The originality and power of Pierre-Michel Menger’s work has only become apparent gradually. Like other sociologists of his generation, he had to find his place in a professional universe where the solidity of established reputations and long-entrenched oppositions (primarily that between methodological individualism and deterministic structuralism) made it difficult to see the theoretical originality of an alternative position. This explains, perhaps, the almost obsessive attention Menger has paid to concepts that are rarely mentioned by his colleagues, such as creative labor, self-fulfillment, and self-enrichment through the production of an original work. This attention can be understood as an expression of anxiety about the retributive value of the intellectual work of a philosopher who, in the early 1970s, converted to an empirical discipline. “Is practicing sociology to achieve self-fulfillment rational?” This question may well be the driving force underlying the theoretical project and empirical program that Menger has pursued, as well as the disciplinary form of the question that has guided them: “Is working to achieve self-fulfillment rational?”¹ The initial difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that the general retreat from grand paradigms and the postmodern mood permeating the social sciences were not receptive to overarching theories. There was little space

¹ This is the title of chapter 2 of Pierre-Michel Menger, Le travail créateur: S’accomplir dans l’incertain (Paris: Gallimard/Éd. du Seuil, 2009). An abridged version of this work has been published in English: Menger, The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement under Uncertainty, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
to navigate between the shrewd managers of the symbolic returns generated by the major works of the previous generation and the “anything goes” epistemological anarchism that perfectly suited the social and scholarly profile of sociologists, often inadequately equipped in theoretical terms. The latter obstacle was no doubt key: the dialogue that Menger initiated with economics was striking at a time when history and sociology were developing, albeit in a necessarily uncoordinated way, approaches that were highly critical of the use of quantitative tools in the social sciences.

Menger thus needed a great deal of determination to—putting it simply—resist the age and its temptations, which ranged from the reiteration of a theoretically exhausted structuralism and the distinctly unreflective critical posture that generally accompanied it, to the simplicities of a broad interactionism that was appealingly flexible yet lacking in analytical strength. Well versed in American economics and sociology, Menger began by carving out an intellectual space, which could be described as technical, that depended on the existence of an institutional niche: the French Ministry of Culture’s research department. The robust findings he gathered enabled him to reconstruct a theory of action that was more than a synthesis of previously formulated positions. In his recent inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he emphasized the proximity between the arts and the sciences in his definition of creative work as self-realization. And he has recently begun a project on higher education and research that should allow him to further refine his theoretical edifice. It is too early to reach any conclusions about this broadening of his inquiry, but it is useful to examine the opportunities and limits inherent in the homogenization of historically very differentiated social fields through the unifying concept of innovation. It is this progression that will be analyzed here, followed by an examination of the role that Menger assigns to the history of talent in his theoretical system.

The Musician’s Paradox: Artistic Trajectories and the Dilemmas of Public Action

Menger cut his teeth on a study of composers of contemporary music, which combined the analysis of professions with a justification of public policy. Unlike forms of current music that are driven by market demand in the cultural industries, what is known as “contemporary music” is directly dependent on public funding, which in turn is based on an expectation that aesthetic forms will last over time.

The quality of these forms is taken for granted, even though it is understood that ordinary actors have a difficult time recognizing it. It was less the study’s methodology, which Menger was still figuring out, than the productive intersection between the theory of cultural legitimacy and the analysis of professional trajectories that had an impact. His closeness to French proponents of methodological individualism at this time was mainly superficial: while Menger restored the rights of actors obliged to make decisions in an uncertain world, he never formulated their actions in the strict terms of rational choice theory. The role of uncertainty was much less clearly defined than in his subsequent analyses, but was already recognized through the inscription of artworks in time, insofar as they always lend themselves to (re)discovery, to being forgotten, and to spells in purgatory. His reading of Francis Haskell’s contribution to this question in the field of art history is, from this standpoint, particularly instructive. This approach did not lead Menger to locate an artwork’s value entirely in the space of its reception, like constructivists who believe that an art object’s reputation is no more than the sum of the judgments of taste and institutional guarantees that it accumulates at various historical moments. The critical fate of works of art thus primarily becomes a way of considering their uncertain trajectory through time—what Menger called “the eternal uncertainty of history’s judgment.” This results not in relativism, but precisely in a definition of artistic activity as a wager on recognition and duration.

Cursory readings of Menger’s work that see it as a kind of synthesis of Raymond Boudon’s approach and the sociology of culture should be challenged. It must be recalled, once and for all, that the empirical sociology Menger elaborates in his major studies is simply the extension of the rich body of research that resulted from the productive contact between the interrogations of a still-developing cultural bureaucracy and the thirst for knowledge of young sociologists who lionized cultural objects, largely neglected by their predecessors in favor of questions relating to labor, industrial society, and the transformation of rural society. At the instigation of Augustin Girard, who from 1963 founded and directed a study and forecasting committee (later a department) at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, a close relationship was established from the early 1960s between the underlying justifications of public policy—that is, the imperative of equal access to culture, understood as a universal and thus sharable heritage—and sociology’s primary interrogative framework—namely, the measurement of inequalities in access to cultural goods and the analysis of their social and symbolic functions.

This intersection between knowledge and power clearly marked Menger’s first works, in which he reexamined several points of tension in a new light. The analytical framework within which he chose to examine contemporary music brought together two kinds of preoccupation. The first was one that Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron had developed from Max Weber’s work, by applying the concept of legitimacy to cultural objects as a whole. In the musical realm, these objects do not all have the same degree of legitimacy, and their distribution within social space affects some of their properties. This is notably the case with scholarly music, which represents a maximal degree of legitimacy in its association of highly skilled composers, the high level of their artistic ambitions, and institutional commitment to them. The second preoccupation was the construction of a set of empirical materials relating to “the life of an artist,” with the aim of extracting this “life” from the ensemble of myths that have defined it. Some commentators have seen Menger’s first study as a form of “positivism.” The term is imprecise: its goal was to acquire greater empirical knowledge about the art world, based on the study of artist populations. The young sociologist was thus building on the example of Raymonde Moulin and her colleagues in their study of architects, a groundbreaking work on the sociology of professions that can be related to her later research on the social morphology of artist populations. The accumulation of data was a necessary condition for a study of this kind to produce intelligible results.

