

Creativity, Reason and Uncertainty What is Sociology of Art? (I)

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How can art, creativity and genius be subject to sociological and economic analysis? According to Pierre-Michel Menger, their rational status can be based on the idea of uncertainty. In Nathalie Heinich's view, although Menger's project has both theoretical density and captivating reflections on artistic life, it sometimes fails to get very deeply into the subject, because it does not pay enough attention to the point of view of the actors, especially when it comes to the issue of recognition.

Reviewed: Pierre-Michel Menger, *Le Travail créateur: S'accomplir dans l'incertain* [Creative Labour: Achievements under Uncertainty], Paris, Hautes Études - Gallimard/Seuil, 2009. 667 p., 29 €.

Pierre-Michel Menger responds to Nathalie Heinich's review [in Books & Ideas](#).

In this book of close to 700 pages, Pierre-Michel Menger has brought together the main articles that present his work as a sociologist of art. The articles were originally published from 1989 to 2004; he updates some of them here. The thirteen articles, accompanied by two indices and a copious bibliography, are arranged non-chronologically, in order to make clearer the coherence of the whole. An introduction and a conclusion try to bring out the central theme of these various works.

Menger's search for coherence consists mainly of his focus on the "uncertainty" that is evoked in the book's subtitle and reprised in the title of the introduction: "The Principle of Uncertainty". In fact, uncertainty appears to him to be constitutive of artistic activities, whether it be uncertainty about the future and the chances of success of a creative activity ("Acting in an Uncertain Horizon", "Is it Rational to Work in order to Flourish?", "Rationality and Uncertainty in the Artist's Life", "Talent and Reputation"), or about the origin and interpretation of artists' exceptionality ("Beethoven and his Genius", "Creative Precocity"), or, on a lesser scale, about the moment at which a work can be regarded as finished ("Profiles in Incompleteness"). There are also various reflections about the epistemology of the social sciences ("Durkheim and Art"), the socio-economic specificity of certain professions ("Actors' Activity", "Artists, Employers, and Insurers"), cultural politics ("Paris and the Concentration of Artistic Supply", "Art, Politicization, and Public Action"), and cultural consumption ("Labour, Social Structure, and Cultural Consumption" – a great article, even though it strays far from the theme in its title). Focusing on uncertainty as the common thread in all this allows us to rethink – if not to resolve – the problems that artistic activity poses for economic analysis; to re-examine, in the light of the specifics of the artistic

world, the classical problems of rationality and determinism; and to throw new light on sociological themes as different as the precocity of child prodigies, Beethoven's genius, the problems of managing actors' careers, the situation of intermittent workers, and the works of Rodin.

The central place given to uncertainty is most explicit in the first article, "Acting in an Uncertain Horizon" (brilliant, but so specialized that it may well discourage readers who are not professional social scientists). This article is an epistemological analysis of the determinism/interactionism divide in sociology and economics. Menger shows that this divide does not run between the two disciplines but within each of them. In the imperfect competition model in economics, as in the interactionist approach in sociology, the assumption of rational actor behaviour can be preserved, provided that we do not dismiss the dimension of uncertainty – uncertainty of talent, of success, of price – as a marginal variable, but see it as a constitutive element of the world of art: "Creative activity is rational conduct: this statement attains its full meaning only if this rationality is specified as that of behaviour in an uncertain horizon."

By introducing economics questions into the sociology of art – which is the principal originality in his work – Menger is inevitably led to bring to the forefront the issue of rationality. That issue is emphasized in "Is it Rational to Work in order to Flourish?" and "Rationality and Uncertainty in the Artist's Life", where Menger suggests adding to the economist's toolkit some dimensions in addition to that of immediate utility – in particular, two special forms of "job satisfaction": the non-monetary benefits that one gets from creativity, and the hope of exceptional gains from artistic activity. "Talent and Reputation" digs extensively into possible explanations for the differences in artists' success, brilliantly displaying the various theories available in sociology (including sociology of science) and economics. Uncertainty once again appears as a key, as much for understanding the strategies for success (the comparison and competition that are constitutive of artistic activity "are not separable from uncertainty, which is the fulcrum of creativity"), as for understanding the creative labour itself: "Intrinsic uncertainty is a condition that is both necessary and feared: with this condition, the work can be inventive, expressive, and non-routine, but this condition is also a challenge that is always testing, but also always accommodated, since the work involves trial and error, and although it is directed towards completion, it does not have an end clearly and comfortably attributed to it. In this way, rules for artistic invention are like rules for managing uncertainty." In short, taking uncertainty into account makes it possible to preserve the assumption of rational behaviour, in this area where that assumption might seem to be undermined.

The basis of Menger's analysis of the case of Beethoven, a classic quarrel about determinism, is the contradiction between the essentialist approach, postulating self-determination by an autonomous creator, and the determinist approach, wanting to see things completely in terms of social context. To resolve this contradiction, he applies the tools of interactionism, with the (persuasive) assumption of a "dynamic scheme of amplification" that "suggests how the careers of two artists originally similar can radically diverge": "The intrinsic strength of individual talent and the segmentation of the creative labour market (brought about by the effects of selective comparisons) constitute two forces in a dynamic interaction, the composition of which produces significant variance in reputations; and this talent strength and market segmentation can – at the high end of the statistical distribution of aptitudes – lead as far as the exception that is declared to be genius."

Compared to these reflections with their high theoretical density, the other articles are more descriptive and more directly connected with the present day, full of opportunities for reflecting on the particulars of artists' (especially actors') careers, of artistic geography (more and more Parisian), and of cultural politics, especially its ever increasing division (in France) between two systems, one – elitist – oriented towards the professionals of creativity, the other – democratic – towards amateurism and value relativism. Thus this collection is intended not only for social scientists but also for culture professionals.

