

Richard Florida's High-class Glasses

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WHEN Richard Florida took the mainstage at last year's Americans for the Arts conference in Portland, Oregon, the woman next to me—we had never met—leaned in with an immediate response. "Hubba-hubba," she murmured in my direction. The Carnegie-Mellon University professor of economic development had come a long way since the publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class* in June 2002. On the back flap of the book, the author's photo portrayed a typical academic—a bit slouchy, in a dark polo shirt and blue jeans (albeit strategically positioned in front of an abstract painting). But here in the Hilton ballroom, the guru of the creative class was costumed as an impeccably groomed and fashionable figure.

His performance was equally sleek. All the essential dramaturgical ingredients were there: a compelling narrative (he makes his argument by converting his research into a story, which begins with his Italian immigrant father in Newark, New Jersey), dramatic timing, even props. The climax of the show came when Florida drew from his breast pocket a pair of fashionable glasses. To make his point about the value added by design, he recalled how cheaply his father's factory had produced the same basic product.

Predictably, the response was dizzying. You could feel the love. For arts administrators and advocates embattled by financial and social retrenchment, an economic development professor extolling the virtues of creativity becomes a rock star.

But I had to wonder. Is this the song we want playing as our anthem? Had anyone in the hall read page 201?:

As for the fear that mass marketing kills the artist's political message: Reports of that death have been greatly exaggerated. Few cultural products have much political content to begin with. Many cultural theorists like to see cultural forms such as graffiti art and rap as political movements expressing the voices of the oppressed. This absurd notion does a disservice to both politics and art. True political movements, from the civil rights movement to the grassroots organizing of the right wing, are serious entities, laboriously put together and directed to specific political ends. These movements sometimes adopt art forms but are not generated by them. Meanwhile, most good graffiti artists and rappers are like good artists of any kind. They mainly want to hone their skills and do their art. They spend a lot of time practicing, as you may know if you live near any. If they can make money in the process, that's wonderful.

Did Florida include any artists in his focus groups? If so, he might have discovered that those cultural theorists' ideas are not all that absurd. Artists can be perfectly serious about their social/political engagement. And if you do live near any, you probably know that they would very much like to be paid a wage comparable to their fellow *creativistes*: software engineers, scientists, professors, and the like. If artists are worth being co-opted in the drive toward economic expansion, if people are willing to pay hundreds of dollars for a pair of high-design plastic eyeglass frames, then why don't artists earn a living wage? Why does an expert in economic development buy into the—dare I say "absurd"—myth of the happily starving artist?



In October, Florida speaks to an SRO crowd at The University of Texas at Austin (my town), hosted by our Blanton Art Museum. He is introduced as "the great Richard Florida," and the litany of organizations and governmental bodies he has advised is long. (It includes no arts groups, as I

recall.) The rap is mostly the same, though the *mise-en-scène* has been modified. Back in Austin, at the university, he's wearing jeans with shirttails trailing out of a casual suede jacket. He's grasping a bottle of water. This performer knows how to connect with his audience.

What does Richard Florida know about art and culture? Not a thing, he explicitly admits at the outset. The disclaimer continues: he knows nothing about cultural studies, gay studies, or ethnic studies, either. He acknowledges the truth of a remark made at a conference in Amsterdam, that there's nothing new in his work. Everything he knows, he says, is plain old common sense that he learned from his Dad. He comes to the subject of creativity as a student of economic growth. His research is driven by two specific questions: How do regions grow? What motivates that growth?

As in Portland, Florida speaks for about forty minutes, leaving no time for questions from the audience. And again, he gives out his email address: florida@cmu.edu.

Florida has been extending his argument for a new book, and rebutting emerging criticisms of his last one. He swiftly glosses these more recent ideas—he frames them as "challenges"—at the lecture's end. It's a familiar pattern from his book and subsequent articles, and it weakens his credibility. He spends lots of time in analysis, and then he spends too little time "in conclusion" on sweeping social (and most recently, political) statements that lack the necessary expertise, depth, and rigor to be convincing.

In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida relentlessly pursues the holy grail of regional economic growth for 300 pages. Then, in what feels like an editorial afterthought, he turns to the great social divide being perpetuated by this brave new world. Nevertheless, I believe Florida's sincerity when he writes that "the real issue is how well we understand the driving forces at work in our society today and use them to build the more cohesive and equally open and tolerant communities we desire" (p. 282). He's just out of his depth, as an urban planner, to explain and remedy social/political conditions. I admire him for using his bully pulpit to address these problems, but without any knowledge of art and culture, cultural studies, gay studies, or ethnic studies, his progressive concerns and platitudinous epithets ("everybody is creative") ring hollow.

