studying the complex realities of humanitarian aid. Understanding humanitarianism as a product of organizations and organizational practices will provide a powerful theoretical foundation on which future studies can build, especially as scholars continue to wrestle with questions of how humanitarian relief efforts affect the lived realities of distant others. Both books would be excellent teaching tools in advanced undergraduate and graduate classes. And both books should be required reading not just for scholars of humanitarianism, but also for scholars of globalization, development, and organizational studies.

When Sociology Evaluates Great Art

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Genius is not socially constructed; it is socially perceived and sometimes applauded, but its genesis lies elsewhere. It is what it is, and sociological interpretations will not yield deeper or clearer understanding of its originary nature. In short, it is not intellectually domesticable. Penetrating any famous black box, the teasing conundrum, with the techniques specific to a discipline (or cult or trade) is every ambitious researcher’s hope—to slay the mysterious dragon and bring its head back to camp for group admiration. But try as they might, sociologists have little of substance to contribute when it comes to capturing superlative genius in their net. And even psychologists, after a century of systematic inquiry and thousands of pages probing it “empirically,” have come up short. Genius requires, so they say, an IQ of at least 122 (Richard Feynman’s middling score), yet almost no high-IQ people scale the heights of genius. Younger mothers and older fathers create more of them, they are often puny when young and bedridden, the Ashkenazy Jews produce a disproportionate number, and ordinary people typically lionize them (Einstein) without understanding what they accomplished, or vilify them (Galileo) for the same reason. They undercut the normal distribution.

Felix Mendelssohn when young heard an opera once, and several days later played the entire score on the piano without ever having seen the music; when Franz Liszt was given Edward Elgar’s new piano concerto, he sight-read it as Elgar watched, mouth agape no doubt; when Joe Morello played with Dave Brubeck, he could maintain different rhythms simultaneously with each limb, something top-flight drummers only later learned to do; who but Bach could write a cantata every week, along with lots of other work?; when Picasso was 13 he could paint like a Renaissance master, but soon was bored with that and moved through his famous five stages while inventing cubism along the way; when Paganini played his six violin concerti or his 24 Caprices, women in the audience swooned and men believed he was Satan’s representative on earth because it was “impossible” for anyone else to make those sounds.

It is hardly surprising that genius of this order has always had thundering box-office potential, because humans love to be shocked and delighted by oddities, especially those which contribute positively to their lives. Nobody minds that Edison held almost 1100 patents, still the record. By contrast, sociology’s subjects of study are by definition mostly unexceptional, so genius contradicts nearly everything that is sociologically provable. It ignores parentage, nationality, age, race, education, and all the

other sociological verities about social mobility and life-chances. Genius historically favors males, but who knows if that has more to do with opportunity than aptitude. Fanny Mendelssohn was a fine pianist and composer, as was Clara Schumann, and each might well have produced more and better material had they not been overshadowed by their male family members or become busy raising families. Who wrote better novels than Jane Austen, except perhaps Mary Ann Evans as George Eliot?

Yet the obvious contradiction between the fundamental nature of genius, even if loosely defined—is Warren Buffett a “genius” at stock picking?—and the standard claims sociology makes about human behavior has not deterred a few brave sociologists from trying to pry open this black hole that refuses to emit much light. Tia DeNora some years ago had a go at Beethoven’s artistic and cultural setting as a necessary if not sufficient explanation for his work; Randall Collins’ encyclopedic history of global philosophies by strong implication does the same thing for the Great Thinkers; Howard Becker’s many writings along these lines, including his recent rhetorical zinger What About Mozart?, heroically push the sociological interpretation of art and its worlds as far as one can without becoming preposterous. These are smart and innovative sociologists, each of whom values genius, art, and creativity for their own sake, yet cannot leave them alone to exist happily within the non-sociological realm of being. They want to colonize these peculiar and thrilling zones of human action, hauling them within the sociological bigtop, while gingerly sidestepping the obvious risk of trivialization or absurdity. Would Picasso have created modern art had his father not been an art professor and coached him from youth? Had he been born in the Amazonian jungle, would he have created great art there, too? Are there today a million Chinese genii in the hinterlands who cannot afford musical instruments or instruction, and will languish because of it? Would Napoleon have been less militarily ingenuous had he been a foot taller and born in Sweden rather than Corsica?

