

## **Creativity as Labour**

### **What is Sociology of Art? (II)**

Pierre-Michel MENDER

**Pierre-Michel Menger presents the central argument of his book on creative work, in response to Nathalie Heinich's questions and objections. His primary concern is to think about artistic creation as labour, and to subject it to the same sort of sociological and economic analyses as any other kind of labour.**

This article is a response to Nathalie Heinich's review of Pierre-Michel Menger, *Le Travail créateur. S'accomplir dans l'incertain* [Creative Labour: Achieving under Uncertainty], Paris, Hautes Études - Gallimard/Seuil, 2009, published in [Books & Ideas](#).

Nearly absent in Nathalie Heinich's reading of my book is something that I put at its centre: the question of labour, and the treatment of creative acts as labour acts. So I would like to start with this point; recalling the general argument of the book will allow me then to respond to some of her questions and objections.

Juxtaposed in the book's title, *Creative Labour*, are two vocabularies that generally appear contrary. Creativity has long been conceived as an activity in which the most admired results embody the appearance of novelty, i.e. novelty that is significant and exemplary. Immanuel Kant defined genius as the ability to produce works that can be taken as models. How, then, should one describe beauty in such works, which is a matter of taste? The well-known Kantian thinking about this is contained in an enigmatic phrase: "Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as that is perceived in it apart from the representation of an end." This thinking can be shifted to apply to the productive activity itself, as Jaakko Hintikka has shown in his work.

Is this way of thinking about artistic creation restricted to the philosophical sphere? Not at all. Kant's reasoning is reprised almost literally by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). In INSEE's recasting of their socio-professional nomenclatures which since 1982 have classified artists in the category "higher intellectual cadres and professions", practitioners of the plastic arts are described as follows: "Artists in the field of graphic or visual arts who create an original work, which can provide aesthetic pleasure by being contemplated, and which is recognized as containing its own finality." This typically anti-utilitarian thinking had already appeared in Emile Durkheim's view of art as a happy embodiment of the social, economic and civilizational value of those activities that are not assigned ends and are not treated in accordance with the usual laws of market-oriented economics. This thinking is also at the heart of the long tradition that sees in practices freed

from utilitarian finality the capacity to produce durable goods that are unlikely to be made obsolete directly by goods that are more ingeniously conceived, with innovative techniques, and that better fulfil the functional goals that their conception requires them to meet.

But how should we conceive of the activity that produces such goods? Calling it labour is faithful to the testimony of artists themselves, who – especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – have done so much to document the labours of artistic invention, by making available to us some materials of the creative process (sketches, successive manuscripts, revisions, pentimenti, notes, etc.). And yet, it is well understood that creative labour is not just a particular kind of complex, skilled, specialized labour. It strongly relies on intrinsic motivation – a taste for the activity itself, without immediate and instrumental concern for compensation. After all, firms dream of outfitting everyone on their team with such motivations; isn't having all the workers seeking to give meaning to their work one of the best guarantees of greater productivity? That is why artistic creativity has served as a reference point for the condemnation of the denial of meaning that is involved in prescribing labour that is routine, supervised, and only economically justified; and has also served as a positive model to be drawn upon in order to enrich work or to enable people to get the most out of the knowledge and skills that they are told to develop throughout their lifetimes. There are now countless books about creativity and talent; one cannot leave it at saying that the production of all this literature is just an expression of the managerial manipulation of work using today's more acceptable arguments.

Let's look more closely at artistic creation, understood as an activity that is conducted under the rules of originality, but is not devoid of conventions, and has as a central motif getting out from under the sway of instrumental ends and utilitarian functions. Let's admit that it is labour much more than it is a free expression of inspired spontaneity, for it takes place under constraints. What are the necessary conditions for doing such work successfully? The usual reasoning is that the remuneration of labour varies with the demand for the goods or services, the amount of effort by the workers, the level and the rate of obsolescence of the abilities that they acquired in their initial training, the experience they've accumulated in their working lives, their innate skills, and some random factors (general conditions, good or bad match between worker and business and co-workers, and so on). However, analysis of artists' income largely falls outside this reasoning; the wage equations don't work very well here. The benefit of the initial training is abnormally low (although there are differences among the artistic professions). The amount of paid work correlates with the individual's reputation, and the relation between effort and the quality of the result can be extremely variable from one project or work to another. The high yield of professional experience reflects the fact that some artists could not carry on and that experience is also an index of selective professional survival. And finally, the differences between individuals are very great, even between two artists who have had the same training and the same professional experience. How can we explain this? It would be misleading here to invoke talent, genius, and irresistible creativity, those mysterious powers and substantial qualities that some would obviously be blessed with – and others not – because it would be ludicrous to suppose that the great differences in success reflect ability differences of similar magnitude.

