

Chapter 2

Florida's Creative Class Thesis

Abstract In this chapter, I explain Richard Florida's definition of the creative class, and discuss his controversial creative class thesis. I also discuss critical reactions to his work, offer my own critique of his work, and note that my use of his creative class perspective to inform the present project is highly selective.

Keywords Richard Florida · Richard Peck · Creative class · Creative city · Urban geography · Urban policy

2.1 Defining the Creative Class

Florida defined as members of the creative class, those who are employed in occupations that are, to a significant extent, associated with “the creation of meaningful new forms.” Florida rejected the option of defining the creative class in terms of human capital (i.e., college graduation), pointing out that not all college graduates work in creative occupations, and many who are employed in creative occupations never attended college or dropped out prior to graduation. Members of the creative class, though, do tend to be college graduates.

Most members of the creative class are not “super-creative.” Florida sub-divided the creative class into a *super-creative core* that includes those whose work constitutes “directly creative activity,” *creative professionals*, and *others* whose work is constituted by a significant creative component. Members of the super-creative core include those classified by the BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics, in their Occupational Employment Survey) as working in “Computer and mathematical occupations,” Architecture and engineering occupations,” “Life, physical, and social science occupations,” “Education, training, and library occupations, and “Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations”). Artists are classified under the BLS category “Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations,” and Florida therefore classifies them as part of the creative class's super creative core. Creative professionals are defined as those classified by the BLS as working in “Management occupations,” “Business and financial operations

occupations,” “Legal occupations,” “Health care practitioners and technical occupations,” and “High-end sales and sales management”) (2012, p. 401). Florida, furthermore, maintains that there are *others* whose work, at least to some extent, involves the creation of “meaningful new forms” (e.g. shopkeepers, chefs, creatively oriented factory workers¹), and should thus be thought of as part of the creative class (see Florida 2002, p. 10).² Florida has estimated that the creative class comprises roughly 33% of the US workforce, while the traditional working class (e.g., most factory and construction workers) comprises roughly 20% and the service class (e.g., retail store clerks, house cleaners, security guards) comprises roughly 47% (Florida 2012, see pp. 44–48).

2.2 Florida's Creative Class Thesis

Florida (2002, 2012) maintained that cities that fail to attract, maintain, and facilitate the activities of the creative class are much less likely to achieve high levels of prosperity and economic growth, and generate a high tax base. Members of the creative class, especially those whose work is “super creative” (e.g., software designers) tend to prefer, and generally thrive within cities constituted by an advanced technological infrastructure (e.g., major universities and research institutes), and a people climate that is conducive to creativity. Cities with creative people climates are culturally tolerant and diverse, thus making creative people in general, and creative innovators and eccentrics in particular in general feel welcome (e.g., eccentrics like Steve Jobs). Such cities, furthermore, are comprised of cultural amenities that stimulate creative expression, creative conversation and opportunities for social networking (e.g. galleries, artsy shops, cafes, hip bars, trendy nightclubs and restaurants). They also tend to contain neighborhoods with (physical) structural characteristics that stimulate creativity and creative non-conformity. Drawing on Jacobs's (1961) classic work, the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Florida argued that such neighborhoods are walkable, constituted by a substantial amount of mixed-use space (residential/commercial), and offer ample opportunities for creatively stimulating social interaction.³

Florida illustrated, and offered anecdotal support for his creative class thesis by pointing to cities such as Austin, San Francisco, and Seattle. These cities achieved high economic growth rates that were arguably due, in large part, to the fact that

¹Florida (2012) noted, however, that very few factory jobs afford much opportunity for the expression of human creativity.

²These “creative class others,” however, are not included in Florida's statistical studies of the creative class.

³Jacobs did not analyze the bohemian life of the Village, although her analysis implies that the Village was an ideal setting for bohemia. Jacobs, though, analyzed the Village before it became subject to a hyper-gentrification process that ultimately limited its ability to house bohemians and other low income residents (see Zukin 2010).

their creative amenities and reputation for cultural tolerance attracted talented innovators and eccentrics (e.g., software designers and high tech entrepreneurs). Florida also supported his thesis via correlational research. This research found relationships between urban economic growth and the presence of the creative class. It also found relationships between the presence of the creative class, and the presence of gays as well as “bohemians” (operationally defined as those employed in an artistic occupation). These relationships held up even after Florida controlled for a variety of relevant variables. He explained these relatively counterintuitive relationships by positing that a strong gay or “bohemian” presence can help a city to attract the creative class by signifying that it offers a culturally tolerant people climate that makes creative types feel welcome. He further argued that “bohemians” often play a particularly important role with respect to enhancing a city’s creative appeal, creating cultural amenities (e.g., edgy art galleries and hip music venues) that attract and stimulate the larger creative class.⁴