Yet while it is affiliated with these two traditions, Menger’s work is more than just an extension of them. It rearticulates, in a productive way, the problems of legitimacy and professionalism from a public policy standpoint: How can one rationally justify public support for aesthetic forms that have no audience? What effects does public policy have on the social definition of a hierarchy of objects and their audiences? Well before political scientists began to examine cultural policies and their evaluation, Menger had clearly presented the dilemmas public institutions face when, rather than following the arbitrary will of rulers or the preferences of patrons, they try to satisfy the demand for transparency and rationalization. The pioneering nature of Menger’s vision is, in this respect, rarely emphasized. Indeed, one of the great merits of *Le paradoxe du musicien* is that it makes it possible to consider simultaneously the worlds of art—understood as chains of interaction—and government action—considered as the means for correcting, regulating, and (up to a point) creating markets.

The book also offers, in the long wake of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s essay on tonal music, an important insight into what one might call the tonal habitus. Menger

demonstrates both its historically situated character and its extraordinary significance, which is comparable to the role of narrative in literature and film. Noting the massive disconnect between avant-garde musical production and the public’s exclusive preference for tonal music, he formulates an analysis of the contradiction between the increasing autonomy of artistic gestures in relation to external demands of any kind and the democratic imperative of a sovereign public.

While Menger did not follow every path that his work opened up, and while he did not really move in the direction of audience analysis—to which he later devoted several ancillary works—his first book displaced the established way of asking questions in the sociology of culture. Drawing on French sociology’s rich achievements in the realm of cultural practices, exemplified in the early studies produced by the Ministry of Culture or by the work of Bourdieu and his team, Menger refocused the inquiry based on the point of maximal tension between the production and the reception of artworks. From there, he was able to refine his methodology and to establish the protocols of his inquiry on a more clearly defined theoretical basis.

The Genesis of a Theoretical Ambition

In addition to recalling the particular institutional and disciplinary context in which Menger developed his work, it must also be emphasized how, quite precociously, he reconfigured the dominant problematiques in the French sociology of culture. Like other prospective sociologists of his generation, Menger was confronted early on with Bourdieu’s imperium, and, like them, he saw its intellectual seductiveness as well as its limitations, both mental and psychological. Unlike his fellow students, however, he immediately refused to proclaim his allegiance, and, in contrast to his mentors—Moulin and Passeron among them—he never embraced the idea that relatively autonomous theoretical positions could exist alongside or in counterpoint to the exclusive position that was Bourdieu’s general sociology. This stance is evident in the broad orientations of his doctoral thesis, which he defended a year after the publication of Bourdieu’s Distinction, at a time when references to its author were becoming hegemonic. A perfect illustration of Menger’s position can also be found in the first chapter of Le travail créateur, in which he offers a biting critique of the contradictions in the theory of habitus and of the inherently oxymoronic character of the concept of “unconscious strategy.”

In this very rich text, Menger departs from his customary practice of using survey reports to build his arguments, in order to clarify the conceptual framework informing his analyses. Contrary to what researchers inspired by Boudon

proposed in the late 1960s, the point is not to turn sociology into a mere apprentice of economics—something that sociologists have, incidentally, never really attempted—but rather to become deeply familiar with how economists think so as to find out what the social sciences can learn from them. This is an important point: Menger has endeavored to penetrate the conceptual heart of economics not to transpose it directly onto the study of social objects, but so as to reconstruct sociology’s own tools. There is nothing servile about this approach: if Menger seeks to reap the fruits of his extended exploration of economics, a discipline endowed with far more scientific and political legitimacy than his own (he is, in this sense, a perfect rational actor in his professional universe), he never proposes an adapted version of it. The level of formalization he uses remains entirely accessible to sociologists and historians. He has never sought to propose a sociology with an economist core, and his work remains steeped in the traditional disciplines of the humanities, which are often painfully absent from economics. The rapprochement he advocates results neither in an exact replica, nor in fusion. Rather, the goal is a comparison with the kinds of reasoning and analytical frameworks used in an adjacent discipline, in order to strengthen sociology’s capacities without losing sight of the social sciences’ foundational goals.

Menger, one might say, preserves the tension between the competing approaches to social objects that have historically shaped these disciplines, with their multiple points of intersection and the gaps that remain when knowledge is divided up in this way. His work never suggests the desire to found a new paradigm charged with encompassing all possible knowledge in a unified science that is always promised but never realized. Some have seen this as a lack of ambition: surely the whole game of sociology consists in inventing one’s own vocabulary and making it one’s personal signature? The semantic luxuriance of the discipline’s major texts in this regard seems symptomatic of a serious illness of youth: it is a way of mimicking the attitude of great philosophers whose concepts, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once observed, “are [born] and remain signed.”¹⁴ Menger has understood this, and prefers to resort to concepts that are undeniably more anonymous, as they are drawn from both sociology and economics, but which open the possibility of cumulative knowledge and translation between disciplines. Menger’s lexical sobriety is, in my view, undeniable evidence of his maturity as a scholar. That it is held against him as proof of his lack of creativity should rather be seen as a shortcoming of a discipline that contents itself with mere words. In this respect, his regular interaction with economists has been a major advantage.

Menger’s constant reference to economics has often masked his proximity to an eminently French tradition, extending from Émile Durkheim to Bourdieu by way of Lévi-Strauss, that, even as it brazenly declares its independence from literary tradition, nevertheless cultivates an affectionate closeness to the humanities. As fascinated as he is by the reasoning of economists, Menger has never borrowed their style or their equations. Many of the questions that animate his writings derive from

philosophy, particularly when it comes to the central concept of labor. He began by studying German philosophy, in particular the philosophy of art, and he constructed the protocols of his first surveys on the basis of classic questions pertaining to the value of art, the status of artworks, and their (often unexpected) historical fate. If canonical questions of non finito in art have so deeply preoccupied him, as evidenced in the chapter dedicated to Auguste Rodin in Le travail créateur, it is because they raise in an almost experimental way the question of the adequation between an aesthetic ambition and a communicable and transmissible product. Drawing on the work of Leo Steinberg and Antoinette Le Normand-Romain in particular, Menger shows the extent to which “the unfinished artwork offers privileged access to the very dimension of labor that the artistic act conceals.” Unlike the art historians who provide the material for his argument, he does not dwell on the historical circumstances in which Rodin developed his experimental practice. Nor is he concerned with the sculptor’s position in the artistic space of his time: an approach emphasizing creative labor makes it possible to circumvent the historical dimension of cultural production and the space of possibilities in which it operates. Paradoxically, art historians are more interested than Menger in the social conditions shaping the production of artworks. To explain the regime that governs the existence of such works, Menger has instead opted to turn to semiology, philosophy, and even psychoanalysis. He looks to the poetics scholar Gérard Genette, the logician Nelson Goodman, and the psychoanalyst André Green to explain the “superabundance of versions (varying in their degree of difference) derived from the same artwork”: replicas, reworkings for commercial, comparative, or evaluative purposes, thematic variants, alterations, and obsessional recurrences of the same motif.

