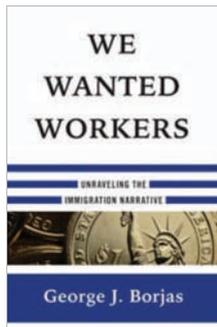


# Books, Arts & Manners

## The Facts on Immigration

MARK KRIKORIAN



*We Wanted Workers: Unraveling the Immigration Narrative*, by George J. Borjas  
(Norton, 240 pp., \$26.95)

**G**EORGE BORJAS'S new book doesn't tell you *what* to think about immigration, but *how* to think about it.

Borjas, the nation's leading immigration economist (and an NR contributor), is also the author of one of the top college textbooks on labor economics, now in its seventh edition. But *We Wanted Workers* requires no math you didn't learn in the third grade.

This is a user's guide to the policy debate over immigration, summarizing some of the basic things we know about its economic and other effects, explaining the caveats, and pointing out the assumptions hidden in footnotes that can radically change the results of widely touted studies.

The overarching lesson of the book is not to take at face value the assertions of immigration advocates, even (or especially) if they're academics. Enforced "narratives" repel Borjas. Listening to "Marxist-Leninist nonsense" in school in Castro's Cuba (he emigrated in 1962 at age twelve with his mother) "taught me to distrust authority and to be skeptical—very skeptical—of expert opinion."

Later, as his academic work exploring the declining skill level of new

immigrants started to get noticed, he encountered another kind of ideological enforcer. Libertarian immigration advocate Julian Simon wrote him warning that "anti-immigration people" were citing his work. Simon suggested that Borjas write a disclaimer to be read aloud at "meetings about immigration" by a lobbyist (whose name Borjas redacts) to "embarrass those who would use you to that effect."

Borjas never wrote the disclaimer, but Simon's request made a deep impression: "There was certainly a lot of pressure to make sure that the 'correct' interpretation was attached to whatever academics were writing on immigration, lest the 'xenophobes and racists' get the wrong idea and actually begin to cite data from

model that predicts a \$40 trillion increase in world GDP from the abolition of all immigration barriers presupposes the relocation of 5.6 billion (with a "b") people from the Third World to the advanced industrial countries. He notes dryly that "glossing over this number is the politically sensible thing to do if one wishes to advocate these types of models in policy circles." You can say that again.

A more basic assumption of this fantastical calculation, which isn't in the footnotes at all, underlies much immigration research (and policymaking): the assumption that immigrants are simply labor units. Thus the book's title, which is from writer Max Frisch's observation about guest workers in his native Switzerland: "We wanted workers, but

## Beatles fan Borjas devotes his first chapter to imagining there's **no countries**—the economics of John Lennon's borderless world.

research studies." Borjas doesn't hew to party lines, whether set by Fidel Castro or Julian Simon.

That is not to say this is an anti-immigration book. Toward the end, he makes clear he's not opposed to immigration as such, and even favors a certain amount of unskilled immigration: "I still feel that it is a good thing to give some of the poor and huddled masses . . . a chance to experience the incredible opportunities that our country has to offer." Nor is that merely a piety for print; I've heard him say something similar to a crowd that probably didn't want to hear it.

Beatles fan Borjas devotes his first chapter to imagining there's no countries—the economics of John Lennon's borderless world. This may seem fanciful, but it's a standard talking point among pro-immigration thinkers that abolishing frontiers would yield tens of trillions of dollars' worth of additional economic growth, and that supporters of limits on immigration are "leaving trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk," as economist Michael Clemens puts it.

So Borjas decided to read the footnotes. It turns out that the mathematical

we got people instead." Borjas notes that even in economic terms the immigrant-as-worker perspective is false: "Viewing immigrants as purely a collection of labor inputs leads to a very misleading appraisal of what immigration is about, and gives an incomplete picture of the economic impact of immigration." In other words, Immigrants Are People, Too.

The heart of the book is Professor Borjas's taking readers on a survey of what we think we know (and what we don't know), in chapters covering "the self-selection of immigrants," "economic assimilation," "the melting pot," "the labor-market impact," "the economic benefits," and "the fiscal impact." It's a brief book, so none of these chapters is especially long, and there's nothing here that any reasonably intelligent layman can't understand. The material is familiar to me, but even I found his digest of it useful.

And there are many notable bits along the way. For instance, he looks under the hood of the estimates of the size of the illegal population, and especially at one key assumption in such calculations: that the Census Bureau's surveys miss 10 percent of illegal aliens, an error known as

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the undercount rate. Our research at the Center for Immigration Studies uses this same estimate for the undercount, since it's the only one there is. But where's it from? A single unpublished paper presented at a conference 16 years ago looking solely at Mexicans in Los Angeles County. Professor Borjas's lesson: "There are good reasons for Americans to be skeptical about government pronouncements that purport to describe demographic or economic conditions in politically sensitive issues."

