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Talent and creative work. Ability distribution and reward inequalities

Prof.: Pierre-Michel Menger, CESPRA, EHESS CNRS Paris

Pierre-Michel Menger studied philosophy and sociology at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris and earned his Ph.D. at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in 1980. He is currently senior researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris) and professor (directeur d'études) at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales where he teaches sociology of labor and sociology of art and culture. He also holds a position of Permanent Visiting Professor at the University of Quebec (Canada). He is the author or coauthor of fourteen books, and has published numerous articles in such journals as *Revue française de Sociologie*, *Sociologie du travail*, *L'Année Sociologique*, *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, *Annales*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Poetics*. He is currently chief editor of the *Revue française de Sociologie* and member of the editorial board of the *Revue Economique*, *Poetics*, and *Twentieth-Century Music* a.o. Publications in English include i.a. « Profiles of the Unfinished : Rodin's Work and the Varieties of Incompleteness » (in *Art from Start to Finish*, edited by H.S. Becker, R. Faulkner, B Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006); « Artistic labor markets : Contingent Work, Excess Supply and Occupational Risk Management », a chapter of the *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, edited by V. Ginsburgh and D. Throsby (Amsterdam, Elsevier, 2006); *The Economics of creativity*, Harvard University Press, forthcoming. Books in French include i.a. *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur* (Paris, Seuil, 2003); *Le travail créateur. S'accomplir dans l'incertain* (Paris, Gallimard / Le Seuil, 2009); *Les intermittents du spectacle. Sociologie du travail flexible* (Paris, Editions de l'EHESS, 2011).

More information: <http://lodel.ehess.fr/cespra/document.php?id=575>

Abstract:

How is talent understood in the realms where it is obsessively sought after, those of the arts and sciences? To what extent can the talent factor help explain differences in reputation and earnings that attain extreme levels? I'll show that in creative undertakings initial education does explain far less of occupational achievement than elsewhere in the economy. When it comes to define talent, the standard answer is cast in terms of gift and calling: talent is the expression of abilities that seem to originate in the genetic lottery, especially if they manifest themselves early in the artist's life; this genetic capital enters into a nurturing family and social environment that fosters its development. With this posited, all that has to be done is inventory the unique traits of exceptional talent and see what reactions its products elicit, thereby determining whether the creative activity of the genius in question is supported, ignored or thwarted in the world of his or her contemporaries or the most influential of them. A biographical account of this sort amounts to a narrative of the adventures and misadventures of expressions of pure talent in favorable or less-than-favorable environments. But if "talent" is just another name for ability, as contrasted with skill, and as such represents the point of origin to which all other factors implicated in success should be tied, in accordance with a determinist schema of propulsive causality, then what remains to be explained? And on the demand side, how are talent and its products discovered and assessed by audiences? An essentialist understanding of talent or genius would postulate that gaps in degree of material and symbolic "consecration" (fame, recognition) in the arts and sciences are due to

proportionate differences in aptitude and that the peer community (in sciences) and the varied sets of audiences (for the arts), even if imperfectly informed or unequally cultured, will necessarily recognize, sooner or later, the value of this or that work of art by producing an aggregate value judgment, thereby providing a universal foundation for that judgment and perception of difference. But if things did in fact happen this way, the factorial breakdown of causes of inequality in artist earnings should be able to capture the influence of determinants as strong as abilities, with which individuals may be unequally endowed. As I will show, this is precisely what wage equations fail to do. So we have to find another explanation for those inequalities. If abilities were readily definable or observable there would be no uncertainty about success. It is precisely such uncertainty that fuels creative work, and the competition and innovation within the various art worlds. The reason those worlds proceed by ceaseless comparisons is that the wellsprings of inventiveness and originality cannot possibly be fully determined. Comparisons and tournaments, as I shall show, not only rank ordinally producers and products, but come to magnify interindividual differences that may have been tiny or large, but essentially impossible to calibrate from the outset.