Menger thus provides a precise description of the process of permanent reworking that characterizes Rodin’s undertaking and distinguishes it from the work of his contemporaries. The sociologist concentrates on the various stages of a work’s development, and as a result pays less attention to the concrete aspects of the experimental practice that allowed the artist to break with the dominant forms of representation in sculpture, even as he heeded the requests of his clients and remained attached to the commercial success that allowed him to continue his explorations independently. The constitutive ambivalence of the sculptor’s work blurs the dividing line between commercial production and the avant-garde that has been institutionalized by common sense but also by sociology. Rodin is typically described as the last classical and the first modern sculptor. This ambiguity reflects the permanent vacillation of his position, which, one might say, triggered a symbolic revolution in the sense that Bourdieu gives to the term in his work on Édouard Manet, even as Rodin continued to produce work for a market

16. Menger, Le travail créateur, 458; The Economics of Creativity, 294.
17. Ibid., 451; trans., 288.
based on the satisfaction of a clientele that was usually attentive to the “finished” character of production. Re-historicization is a necessary condition for analyzing the effectiveness of his practice. As Sophie Biass-Fabiani observes:

*The observation of all the preparatory effort that made the artwork possible reveals complex forms of experimentation, which enable us to reevaluate the degree of innovation in his work. Rodin relentlessly pursued his exploration of the human body by constantly experimenting. … In the space of his studio, he built a repertoire and continuously rearranged its elements. It was on the basis of this repertoire of forms that Rodin proposed a genuine art of combination (*ars combinatoria*): the repertoire’s units were detached from their original context, thus entering into a state of tension with other forms, in a way that deepened, in often unexpected ways, the sculptor’s quest.*

In this respect, the fact that a sculpture only shows a part of the body, such as a torso or hands that have become autonomous, has less to do with questions of incompleteness than with a logic of experimentation that can incorporate chance and unintended elements, as evidenced in the importance Rodin gave to destroyed plasters and the various elements he called his “*abbatis*” or “spare parts.” Focusing closely on the sculptor’s practice in this way has deflationary effects: the key to the “labor” of which Menger speaks is located less on the ontological-aesthetic level, where the existence of a fragment or an incompleteness might find its ultimate meaning, than on the pragmatic level. Menger himself emphasizes the processual turn taken by Rodin’s practice as he multiplied his experiments and as he distanced himself from the constraints of commissions in order to impose his own repertory of forms. Rodin’s incomplete work cannot be considered within the ahistorical logic of the *non finito*, which would lump together artists from Michelangelo to Pablo Picasso, as sociologists who essentialize incompleteness are prone to do. The rapport with fragments and pieces must be analyzed in relation to the historical moment in which the artistic gesture was produced and according to the logic of production of the artist, whose sculptures must never be considered in isolation, but rather as part of a continuum that includes his drawings and other sketches. Menger, who has a perfect understanding of Rodin’s work, never loses sight of what a sociology of artwork should be, and returns to it at the very end of the chapter’s conclusion:

*But what a sociology of the artwork must propose (other than an aesthetic ontology, however deconstructive) is exactly the analysis of a completely deployed space of games, in the precise sense offered by game theory, in which the production, definition, evaluation, and commercialization of artworks, in their various possible states of uniqueness and multiplicity, of*

being finished or unfinished, of being “produced” versus being “reproduced” (repetition, transposition, reuse, and so on) are the subject of a remarkably open ensemble of procedures of experimentation and negotiation.  

Two remarks are in order here. One of the notable consequences of Rodin’s work (which, considered from the perspective of practice, often resembles labor that seems only minimally creative) is the way that it challenges the oppositions listed in the last quote. The question can never be reduced to the binary logic deployed by the “versus” in cataloging the artwork’s forms of ontological inscription, but henceforth envisages multiplicity in unity and the productive dimension of reproduction. No sociologist could disagree with Menger’s conclusions about Rodin; but it is fair to ask why he did not begin by describing the procedures of experimentation and negotiation with which his magisterial demonstration culminates. Did he succumb—as his subject might dispose him—to the allure of artistic virtuosity? Did he want to dazzle his reader? This would not be difficult to understand. Is art history destined to be an auxiliary field that does nothing more than supply facts? Has Menger been affected by the imposing logic of disciplinary hierarchy, preferring to cite Goodman and Genette over his own colleagues? Does sociological work bear the stigmata of a tripalium that remains unemancipated from the trivialities of practice? Is speaking of artistic work in general a necessary condition for producing a theoretical construction? It is too early to answer these questions. Nonetheless, his chapter on Rodin, which could be considered marginal to Menger’s oeuvre, offers a high concentration of the points of tension found within his theory.

Acting against an Uncertain Horizon

If Menger proposes no “general sociology,” it is because, as a reader of Weber, he knows that such an endeavor is impossible when dealing with historical objects, or even with temporal objects that can be grasped as sequences of events or processes. The heart of his theoretical reflection lies in a problematique of temporality, as is clear in the first chapter of Le travail créateur, which can be read as a manifesto of sorts. As is his habit, Menger approaches action theory through a critical evaluation of propositions current in economics and sociology. What is interesting here is not the opposition between the two disciplines, in the sense that each can be distinguished by the anthropological nucleus around which it revolves (the rational action of individuals versus the force of collective constraints, domination, and relationships based on power and exploitation) or by the privilege it gives to one class of objects over others (logical action versus non-logical action, in the terms of Vilfredo Pareto). In fact, the opposition between distinct models of action traverses both disciplines, and these models can be distinguished through their relationship to time. This argument is not entirely new, but the angle from which Menger approaches it casts the question in an original light.

