

## Richard Florida's *Cities and the Creative Class*

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The *Penguin Guide to Plain English* offers the following caution to writers about using words of approval and disapproval:

Words of strong approval or disapproval acquire emotive force which sometimes gets out of hand. That is to say, speakers or writers latch on to them for giving vent to likes and dislikes with a rather loose awareness of their exact meaning. An instance is provided by the words 'creative' and 'creativity'. The precise connotation of such words requires us to use them of acts which produce something where nothing of the kind existed before ... When one thinks of the kind of context in which the word 'creative' is properly at home, what comes most readily to mind is perhaps the towering genius of a Shakespeare or a Beethoven. But the word so conveniently arouses feelings of wonder that it gets bandied about in relation to all kinds of activities calling for our approval where, strictly speaking, true creation is not at issue...<sup>1</sup>

Although it is questionable as to whether creativity is limited to the high arts – community arts are no less creative – the general point is sound enough: 'creative' and 'creativity' are much overused and abused nowadays. A case in point is current public policy and business writing. 'Creative' and 'creativity' have become the latest mantras.

The increasing interest in creativity owes no small debt to Richard Florida, Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University. Florida has published a string of books on the importance of creativity to individuals, firms, cities and regions. He is particularly concerned to document the emergence of what he refers to as the 'creative class'; individuals who work in jobs which require some form of personal input or expertise, which includes artists, writers, sculptors, software engineers, graphic designers, scientists, and academic researchers. Such people, Florida claims, currently account for around one-third of the US workforce and are the key to generating economic value.

It might be asked whether the term 'creativity' really captures what such

people do. Academic research is a good example. There is of course a creative *dimension* to academic research, but this is significantly constrained by other considerations, such as ethics, the search for truth and rigour, all of which qualify creativity. The same broad limitations might also be applied to engineering and IT design.

Surely the term ‘intellectual’ or ‘intellectually trained’<sup>2</sup> – that is, people who are not intellectuals *per se*, but are trained in the techniques of intellectuality – is a more apt description for the kinds of occupations that Florida describes. ‘Intellectual’, however, has never shrugged off the pejorative air from its birth, and therefore lacks the positive connotations of ‘creativity’.

And Florida’s books are as much about sociological analysis as promoting the interests of the people he describes. *The Rise of the Creative Class*<sup>3</sup>, Florida’s most sustained analysis of the creative class, for example, reads less like serious sociological analysis than an extended PR campaign for graphic designers, architects, software engineers, ad men, writers, artists and assorted other ‘creative’ professionals. Such people appear, collectively, to be the most tasteful, tolerant and socially and politically progressive class in history. They have better and more diverse tastes in music, live in the best apartments and houses in the hippest suburbs in the liveliest cities, have more varied and exciting jobs and leisure pursuits, more interesting and diverse friends and, seemingly all-importantly, more piercings (for some reason Florida is careful to note the piercings and dress styles of his informants, as if such trimmings are markers of authenticity), than any class before them.

This has, however, not stopped his ideas being taken seriously. State governments and business leaders in both Victoria and NSW, have shown much interest in Florida’s work, hosting talks and visits from the man himself.<sup>4</sup>

*Cities and the Creative Class* is the follow-up, though in good Hollywood fashion Florida describes it as the ‘prequel’ to earlier book since the research presented in *Cities and the Creative Class* was carried out prior to *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

For those who waded through the first book, there is not much new to be had in *Cities and the Creative Class*. Florida’s basic thesis is straightforward: Where in the industrial economy the key to economic success was seen to lie in attracting large industry to employ people, in the so-called ‘creative economy’ the economic success of regions and cities is about attracting talented and creative people. In short it is the skills and knowledge that people possess that is the key determinant of success in the contemporary economy.

There is something to be said for Florida’s basic analysis. Such people do account for a larger proportion of the workforce than was the case ten or twenty years ago. But his analysis is marred by a tendency towards overstatement. Take, for instance, the following statement in *Cities and Creative Class*: ‘In the creative economy, ideas and intellectual capital have replaced natural resources and mechanical innovations as the raw material of economic growth’.

This, politely, is tosh. Natural resources and mechanical innovation remain just as central to economic growth as they always have. If in doubt, simply recall the fact that the US just led a war and are now occupying a country driven primarily

by the desire to secure oil reserves. So central are natural resources like oil to economic growth that states go to war for it. Until wars are waged to secure the services of creative people, Florida's claim that creativity has *replaced* other factors of economic growth will fail to convince.