2.3 Critical Reactions to Florida's Work

Florida's creative class approach to urban economic development has generally been well received by urban politicians in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, and has become an integral part of urban policymaking in nations throughout the western world. In most cases, this approach informed and amplified existing efforts of cities to offer culturally stimulating milieus for creative production and consumption. By the 1970s, numerous cities had already adopted “creativity agendas” designed to attract those who Florida later called the creative class (Evans 2005; Peck 2005; Bontje and Musterd 2009; Grodach 2011). These agendas mushroomed since the 1980s, as a growing number of cities throughout the world endeavored to cope with post-Fordist restructuring and deindustrialization. In many cases, however, cities initiated new creativity agendas in response to Florida's ideas.

Efforts by cities to enhance their creative milieus have generally focused on large-scale, top down projects such as new museums and cultural centers, but have also included support for small-scale projects that encourage art and culture to blossom within walkable, mixed use neighborhoods (see Borrup 2014). Through his writings and consulting activities, Florida encouraged cities to offer new (or additional) support for these small scale, neighborhood based efforts. He has also encouraged cities to enhance their creative people climates by offering an atmosphere of tolerance (e.g., by supporting gay rights and welcoming immigrants), and by finding new ways to promote themselves as creative cities.

Academic researchers have often been highly critical of Florida's work. Florida, however, has produced a growing cadre of academic followers and critical

⁴Florida, though, notes that attracting a substantial bohemian population may not be a realistic goal for most small and mid sized cities.

supporters, and his work has been the subject of vigorous and often highly contentious academic debates. Florida himself has welcomed these debates, and maintained that they have been illuminating and fruitful (Florida 2011).

Academic critics of Florida have pointed out that regional human capital (i.e., measures of college degrees) account for measures of economic growth better than regional creative capital (i.e., measures of membership in the creative class) (Glaser 2005; Rauch and Negry 2006; Hoyman and Faricy 2009). Other scholars (including Florida himself), however, have found that creative class measures do a better job in accounting for economic growth (e.g., Marlet and Van Woerkens 2004; Mellander and Florida 2009). Florida et al. (2008) responded to these divergent findings by arguing that the question of whether human capital or creative class models better account for regional growth is contingent on how economic growth is defined; Florida and his associates found that measures of human capital are more strongly associated with wage growth, while measures of the creative class are more strongly associated with income growth.⁵

Asheim and Hansen (2009) argued that Florida's notion of a single creative class needs to be amended. Their own (2009) research utilizes a typology grounded in the proposition that different creative occupations and industries emphasize different bases of knowledge (i.e., synthetic, analytical, and symbolic). Synthetic knowledge is generally emphasized in traditional industries (e.g., automotive, oil and natural gas) and typically formed in response to the need to solve specific problems through interactions with customers and suppliers. It utilizes a creative process in which innovation takes place mainly through the application or novel combination of existing knowledge. Analytical knowledge is dominant within industries that utilize analytical models to produce formal scientific discoveries or radically new inventions or products (e.g., biotechnology, software engineering, nanotechnology), while symbolic knowledge involves the "the creation of meaning and desire," "intellectual and/or spiritual nourishment," and "the aesthetic attributes of products." Symbolic knowledge is dominant in occupations and industries that produce designs, images, symbols, and cultural products (e.g., filmmaking, publishing, music, advertising, website design, packaging design, and fashion). Florida argued that cities that have a tolerant, diverse and stimulating people climate will attract the creative class overall, but was referring mainly to those in the super creative core who work in newly emerging creative industries drawing mainly on analytical and symbolic knowledge (Asheim and Hansen 2009). Those who work in analytical production, and especially, symbolic production tend to prefer central city locations, make locational decisions that are affected by the people climate factors highlighted by Florida, and tend to benefit greatly from the cross fertilization of knowledge (e.g., fashion, art, media, technology, design) that occurs in a diverse, cultural tolerant multicultural milieu where creative producers get direct exposure to emerging signs, symbols, and images. Those whose work involves more traditional

⁵Income is not solely derived from wages; it is also derived from capital gains, business ownership, and intellectual property.

industries where work usually emphasizes synthetic knowledge (e.g., most engineers) don't normally benefit from exposure to a culturally stimulating urban milieu, and are often relatively conservative. They tend to prefer a relatively peaceful environment, and more likely to live in a suburban region, but their locational decisions are based mainly on "hard locational factors" such as rent levels, tax levels, and traffic and technical infrastructure (Asheim and Hansen 2009).