Elsewhere he illustrates differing opinions over immigration's harmful impact on low-skilled Americans by quoting a blog post from libertarian economist Bryan Caplan titled "Are Low-Skilled Americans the Master Race?": "Economists are used to rolling their eyes when people object to better policies on the grounds that some special interest will suffer from the change. It's time to cross the final frontier, and start rolling our eyes when the special interest is low-skilled Americans." (No, this is not a parody.)

Borjas also discusses what he calls "saving-the-narrative research," which whips the data until they sing that immigration doesn't have an impact on low-skilled Americans. He specifically focuses on his reappraisal of earlier research on the impact that the Mariel boatlift had on wages in Miami. Contrary to the old saw that academic disputes are so bitter because the stakes are so small, here the stakes are large and the bitterness, while masked, is nonetheless evident. His main target is Giovanni Peri, a pro-immigration economist who, with a co-author, wrote, "We think the final goal of the economic profession should be to agree that . . . we do not find any significant evidence of a negative wage and employment effect of the Miami boatlift." Borjas's reply is visceral: "Such a call to arms reminds me very much of the Marxist-Leninist teachers at that revolutionary school in Havana long ago: *They believed*. All that was left was to compel everyone else to believe as well."

Aside from that, Borjas's tone is measured and sober throughout. But "measured and sober" doesn't mean ambiguous or equivocal: "The politically correct narrative is wrong: Immigration is *not* good for everyone." "After all is said and done, immigration turns out to be just another

government redistribution program." "The claim that mathematical modeling and data analysis can somehow lead to a scientific determination of social policy is sheer nonsense."

The main takeaways of his survey will be familiar to those who follow the issue: There are winners and losers from immigration. The small economic gain (the "immigration surplus") arises from a large-scale redistribution of wealth from Americans who compete with immigrants to those who use immigrants. And that small economic gain may be entirely canceled out by the fiscal burden of providing government services to immigrants.

Perhaps the most important lesson comes in the final chapter, "Who Are You Rooting For?" Here the economist acknowledges that economics can't determine immigration policy—this is ultimately a political question, not a technocratic one: "In the end, different beliefs about the right thing to do will often lead to different immigration policies, regardless of what the underlying models and data say."

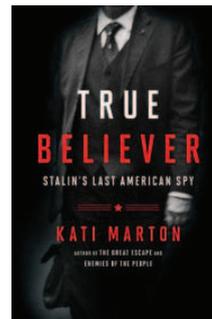
Borjas devotes a few pages to spelling out some of his own policy preferences. He would continue the current mixed system "that generates economic gains by admitting high-skill immigrants but that also 'does good' by admitting some of the huddled masses." He doesn't specify numbers and categories, but does offer some concrete items: secure the border, punish law-breaking employers, engage in benign neglect of the current illegal population until we fix enforcement. He devotes the most space to calling for an immigration counterpart to the Trade Adjustment Assistance program, to ensure that some of the gains from immigration are redistributed to those who suffer from immigrant competition.

You might not agree with all of his choices—I don't—but this isn't a book about his preferences. Instead, Borjas offers a roadmap for thinking through the consequences of your own policy preferences, with the added counsel that "prudence and caution are traits that would serve us well in the immigration context."

However much you think you know about immigration, you'll learn something from this book. And buy a second copy for your congressman—he needs it even more than you do. **NR**

# Dark Loyalties

RONALD RADOSH



*True Believer: Stalin's Last American Spy*, by Kati Marton (Simon & Schuster, 304 pp., \$27)

**T**HOSE familiar with the Alger Hiss case may remember Noel Field as one of the people Whittaker Chambers identified as a Soviet spy. Like his friend Hiss, Field was an upper-crust young man: He grew up at a lakeside villa in Switzerland, returning to the U.S. only to attend Harvard. In 1918, when Field was 14, he met his father's friend Allen Dulles at a lunch held at the villa. Decades later, Dulles must have been stunned to learn that the young man he had turned to and asked "What do you plan to do with your life?" had grown up to become an agent of Stalin.

In her riveting page-turner, which includes information from previously unavailable archival manuscripts, Kati Marton offers us Field's entire story, following him as he evolved from an idealist and pacifist to a committed Communist, willing to sacrifice literally everything for Stalin and the Party. Field was not alone. His pro-Soviet activities took place in the era described in Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and in the period immediately after its publication. Koestler's protagonist, a committed Soviet police operative, willingly goes to his execution—not because he

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