In Austin, for example, he chides the audience for the vast and growing inequality in wages. "You have to do something about that," he says earnestly, as if it's a matter of some singlehanded will-to-power. And anyway, which wage inequality? Wage inequality is not a new issue to the artistic creatives in the creative class, but Florida remains content to imagine that artists just want to practice, without much aspiration toward a living wage. Being conscripted to the creative class has not yielded to artists the economic privilege that their presence is said to breed.

For another example, consider Florida's favorite line in the book. In Austin, he recalls a conversation in which an informant explains how much he loves the nightlife, the street culture, the indigenous scene. Florida has an epiphany: he realizes how important *experience* is to these *creativistes*. But upon further questioning, the informant reveals that he doesn't necessarily hang out much in that nightlife, because—and here comes Florida's favorite line—"We can't afford the recovery time." The creative class loves what Florida refers to as the "signals of creative energy." They thrive on the buzz—the *idea* that the options are available. But how much do they actually participate in cultural experiences, and do they financially support them? Is it any coincidence that Austin rates second on Florida's large-city creativity index and seventh on the *Chronicle of Philanthropy's* November 2003 list of stingiest cities? If the creative class is not willing to patronize the cultural creativity whose "signals" it craves, then who will?



The inevitable backlash has begun. The objections to Florida's work vary: That his claims to causality are simply overstated correlation. That his numbers, taken from the height of the dot.com boom, are aberrant. That his logic is circular (artists are included in the creative class, as those to be attracted, but they're also positioned as the bait to attract themselves as part of that class). No doubt, this big idea will go the way of its predecessors, like economic impact studies and Robert Putnam's theory of social capital. The problem with such totalizing theories is that there is no such thing. There is no single index, no single calculation, no silver bullet that solves everything with one well-aimed shot. Our world is too complex, and too quickly changing.

Of course, there has been beneficial fallout from the Florida phenomenon. Art and culture have become freshly relevant to city planners and politicians. But whether that has translated into anything tangible is arguable. In any event, I fear that, when the haphazard efforts to "implement" creativity fail to produce the predicted economic magic, art and culture's shining star will fall as quickly as it rose.

Florida's book appeared in 2002 as a *deus ex machina* for the ailing, post-911 cultural sector: as if heaven-sent, here was a case for the arts that needed no hard sell to policy-makers—a more soulful version of the "economic impact" argument. Have we been too eager to accept such case-making at face value when it comes with the imprimatur of economics, or other quantitative disciplines? The last decade has brought the creative sector an arsenal of hard data generated from our own field, and it's still rolling out. We have enough of it to make our own arguments based on our own questions, based on our own stories. And most of all, based on our own interests: How do regions grow *culturally*? What motivates that *cultural* growth?

To that end, *The Rise of the Creative Class* provides an exemplary model. Florida's ideas caught on, in part, because he offered a compelling account of the changes we feel happening in our lives but are unable to explain. Florida was able to see and describe a new picture of life in the U.S. because he set up his research to detect patterns still operating underneath the radar. There are excellent lessons to be learned from Florida's methods, if not his conclusions:

- **Make direct observations.** Attune to what's happening around you. Florida's project was prompted by his curiosity about actual people and their real-life choices, beyond newspaper headlines and generally accepted academic theories.
- **Talk to people.** There's no substitute for conversation when you want to gather information. Florida's impromptu chats and focus groups provided the raw material for his research design.
- **Ask different questions.** Ask "why," and then ask it again. Florida came up with radical new ideas because he wasn't stuck in the same old questions.
- **Search for alternative explanations.** Things are not always what they seem. Florida went to great lengths to avoid premature conclusions.
- **Integrate quantitative and qualitative research.** Numbers are necessary, but not sufficient. Florida knew he needed to make sense of the numbers by unpacking their social meaning.
- **Think big.** Research does not have an impact unless it is part of an ambitious vision. Florida's vision was big, and gained influence.

Whether or not Florida's belief in creativity as the driver of economic growth proves to be correct or to be of any lasting consequence to the creative sector, it has established the foundation for a serious public discourse about cultural growth. The creative sector can take some cues from

Florida's methods and findings in order to press ahead with its own agenda. We can also use his work to course-correct our own practices. I conclude with three directions we need to consider taking:

- First, we need to expand our exclusive focus on organizations. We have just begun to ask: what do artists need? The era of institution-building is over; the future is in networks. The era of project grantmaking is over; the future is in infrastructure.
- Second, cultural growth needs to be planned on the basis of emerging conditions rather than past practices. Scenario planning, a long-term planning tool used by large corporations, is one possible way to effectively stimulate cultural growth.
- Third, the creative sector needs to establish the interpretive function that transforms research data into policy recommendations. Our numbers will become meaningful—and convincing—only when they are fully humanized and framed by compelling vision.