Book Review

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Pierre-Michel Menger

The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement under Uncertainty

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

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In *The Economics of Creativity*, French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger aims to develop an explanation of the deep inequalities that define contemporary Western artistic labor markets. In this effort he moves away from the literatures on employment and professions and promotes, instead, a temporally sensitive interactionist model, diving deep into economic and sociological perspectives on art careers to argue that the lineage for such a model can be found for the analyst willing to look. In his model, Menger focuses on three variables: the interactive effort of labor; what he calls ‘talent’; and a measure of unpredictability.

Menger is well-known for his studies of artistic labor markets and careers in the arts and as a theorist of creative work, crossing easily between sociological, economic, and philosophical perspectives on value. He draws on nationally comparative labor market statistics, theoretical work on artistic professions, philosophical perspectives on meaningful work, and case studies of Beethoven and Rodin – along with much more – in this big book with big ambitions.

Menger’s central task in the book is the development of a model explaining artistic success in a highly stratified and unequal market, with success defined primarily by high economic returns. In this model, most clearly laid out in a long fourth chapter, intrinsic differences between individuals in quality and ability – most often very small – are used by the art community (art teachers, critics, etc.) to rank individuals through ongoing competitive comparisons. In these trials – a constant feature of art worlds defined by competition – perceived differences between individual artists guide the investments of other actors in the system, and as such these differences matter, whether or not they are entirely observable to the analyst. Because art worlds are social worlds, and because there is far too much art in the world for any one actor to experience, actors rely to a great extent on one another to decide where to place their energies; we look where others are looking, and infer quality from the attention of others. Finally, a process of assortative matching exacerbates inequalities, as the successful collaborate with and are promoted by ever more successful interlocutors. The uncertainty that marks this process – and the tolerance for risk that accompanies the acceptance of such uncertainty – are, for Menger, constitutive elements of the arts field.

Say Alex and Sam enter an art academy at the same time, the only two painters in their cohort. Differences in the quality of their work are not great – indeed, you and I might not agree in our judgments, but during that first year a consensus slowly builds at the school: Alex is the better painter, though Sam is also very good. Alex’s teachers spend a little extra time with her; in her

second year, one invites her to exhibit work together with him, and a curator takes note, later nominating Alex for a prize. The prize exhibition is reviewed in the newspaper, and though the writer doesn't particularly care for her work, the fact of his attention is enough to pique the interest of a gallerist, who later that year signs a contract to represent Alex. Meanwhile, Sam carries on, like most, exhibiting work here and there, maybe selling a painting or two, thinking about a career as an art teacher or graphic designer. She and Alex were paired by chance; had Alex deferred and another painter been her studio mate that first year, things might have turned out differently. But they didn't, and Menger provides an explanation for the wildly divergent careers of these two young painters – and offers some insight into Sam's failures and her reasons for persevering as well as an explanation for Alex's rocket to the top.

With chapters on individualism, the vast 'dark matter' of the art world (while Menger doesn't cite Sholette or use his term, the two authors would no doubt make a great panel), Beethoven's genius, and Rodin's unfinished works, this substantial text never transcends the collected-articles mode of academic writing, with arguments jumping through the text in fits and starts. It is nonetheless by far the best introduction available to the English-speaking world of Menger's formidable synthetic and theoretical chops, and the book should be required reading for researchers interested in creative industries, cultural markets, and artistic professions. The wide-ranging book will also be of interest to those concerned with meaningful work, rationality under conditions of uncertainty, nontraditional and ephemeral work as well as work outside of organizations, inequality and stratification, and the arts generally. These readers farther from the sweet spot of cultural economics will find much of generative value, whether it be the careful consideration of economists' assumptions of the disutility of labor in Chapter 2 or the discussion of Beethoven's control over his environment in Chapter 5. Asides abound on subjects like the opportunity cost of time and the morality of individualistic creative practice, often paired with illuminating footnotes. These readers will, of course, find much to quarrel with as well.

