

We Wanted Tech

“We wanted workers, but we got people instead.” This line from Max Frisch didn’t just give George Borjas the title of his most recent book. At last Friday’s immigration conference in St. Cloud, Borjas declared it his all-time favorite immigration epiphany. The point, he explained, is that immigrants aren’t just machines that produce stuff; they have broad social effects on our culture, politics, budget, and beyond.

Borjas is right, of course. In fact, he doesn’t go far enough. After all, even *machines* aren’t just machines that produce stuff. They too have broad social effects on our culture, politics, budget, and beyond. If you look closely at *any* major technological development, you can justly say, “We wanted tech, but we changed society instead.”

Consider cellphones. When they were first introduced, you might picture them as more convenient phonebooths. But they’ve revolutionized not only our society, but our psychology. Many human beings now interact with their phones more than they interact with fellow human beings; go to any public place and you will see this to be true. Even when we *are* talking to fellow human beings, cellphones have changed the tone and tenor of our conversations. When I casually chat with my friends, for example, we often fact check each others’ assertions. And cellphones are crucial for social media, which has dramatically swayed not only public discourse, but elections and policy. Without Twitter, would Donald Trump’s candidacy even have been able to get off the ground?

When driverless cars come, they’ll disrupt our whole society again. Commuting time will plausibly skyrocket, especially in high-rent areas. If you can relax – or even sleep – in your car, why pay \$1M for a tiny apartment downtown? Indeed, once you get rid of the driver’s seat, we’ll probably turn cars into small motorhomes, so “living out of your car” could become an alternative lifestyle rather than a tale of woe. And what will happen to all the truck drivers, taxi drivers, Uber drivers, and delivery drivers?

Still not convinced? I trust you’ll admit that nuclear technology did more to the world than slash electric bills.

Verily, we wanted tech, but we changed society instead.

How should you react to this truism? You could say, “Duh, everybody knows this already.” That’s my knee-jerk reaction to Frisch’s quote, too. But both “duhs” are too dismissive. “Obvious once you think about it” ≠ “Obvious.”

What else is there to say?

1. You could retreat to agnosticism. “Well, there are direct economic benefits, plus an

array of intangible social effects. We don't know how to measure these intangibles; we don't even know if they're good or bad." This is basically what Borjas said about immigration in his Friday talk. There's no reason we couldn't generalize it.

Reaction: Philosophically, agnosticism of any kind is incoherent sophistry. We always have *some* information. We can and should combine this information with common sense to form reasonable guesses about whatever question is on our minds. Crucially, "information" includes psychological evidence about the errors to which the human mind is prone. And one of the best ways to keep your guesses reasonable is openness to bets.

2. You could start by measuring the direct benefits, then see if any of the broader social *negatives* are plausibly in the same ballpark. If not, the standard conclusion still goes through despite the complexity of the world.

Reaction: Once you factor in the value of time, this is typically the best approach for laymen. It's a quick way to resolve a wide range of policy disputes, especially if you embrace some version of *weak deontology* rather than consequentialism.

3. You could try a lot harder to study the measurement of so-called "intangibles." This might require a massive research program to fill in the enormous gaps in our knowledge. Or perhaps if you play around on Google Scholar, you'll discover that many researchers have already measured the stuff you imagine "no one knows."

Reaction: This is the best approach for experts. If you do good work and/or publicize it, you also help laymen reach the truth with modest mental effort. So earn your paycheck!

Whatever you conclude, know that immigration is nothing special. *Everything* has broader social effects. These complexities are no reason to defer to popular prejudice, which is what I suspect Borjas hopes we'll do. Instead, these complexities are a reason to think broader and work harder to get the best answers we can.