claimed that we were missing trillions of dollars of gains, most people would be deeply pessimistic. Some would bemoan the fate of grocery stores if restaurants were legalized, or warn that releasing tens of millions of homebodies into the workforce would lead to catastrophic unemployment. The main mental block, though, is that people would have trouble visualizing a straightforward way to make us trillions of dollars richer.

If you can get over this mental block, if you can see what we've *lost*, then it's only a small step further to see what we're *missing*. If people were free to take a job anywhere on Earth, humanity would have more agriculture, more manufacturing, more services. We would have more restaurants, more homes, more elder care. We would have more doctors and more janitors, more meal delivery and more cars to deliver the meals. If coronavirus can eliminate 90% of the restaurant business, open borders can add 90% to the restaurant business. You've seen the former with your own eyes, so you should have no trouble seeing the latter with the eye of the mind.

To be fair, you could demur, "We've shut down most of the domestic labor market to

prevent the spread of a horrible disease. Similarly, we shut down most of the international labor market to prevent something similarly horrible.” The difference, of course, is that the coronavirus is all too real, while the horrors of immigration are speculative at best. Indeed, on inspection they’re largely imaginary. And while many will now be add infectious disease to the list of social ills to blame on immigrants, that argument too makes little sense.