20. Menger, Le travail créateur, 482; The Economics of Creativity, 310.
While the two disciplines cannot be compared on a one-to-one basis, especially when it comes to their degree of paradigmatic homogeneity or their respective propensity to decontextualization, they can nevertheless be jointly analyzed in terms of the different ways they grapple with the relationship between temporality and action. What underpins this manifesto is the drive to show that a fine-grained analysis of models of action can offer “a link between sociology and economics rather than a line of separation.”\(^{21}\) This observation reveals an epistemological convergence that, without rendering the disciplines indistinguishable, challenges Passeron’s theory that anthropology, history, and sociology are unified by a shared attention to the temporal specificity of their objects of study, in contrast to other ways of knowing the social, such as economics and linguistics, which have managed to deindex their objects from the historical course of the world and develop completely decontextualized problematices.\(^{22}\) In this way, Menger renounces the advantages of what he calls the “spectacular” opposition between economics and sociology to find, beyond the disciplinary rhetoric, analytical frameworks for understanding actor or agent behavior that differ only slightly. The diversity of models of action relates to a central question, which Menger formulates in these terms: “What type of dependence exists among the states, behaviors, and initiatives of successive moments in the actor’s existence?”\(^{23}\)

Deterministic theories in sociology can be understood through a kind of “primacy of the past”: one has only to attribute to an actor a past (consisting of sedimented learning, habits, internalized constraints, and systems of norms), and then to find it, in identical form, in action situations. The first formulation of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, before the introduction of the “cleft habitus,”\(^{24}\) perfectly illustrates the way the force of the past acts upon the present. Menger offers a brilliant analysis of the pros and cons of this type of model, which presupposes a stabilization of internalized constraints: time is condensed at the system’s origin, and is sedimented within it through the naturalization of values and norms. In this model’s purest manifestations, such as Talcott Parsons’s functionalist action system,\(^ {25}\) the system’s future state is entirely contained in its present condition. In more complex versions, such as Bourdieu’s phenomenologized determinism, there is room for historical change, but this can express itself only as a structural lag or as a hysteresis of the habitus, which never challenges the omnipotence of the past that is characteristic of the deterministic model.

By associating Bourdieu with Parsons, Menger takes a bold step, as their connection is largely counter-intuitive. Yet he tends to lose sight of what differentiates them, which results from the former’s unrealized attempt to account for the irruption of history. In its canonical form, habitus is merely history transformed

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21. Ibid., 33; trans., 15.
23. Menger, Le travail créateur, 35; The Economics of Creativity, 16.
into nature: yesterday’s person speaks within us, yet we fail to realize that yesterday happened, as habitus operates in the present and, with apparent spontaneity, makes possible an indefinite array of tasks. The structure itself is thus an immense historical warehouse. Even so, and in contrast to Parsons’s homeostatic and consensual model, this system does not ensure an adjustment between the individual and the structure. As for the adjustment between mental structures and social structures—a major theme of Bourdieu’s work—it implies neither adequation, nor superposition, nor homeostasis, despite the fact that these traits belong to the system’s organic forms. Between the mental and social realms, a lag or wrinkle is always possible, but it is never the outcome of the distinctive dynamic of an event or the emergence of new possibilities. It is nothing more than the effect of the internalized past’s failure to adjust to new objective conditions.\(^\text{26}\) The analytical framework Menger proposes makes it possible to assimilate theories that are in obvious disagreement when it comes to the respective place assigned to consensus and conflict. The fact that Parsons gives disproportionate weight to consensus and that Bourdieu adheres to a thoroughly agonistic vision of society has no impact on the homology between their representations of the relationship between present action and the sedimented past.

To these deterministic models, which are largely formulated in terms of a problematique of socialization and the enduring internalization of norms or dispositions, Menger contrasts interactionist theories. In these theories, the distinctive competencies of actors are restored through a recognition of their intentionality; socialization is no longer seen as an ensemble of conditionings, but as the result of a process of adaptation to constantly changing situations. Consequently, primary socialization no longer plays a central role and experience becomes a permanent source of cognitive reconfiguration. The structural homology between dispositions and positions, which is the foundation of the deterministic approach, gives way to the formative dynamic of interaction, through which actors direct and inflect their positions in response to the actions of others. Coordination between actors, which expresses itself in deterministic sociologies through the language of preestablished harmony, becomes problematic in interactionism—hence the importance accorded to misunderstandings, errors of interpretation, and above all negotiation: the outcome of a game is never fixed in advance, and uncertainty, even if it is very limited in routine situations, is inherent in interaction due to the strategic interdependence that defines it.

The first consequence of this reorientation of the logic of action is the increased complexity of social causality, which determinism simplified by unequivocally equating it to the active power of the past: the interpretations and anticipations that characterize the interplay of interaction presuppose the existence of feedback loops and overlapping motivations. The second consequence is the emergence of a generalized reflexivity, which contrasts with the prereflexive universe of deterministic sociology: it is no longer necessary to postulate false consciousness or even an unconscious. The introduction of temporality into action leads to

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a third consequence: it implies a distance in relation to oneself or, more precisely, “role distance,” to borrow the concept developed by Erving Goffman, which calls into question the functional distribution of social roles that deterministic sociologists posit as a prerequisite for their explanatory systems. The multiplicity of “selves” stems from the crisis of the concept of role: it is not the expression of, as Bernard Lahire believes, a “dusty haze of identities, roles, behaviours, actions and reactions, with no kind of connection among them,” but, to the contrary, reflects the constraints of strategic interdependence, the effects of which individuals can partially mitigate by taking some distance from their roles—a strategy that Goffman compares to juggling.

Menger’s analysis is particularly solid. It in no way consists in a scholastic presentation of a system of canonical oppositions such as “freedom versus determinism.” An attentive reading of Bourdieu’s theory allows him to pull apart its contradictions: the author of The Logic of Practice systematically refuses the label of “determinist,” even as he declares amor fati to be the dominant regime of social life. With great originality, Menger shows that the social sciences use phenomenology in two ways. The first, employed by Bourdieu, is in fact perfectly compatible with a deterministic model, to the extent that the prereflexive dimension accorded to action through abstract references to Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and especially a partial borrowing of their vocabulary, does not call into question the preeminence of a stationary time within which complex temporal processes cannot unfold. The second, which one finds in the work of interactionists and ethnomethodologists, often by way of Alfred Schütz, draws on consciousness’s non-identity with itself and the present’s non-presence to itself to propose an analytical model that recognizes the existence of multiple temporalities. Differences between individuals develop over time: learning becomes more important than conditioning, and primary socialization ceases to be the sole way in which individuals are constructed, becoming simply one of its modalities. Contrary to common opinion—comforted by the epistemological claims of dispositional sociologies, which see positions as the univocal effect of dispositions—interactionism is not confined to virtuosic descriptions of infinitely small and fleeting occurrences, the very short time-scale of simple verbal exchanges. Goffman’s Asylums in fact provides one of the best examples of the constraints that organizations and institutions impose on individuals. Both Goffman and

Harold Garfinkel emphasized their affinity with Durkheim—not at the level of social determinism, but at that of the “total institution” for the former, and of the “eternal society” for the latter.

