ADAM OZIMEK responds to David Pogue's most recent post at the New York Times on working conditions at Foxconn's iPhone factories, in which he notes several things. First, Apple has hired
the Fair Labor Association to investigate Foxconn's factories. Second, Foxconn has raised wages. Third, an ABC documentary team visited Foxconn's factories and found mostly a lot of perfectly natural boredom, rather than dangerous working conditions per se. (Foxconn was aware of the visit in advance, and obviously would have ensured everything was scrubbed for the camera and that only compliant workers were around.) And finally, there's tons of evidence that the Chinese workers are very happy to have Foxconn jobs. They're better-paid than life in the village, they're often viewed as starter jobs for young people who are planning to move on to something more substantial later on, and, as one letter writer notes, working at Foxconn was a lot better for his aunt than her prior job as a village prostitute.

Mr Ozimek concludes two things. The first is an argument about the primacy of rising productivity, rather than labour safety regulations, in improving working conditions. The second is that Westerners who argue that we should be sourcing our products in countries with better-enforced labour laws, like South Korea, Taiwan or Japan, rather than China, are making a huge mistake, trying to deprive Chinese of the income growth they need to better their lives and ultimately achieve safer and happier workplaces.

On this latter point, Mr Ozimek is absolutely right. But that's not the important argument here. The argument isn't "many factories in China have terrible labour conditions, therefore we shouldn't buy Chinese products." That would indeed be silly. It would also be completely doomed. Globalisation is a fact, not an option. We import huge amounts of stuff from China, and will continue to until Chinese wages rise much, much higher than they currently are. Rather, the argument is "many factories in China have terrible labour conditions, therefore we should demand that Western companies that source their products in China use their bargaining power to force Chinese factories to improve working conditions."

A lot of people who are generally supportive of free trade seem to be making the same mistake Mr Ozimek is making in response to the Foxconn story: they're refighting the "sweatshops, good or bad?" argument of the 1990s. That's not what this is about.
There are probably some people trying to argue that we should be demanding Apple make its iPhones in America to avoid infractions of its corporate code of conduct. Mr Ozimek cites Andrew Leonard's article at Salon about a labour-union official who said in his search for an ethically manufactured mobile phone he considered buying Samsung because their phones are largely manufactured in South Korea, where safety regulations are better enforced. This is not a significant phenomenon. Vanishingly few people will ever go to the trouble this labour-union official has gone to in researching the sourcing of his phone, so any hypothetical harms from such decisions will fail to develop.

The media and public pressure being exerted on Apple is not focused on getting it to stop making phones in China. It's focused on getting it to apply its own corporate code of conduct rigorously at the factories that make its phones in China. That corporate code of conduct is part of Apple's brand ID. It is part of the reason why people desire to buy the phones that make those Chinese richer in the first place. If people think Apple is a sleazy company that employs workers under abusive conditions, they will not want to pay as much for its phones, and then those Chinese workers will be harmed. Getting manufacturing companies in China to allow more open scrutiny of the workplace and to cease any possible violations of their contracts guaranteeing adequate working conditions is good for Apple, good for consumers, good for the companies, and good for the workers. It's just good. There's nothing wrong with it. Nobody is trying to stop globalisation here, or take away Chinese workers' jobs. As Mr Pogue's article puts it:

[We] should be happy that in this corner of the Chinese landscape, things are getting better. On ABC’s show, a Fair Labor Association inspector, Ines Kaempfer, called the last month a “Nike moment” for Apple. In the 1990s, Nike’s sweatshops weren’t the worst in the business, but they’re the ones that got the negative publicity. In response, it cleaned up its act, and thereby lifted the bar for the entire industry. Clearly, the recent spotlight on conditions at Foxconn has performed a similar service for the electronics industry. Better wages are good. More careful monitoring is good. Transparency—like letting TV cameras into your assembly lines—is good.”