



Pierre-Michel Menger: The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement Under Uncertainty

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Book Review

The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement Under Uncertainty, by Pierre-Michel Menger. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-674-72456-3, \$49.95, 405 pages.

The financial crisis has fueled the production of books claiming that uncertainty has been a major outcome of recent economic and social developments, perpetuating a climate of risk in advanced western societies. Yet, contributions emphasizing the potential of uncertainty to stimulate the emergence of the creative, original, and new are scarce. One exception is the compelling and rigorously researched book, *The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement Under Uncertainty*, by Pierre-Michel Menger. Drawing on sociology, economics, and philosophy, this thought-provoking contribution on artists and their labor markets reveals that uncertainty is a necessity, without which self-realization and creative innovation would not be possible. Menger approaches creative work – and beyond that, action under uncertainty – through the conception of time in order to define the determinants as well as the indeterminate nature of what is original and, by definition, cannot be derived from the past. The argument relies heavily on sociological theories, including Pierre Bourdieu and his notion of habitus (pp. 18-21), Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, and interactionist theories in sociology that – taken together – attempt to restore intentionality to actors (Marxian, Tocquevillian, Mertonian, and Weberian theories) (pp. 24-38). After this thorough sociological analysis, the book provides a symmetrical assessment of the economic actor within the axioms of neoclassical theory. Key to this assessment is a critical movement of economists from an analysis of “general equilibrium,” toward otherness and imperfection, and of historical rather than logical time (pp. 38-71).

Contrary to the economic analysis that attributes the restrictive value of “disutility” to labor and “maximization under constraints” to engagement in employment (p. 72), Menger proposes a positive conception of labor as a “vector of individual accomplishment.” Therefore, careers and profitable ventures become possible through the development of individual techniques for managing uncertainty, and not, as clichés suggest, due to individual genius or the industrial engineering of talent. What determines careers, in the absence of clear career paths, and who judges achievement? Whereas most economists infer that the heterogeneity in professional

success is due to differences in training and individual ability (pp. 75-86), Menger argues that having a successful, middling, or failing career depends on initially minor gaps in intrinsic ability. These minor gaps become reinforced and accumulate over time by and within the networks of elite professionals. The practice of the arts is thus a much more formative process than in the majority of other professions, because careers and achievement are more uncertain (pp. 98-103). Here, Menger goes back to the principles of praxis, by which Aristotle justified the valorization of human labor: the principles of self-realization (which has itself as its own end), individuation, and contingency (which connects creative individualization with risk) (p. 99).

Drawing upon economic and sociological theory, Menger addresses rationality in artistic behavior in chapter 3. He views the absence of certainty in artistic careers and achievement as compensated for by the hope of elevated gains and non-monetary revenues (such as social gratification and attractive working conditions) – or the very “essence of satisfaction” that guides the pursuit of individual artistic activity. At the collective level, he describes uncertainty in the forms of indeterminate competition and labor market disequilibria, in which artistic activity is a form of risk-taking, because success and variation in revenue instantaneously signal the value of ability. The benefits of risk-taking thus depend on the very conditions of the labor market, the way risks are graduated, the way artistic activity can be organized (multi-tasking, discontinuous, or open in its material organization), and the extent to which early bets on talent have to be made. Throughout this chapter, Menger provides a stunningly insightful argument on the value of uncertainty. His main point is that uncertainty is the key to integrating sociological and economic approaches that try to restore actors’ ability to take initiatives and make career choices, even if under “the seduction of uncertainty” underlying the satisfaction obtained from practicing an artistic activity (p. 115).

The final theoretical section, chapter 4, rigorously dismantles social science explanations for varying degrees of success by differences in training, and offers two insightful arguments as potential ways out. The first argument is that the high sensitivity of demand creates a strong concentration of attention on the artists who are deemed most talented by the professional elite (p. 164). Yet, can artistic activity escape the contemporary art market’s speculative whirlwinds and manipulative advertising techniques aimed at inflating the reputations of some new artists? The second argument is that minimal differences in ability between two candidates at the beginning of individual careers accumulate over the course of one’s professional development and become amplified through selection into teams and collaborative networks. Are individuals ranked by their abilities and intrinsic qualities, and do those with similar measurements in the desired qualities occupy similar scores that diverge over time? These and many more questions are discussed further in subsequent chapters, where Menger applies his causal and temporal analysis to the early career of Beethoven and the unfinished artwork of Rodin.

Beethoven’s career and the numerous attempts to define artistic greatness are the main focus of chapter 5. The definitions of artistic greatness presented range from the image of the artist as an incarnation of historical necessity to that of being a

strategist optimizing the organization for his/her artistic activity and mobilizing patrons' investments. However, the reader is invited to question whether individuals are exceptional because of their aptitudes alone or whether the existence of exceptional social forces allows some artists to reach the upper echelons of the artistic career hierarchy and, by doing so, to obtain artistic greatness, whereas others fail. Menger makes an alternative point to these arguments at the end of chapter 5 (p. 279). He suggests that, at a micro-level, early advantages are created due to minimal perceptible differences in qualities that define probabilities of success and decide who wins a competitive trial (pp. 280-281). Based on the schema of dynamic amplification and cumulative advantage, winning competitive trials attracts subsequent investments at the individual level, and generates the emergence of optimal competence profiles for growth through the very formative character of labor situations. Highly consistent with the idea of assortive matching for the artist's activities, Menger assigns a vital role to professional networks, patrons, instrumental patterns, and collaborative relations, through which Beethoven developed his fertile collaborations and loci of mutual learning (e.g., Clement, Rode, Schuppanzigh, and others) (p. 281).

The last section, chapter 6, is dedicated to the role of the unpredictable, as manifested in the trials, errors, and new starts that altogether materialize in the process of invention – and more than anything else, the varieties of the “unfinished.” Rodin's aesthetic audacity highlights these aspects of documentation as reflexive support for a creative activity that is governed by the uncertainty of results. Sketches and outlines provide insight into the creative activity springing forth from his initial stages of labor, whereas in the absence of guidelines regarding perfection, questions arise as to whether the artistic work can ever reach its culmination. Rodin's creative practice vigorously exemplifies how artists use the uncertainty of the creative process as a source of invention and, in the same instance, as a means of increasing their productivity. The result is a fascinating book that conceptualizes the production of artworks at the intersection of labor, talent, and chance, in an irrational world and without a clear formula for evaluation.

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