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Create and/or Be Damned

By Benedict Seymour

Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and urban renewal 'guru', has had a great idea for a new book (*The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*): declare that your chronically silly but successful previous work was a bit one-sided, add a modishly gloomy bit of social conscience, then repeat most of the fatuous assumptions you started out with.

Whereas before The Creative Class was on the point of saving humanity one gentrified former industrial zone at a time, now it turns out that the creative class's ascendancy is actually creating a seriously uneven, overconcentrated and 'spiky' world. The 'creative cities for cultural creatives' dynamic produces not zingy diverse hubs of vibrancy but - shock! - creative ghettos that the cripplingly uncreative poor persons of the world just can't afford to live in. It's a revelation.

Actually, Florida still likes the world's 'creative cities', but it's just there's only 10 of them and their demographic profile is about as diverse as Pitcairn island's. Housing bubbles are making the archetypal creative cities uninhabitable for all but the already rich; gentrification is pricing out not only the creatively challenged residuum but more seriously now also the young 'creative' entrepreneurs. It's horrible.

[IMAGE]

Richard Florida's Class Divide Index

Fortunately for his career as a regurgitator of undead liberal ideology, Florida manages to remain deluded about the real causes of the inequity he now decries. Rather than discovering structural problems with the capitalist economy as a path to universal human creativity, he believes that if America can just get back to the Rooseveltian good old days and start seriously investing in the creativity of the wider population (public works projects? collective mural painting?) it may be able to hold on to a diminished but respectable place in a 'multipolar' new global order.

In fact, for Florida, on top of the growing economic divide which for some reason is accompanying the rise of the creative economy, it's the right-wing post-9/11 crackdown that's most seriously stifling the US' ability to beat its 'creativity deficit'! The clever, highly skilled upscale immigrants that the US economy depends on are turned off by Bush's restrictions on foreign labour (Florida doesn't consider the crucial role of illegalised immigrants in servicing the 'creative'/service economy, of course, nor the way the Patriot Act helps produce a pool of cheap precarious labour fit for the US of Walmart, Starbucks, etc.). Amusingly, Florida seems to think that the US' shortage of indigenous 'creatives', and not the current account and trade deficits (which are mere symptoms of the former, apparently), is the real crisis facing the US.

[IMAGE]

Unsurprisingly, Florida goes on to argue that only a renewed sense of the importance of (you guessed it) creativity can save the US – and the rest of the global creative economy. The underlying economic reasons for US decline – which, of course, also lie at the origin of the 'creative class' and the 'creative economy's' ascendancy – remain quite opaque, allowing him to return once again to the universal panacea of vibrant, dense (!) and tolerant cities. If we could just invest in creativity like we invest in sport, even dumb people could be made to activate their latent potential and the US would reverse its decline.

As in anti-Semitic 'theories' about capitalism being okay if it weren't for the contingent obstacle to universal well-being posed by parasitic Jewish financiers, Florida suggests that if it weren't for the Republicans and their militaristic imperialism, the US could get on with reinvesting in creative jobs for all. Soon America would become the creative Reich it should rightfully be, with everyone's inner potential deployed to maximum economic benefit and no more wars... The similarity, in terms of unproductive labour, between military and creative economies seems to pass him by, let alone the interdependence of the two.

In the end the term 'creative' for Florida is synonymous with 'middle class', creativity being located not only in the usual exalted forms of media and IT work, but also the traditional professions, engineering, and so on. Unfortunately, capitalism seems to have a problem turning everyone into members of this 'creative' middle class, though the idea that it might somehow do so isn't exactly fresh. Like Negri and Hardt, but without the professed ambivalence regarding the construction of a global superstate, Florida sees the answer to this problem in a global effort to foster a creative multitude. He calls for a global New Deal, since the economic polarisation he describes is after all not just an American problem but a global one. To really address the downside of the 'creative revolution', some kind of international coordination of capitalist strategy is now necessary and this will involve management of the global flows of population. 'People whose minds are ready to become means of production' will be fine, and their smartness should be rewarded by a tolerant immigration policy attuned to entrepreneurial acumen, but the rest of the under-exploited biomass will need some tweaking and some tending if they are to get by in the new, integrated global order.

With the goal of bringing more people into the creative class, Florida's wishful thinking nevertheless implies new forms of biopolitical control: the global labour pool needs to be reorganised to extract more creativity from more people. At this point his call for tolerance and diversity shows its true face as a higher form of the barbarism he deplores in current US immigration policy.

Unfortunately, as a kind of 'mental Stalinist' (or mentalist Stalin) still enthused about the economic benefits of maximising new forces of intellectual production, Florida doesn't seem to realise that the creative economy is in itself a symptom of – and stimulus to – the crisis of profitability which is now starting to affect his chosen people. As the global bubble of fictitious capital grows, so the centres of 'creativity' (aka privileged nodes in the circulation of this fictitious capital) themselves become too expensive to reproduce. It's ironic that from Florida's perspective it's the potential shortage of entrepreneurs that threatens the global economy, not, for example, its reliance on financial and other service industries at the expense of productive industry.

Florida's switch from upbeat reformist spin about the creative economy (in 2002) to gloomy reformist spin about its unsustainability (2005) is in itself a sign of crisis. He seems to be always about 3 years late with his grand prognoses – hailing the creative class in 2002? If his timing is as good with this book as last time, the housing bubble in the USA will have collapsed by the time it's in paperback. At least, however, Florida is right to emphasize the US' complacency about its global dominance, though his prescription for restoring it to a healthier, less arrogant condition in the global economy seriously underestimates the depth of the crisis.

Related Links

Richard Florida, *The Flight of The Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*, Collins: 2005

Richard Florida Creativity Group

The London Particular

Videos by The London Particular on gentrification in East London