Florida's 'creative capital theory', as he calls it, is a species of human capital theory, the idea that economic success is dependent on the knowledge and skills that individuals possess. He is, however, quick to highlight two key differences between his own theory and human capital theory. The first is that human capital theory focuses on a specific form of knowledge and skills—namely creativity. Secondly, Florida claims that creative people choose specific places to live and work; it's not just a case of economically well-off regions having lots of talented people. Creative workers, according to Florida, choose to live in particular places for quite specific reasons. In doing so, they increase the likelihood of it becoming economically successful. Business will locate or spring up where talented people are.

*Cities and the Creative Class* offers advice to city and regional planners on what they can do to attract more creative people and thereby enhance economic prosperity. Successful places, he argues have three things in common: talent, technology and tolerance. These are the 3T's of success in the contemporary economy. Much of *Cities and the Creative Class* is given over to showing how the 3T's can be measured and how various US cities stack up in terms of creativity.

Thus, access to technology is measured through a 'Tech-Pole Index' which measures the number of high-tech firms in a place. Talent is measured by a 'Bohemian Index', which draws on US census data to determine the numbers of writers, poets, musicians and the like live in a city. Tolerance, meanwhile, is measured by a 'Gay Index' which, again draws on US census data to provide an estimate of how many people identifying as gay or lesbian there are in a place; the more people identifying as gay, the higher the a place scores in terms of tolerance.

The key message to policy makers and planner is to use lifestyle as a lever to attract certain kinds of workers to a city or region. Florida's logic is that in a less secure, fast-shifting labour market in which people move from one job to another in quick succession, the amenities afforded by a locale are what attract and retain people. In Florida's words: 'A high-amenity city that is a nice place to live provides a level of permanence that a job does not'.

In some respects this appears to offer a more comprehensive approach to regional development than more mechanistic approaches of the recent past which focused on building more infrastructure in the hope that this would spur development. Florida, for example, rejects the simplistic notion that universities are generators of innovation and ideas that drive economic growth, such that all one had to do was plonk a university in a place and watch a place take off. He argues, rightly, that this leads to universities focussing on applied knowledge rather than pure sciences, which brings the university into competition with industry. Instead, Florida argues that universities spur on economic growth and innovation by attracting talent to a place. For Florida, the 'role of the university in the creative economy is as a collector of talent'.

A university, he notes further, is in itself insufficient. There also need to be other businesses and industries around which are able to absorb and apply the knowledge produced by the university. In addition, one also needs cafes and bookshops, amenities and services, good public transport, extensive pedestrian and bike paths, a thriving music scene and the conveniently located water sports that the creative class demands. In short, what you need is a small university college town.

This, however, seems as equally simplistic as the view that Florida is determined to reject. In particular, it raises the problem of how small and regional cities are supposed to attract all of these things in the first place.

This is not to say that Florida's ideal city is unattractive, just very difficult to realize. The world he imagines is one of cities with ample and convenient amenities, excellent public transport, lots of outdoor recreational activities, (water sports seem to figure highly), independent books stores and independent cafes, a thriving local music scene.

Much of this might be applauded, but it's unclear why a 'preference for high-amenity places' is distinctive to the creative class. It is unlikely, for example, that call centre employees or plumbers would report that they wanted to live in poorly serviced areas with few recreational options where there were decrepit schools run by unqualified and amateur teachers.

The point, of course, is that those in creative jobs have the means to pay for such things and have the means to ensure their demands are heard. And, to be fair, Florida does make the point that such services need to be accessible to anyone and everyone to promote diversity; access is important. He also focuses on the downsides to the changes he examines, including rising social and economic inequality. This is particularly the case for some of the places that score most highly on creative index. There are other negatives too – many of which afflict the creative class as well – including unaffordable housing, uneven regional development, sprawl and ecological problems, increasing stress and anxiety, and political polarization between the privileged creative class and the rest.

But beyond listing these problems, Florida offers no serious analysis of such problems or how they might be overcome. When he veers towards such questions of inequality, such as why African-Americans are under represented in high-tech industries, he very quickly steers away from it. Of course, one oughtn't expect comprehensive solutions, or a watertight plan, but some tentative suggestions might have been helpful.

