

The Other Great Shutdown

Here's my opening statement for last night's Soho Forum debate with Mark Krikorian.

I've debated Mark Krikorian on immigration many times before, but today's crisis provides a new and gripping argument against immigration. Almost anyone can see the force of it: Coronavirus originated in China, migration brought it here, and suddenly life is terrible. Dogmatic libertarians can keep droning on about "liberty," but everyone else now plainly sees that strict immigration controls could have stopped this plague – and only strict immigration controls can stop the plagues of the future.

This argument sounds so right. What could possibly be wrong with it?

Let's start by backing up. Before the coronavirus, did we have anything close to open borders? Of course not; Mark himself has conceded this point in prior debates. Under open borders, the U.S. could easily have tens of millions of immigrants annually. A conservative estimate says that our borders are normally 95% closed. I say it's more like 98% closed.

So what? Even with our borders *98% closed*, the virus had no trouble spreading here on a massive scale. Once a few sick people enter your country, it spreads far and wide. The same is true all over the world. The United Kingdom is an *island nation*, but it has the second-highest body count on Earth. So it seems like we couldn't have solved our problem with moderate further restrictions; we'd need to virtually end immigration altogether. But would that be enough? No way. You would also have to virtually end international *tourism*, too. That doesn't just mean keeping foreign tourists *out*; it also means keeping domestic tourists *in*. Or at least tell your own citizens, "If you leave, you can't come back."

The upshot: Even cutting immigration down to Japanese levels would do very little about contagion. Instead, it looks like you would have to approach North Korea's policy of "no-one-gets-in-or-out-alive."

At this point, you might be wondering, "Well, couldn't we allow tourism, but simply require a strict supervised two-week quarantine for all international travelers?" Indeed you could. Sadly, this is so burdensome it would practically eliminate international tourism. Perhaps people would take one or two international trips per lifetime, spending two weeks in quarantine on arrival and return. But that's about it. The benefit of tourism is too modest to offset weeks of confinement.

Now we reach the trillion-dollar question: What *would* be enough to offset weeks of confinement? The indubitable answer is: the opportunity to permanently immigrate! If

you're already willing to leave your country of birth to build a new life for yourself, two weeks of quarantine only modestly increases the cost. Even seasonal migrants would endure quarantine; they might lose a month of time on a round-trip, but U.S. agricultural wages are about five times as high as Mexico's. The punchline, then, is that if you are mortally afraid of contagion, what you need to stop is not immigration but tourism.

Which is, by the way, the opposite of what is likely to happen, because we have long been ruled by innumerate, hysterical demagogues.

An immigration policy of open borders combined with a two-week quarantine would, in my view, be an immense improvement over the status quo. I'd say that would move the border from 98% closed to 95% open. If contagion were your sole objection to immigration, this is the policy you should favor.

I know, of course, that people have a long list of other objections to immigration. Indeed, as far as I recall, this is my first debate with Mark where he even mentioned contagion. Instead, he's primarily relied on cultural objections, while downplaying immigration's economic benefits.

Which makes me wonder: Has the present crisis shed any new light on our earlier disagreements? The answer: Yes on both counts.

Culturally, the crisis has shown that Americans have a lot to learn from other cultures. Our way of handling contagion has been clumsy at best. Maybe we should have learned from Singapore and South Korea, maybe we should have learned from Iceland and Sweden. What Americans definitely shouldn't do is look in the mirror and admire our wonderfully functional culture. We're not the worst on Earth, but now is a fine time to embrace a curious cosmopolitan perspective.

The economic lesson of the crisis is truly clear-cut. Since mid-March, the greatest economy in human history has been in "shutdown" or "lockdown." Our standard of living has crashed, and unemployment is near the level of the Great Depression. Why? *Because we have temporarily annulled the right of free migration within the United States.* Let me repeat that: *Our standard of living has crashed because we have temporarily annulled the right of free migration within the United States.* Americans are no longer able to work and shop where they like. The result is not a minor inconvenience, but disaster. We are suddenly stuck in a post-apocalyptic movie. I detest hyperbole. But this, my friends, is no hyperbole.

What would we think, however, if this economic shutdown had existed for all of living memory? We'd probably be content with the only life we've ever known. We only know what we're missing because - until very recently - *we had it.* And we all look forward to a future where we can restore free migration within the United States and regain its

immense benefits.