By taking interactionist theory seriously, Menger liberates it from the condescending gaze with which, in France, it is often regarded. He shows that, contrary to its conventional portrayal as a kind of radical empiricism seen “from below” and condemned to explain only the minutiae of social life, rather like an instantaneous and ephemeral snapshot of the world, interactionism is characterized by a complex conception of temporality. This enables its proponents to consider the historicity of the social more fully than do advocates of determinism, for whom the stationary time of reproduction fully suffices. The rejection of determinism never means the rejection of social determination: the aim is to take into account the element of uncertainty that pervades even the most ordinary social interaction and to recognize, through the complexity of temporal trajectories, the difficulty of postulating behavior as absolutely predictable. On this point, it is not hard to understand that Menger views the interactionist model more favorably than the deterministic one. One could even reproach him for replacing the structuralism/interactionism binary—or structural functionalism/interactionism, if one prefers—with that of determinism/interactionism. Determinism is a philosophical stance toward the world rather than an analytical model for understanding action; as we have seen, those who are labeled determinists—notably Bourdieu—frequently object to this designation. This observation in no way challenges the quality of Menger’s comparative analysis, but it does allow for a more charitable assessment of structuralist sociology.

If we follow this line of questioning further, we see that even if the aforementioned determinists emphasize a stationary and thus historically amorphous conception of time, they are regularly confronted with the specific constraints of their objects of study, understood as historical objects: Bourdieu’s not entirely successful attempts to understand historical change and events such as those of May 1968 have already been invoked.32 While Parsons was largely uninterested in this question, this was not true of Durkheim, who thanks to The Evolution of Educational Thought can be considered, alongside Weber, as the founder of a method of historical sociology.33 For Durkheim, two kinds of relationships between education and society can be distinguished depending on the conception of normality, and the causes of a pathological situation are to be sought in the “desynchronization” of these two socializing forces. This divergence is generally due to effects brought on by the inertia of pedagogical forms that tend to survive their historical conditions of production, triggering their own temporality and acquiring an autonomy in relation to the present. The relative autonomy of

the educational and school system, a characteristic of Western education over the
very longue durée and the first condition of its development and capacity for cultural
innovation, is thus marked by an ambivalence. On the one hand, it is necessary
for the establishment of a full-fledged pedagogical space that is not subject to the
injunctions of power and within which genuine “sites of knowledge” can develop;
on the other hand, it creates two separate temporalities, that of the school and that
of society.34 In the Durkheimian way of thinking about history, it is very difficult
to distinguish the social pathologies manifested by an abundance of particularized
social spaces and temporalities from cultural and scientific innovation.

In his preface to The Evolution of Educational Thought, published in 1938,
Maurice Halbwachs made the case that reading Durkheim’s lectures on the history
of education would show a dimension of his thought that caricatural simplifications
of it had largely masked. In these lectures, the sociologist and the historian came
together, reconnecting with his early interest in Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges
and his reading of Alcuin in the original Latin. The project was to show how peda-
gogical problems “arose in the course of events under the pressure of circum-
stances and the social environment.”35 The edition of the lectures that Halbwachs
introduced had the explicit goal of resisting two prevailing views of Durkheim’s
oeuvre: that Durkheimian sociology was doctrinaire and abstract, and that it was
characterized by an esprit de système—a system-building mindset. While Halbwachs
approached the question from the standpoint of inertia—some elements of which
can be found in the concept of hysteresis later developed by Bourdieu—this does
not mean that reference to the existence of multiple temporalities in the social
world offers a plausible alternative to the model of stationary time that lies at the
heart of every deterministic sociology. Even so, the fact remains that this reference
does, at least partially, call the model into question.

The call for a greater proximity between economics and sociology in the inter-
est of analyzing actors’ relationship to time does not lead Menger to propose an
integrated analysis of their “ways of doing.” Instead, he offers a “symmetrical”36
presentation, since the language each discipline uses to describe the world and the
traditions that have shaped them preclude any common enterprise, as do the glar-
ing differences in their degree of paradigmatic integration. In practice, the ques-
tion of the effective dimension of this symmetry is unavoidable. Menger begins
by offering a synthesis of neoclassical economic theory, on the grounds that it is
widely accepted. The fact that it has an axiomatic character is enough to radically
distinguish it from the sociological theories to which it is juxtaposed in the demon-
stration. The disciplines are further differentiated by a second factor, namely that
economic theory is founded on agent intentionality, which is characteristic of the
interactionist sociologies that reject deterministic models. The decontextualization

34. Jean-Louis Fabiani, “Par la porte étroite de la pédagogie. Durkheim ou de
35. Maurice Halbwachs, “Introduction to the French Edition,” in Durkheim, The Evolu-
tion of Educational Thought, xiii.
36. Menger, Le travail créateur, 64; The Economics of Creativity, 38.
upon which neoclassical theory’s ability to model is founded could provide a point of comparison with general sociologies, insofar as the latter also dispense with—albeit at the price of illusory conclusions—the imperative of gathering information from the real world.

Menger quickly abandons the principle of symmetry laid out at the beginning of his analysis. His examination of neoclassical economics mainly focuses on listing the differences between the two disciplines: “At a more general level, economics and sociology are sharply distinguished from each other by the way that they classify components as either endogenous or exogenous.”37 Advocates of general equilibrium economics have effectively dispensed with a wide array of variables that are commonplace in sociological studies (such as the initial attributes of agents and, beyond that, the heterogeneity of behaviors). Economics is founded on a kind of felicitous reductionism. The resulting axioms link uncertainty to exogenous factors and make it possible to set aside not only interaction—and the fundamentally undecidable character of its outcome—but also action in its own right. Following Gilles-Gaston Granger, Menger shows how, in the neoclassical model, calculation completely replaces action. As Granger observes:

*Economic actors are reduced here to passive elements in a force field whose unity derives from the highly familiar hypotheses defining the perfect competition market: perfect fluidity, complete and immediate information, free market entry, etc.*

The passivity of these elements in the field of forces allows Menger to reestablish some of the symmetry of his analysis. Contrary to the seemingly intuitive opposition between neoclassical economics and conflict sociology (which takes general disequilibrium as its analytical mantra), Granger’s demonstration that the theory of general equilibrium presupposes the existence of passive elements in a field of forces allows him to construct a suggestive rapprochement between the production logics of deterministic sociologies and those of neoclassical economics, whose similarity he underscores. If Menger’s radical critics generally neglect this crucial point in his theory, it is because the association he posits between neoclassical economics (which his opponents condemn almost reflexively) and sociological determinism (which constantly informs their critique of the uncertain world that Menger proposes) is logical, rather than ideological.