Florida's most substantive response to structural inequality and racism are exhortations that creativity be unleashed throughout the workforce. But Florida's suggestions of how this might be achieved appear utopian at best. The kind of world envisaged by Florida would require far greater and more comprehensive transformation than what he seems willing to contemplate.

Take the example of public transport. It's easy enough to advise city planners that they should have large integrated transport systems, but realizing this in practice is much more difficult. One would come up against car manufacturers

and the oil industry in quite fundamental ways. Of course, simply because there is opposition to such plans is not good reason for abandoning them, but Florida seems barely able to conceive of the quite radical implications of the world that he is proposing. More diversity, more creativity, more hip cafes, more independent bookstores, more tech start-ups and more amenities for outdoor recreational activities, it seems will solve such problems.

These considerations raise the question of how much of Florida's advice is likely to be taken up by town planners and politicians. This may be an overly cynical view, but I suspect that much of what Florida counsels, including the suggestion that places promote diversity and a degree of equality of access will be ditched. It is the easier aspects, the things that cater to the already wealthy and/or privileged that are likely to be implemented. The world that is more likely to emerge from Florida's advice is the kind of urban landscape that has sprung up from the re-development of Melbourne's Docklands: well-serviced playgrounds for the wealthy and the already privileged.

Florida cannot, of course, be held responsible for the way in which his ideas are applied and misapplied and he does go to some lengths to stress diversity and access. But there is also a degree of naivety in his writing in that power and politics simply don't come in for serious analysis. He talks about city and regional planners as if they are just honest brokers without pressures from developers on them.

This is especially evident in the vignette's of cities which have reinvented themselves along lines which Florida approves. It all seems so easy and straightforward, as if a group of progressive-minded, can-do business and civic leaders, town planners and engineers, and artists one day got together and developed a strategic plan to produce a creative city that then unfolded seamlessly with astounding results.

Reading through these vignettes, the questions that kept recurring in my mind were: was there local opposition to these plans? Who was excluded through this process? What displacements occurred? What were the local resistances to these plans? Were they listened to?

Of course, there may have been none, but it would be very surprising if that was the case. The problem with Florida's story is that it's too good to be true; as a reader you feel you're only being let in on the parts of the story that strengthen Florida's argument.

There are other problems with Florida's use of the term 'creativity'. He goes out of his way to ward against a narrow definition of creativity, which confine it to aesthetic expression. But his own notion of creativity is equally narrow, a point that is evident from when he seeks to provide a substantive example of creativity. Almost inevitably, the highest exemplars of creativity are people from the business world and those in the IT profession. It should come as no surprise, then that Florida's account of creativity is almost exclusively a male affair. Since women are under-represented in both IT and business, they don't figure prominently in Florida's analysis. Diversity, it seems, has its limits.

The differences that Florida does entertain are not the deep kinds between

wholly different ways of life, but the difference between, say, a graphic designer and an engineer. These are not worlds apart, they're simply differences of kind. The kind of diversity one finds in Florida's imagining of the ideal urban space is roughly akin to that found in the popular computer game, *The Sims* rather than that found in real life.

More generally, there is a latent contradiction between what Florida espouses and the advice he gives. If his advice were to be followed, pretty well every city and region in the world would resemble Silicon Valley and the Bay Area in San Francisco – both of which are ranked highly on his creativity index. In doing so, one would undermine the very thing that the creative class is supposed to desire: diversity and new experiences.

Before we reach such point, though, it is more than likely that Florida's ideas will collapse under the weight of their own contradictions, omissions and simplifications.

*Richard Florida's Cities and the Creative Class is published by Routledge, New York, 2005.*

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Penguin Guide to Plain English*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, pp. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> See Geoff Sharp, 'Constitutive Abstraction and Intellectual Practice', *Arena*, 70, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Pluto, North Melbourne, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See the Victorian Government website investVictoria: <http://invest.vic.gov.au/News/News/Melbourne+and+the+creativity+class.htm>; The Committee for Melbourne: Creative Melbourne Taskforce <http://www.melbourne.org.au/154.0.html>; and Richard Florida's Creative Class website: [www.creativeclass.org](http://www.creativeclass.org); [http://www.creativeclass.org/pe\\_oz04.shtml](http://www.creativeclass.org/pe_oz04.shtml) (All pages accessed 24 April, 2005)

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