What does this have to do with immigration? To quote Obi-Wan Kenobi, “More than you possibly can imagine.” In normal times, current immigration law keeps the whole world on permanent lockdown. While people can usually move freely within their countries of birth, governments strictly regulate international mobility. This regulation traps billions of people in unproductive backwaters of the global economy. Current policies don’t just needlessly impoverish all the would-be migrants eager to build better lives for themselves. They also impoverish their billions of customers. *The secret of mass consumption is mass production.* This is most fundamental lesson of economics. When you shut down the restaurant industry, you don’t just hurt waiters and chefs; you hurt diners. When you shut down immigration, you don’t just hurt immigrants; you hurt all the natives who would have purchased the fruits of immigrant labor.

Is the harm of ongoing immigration restriction really comparable to the harm of the coronavirus lockdown? Definitely. The *highest* estimates of the fall in U.S. GDP are about 50%, and that combines the effects of the virus and the policy response. Estimates of the total damage of immigration restrictions, in contrast, are *typically* around 50% of global GDP. In both cases, draconian restrictions on freedom of movement strangle production.

Even the most ardent fans of the coronavirus lockdown do not deny how much their policies have depressed our standard of living and our quality of life. Even the fans of immigration, in contrast, rarely realize how much the immigration lockdown deprives humanity year after year. How come almost everyone sees the former cost yet almost no one sees the latter? Because it’s much easier for human beings to miss wonderful things they used to have than it is to miss wonderful things they’ve yet to experience.

Can we really compare the coronavirus lockdown to the ongoing immigration lockdown? We can and we should.

The coronavirus lockdown is only temporary and delivers a semi-plausible benefit. I’m against this lockdown. But maybe I’m wrong.

The ongoing immigration lockdown, in contrast, has gone on for about a century and delivers benefits so dubious even their fans struggle to articulate or quantify them. And when we sympathetically examine economic, fiscal, cultural, and political objections to immigration, they turn out to be either flat wrong or greatly overstated. If you want details, try my new *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*. But here’s the quick version.

1. Economic objections to immigration are totally wrong-headed. To repeat, the secret of mass consumption is mass production, and immigration restrictions strangle production by trapping human talent in low-productivity countries. A Mexican farmer grows far more food

here than he can grow back in Mexico. Not convinced? How productive would *you* be in Mexico?

2. Fiscal objections are flimsy. Despite the existence of the welfare state, boring apolitical number-crunchers conclude that even low-skilled immigrants are a net fiscal positive for natives, as long as they arrive when they're young. You don't have to take my word for it; if you like looking at numbers, try chapter 7 of the 2017 report from the National Academy of Sciences.

3. Cultural objections are weak, insofar as we can even measure them. Almost all second-generation immigrants speak fluent English. Immigrants' crime rates are lower than natives'. And advanced statistical work on the effects of nations' ancestry and average IQ still imply massive gains of immigration. In a previous debate, I asked Mark Krikorian why he chooses to live in the Capital area, one of the highest-immigration regions of America. I kind of expected him to say something like, "It's hell, but I'm sacrificing my well-being so the rest of America doesn't have to endure the same fate." But if I recall correctly, he just shrugged, "It's complicated." I suppose it is complicated, but I can't understand why you would lead a political crusade against anything "complicated" when the world is still packed with stuff that's blatantly *bad*.

4. Political objections, finally, look minor at best. In the U.S., the foreign-born are, unfortunately, more socially conservative and economically liberal. But the difference is modest, even immigrants eligible to vote have low turnout, and their descendants assimilate to mainstream American political culture. It's not a big deal. Even if you disagree, why not welcome immigrants to live and work, but not to vote?

I know this is a lot of information in a short space. I'm happy to expand on any of these topics in the Q&A. But I predictably stand by the conclusion of *Open Borders*: Immigration restriction is a solution in search of a problem. People don't really know why they want to restrict immigration; they just know that they do.

Even if my book is thoroughly wrong, though, the current crisis provides no *bonus* argument in favor of immigration restriction. Tourism – including American travel abroad – may be a problem, but we can safely admit all willing immigrants with a suitable quarantine. And such a quarantine would do little to discourage immigration, because the gains are astronomical.

Last point: If you fear a world where American citizens, in the name of disease prevention, lose their basic freedom to travel abroad, I share your fear. But when you cherish this freedom, please remember that the vast majority of the world's population has lacked this freedom for about a century. Even the world's poorest people can scrape together the money to get here; what most will never get is the government paperwork that allows

them to live and work in peace. Our shutdown will end in the foreseeable future. The world's shutdown will endure until we see it for needless cruelty it is.