We can now turn to the conception of time found in neoclassical economic theory. This model requires instantaneous temporality, for duration is a significant obstacle to the perfect fluidity it requires. Logical time thus stands opposed to historical time. The requirement of simultaneity rules out any sequential approach to action and the attribution of any complexity to agents. Characterizing all the reductions that neoclassical theory demands, Menger clearly shows that “logic precludes taking into account time, the individual, and the uncertainties

37. Ibid., 66; trans., 40.
attaching to the historical course of the world with all its interactions.” Though the vocabulary used is not the same (deterministic sociologies speak of circular time, neoclassical economics of logical time), the question of temporality is treated in a homologous way in both cases, making it possible to return to a kind of symmetry. The major difference remains, however, their attitude to modeling, since general sociology uses models only metaphorically.

Menger, it should be noted, undermines the principle of symmetry he proclaims in a second way. In the field of economics, there is no form comparable to interactionism: while several economists have recently sought to reintroduce a kind of historical time into modeling, this trend has resulted in no general theory. Though Menger is perfectly aware of this difference, which results from economics’ higher degree of paradigmatic integration, he does not take it up as a theme. He nevertheless shows that the greater the attention accorded by the discipline to the effects of memory, anticipation, and learning found in sequential economies, the less one is required to accept the logical constraints that characterize the general equilibrium model. Even so, readers of Menger who are not economists, and are thus necessarily less well informed than he is, will wonder why the various advances within economic theory have not resulted in a paradigm change. The reason is that economic theory can still be spoken of in the singular, even though Menger’s analysis shows the extent to which the generalized use of game theory (and particularly that of repeated games) challenges the assumptions of general equilibrium theory. One senses here what a dose of the sociology of academic disciplines might have contributed to his analysis. There is undeniably a family resemblance between interactionist sociology (as well as processual sociology, which Menger mentions less frequently), and recent advances in economics.

Menger’s honesty leads him, however, to go no further than highlighting these similarities. The fusion of the disciplines remains unimaginable, particularly since sociological interactionism has consistently proved resistant to any form of quantification and thus to modeling. The parallel examination of the two disciplines precludes the possibility of conceiving a general system. Menger is perfectly aware of this, and does not seek to settle the question through rhetoric or will. The dense final pages of Le travail créateur’s first chapter, which owe much to Granger, are nevertheless remarkable in their rearrangement of the generally accepted relationships between the two disciplines, relations founded on the opposition, first conceptualized by Pareto, between homogeneity and heterogeneity and between logical and non-logical action. While no convergence is conceivable in the short term—in particular given the two disciplines’ modes of social existence and historical trajectories, apparent in the hierarchy of their objects of study and the agents who deal with them—economists are now finding ways to take into account the

40. See, for example, Bernard Walliser, Anticipations, équilibres et rationalité économique (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1985).
imperfections of the world’s historical course: its asymmetries, its cacophony of communication, and the high degree of interdependence between individuals. In other words, economics is trying to update the logic of what Pareto called non-logical actions, which seem non-logical only when we lack the ability to analyze them in all their complexity. It is from this perspective that one must reconsider the comparison between economics and sociology made in *Le travail créateur*, which remains Menger’s most theoretically ambitious work to date. In taking into account the “thickness” of agents and their engagement with complex systems of interaction premised on reflexivity and permanent readjustment, economists have shown how strategic interaction could be placed at the heart of analysis and become its principal site of theoretical and methodological innovation. Without minimizing the objective differences between social and economic science, an attentive reading of the work of economists should provide sociologists with an opportunity to reconsider their own project:

In connection with at least one of the issues involved in renewing sociological theory—how to qualify individual differences—the movement under way in that discipline is not fundamentally different from the one just observed in economics. The question is how to qualify those differences in a way that will allow for analyzing interindividual adjustments dynamically—since the analytic space is that of conflict as well as negotiation and agreement construction—without actors’ being weighed down from the outset by the deterministic model, and without situations being purged of elements of uncertainty, since uncertainty is what simultaneously gives substance to the acting other and to the course of action.  

Indeed, even if Menger does not mention it, one dissymmetry between economics and sociology remains: while strategic interaction is clearly a site of innovation in economics, interactionism has long been a devalued subfield of sociology. In France, for example, Bourdieu frequently categorized its representatives as virtuosos of the miniscule, despite the many other theoretical contributions they had to offer. The program outlined by Menger in the first chapter of *Le travail créateur* should be welcomed by the majority of sociologists. It is difficult to see an alternative, unless one maintains—as is increasingly the case, and not always in the most disreputable places—that the age of sociology as a science is behind us, and that the discipline should devote itself to supporting social movements. I make no predictions on this matter: there is great uncertainty concerning the future of our scientific configurations even if, since the end of the Second World War, a genuine policy of public support for research has developed, tending to reorient and recharacterize disciplinary space according to a development agenda in which the idea of post-disciplinarity has played an increasingly prominent role (though more at the level of

42. Menger, *Le travail créateur*, 99–100; The Economics of Creativity, 71.
bureaucratic injunctions than actual practices). A review article is not the place to pursue this question further, but it is imperative to mention its importance for future discussions. Despite the care with which he compares sociology and economics, Menger does not envision the expansion of the debate to include a historical analysis of the way scientific knowledge is configured. Yet the division between the sociological paradigms of structuralism and interactionism is largely inherent to the particular conditions in which American sociology developed, and can only be understood in relation to an analysis of the academic sphere and interdisciplinary competition.

