VALUING THE UNIQUE: ECONOMICS OF SINGULARITIES, by Lucien Karpik. Translated from the French by Nora Scott. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. ISBN: 9780691137100; 280 pages.

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This book might be of value to many heterodox economists interested in economic theory, economic sociology and cultural economics. Lucien Karpik builds upon the work of Edward Chamberlin's monopolistic competition by helping to unpack the "empty boxes" of Marshallian economics. Time and history, networks, the logics of choice under uncertainty, the embeddedness of the market in society, and novelty and product differentiation now matter. The market process is based mostly upon product *quality* competition as opposed to *price* competition only.

Consider the music of John Coltrane as an example of a unique product. If we take Chamberlin's market definition to the extreme, where every product makes up its own unique market, we can indeed say that, for some, there is no substitute for Coltrane - his sound and tone, vision, attention to craft, risk-taking and the ensemble playing of his classical quartet are not comparable to anything else. Coltrane's *product* is a singularity: "Singularities are goods and services that are structured, uncertain, and incommensurable" (p.10).

Examples of singular products and markets in *Valuing the Unique* are many and varied: psychoanalysis, opera and classical music, legal services (the object of Karpik's renowned 1989 work in economic sociology), fine wine, popular music, literature, film, high-end audio equipment, restaurant guidebooks, art auctions, fashion, theatre, jazz, megabrands ("Nike, Virgin, Dannon, Marlboro, and Walt Disney," p.164[1]), radio, television, violins, shopping, "markets for revelation" (clairvoyance, astrology, card-reading, sorcery), university professors, luxury goods, and "superstars" (unfortunately without crediting Andy Warhol's coining of this phrase.)[2]

After introducing the concept of singularities generally Karpik has a justly exalted 15-page chapter entitled "Do We Need Another Market Theory?" where he offers a critique of neoclassical economics illustrating how the neoclassical 'model' fails to provide insight into heterogeneous goods. Karpik divides mainstream economics into two categories: 1) Walrasian and 2) the *new economics*. It is evident that Karpik is not in Walrasian territory; quality (a subjective value) is not a variable in the Walrasian instantaneously-clearing systems of equations where quantity (objective variables) determines market outcomes[3].

[1] Karpik purposely excludes digital media from the book's analysis, which would include "megabrands" such as Apple and Google.
[2] Note that many if not most of these markets might be considered the result of "unproductive labor" in classical value theory. The author of this review thanks Johann Jaeckel for a discussion on this point.
[3] Gibbons 2005 states that economists might enjoy economic sociology as it introduces "new variables." In this case, the relevant variable is heterogeneous quality competition.

Alternatively, in *Valuing the Unique*'s "What the 'New Economics' Chose [sic] to Ignore" we learn that while the *new economics* on information introduces uncertainty into the individual choice framework of neoclassical economics both in market coordination ("strategy") and in product quality, it overlooks the impossibility of comparing preferences between singular markets in a generalized choice framework. This new research program of the last 20 years does not acknowledge adequately that singular products require inter-subjective preference creation. Singular markets contain products and services with quality characteristics not reducible to a vector that can be added to a preference matrix in the neoclassical framework. The (social) "structure" of preference matrixes for each market are not comparable under multidimensionality. For example, conformity or originality (but not both) might help frame a preference choice. The degree to which these social influences affect each of us is unique to each product market. Also interesting in this section is a discussion on O.E. Williamson's work on 'asset specifity.' For Karpik, this specificity, while appearing singular, loses its essence in the "magical" (p. 30) neoclassical equilibrium clearing process.

Valuing the Unique disrupts its narrative flow when Karpik introduces taxonomy to frame his analysis of the markets mentioned above. We learn about nine "judgment devices" , "trust devices," seven "coordination regimes" ,and the "service relation." It seems that Karpik is reintroducing markets into more (in this case sociological) boxes, leaving his most profound insights about economic theory somewhat adrift. These discussions about taxonomical categories are engaging in their own right (and take up the majority of the book), but when applied to actual case studies specific analysis amounts to over-determination.

Also missing from *Valuing the Unique* (and from Michael Hutter's review of the book in the *Journal of Cultural Economics*) is an explicit discussion on the relationship between singularities and experiential goods. Again, some Coltrane may sound off-the-wall upon first listen but can become indispensible to the appreciator of music as utility grows through increased listening and understanding (science and education have similarly increasing returns to scale of production/consumption).

A final critique is of Karpik's use of the term "collective action" and immediate derivations thereof. This concept is introduced over and over again.) without an unambiguous definition, and this is a problem when he clearly uses the economic logic of methodological individualism in action. Collective preference creation does not necessarily imply collective action. Karpik does not dispute this point in any comprehensive way in *Valuing the Unique*, something that we might expect in a book at least partly advertizing itself towards an 'economics' readership by the publisher.

Where this book excels in its discussion of certain markets as case studies (case studies being a methodological definition of economic sociology). This reviewer especially enjoyed the discussion of those markets categorized under the "common-opinion regime" where the "logic of choice" is conformity (such as in the film box office, the hit parade and best-sellers). Here Karpik gets into the strategy of the merchandizing and marketing of these products and in his view what the specific necessary conditions are for having a hit.

Further, in his chapter "Homo Singularis" Karpik walks us through the journey of a fictional median consumer named Recordo as he hunts for a CD of Beethoven's *Ninth.* Ricardo bases his search on market signals of awards ("public devices," p. 84) pasted on the CD label-cover such as "Recommandée par *Classica,*" discussions with the record store personnel, and price/award trade-offs in a purchase decision. We see the development of Recordo's own preferences as he goes through the discovery process of experiencing the many different contemporary recordings of a long-ago piece of creative output. Recordo discovers that Beethoven must have written many *Ninth*s.

When not trying too hard for grand theory *Valuing the Unique* offers a refreshing series of case studies into unique creative and individualized product markets. As Hutter states at the end of his review, there is much here that can be picked up by economists in their own research into product markets. However, because *Valuing the Unique* is for the general reader (the book is math-free), one does not need be a trained economist to enjoy its discourse.

References

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