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Creativity and Class

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Review of: Richard Florida
The Rise of the Creative Class: and How it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life, 2003, Christchurch, New Zealand : Hazard Press, 326 p, 1877270571 (pbk.) (£9.99)

Richard Florida
Cities and the creative class,
198 p, London : Routledge, 2005 , ISBN 0415948878 (pbk.) (£9.49)

Richard Florida and Irene Tinagli
Europe in the Creative Age,
London: Demos, 2004, 48p., free, ISBN: n/a, Available for free at:
<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/creativeeurope>

Richard Florida
The flight of the Creative Class
New York : Harper Business, 2004, 326 p. ISBN 006075690X (£14.24)

In March of 2006 New Zealand's dominant internet auction site, the eBay equivalent, Trade Me was sold for a staggering NZ\$700million (£235m/€342m) to the country's dominant newspaper group, Australian-owned, Fairfax. This internet site, which opened for business in 1999, netted its owner, 30-year-old kiwi Sam Morgan, a colossal NZ\$230million (£80m) fortune. The remaining NZ\$470m was shared among just eleven other investors. In the days that followed the sale New Zealand's media crowed about the transaction. It was evidence, they mostly said, of the creativity and tenacity of the site's founder, and the inability of 'old' media to understand the nature of new economy businesses (O'Sullivan, 2006; Gaynor, 2006; King, 2006). Among the commentators was one Gareth Morgan¹. Morgan is a prominent New Zealand economist, investment analyst and newspaper columnist. He is also Sam Morgan's

¹ Just in case this is not the same Gareth Morgan who authored 'Images of Organization' (Sage, 2006)

Dad, and \$47m richer from the Trade Me sale². While evidently proud of his son's achievement, Morgan senior used his newspaper column in the week of the sale to identify the lessons that the development and sale of Trade Me offered. Firstly he claimed the sale sent a message to young New Zealanders that they did not have to travel to London or Sydney or elsewhere to do creative and subsequently valuable things. It proved there were openings in the New Zealand economy for creative people including those who did not fit-in as 'functionaries' in corporate 'Dronesville'. He said his son had opted out of his university study to avoid just such places. Trade Me

offers a beacon of hope that the contemporary New Zealand economy is not the preserve of State and Foreign owned corporates that have vacancies only for journeymen (sic) and which, by their very nature, choke innovation and certainly self-determination (2006:2).

Morgan's column carries his by-line. But his claims about the value of creativity, the importance of retaining it in a particular location, and the challenges it poses for traditionally managed workplaces, are almost identical to the economic advice of American creativity and regional development guru Richard Florida. As far as we are aware Morgan and Florida have never met. But this isn't necessary because what they share is a form of knowledge with a particular degree of political and cultural cache. In this essay we offer a critical review of this form of knowledge as elaborated in Florida's key thesis and we use the *Trade Me* sale to illuminate some of the problematic features of Florida's work. Here we focus largely on the original book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Florida's follow up texts - *Flight of the Creative Class*, *Cities and the Creative Class*, and the DEMOS pamphlet *Europe in the Creative Age* - are largely appendices to the original work. Each extends in empirical and prescriptive directions Florida's original thesis. In particular these texts explore the location and distribution of the creative class across the US, Europe and around the World.

Why is Florida's work engaging?

Richard Florida is no stranger to the question of the mobility of labour and capital. Trained as an economic geographer his earlier books address the threat of Japanese capital and production processes to US superiority in manufacturing in the 1990s (Kenney and Florida, 1993; Florida and Kenny, 1990), and the failure of some US companies to capitalise on high tech ideas (e.g. Xerox). This work does address the mobility of elite forms of labour, particularly between firms. The 'creative class' thesis throws this theme wider and explores the mobility between cities, regions and countries.

A key difference between the *Rise of the Creative Class* and the earlier works is the style. Florida's recent work has had a 'best-seller' make over (Furusten, 1999). The earnest closely argued text of the first books has been replaced by a folksy, storied and prescriptive style similar to other popularized academic authors [compare for example Shoshana Zuboff (1988) and Zuboff and Maxim (2002)].

What is Florida's 'problem'? In broad terms it is the economic impact of a group of mobile high value workers he labels the creative class and how nations, regions and

² As an investor in the site Morgan senior became a beneficiary of the sale. He has subsequently announced that he doesn't need the money and will give it to charity (Chalmers, 2006).

cities can maximise the impact of this group. His advice – stripped to its barest elements - is the need to develop social and cultural environments that attract and retain this class in countries (see *The flight of the Creative Class*), cities (see *Cities and the Creative Class*) and regions (see the *Europe in the Age of Creativity*). So why might this work be of interest to *Ephemera* readers? For one thing Florida addresses the relationship between social and cultural environment, and global flows of work and labour. And secondly Florida offers a contemporary and popularized form of ‘class’ analysis.