Markuseen (2006) advocated studying each occupational group in Florida's creative class separately, asserting that grouping diverse occupational groups (e.g., artists and engineers) into a singular creative class is empirically inaccurate and counterproductive, since it leads us to assume that each group can be lured to regions, cities, or communities via the same set of policies. Asheim and Hansen's (2009) subdivision of Florida's creative class addresses Markussen's concern, but only partially. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which the effects of various types of people climates tend to be substantially different for different occupations within each of Asheim and Hanson's three subdivisions of the creative class.

Morgan and Ren (2012) argued that not all contemporary creative urbanites have morphed into what Florida referred to as a larger creative class, citing examples of European cultural enclaves constituted by a substantial cultural divide between low-income cultural producers and relatively affluent creative urban establishments. Morgan and Ren argued that these low-income cultural producers constitute a *creative underclass* comprised of struggling bohemian artists and other cultural rebels. Those within the creative underclass live very cheaply and, in many cases, survive by existing as urban squatters. They often express opposition to the larger society by expressing revolutionary sentiments, refusing to commodify their art, and associating with anarchist, punk, and other anti-establishment movements. In some cases, though, relations between the creative underclass and the larger creative class have been constituted by a limited degree of collaboration. Many artistic squatters in Paris, for example, have capitalized on their economic value to urban establishments. These squatters have successfully sought formal recognition and permanent residential status, and are thus no longer squatters (Vivant 2010).

Brockbank (2006) studied two cities in England, Quesburn Valley's Newcastle City and Gatehead. These cities underwent deindustrialization since the 1970s, and attracted struggling (bohemian) artists seeking low cost space. These artists were generally disdainful of capitalism, and of the capitalist commodification of art. More recently, Florida's Creative Cities Vision was used explicitly by these cities to recast their images as "world class" creative communities. As a result, they attracted new media and other creative firms (e.g., Public Relations, Web Design, Advertising, Film production, etc.). Brockbank did not find evidence of a substantial level of collaboration between struggling artists and new creative class arrivals. Artists, furthermore, were worried about being priced out of their rented apartments and studios, and saw the area as favoring the interests of investment capital over independent, low-income artistic producers. Brockbank concluded that

Florida style cultural regeneration will inexorably contribute to artist displacement and a cultural “buzz to bland” cycle (Minton 2003) within the area. He concluded by noting that he sees as implausible, Florida's notion that struggling artists can make common cause with the creative class.

Critics of Florida's approach have also highlighted its relationship to its contemporary deindustrialized, neo-liberal, and globalized urban context. The current urban context, that is, has been constituted by a decline in good paying factory jobs and (especially in the US) national social initiatives (e.g., public housing), and increased global competition between cities (i.e., for employees and jobs). A variety of scholars have noted that Florida's creative class approach has received considerable support from urban policymakers because it is consistent with the ways in which these policymakers have reacted to this context. Urban policymakers, that is, have generally failed to seriously address issues pertaining to economic inequality, and strived to replace residents whose incomes generate relatively a low tax base and declining federal incentives (i.e., the working class and service class) with those who are relatively affluent (i.e., those Florida refers to as the creative class) (Peck 2005). These urban policymakers appear to value creativity as a public good, but actually value it primarily for its ability to attract affluent workers/jobs. Their Florida inspired “creativity agenda” has enabled them to spin their neo-liberal, pro-gentrification policies as efforts to promote creativity (Peck 2005; see also Krätke 2012). A de-emphasis on low cost housing and support for gentrification is controversial, but who is against the promotion of creativity?

Peck also pointed out that Florida, through his consulting activities, has often advised cities to attract the creative class by becoming more culturally tolerant, walkable, and bohemian. When successful, these efforts tend to facilitate working class displacement. In most cases, however, these efforts, according to Peck, constitute urban hucksterism, as cities have no realistic hope of attracting the creative class are led to believe that they could become creative class meccas. Florida, though, has pointed out that he does not advise *all* cities to attract the creative class. In some cases, for example, he advises cities to attract other types of residents (e.g., immigrants). Further research is needed to document Florida's consulting activities, and to ascertain the overall effects of these activities on the decisions of urban policymakers in various types of cities.

