

Economics That Cuts Through the Fog

by Allen Mendenhall



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Not long ago, I found myself released from the regular burdens of travel when a Club for Growth Foundation event descended on me in Birmingham, Alabama. The city wore its dampest, grayest aspect that morning, the kind of misting, melancholy weather that transforms our Southern steel town into a passable imitation of its English namesake. Even the light seemed borrowed from across the Atlantic: thin, apologetic, the color of old pewter.

We gathered at The Club, that eyrie perched above the city, where on clearer days one can survey the valleys and ridges like that minor god, Vulcan, inspecting his domain. But on this particular afternoon, the commotion below us had dissolved into a watercolor wash of fog and drizzle, the buildings merely suggestions, the distant mountains erased entirely.

I had been a Club for Growth Fellow in 2024, but for most of the people in this room the Club for Growth's arrival in Birmingham was a novelty, an exotic bird blown off course. Yet here we were, a fascinating assemblage: the prominent and the passionate donors and elected officials, concerned mothers with notepads and professors wearing glasses, all of us united by the quaint belief that ideas about markets and liberty still mattered in an age increasingly skeptical of both.

My friend Art Carden was there. Art—Dr. Carden to his students—is that rarest of creatures: an economist who can make his dismal science sing. He'd come to discuss his new book, *Mere Economics*, co-authored with Caleb Fuller of Grove City College. The title itself is a small act of mimesis, an echo of C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, suggesting that economics, like faith, might be distilled to its essential truths, stripped of the baroque theorizing that so often obscures rather than illuminates.

Art delivered. His lecture possessed that quality one finds in the very best teaching: made the complex seem suddenly, startlingly simple, as though he were revealing not some arcane formula but a truth that had been hiding in plain sight all along. By the time he finished speaking, I knew I would leave with his book tucked under my arm.

By week's end, this paperback had acquired the pleasant brokenness of something carried everywhere, its spine creased, its pages dog-eared at passages I wanted to remember. I highly recommend it to both novice and expert alike.

These men have produced, in fourteen chapters generously annotated with scriptural citations and the usual theological suspects, what amounts to a Christian version of *Basic Economics*, the Thomas Sowell volume that Carden keeps on his nightstand.

The authors' central insight is that "[e]conomics doesn't tell you what to value, only that there are tradeoffs"; nor does it "tell you what to choose" but instead "helps us think systematically and clearly about people's choices." How refreshing! Genesis makes an appearance to distinguish dominion from domination (markets over coercion, as it were). And this dynamic duo dispatches the tedious accusation that

capitalism feeds on slavery and exploitation with an observation so obvious that it's apparently invisible to tenured radicals in the humanities: if this were true, regions where slavery persists or recently existed would be economic powerhouses. They are, however, basket cases and economically depressed.

On rationality, the professors offer clarity: "By 'rationality,' economists just mean people try to achieve their goals as best they know how. People's goals need not be praiseworthy, wise, or consistent with their proclaimed intentions." One wishes that more public intellectuals and online influencers grasped this distinction.

The treatment of profits and poverty cuts through sentiment: "Profits aren't transferred from customers or workers to capitalists. They are new wealth that rewards entrepreneurs' good judgment." And: "People are poor because they produce little. If we want to enrich them, we should concentrate our moral and political firepower on the institutions... that keep them unproductive."

There's practical wisdom here, too: "As a matter of personal policy, you can raise your earnings by learning how to do things other people value. The process isn't instantaneous, but you can expect that increases to your productivity will eventually be rewarded with increases to your compensation."

I found this primer sufficiently accessible and uncorrupted by jargon that I bought a copy for my fourteen-year-old son, who's still wondering what career and subjects to pursue. Whether this purchase represents optimism about his future or pessimism about the economics curriculum that awaits him, I'm not sure. Regardless, the glossary at the end will prove helpful when he inevitably asks what his teachers are talking about.

Lewis once proclaimed that the task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. Carden and Fuller fulfill that charge with a steadiness and grace that feel increasingly rare. If more thinkers wrote with this much clarity, even our foggiest mornings might begin to feel a little brighter.



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