It is undeniable that these essays constitute a study some parts of which are impressive in their erudition (especially those related to economics), in their precision (the analysis of the conflict about intermittent work is as faultless as it is irrefutable), and sometimes even in their originality (e.g. the article on the incompleteness of works – even though this article itself has a whiff of incompleteness). Nevertheless there are a number of things that are unexplored, sometimes leaving the reader hungry for more. Of course I am not referring to works of art themselves, a return to which Menger outlines in his conclusion (“I want to close this book by going back to the result of creative labour, the artistic work itself”), in a slightly unexpected tribute to the old academic pecking order that persists in seeing the analysis of works of art as the highest aim of the sociology of art.

By importing into sociology from the discipline of economics something as problematic as economic rationality, the sociologist inherits that concept's unconsidered assumptions and the problems that it presents to the analyst. Of course, Menger is well aware of rationality's polysemy, which he very finely dissects; but he seems less aware of the profound normativity in making the assumption of actors' rationality not only the basic axiom but also the aim of the demonstration, driven by an ideological assumption that disqualifies and excludes from the analysis so many of the very things that characterize human experience: intuition, interaction, unconsciousness, ambivalence, contradiction, even stupidity! It would have been better if a critical enquiry into the relevance of these problems surrounding “rationality” had preceded its being applied to artistic activity.

Likewise, one could wonder whether it was really necessary to reopen the endless quarrel about determinism, which is stated here in very conventional terms (“two opposing arguments...”, “either... or else...”, “how to escape the horns of this dilemma...”). A less narrowly logical vision could well comprehend both individual autonomy and the heteronomy of contextual opportunities, thereby also deflating the speculative bubble of the rather old-fashioned philosophical idea of an imagined incompatibility between freedom and determination. Generally, lurking behind this logical contradiction is an axiological problem: the problem of individual responsibility in the face of inequalities, in this case inequality of talents, the ideal-typical incarnation of which, since the French Revolution, has been the world of artists, in which the problem of justice constantly reappears. But in Menger's book this normative aspect remains out of sight, hiding behind a logical problem that is virtually insoluble because it is stated in mutually exclusive terms. Here again, before a detailed discussion of the ins and outs of the model, it would have been better to examine its relevance in principle.

The implicitly axiological aspect of a problem is difficult to discern when the researcher's position itself bears the marks of normativity, as is sometimes the case with Menger. He seems not quite to have got to grips with the a-critical turn of contemporary sociology “from critical sociology to the sociology of critique” (in Luc Boltanski's felicitous phrase some twenty years ago). Being anxious to track down the “stereotypes” of prevailing

understandings, the “ideological enchantments”, and the “necessary illusions”, as they appear, for example, in “arguments for non-monetary benefits” such as vocation or inspiration, he seems not to admit that rather than toeing the line of critical sociology and critiquing the actors’ representations, and contrasting them with counter-ideologies, it is possible to study them by clarifying their *raison d’être*, their constraints, and their coherence. Fortunately for sociology, Lévi-Strauss did not linger on the “stereotypical” aspect of indigenous myths!

However, such a stance requires that the comprehending side of sociological analysis not be, as it is in this book, systematically sacrificed to its explaining side. For example, Menger preposterously sees in Norbert Elias’ book on Mozart an attempt to explain genius, whereas that book was actually trying to comprehend why it was so difficult for Mozart to live with the effects of genius. Instead of wondering why an artist is a genius, why can’t we wonder *how* singularity becomes perceptible and acceptable? But that would mean focussing the enquiry more on the problem of recognition, which is a ceaseless torment in the world of art; however, that term is virtually absent from the book (it doesn’t even figure in a quotation of Jon Elster), except in the very limited form of economic sanctions. The same goes for the pleasure of creating – which disappears behind the question of success – as well as for inspiration and vocation, both of which are fundamental features of relating to artistic labour. Yet sociology has shown that you can investigate these things without getting your fingers burnt.

This strictly hypothetical-deductive approach is also confusing because of its penchant for stringing theories together, and thus failing to shed more light on the less abstract characteristics of the artistic world. For example, examining singularity – not in the weak sense of specificity, but in the strong sense of originality, singularity, and incommensurability – might have made it possible for the author to widen the scope of his model of uncertainty, since uncertainty is of course only one of the potential consequences. When, as during the past century and a half, originality, innovation, and departure from the canon become in principle necessary for having artistic status, the uncertainty of creative people about their talent and about their chances for recognition become constitutive parts of that status. But that was not the case when artistic activity was carried on in accordance with the rules of a craft or a profession. Considering singularity would also have allowed Menger to complete his analysis by introducing into it the construction of non-substitutability; in this, artistic circles – the creators as well as the performers – present the social sciences with a very rich field for research. But Menger, although he is an excellent reader, seems to ignore works that have moved in this direction in recent years, in economics as well as in sociology. I have in mind Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit on the economics of esteem, Lucien Karpik on singularity, the sociologist of music Antoine Hennion on taste, the musicologist Esteban Buch on Beethoven and Schoenberg, and also my own works on singularity in art. Unfortunately, because he does not consider such advances made by his nearest co-workers, he misses out on ways of updating his work through discussion.

Despite these reservations, Menger’s work is undeniably important. It prompts us to continue the discussions of art, in which, following up the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Raymonde Moulin, French sociology has particularly distinguished itself during the last forty years.

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