Urban inequality was not Florida's main focus,⁶ but his work was motivated by the hope that policies designed to help a broad range of cities to attract the creative class would make the geography of the creative class less “spiky” (i.e., less concentrated in a few major urban centers). By redistributing the creative class, he hoped to redistribute those who create high wage jobs, thus promoting greater geographical/economic equality. Florida, though, admitted that an increase in the presence of the creative class in a city or region tends to promote economic growth while simultaneously *increasing* inequality within that city or region; it tends to

⁶Florida, however, is currently writing a book focused on issues pertaining to class inequality.

produce high wage high skill creative jobs along with a greater number of low paid working class and service sector jobs designed to support the occupational and personal needs of the newly arrived creative class (e.g., for clerical support, food preparation). It also tends to raise rents, thus making it difficult for low-wage workers to find affordable housing. Florida (2002) responded to this problem, albeit briefly, by proclaiming that the creative class should endeavor to reverse this tendency by creating high paying creative jobs for the entire workforce. This solution was grounded in the free market and in an arguably naïve call for enlightened corporate action.

In the revised version of his book on the creative class, Florida (2012) devoted more attention to issues pertaining to income inequality, and clarified and augmented his position. He called for a new social compact, a creative compact designed to enhance the social safety net, build an education system that encourages creativity, and enhance the creativity and pay of those employed in low wage service sector jobs (e.g., by offering government incentives to employers who enhance service sector jobs).⁷ This social compact thus supplements his original reliance on corporate enlightenment with a reliance on the liberal enlightenment of government policymakers. It does not, that is, call for organized social action against corporate and government elites.

2.4 My Critique of Florida's Work

According to Florida, the creative class comprises roughly 30% of the US workforce. Assuming this figure is correct, this means that roughly 70% of the US workforce is employed in a job that is relatively *uncreative*. The creative, high tech economy celebrated by Florida might thus be more aptly described as an *uncreative economy*, or more accurately, as a *class divided economy*. New computer mediated technologies have helped to produce a larger creative class, but have not eliminated (and have often helped to produce) relatively uncreative labor and increases in economic inequality (see Kristal 2013). The socio-economic structure of our society has been constituted by greater occupational *inequality* in terms of income, wealth, and creative expression; it is not moving us toward a full-fledged creative age constituted by full-fledged creative cities.

Florida's work, furthermore, has often functioned to exacerbate urban inequality, and justify the neo-liberal, pro-gentrification policies that have enabled such inequality to grow. Florida has become increasingly aware of this, but his analysis is still, in my view, fundamentally incomplete. It ignores, that is, the power structure that underlies the realities of life within the contemporary high tech

⁷On www.citlab.org, furthermore, Florida has recently praised the social democratic redistribution policies of scandinavian nations.

“creative economy.” Florida calls on corporate leaders, politicians, and other members of the creative class to enhance the pay and creativity of those employed in the service sector, provide incentives for service sector job enrichment, and establish creative education for all. He also calls on politicians to enhance the social safety net. His approach here is noble, and if implemented, could yield significant benefits to those employed in relatively uncreative jobs. Actual implementation of this approach, however, would almost certainly be diminished by the power of corporate lobbyists, and function, in part, to put an egalitarian gloss on contemporary conflicts between the upper echelon of the creative class (“the 1%”) and the working class. Contemporary capitalist enterprises, like their industrial age predecessors, generally maximize profits by creating, whenever feasible, a relatively high number of low-skill/low-wage working class wage jobs (Gough 2003). Such jobs limit worker control over the labor process (thus minimizing worker creativity), and produce workers who can be paid less because they are easily replaceable. The affluent creative class managers who run capitalist enterprises thus have no economic incentive to foster widespread increases in worker control, creativity, and pay.⁸ And they have no economic need to support a widespread creative upgrading of working class education. Such education would prepare future workers for new creative jobs that the creative class elite has no incentive to create. Structural relations between workers and their creative class managers will, in my view, remain constituted far more by class conflict than by social unity grounded in common creative values. In my view, a successful endeavor to achieve widespread increases in worker control, creativity, and pay would need to incorporate a conflict perspective, and be grounded in organized struggle (e.g., labor union organizing, new protest movements).⁹

Although I view Florida's overall creative class approach to urban economic development as fundamentally incomplete, and sometimes detrimental to social equality, I maintain that his central construct, a broadly defined creative class, and his ideas pertaining to the incorporation of urban artists into this class (which I will discuss in detail in Chap. 5) captures and illustrates features of contemporary urban life that are highly relevant to the analysis of at least *some* artistic communities in contemporary society. In my case study of Lawrenceville's artistic community, I thus feel free to selectively utilize these portions of Florida's work.

⁸Many corporations, though, have established job enrichment programs designed to increase worker satisfaction and creativity, and from the establishment of profit sharing and employee ownership plans. Such efforts, though, have never been dominant within industrial or post-industrial capitalist economies.

⁹On www.citlab.org, though, Florida has recently suggested, albeit briefly, that workers could reduce inequality through the formation of labor unions.

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Moss, G.

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