But it would be equally misleading to suppose that these differences in success have no relation to differences in skills and abilities. I discussed this point at some length, in order to challenge naively constructivist arguments. In fact, artistic careers can be better understood by starting with the indefiniteness of initial differences of ability; in this way there will be a progressive revelation of these differences, through the trials of comparison and the

accumulation of professional experience; the perceived responsiveness of demand to differences in quality will act like an amplifying lever. In other words, the abilities needed for success are more imperfectly developed by the initial training in artistic professions than elsewhere, because these professions operate under the rules of originality and competition with no fixed and absolute standards of quality. At the outset, individuals are badly informed about their abilities, because these apply only relatively, by comparison. Intrinsic motivation supports the wager of going into a career in which the distribution of rewards (money, esteem, recognition) is very unequal. But tolerance for inequalities is also surprisingly high.

With this analytical framework, it is easy to respond to Nathalie Heinich's questions and objections. Rationality? It is of course the Bayesian rationality<sup>1</sup> of behaviour under uncertainty: individuals form expectations, obtain new information, and reassess their chances in acting. Thus we can understand that the fit between their abilities and maintaining or developing their activities is revealed to them only gradually, on the job. Their overestimating their chances of becoming professional seems like an almost functional necessity for engaging in activities in which there is such a high uncertainty of success and such intense competition.

As for "the pleasure of creating", its place is carefully described in my account of the "psychic gratifications" of work. And did I neglect decisive explanations of behaviour – "intuition, interaction, unconsciousness, ambivalence, contradiction, even stupidity"? But these have to be situated within an explanatory reasoning. The variability of action situations, the tentative nature of work in an uncertain environment, and the possibility of an apprenticeship full of low-routine activities, are all features that make it possible to reconsider the function of making mistakes; to see rumination, or unconscious associations generating new ideas, as phases of invention; and to make visible the psychological mechanisms of overestimation and self-deceptive rationalization, which sustain long-term commitment in an uncertain activity. Artists explore, try things out, change direction, and do a lot of revising of their works, especially in dialogues and negotiations with others (partner, advisor, employer, peer).

And finally, why did I open my book with a study of determinist and non-determinist models of action? It was not in order to write a dissertation on determinism and freedom, it was quite simply to determine how to calibrate in probabilistic terms the chances of acting. It seemed to me to be necessary to show that the reflexivity of the actors, their abilities to learn, the creativity of acting, and the full expression of individual differences in the action, emerge only by a division of the time during which the action takes place into sequences, and not by a deterministic contraction of social causality that essentially deduces the capacities of acting from the initial endowments of the actor.

What is the basic distinction between an analytical sociology of labour like the one I suggest and a comprehensive sociology of art that places the accent on the "uniqueness" of artists and the "problem of recognition"? It is the desire to examine how competition operates in those worlds of labour in which it is difficult to pinpoint the qualities of invention, and which attract a large number of candidates for careers, both by the gratifications of autonomy in the work, and by the esteem given to those who gain attention. Creators go along with an expressive concept of work by letting themselves be guided by motivation for the activity

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<sup>1</sup> Behaviour with Bayesian rationality is equivalent to the following: before making a decision, an individual makes an *a priori* hypothesis on the probability of an event or of a future result of their action. They then receive additional information, or make observations, and this leads them to revise the judgement they had formed *a priori*, and to update their probability estimate.

rather than for the benefits (and by the absolute rather than the relative value of their commitment), but must gradually learn how to react to the information supplied to them by their work being compared to that of others, even though the rules of creative originality normally forbid defining simple standards of comparison. Sticking to the idea of uniqueness risks being paralyzed by the case for incommensurability. The multiplication of comparative tests and of selective allocations of employment and esteem gradually diminish the importance of the random factors in the development of an artistic career, and convert the chances of staying in the profession into opportunities to accumulate formative experiences.

These career trajectories are caught up in a double dynamic: the individualization of professional situations (multiple job-holding is just a way of assembling a portfolio of job connections and of resources suitable for protecting the serious, creative job), coupled with the pooling of certain risks, by financial regimes that insure against the risks of low levels of activity, and by contributions to the financing of projects by the state or by private patrons. This double dynamic is the response to a double question: how to enter into the work in taking one's bearings from the Aristotelian principle of self-fulfilment in activities with long horizons, and how to stay at it, given that success follows the Pareto principle – the distribution of esteem and material rewards gives 80% of the success to 20% of the individuals – and that selective comparison between professionals with comparable reputations is standard practice in project teams. One could add that it would not be difficult to find similarities here to the occupational inequalities in scientific research. That makes it easier to account for the characteristics of artistic work, the fascination with “creativity”, the attributes of working in teams, the spatial concentration of artists, and the characterization and the financing of art as a public good.

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