From the Social Agent to the Artist and the Scholar

As has been observed, Menger established his theoretical foundations through a study of the interindividual and interparadigmatic differences between two concurrent disciplines. The key issue was essentially that of social agents in their environment, these two elements having been defined in varying and often antagonistic ways. The particularities of the artist were not invoked to support the reconstruction of a processual analytical model that the author called for. This raises the question of whether the particular status of artistic milieus in the division of labor should lead one to consider the regime of artistic activity as distinct, or if action against an uncertain horizon is the common regime of all forms of work. On this point, not everything is clear. To define what has remained his primary object of study—creative labor of an artistic character—Menger insists on its exceptional status: the examination of artistic activities brings to light “considerable deformations in relation to what is observed on average in the world of work.” Indeed, this contrast-based approach is the most powerful force driving the analysis. At the international level, a number of common phenomena can be observed: artistic professions attract ever-increasing numbers of candidates even though they offer high levels of unemployment and low average earnings. Professional activities tied to art thus differ considerably from other forms of labor. If, however, one considers the transformation of work underway in today’s capitalism, artistic activity is becoming a paradigmatic form of labor. In Portrait de l’artiste en travailleur, Menger starts from the hypothesis that “not only is activity tied to artistic creation not or no longer the reverse of labor, but it is, to the contrary, increasingly invoked as the most advanced expression of the new modes of production and employment relations engendered by recent transformations in capitalism.” Indeed, flexibility, mobility, self-instruction, and an

45. Menger, Le travail créateur, 7.
ongoing process of learning through work have become the dominant ideological language of the new spirit of capitalism, as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello demonstrated back in 1999.  

Menger—and this point must be emphasized to counter his numerous detractors on the left—has not been taken in by the mirage of creative work. Despite the prudence with which he typically intervenes on social issues, the conclusion of *Portrait de l’artiste en travailleur* (a book which is subtitled “Metamorphoses of Capitalism”) leaves no doubt: the transformations of capitalism mean a greater risk of inequality and exposure to the whims of the market, primarily due to the individualization of trajectories and careers. It is not a given that security mechanisms against the new forms of uncertainty tied to flexibility can compensate for the unequivocal risks threatening professional categories that have a so-called “status” and whose protection has depended on branch agreements and collective bargaining. The creative economy generates its own share of what David Graeber calls “bullshit jobs,” and does not guarantee full recognition of agents’ skills and qualifications. The new economy is far from the locus of self-realization touted by the ideologies of cognitive capitalism. It is, moreover, precisely around this issue that new forms of radical critique have emerged, presenting the “cognitariat” and the “intellectual precariat” as a new political avant-garde. One of the best-known representatives of the Italian radical left, Maurizio Lazzarato, targets Menger directly, accusing him of failing to account for the proletarianization of artistic and intellectual activities currently taking place. In return, however, Lazzarato does not offer a convincing explanation of the transformations underway, apart from an abstract reference to dispossession:

> Pierre-Michel Menger celebrates the freedom, autonomy, and singularity of creative work at precisely the moment they are being attacked, reduced, reconfigured, and normalized, particularly in the intellectual professions. In universities, in the cultural sector, in research—key domains for Menger’s analysis of creative labor—professions are beginning to lose control of their know-how and of the modalities of production and evaluation (this “expropriation” has always been the sign that a process of proletarianization is underway).

This is not Menger’s primary concern, even if he may well address the question in the future. He has, on several occasions, proposed a critique of Marxism from the standpoint of what he calls the “Marxist celebration of creative labor” in postcapitalism. Menger is not at all convinced by Marx’s description of labor in communist

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society. It is this famous passage from *The German Ideology* that he has in mind when he accuses Marx of emptying the concept of creation of its most significant content, recognition by others:

*For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner; just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.*

For Menger, the most noteworthy trait of creative labor is that it produces differentiation, and that talent is acknowledged only if it is recognized by a group that submits the product of that labor to its evaluation and delectation, whatever the perception of the individual engaged in it. In this respect, art inherently generates dissymmetry and inequality: first, between the artist and the public, whose domestication is an important aspect of art history; and second between artists themselves, who constantly measure themselves and are measured against others. Creativity for everyone or at every moment is thus a contradiction in terms. To exist in the social world and to be identified as such, the creative act needs to be recognized. This is one of the paradoxes of art, which Marx overlooked: one cannot be an artist without having first become one, following a series of social tests of which Menger provides an in-depth description, using the metaphor of the “tournament” drawn from economics. Even so, art presents democratic society with a formidable challenge. What does the equalization of conditions that characterizes democracy mean if there is not at the same time a trend toward the equalization of talent? To the contrary, we are even experiencing an explosion of inequality in this respect, tied to the central role currently accorded to the identification of creative talent by the market. The performance-based societies in which we live have exacerbated these differences: an important dimension of Menger’s work consists in showing how micro differences in talent produce macro differences in income and reputation. He is less interested in the enormous capacities for producing frustration and resentment harbored within the machines that now manufacture notoriety. If the vast majority of the population is reduced to admiring the success of a tiny minority, how can social life be rendered bearable, given that the drive for equal opportunities was set as a fundamental endeavor from the outset?

Can the sociology of science set us on a path toward understanding? In recent years, Menger has chosen to turn his gaze toward the worlds of scientific investigation. He laid out the foundations of this project in his inaugural lecture at the

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Collège de France. Art and science both belong to the category of “self-realization through productive action,” a particular kind of labor, restored to its radical heterogeneity in contrast to Marx’s theoretical unification, and an entry point for analyzing their shared traits. These two sectors of activity are characterized, in the first place, by their high degree of attractiveness, which can be measured based on scales of professional prestige as well as indicators of work satisfaction. The consequence of this high position in the hierarchy of careers is a tendency toward the overproduction of recruits, not all of whose vocations will be realized, at least not in the most legitimate sense. Always more aspirants than recognized innovators—this is an important characteristic of these professions, which seem to exclude any form of risk aversion. Put simply, many are called but few are chosen, but this in no way affects the success of the vocational sector. Another trait that the arts and the sciences share is the regularity of evaluative tests (or “tournaments”) that attribute different values to competitors. “Competition is omnipresent,” Menger writes. Yet the competition is not of the same kind. In universities the norm is confrontation between peers based on no other criteria than their own judgment—even if, in practice, matters are complicated by the intervention of bureaucracies, unions, and, more recently, student evaluations. In artistic fields, however, the rule is a proliferation of evaluations by heterogeneous agents and authorities: cultural industry companies, entrepreneurs of various kinds, and a range of cultural middlemen whose role has grown in recent years. The forms of evaluation thus differ significantly.

Furthermore, Menger, who himself makes a point of this difference, tends to underestimate the fact that part of the activity of these ultracompetitive worlds consists in limiting the risks of competition: the arenas in which tournaments are held do not operate in the same way for someone at the beginning of their career as for someone midway through it; individuals can group together to minimize risks; and competition is usually distorted—or limited—by a whole array of mechanisms, for instance complicity between producers and the media in the case of the arts. The appetite for risk should not be taken as absolute: one might say that artists who succeed are those who have managed to seriously limit risk, particularly through their capacity to avoid the uncertainties of tournaments. As for scientific researchers, the tenure system—or, in countries that do not have it, the existence of permanent appointments for lecturers and researchers—has long offered a world that is mostly protected from the usual risks of economic life, though undoubtedly at the price of a few sacrifices relating to income and media notoriety. Tenure is achieved after a series of evaluations and tournaments, in the true sense of the term. But at some point it also brings them to a close, which explains why those who are most ideologically committed to risk, creativity, and evaluation call for—and may perhaps achieve—its elimination.