Pierre-Michel Menger, sociology professor (“of creativity”) at the Collège de France, has done his best to advance this line of thinking in a very serious way indeed. (His 2014 inaugural lecture is on YouTube.) He has employed every socioeconomic notion he can find to elaborate arguments about how genuine innovation and world-altering creativity should be evaluated. Of course, this takes him worlds away from works like Arthur Koestler’s The Act of Creation (1964), especially “Appendix Two: Some Features of Genius.” Here Koestler explains through mini-biographies how harassed and unappreciated talent fights bureaucratized conformity and pseudo-rationality, rising above all that through sheer force of will. Instead, Menger pulls “genius” and creativity closer to earth, patiently connecting them to the mundane along multiple axes: who pays, who controls distribution, who teaches and defines orthodoxy, and so on. And after 235 pages of general analysis, he turns in his penultimate chapter to the great whale himself: “How Can Artistic Greatness be Analyzed? Beethoven and His Genius.” If that were not enough, the final chapter is “Profiles of the Unfinished: Rodin’s Work and the Varieties of Incompleteness.” Menger’s book—based on a fat backlog of previous works in French—is important because he has courage, even if his analysis of what Becker called “art worlds” speaks more convincingly about everyday artists and musicians than about the exceptional ones whose names define its history since the Renaissance.

The first chapter, “Time, Causes, and Reasons in Action” (pp. 15–71) is a theoretical meditation that first appeared in the Revue française de sociologie in 1997 and uses ideas of Bourdieu, Husserl, Jon Elster, Gary Becker, Schutz, Raymond Boudon, Françoise Bourricaud, C. Wright Mills, Anselm Strauss, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, Paul Ricoeur, and many others not usually cited by American sociologists, including the estimable Vilfredo Pareto (via his capsulation by Jean-Claude Passeron). Menger wishes to bring the simple-minded determinist models that captured economics into contagion with the simple-minded interactionist models within sociology in order to understand how “uncertainty” works in social life. He is more successful than others who have walked this tightrope,
even if it remains at base so antinomic in nature that complete reconciliation is by definition unlikely. In concluding, Menger writes “In economics the necessarily temporal dynamics of phenomena are reduced to stasis, while sociology, inversely, takes into account the historical depth of the action—this approach attaining an extreme in the radical historicization of social science objects theorized by Passeron in his non-Popperian epistemology. I have tried to show that this opposition is changing by way of theoretical developments and competition within each discipline, developments and competition that crystallize around the relation between action temporality and actor differentiation” (p. 70). The extent to which he has succeeded in this self-imposed task, and how much this realization will clarify the role of “uncertainty” in social life, remains an open question. However, this chapter is general and speculative enough to be studied by graduate students needing a quick entry into this ancient debate, so it is good that one of the six translators who worked on the book liberated it from its Gallic sphere.

The second chapter, “Is Working to Achieve Self-Fulfillment Rational?” (pp. 72–104), rests more firmly on common socioeconomic ground. It is essentially a study in the sociology of work, even if the work is creative and aesthetic rather than merely gainful. Menger wants to know if it is “rational” to pursue an artistic career, especially given that this particular form of rationality must operate well within the realm of uncertainty and high risk. Not surprisingly, he concludes that those with extraordinary “natural gifts”—Picasso demanding a drawing instrument when very young; Jascha Heifetz asking for a violin at the age of 3, then able to play through all seven positions at 4—pursue artistic training more vigorously than more ordinary people. (The violinist Ruggiero Ricci, the twentieth century’s leading Paganini specialist, said that “Behind every ‘prodigy’ is a prodigious parent!”) Menger believes this is because it becomes “rational” for them to do so, in that they believe the “returns on investment” will justify the input of time, energy, money, and commitment. This makes a good story, of course, if one is economically inclined, yet the expression “I would do this even if they did not pay me” also comes to mind, particularly when one considers characters like Picasso, who created over 30,000 pieces of art in his lifetime. It is noble of Menger, as a sociologist, to admit without compunction that “natural ability” counts, long before any sociological vectors come into play. It does not explain why so many semi-talented people aspire to artistic careers, especially those without trust funds, but it does admit to an undeniable fact about the world of artistic creation that no amount of sociologizing can contain.