This autumn the film *Being Frank* was released, a lovely if imperfect fable about creativity and markets based loosely on the work of Chris Sievey. I watched it in a small theatre with Menger's book in the bag at my feet. A central tension of the movie concerns the arrival of Jon, a bumbling striver, as replacement keyboardist in Frank's band. Through Jon we watch a battle between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, between love and money play out in a small group of fiercely committed artists. One scene in particular stuck with me as I wrote up these thoughts on Menger's work. In it, Jon sits in a postcoital hot tub with Clara, whose enigmatic and often violent behavior and creative force baffle Jon. She calls him 'a mediocre child', 'an abscess, an absence', tells him she finds him 'disgusting'. Jon responds by changing the subject: 'Was it awful in the mental hospital, Clara?' She recoils, asking, 'How should I know?' and Jon answers simply: 'I assumed you were mentally ill.' After a few beats, Jon's struggle with the group's commitment to their own standards and their ambivalence regarding fame or even acknowledgement bursts forth: 'So why are you so against us finding an audience then if it's not because you're mentally ill?'

I remembered Jon's outburst again and again as Menger's book looked at 'artists' (those who make art) and then 'artists' (those deemed to be professionals by the state) and then 'artists' (those drawing an income from artistic work) and then again at 'artists' (famous geniuses, male and dead all) – none of these groups overlapping particularly well with one another and none purporting to encompass the great variety of those we call 'artists' on the ground. Menger focuses his theoretical attentions on artists working outside of organizations and in nonroutine, independent practices, but the majority of those discussed in the empirical work he cites on artistic labor markets are the everyday journeymen of the creative economy: orchestra musicians, graphic designers, and the like. Menger does not expend much energy on seventh fiddlers, and his model suggests that they are simply stuck in place, failed Beethovens, less interesting versions of the 'real' artists that both his

model oriented to explaining success and his chapters on the greats suggest a real interest in. Given that much of the book claims an interest in artistic careers generally, I expected more attention to mundane arts careers. While the particularities of extant quantitative data are well known to researchers in the arts and make large-scale studies of specific subpopulations of artists difficult – especially the ‘fine’, ‘independent’ artists that are of particular interest in Menger’s theoretical work – the jump between the populations under discussion in the quantitative and qualitative data in this study is sometimes jarring. The effect is occasionally that of a book on physicians’ careers that first lumps doctors together with nurses, social workers, and hospital translators in one chapter, then jumps to a close reading of the writings of Dr. Oz in the next. I was left wanting more specificity and breadth both – a little more time on the ground, in the hospital and the doctor’s office, a better sense of the everyday lives of the majority of fine artists.

The book’s lack of concern for the great mass of artists and, despite drawing extensively on cross-national survey data, the significant lack of other kinds of on-the-ground contemporary empirical data in the work make it less useful for understanding the Claras and Sams of the world than it is for helping the Jons tell a compelling new story to make sense of the successes of artists like Alex. Diverse goals and definitions of success are nowhere to be seen in this text. While Menger rejects economists’ narrow version of rationality, he replaces it simply with a more complex story using uncertainty to recast artists as rational actors – actors, of course, with a shared goal. Menger explains great success and the social construction of ‘genius’ and ‘talent’ with impressive clarity and attention to contingency and interaction, but his is an argument that accounts for structure better than action. It explains great inequalities without telling us much about the daily lives, strategies, economics, goals, or experiences of the vast majority of artists.

Those who attempt to put Menger’s verbal model to quantitative use will no doubt find themselves in intense discussion on the measure and definition of ‘quality’, a discussion Menger dismisses in a long engagement with DeNora’s work on the social construction of genius. Quality is a black box, one that Menger turns over and over but never really attempts to open. It is enough for the purposes of the model he proposes to keep the variable boxed up, and throughout the book he considers and then abandons both economists’ proxy variables like training and sociologists’ arguments about the nonquality variables that influence perceptions of quality, often with a series of thought experiments and counterfactuals. The effect of these engagements with economics, sociology, and even philosophy is in the text too often one of a chess grandmaster wandering through a poetry festival, arguing each author’s point on their behalf in turn before turning away, disappointed. Anyone aiming to put Menger’s model to use will no doubt have to grapple with the definition and measure of ‘quality’, especially if they aim to look at the careers of novice artists not presorted for the analyst. As I put Menger’s book down, genius became worth explaining, again. Very much recommended.