55. Ibid., § 21.
Menger, who is right to claim, contra Marx, that work is heterogeneous, is perhaps mistaken in using the integrating concept of competition to re-homogenize different forms of creative work. It is, moreover, paradoxical that the sectors in which his model functions best are not necessarily the most innovative or “creative.” Menger himself recognizes this:

> Of course, activities with uncertain success do not all speculate on talent with the same intensity. Expected returns are highest in the entertainment industry and that of the most popular sports, as these represent the largest markets. The winners of competitions reap the greatest rewards and flaunt them.\(^{57}\)

In other words, academic stars are still simply not in the same league as football stars. One almost comes to miss references to differentiated fields of production,\(^{58}\) notably in regard to the nature of returns on investment (immediate or deferred profits) and the very forms of evaluation—one of the major characteristics of modern art, at least in its foundational moment, was to refuse evaluations offered by the field itself. Building a uniform analytical grid comes at a cost, and future studies will determine whether it is constraining or heuristic. If one confines oneself to the work that Menger has already published on the question, it is not possible to offer a response: his article on higher education addresses one specific domain, that of elite business schools, which, regardless of their quality or their recognition by the market, are not the most representative example of how scholarly innovation is evaluated.\(^{59}\) It is true that the tenure crisis, which is not mentioned in Menger’s early studies of higher education, could contribute to unifying the domains of art and scientific research: precarity is now an important factor in the academic world. This is undoubtedly one of the paths that sociology could take to justify a reasoned rapprochement between art and science. Only after the research program that is currently underway has borne fruit will it be possible to explore this question in more depth. But it is around his univocal use of the concepts of innovation, creativity, and talent that discussions about the innovative power of Menger’s work will revolve.

At this stage, the concept of “talent” in particular would benefit from clarification. Although Menger has devoted the longest chapter in his most important book to this concept,\(^{60}\) it remains a blind spot in his work. Most commentators,
whatever their ideological orientation, have called attention to this fact. Talent, Olivier Godechot writes in his review of *Le travail créateur*, “is never defined in an explicit way.” Menger does not contest this, and recognizes that

*We have no absolute proof of the presence or absence of talent because we do not know exactly what talent is, because we do not know how to measure it independently of what it produces—artworks—and because measuring the value of artworks is not a simple and natural process that is endowed with an incontestable objectivity.*

In his inaugural lecture, he refers to talent as a “mysterious grandeur.” It is thus destined to remain, in part, a black box. Is this sufficient to disqualify the entire project? Answers differ. Sociology in its purest and strictest sense might deem that if talent cannot be defined as a more or less consistent variable, it is better to leave it to artistic hagiography and to focus on sociological variables that describe what are generally called the social conditions of production and reproduction. This is not my position.

*Le travail créateur* is undoubtedly the most fully realized attempt to critique exclusively constructionist approaches to artistic value. For a work of art to speak to us, particularly over the long term, it must obviously be something other than the sum of the social judgments that have been made about it. Clearly, the recognition of talent has a highly contingent dimension: it depends on the current state of taste and the orientation of the market. But it is not only that. The availability of artworks plays an undeniable role, but in itself this is not sufficient to condition evaluation. After all, the greatness of Rembrandt has in no way been diminished by the critical evaluation undertaken by the Rembrandt Project, which reattributed a third of his work to collaborators in his workshop. To the contrary, work by art historians has

61. Along with Olivier Godechot, Laurent Jeanpierre has proposed the most stimulating reading of Menger’s work, shifting the left’s critique from ideology to epistemology. Criticisms are generally based on a condemnation of the non-relative character of talent and on an assumption that Menger is indifferent to the difficulties faced by freelance and contractual cultural workers (known in France as *intermittents du spectacle*), even though he sees this group as a kind of social vanguard. Jeanpierre shifts the interrogation to the core of the theory, arguing that the assumption of actor rationality is unrealistic, and that the unification of the analytical model not only reduces the role of intermediaries but also overlooks the multiplicity of evaluations and, in particular, their almost constant conflictual character, at least in the most innovative realms. See Laurent Jeanpierre, “On the Origin of Inequality in the Arts,” *Revue française de sociologie (English Edition)* 53, no. 1 (2012): 88–106.


revealed a new space of evaluation, which recognizes the talent of the master’s assistants while clarifying the nature of his own gift. The “Baroque revolution” in music can also be invoked in this context: the rediscovery of unknown scores has opened up a new space for enjoyment, in which new hierarchies based on subtler differentiations have emerged. The Collège de France’s 2016–2017 teaching program leaves no doubt that Menger has yet to say his last word on this question, which will enable him to differentiate himself within the sociological competition—the title of his lecture series is: “What is Talent? Elements of a Social Physics of Difference and Inequality.”65 This reference to social physics clearly indicates that Menger will seek no compromise with relativism and constructionism. Whatever the modes of evaluation and consecration, and above all in spite of their errors and approximations, there exists an original core from which trajectories, tournaments, and recognition unfold, and which is multiplied by this unfolding.

The question of talent brings us back to where we began. Menger’s role in the French publication of Haskell’s work on fluctuating tastes in paintings shows a recognition that it is necessary to historicize the analysis of artistic objects. Due to his personal preferences, he has not, however, explored the possibilities of what might be called a history of talent. The (necessarily) incomplete definition he attributes to this concept is largely decontextualized. Let me be clear: it is not my intent, in making this objection, to return to a completely constructionist approach, the aporetic character of which Menger has demonstrated. What is really at stake here is the definition of creation, which he has helped demystify by exploring the aspect that relates properly to work and sometimes to labor, but to which he continues to confer an aura that should itself be submitted to sociological interrogation—not to minimize it, but to clarify it. Here we have reached the limits of a critical reading: Menger truly believes in talent and the way in which creative work can bring about an enrichment of the self. Such a belief is undoubtedly tied to his own trajectory through the university meritocracy, but its analysis is not, in the final instance, the domain of the sociologist.

Jean-Louis Fabiani
EHESS-CESPR

65. These lectures, along with those held in 2017–2018, are now available online at https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/en-pierre-michel-menger/course-2016-2017.htm.