

# Reflections on the Krikorian-Caplan Soho Forum Debate

Thanks again to Gene Epstein and Reason for sponsoring last week's immigration debate between myself and Mark Krikorian. Thanks to Mark, too, for debating before an unsympathetic audience. The resolution, you may recall, was: *The current pandemic makes it all the more necessary for the federal government to tighten restrictions on immigration.*

Here are my extra thoughts on the exchange.

1. I was stunned that Mark did *not* think we should limit immigration to help fight contagious disease. While this position is **deeply flawed**, it has great surface appeal. I have to think that most of his supporters would endorse it enthusiastically. Hopefully he'll strive set them straight, though I doubt it. (Prove me wrong, Mark, prove me wrong).
2. Instead, Mark dusted off the classic populist argument that we should limit immigration to fight high unemployment. Since he never argued in favor of immigration a few months ago when unemployment was at a 50-year low, one can't take him too seriously. As I keep saying, immigration restriction is a solution in search of a problem.

In any case, this is a textbook example of misguided recession policy. Yes, deliberately restricting production during a recession can help *some* workers, but only at the expense of consumers (most of whom are workers in other industries). When Roosevelt ordered the destruction of food during the Great Depression, he helped farmers, but only by depriving the rest of the population of affordable calories. Excluding immigrants, similarly, helps competing native workers, but only by depriving the rest of the population of the goods and services immigrants produce. Wise recession policy focuses on reviving production, not destructive redistribution.

3. Curiously, Mark granted that during this crisis, we should *not* exclude foreign agricultural workers. His logic is hazy. Today offers a prime opportunity to help native farm workers at the expense of native food consumers. If you think that's good policy in general, why not here and now? The real story, I suspect, is that slashing the food supply during a crisis would be highly *visible* – and Mark wants to keep the costs of immigration restriction hidden. I'd be amazed if Mark thought now was a good time to let in *more* foreign agricultural workers; if the existing number is temporarily good during this emergency, though, why stop there?

4. Mark combines this concession on immigrant farm workers with a bizarre long-run plan to wean U.S. agriculture off its "addiction" to cheap foreign labor. Yes, a large fall in labor supply would induce mechanization. But as long as human labor is cheaper, what's good

about switching? Mark's central argument is aesthetic; in this modern age, people shouldn't be digging around in the Earth like "serfs." (His word). This is economically absurd. As long as the low-tech approach is cheaper than the high-tech approach, the low-tech approach is *better*. Sure, we could force-feed mechanization. If we taxed human-powered lawn-mowers, we'd switch sooner to robotic mowers. The wise course, though, is to wait until upgrading actually makes us better off.

(Mark did vaguely allude to a technological path-dependence argument, but those are a dime a dozen even when fully fleshed-out).

5. Toward the end of our debate, Mark claimed that our fundamental difference is that he takes our obligations to fellow Americans seriously, while I think our obligation is to all mankind. I agree that this is a difference, but it's not fundamental. Why not? Because if I were an American nationalist, I would *still* favor open borders in order to maximize Americans' standard of living.

6. What then is our fundamental difference? I say it comes down to *misanthropy*. Mark hears about a human being who wants to immigrate here – and presumes he's going to make our lives worse. Sure, he's glad that we got Albert Einstein on our team, but negativity is Mark's default. My default is exactly the opposite. When I hear about a human being who wants to immigrate here, I presume he's going to make our lives better. Yes, he could be the next Hitler, but the odds are astronomically against it. The vast majority of human beings make valuable contributions to the world, *even though* some of us contribute far more than others. That's what the history of the U.S. shows, and what our future history is going to show.

7. Is Mark really a misanthrope? Notice how he responds when an audience member asks him about government regulation of natives' child-bearing. He doesn't try to argue that native babies grow up to be *better people* than immigrants. He explicitly disavows the idea that we're "superior" to people from other lands. The concrete social effects of an extra native or an extra immigrant should therefore be comparable. And since he deems the typical immigrant to be a negative, he should think the same about the typical native as well. While Mark opposes government regulation of natives' child-bearing, his rationale is not about consequences, but our "social contract." Americans are entitled to have as many kids as they want, even if they're a burden on society. Would-be immigrants, in contrast, are only entitled to burden their *own* societies. So while we're obligated to put up with burdensome Americans, we can and should refuse all those burdensome foreigners.

By the way, the misanthropy is palpable if you peruse the main page for the Center for Immigration Studies. See for yourself; it really is monomaniacal collection of complaints about immigrants. Assembling an analogous collection of ceaseless negativity about any human group – or humanity in general – would be child's play. Just let your inner pessimist

fly.

8. The most intellectually solid case for immigration restriction is that natives are civilized, while immigrants are awful barbarians. (Remember “rapefugees”?) Why doesn’t Mark defend this position? The charitable story is that he knows it’s false. But if so, why doesn’t he try harder to disabuse his fellow restrictionists of their xenophobic pessimism? The better story, I’m afraid, is Social Desirability Bias. Calling immigrants “awful barbarians” makes you sound like a mean person, so Mark won’t endorse this position – or even engage it. Social Desirability Bias elegantly explains why his organization puts the nonsensical “low immigration, pro-immigrant” motto on its masthead instead of a more honest slogan like, “Savages are at our gates!”

9. Suppose we accept Mark’s view that we have special obligations to our fellow Americans, just as parents have special obligations to their own children. If you take this analogy seriously, you should *still* be very nervous that the United States is callously violating the rights of foreigners. After all, parents’ sense of love and obligation for their children often leads them to mistreat strangers for their children’s benefit. (Remember the quaint “College-gate” scandal of 2019?) Shouldn’t we similarly expect nations’ sense of love and obligation for their citizens to lead them to mistreat foreigners for their citizens’ benefit? It would be amazing if it didn’t.

10. Mark casually dismisses estimates of the massive economic gains of open borders. It’s only a model; and the problem with models, as faulty coronavirus projections show, is: Garbage In, Garbage Out.

The real story, though, is that economists who work with trade models are well-aware of their potential limitations. If immigration leads to bad economic policies, for example, simple models are overly optimistic. However, that realization is only the first step. The next step is to look at the data and *measure* how *much* immigration is likely to degrade the quality of economic policy. That’s what I do in *Open Borders*, and I conclude that the effect if any is tiny. The same goes for the other major challenges to the simple model. And while we’re checking the model for excessive optimism, it’s also worth checking it for excessive pessimism; most notably, the standard Clemens model completely ignores the effect of immigration on innovation.

Further point: Even if Mark were right to reject predictions about the economic effects of extreme liberalization, he has no reason to dismiss predictions about the economic effects of *moderate* liberalization. Maybe letting in a billion foreigners would destroy our institutions, but letting in ten million won’t. Frankly, it seems like he’s more interesting in categorically dismissing a model with uncomfortable results than in figuring out the extent to which the model is true.