The next two chapters go more deeply into these concerns, asking in more theoretical and empirical detail why and how artists are trained and how they are distinguished hierarchically in levels of success or failure. These chapters are grist for the sociologist of culture’s mill and will likely be greeted as such, even if there is more reliance on rational-choice jargon than most sociologists will applaud. Menger then goes to the mat in his Beethoven chapter. He is not satisfied with previous sociological responses to great composers by Theodor Adorno (Beethoven, Mahler, Berg, and others), or Norbert Elias (Mozart), or DeNora’s treatment of Beethoven. After relating their analyses, he assesses: “The constructionist destabilization, which seeks to present itself in the guise of a healthy demystification of sacred greatness, thus ends up gradually transforming all the content of sophisticated culture into a gigantic negative social accounting” (p. 283).

His alternative explanation for artistic/musical greatness, however, will not cause culturally attentive sociologists to throw their Adorno volumes out the window. Like so many others today, especially those considering socioeconomic mobility, he concludes that networks of support make the difference: “The intrinsic power of individual talent and the segmentation of the market for creative labor, prompted by the mechanism of assortative matchings, constitute, in a dynamic interaction, the two forces whose combination produces the considerable variance in reputations and leads, when the statistical distribution of aptitudes is completed, to the exception that is called genius” (p. 281; emphasis added). But having proposed this sociological truism, he...
immediately reinvokes Kant’s paradigmatic definition of great music, which holds that it is utterly unencumbered with non-musical goals or structures, that it achieves “universalizing acontextuality” (p. 282), by virtue of originality and aesthetic force. Menger’s knowledge of previous studies and his impatience with their conclusions gives this chapter significant value, even if his alternative does not supplant them.

Some English-language readers will remember Menger’s final (Rodin) chapter because of its inclusion in Art From Start to Finish (2006), edited by Howard Becker and others. Art historians refer to a category of work known as non finito, wherein the artist seems intentionally to have stopped midway in the production process of an artwork, such that the interrupted condition becomes an essential part of the aesthetic statement. Menger lists the most famous instances (Schubert’s unfinished symphony, etc.; p. 285) and later asks, “Can’t we just place such artworks in the category of the non finito, to rid them of the stigma of unfinished sketches?” (p. 290). Rodin’s sculptures appeal to Menger because in them he sees “the role of chance or the unpredictable, and bringing fully to light the labor of creation in its most sinuous, most arduous, most uncertain aspects. Rodin’s aesthetic audacities highlight these two aspects’” (p. 13). Menger becomes interested through Rodin’s incomplete work in “the groping process of invention: Trials, errors, corrections, pentimenti, new starts, and bifurcations [that] characterize, as we know, the artist’s everyday labor.” Rodin’s Clemenceau bust received over 30 iterations! (pp. 308, 385). In an effort to demystify “the creative act” for lesser mortals who do not live on the Olympian plane of artfulness—where “a superior form of narcissistic heroizing” flourishes—Menger pursues this conundrum with the same energy he applied to Beethoven. He wants to know if there is a sociological response to the fact that Flaubert rewrote his novels endlessly and Cézanne painted the same scene dozens of times.

The answer lies in finding a Rodin museum and studying his incomplete works while listening privately to one of Beethoven’s last piano sonatas (Op. 109, 110, or 111 would do). All will become clear—sociologically speaking.

Transnationalism Reconsidered: The Dialectic of Immigration and Emigration

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The Cross-Border Connection, Roger Waldinger’s latest book on immigration, provides a cogent critique of transnationalism, with an eye toward advancing social theory. Waldinger credits transnational theory with challenging the view of societies as neatly contained within nations and celebrates its emphasis on the global processes linking social relations across political boundaries. However, he faults transnationalism for downplaying the opposing processes, most notably forces of adaptation, settlement, and state actions that tend to limit and curtail these same transnational ties. He argues that rather than merely noting the limitations of conventional assimilation theory, the transnational perspective must stretch to provide tools for analyzing the factors that promote and supplant cross-border involvements and how they vary over time and across different types of connections.

In this volume, Waldinger does precisely that: he draws on multiple methodologies and a vast array of data sources to examine the conditions that foster and those that impede transnationalism, with a careful...