On the first issue we ourselves were drawn to Florida’s work because we found it flowing effortlessly into the texts of policy makers, politicians and commentators in our location – Aotearoa/New Zealand. Our Minister for Economic, Regional and Industry Development described Richard Florida as ‘one of the most influential people in the world in economic development right now’ (Anderton, 2004). Florida himself has visited New Zealand, spoken at various government orchestrated ‘talk-fests’ and featured Kiwi *Lord of the Rings* film maker Peter Jackson in the opening to his *The Flight of the Creative Class*. For Florida the Jackson case demonstrates neatly his creative class thesis. On the back of an extraordinarily profitable movie deal Jackson and his chums have built a state of the art film-making complex in suburban Wellington and drawn swathes of high tech ‘creatives’ from around the planet – particularly California – to work there. According to Florida they come not only to work with each other, but to live here. Place plays a role in their migration and retention. It is, in other words, an independent variable in the distribution of labour and capital. The Jackson case is, we might suggest, a rather more complex story but it nevertheless seems to make sense to policy makers, politicians and business spokespeople in our place at least. But how does Florida’s advice work? How does it work to make sense of what is going on? It seems to us to work by taking a seemingly enormous and intractable problem - the global mobility of work, labour and capital - and presenting it in a way that is amenable to concrete solutions. This seems to make a lot of sense particularly for those responsible for some very material and immovable resources e.g. nation states, regions and cities. The solution, create a culturally diverse, tolerant, and simulating local environment that aligns with the cultural and political identifications of this high value group of workers, is to some degree achievable (symbolically at least). But how does Florida frame this seemingly intractable problem? How does his approach make sense of global mobility of labour, work and capital? He does it primarily through a form of ‘class analysis’ and it is with this that we have some problems.

In the preface to *The Rise of the Creative Class* Richard Florida boldly identifies the creative class as ‘the dominant class in society’. Why are they dominant? Well, because they are the ‘purveyors of creativity’ (simple!). Despite this rather circular logic, his claim is that a new, economically important, class of individuals is emerging whose call on resources and/or ability to create surpluses comes down to their particular creative abilities. On the face of it this seems like a perfectly reasonable claim. Before we discuss some of the problem with this let us first note how Florida’s use of ‘class’ works rather nicely.

As a device for presenting his thesis, Florida’s use of ‘class’ allows him, rhetorically at least, to locate this new group in a history of dominant ‘groups’. In his view such groups include the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Thus ‘class’, as a term,

allows him to dabble in a series of literatures that not only carry significant persuasive weight. They have also, for various reasons let's say, fallen into disuse. This 'disuse' means that some of the negative connotations of 'class' have fallen away. But the key problem here is that for Florida 'class' is, largely, a form of social and cultural identity while the economic relations and processes that form or contribute to the formation of these identities is not presented. Florida's take on class is, in other words, rather narrow.

We can illustrate this neatly with Florida's celebration of the founders of *Google*, *eBay* and *Amazon* (like Morgan Senior with respect to *Trade Me*). Like Morgan Senior, Florida seems to be at a loss to explain just how the extraordinary quantities of value these businesses have accumulated are actually produced, let alone discuss the basis upon which this value is distributed. What both commentators offer instead is a claim that attributes the value embedded in these firms to a magic, precious, mysterious and extraordinary quality they call '*creativity*'. Instead of a discussion of how *Google*, *eBay* and *Trade me* are off-spring (but in a different space) of older industrial value production and distribution formulas, Morgan and Florida attribute the success of these businesses to personalized attributes and dispositions that include an impatience with bureaucracies, non-conventional social and cultural behaviours and extensive use of new technologies. In place of discussion of the complex set of social, political and economic processes involved we get simply '*creativity*'. Creativity seems to be inserted into the gap between assembling a certain group of workers, users and customers together and the wealth that seems to miraculously accrue from this formation.

So how is the extraordinary wealth that the likes of *Google*, *eBay* and (locally) *Trade Me* (that Florida lauds as expressions of the work of the creative class) realized, appropriated and distributed? The fact is that the economic returns from these firms is largely due to their ability to reproduce *on the internet*, and thus on an internet scale, business practices that bricks and mortar companies pioneered. Furthermore, much of the value of *Ebay*, *Google* and *Trade me* is a function of the internet activity we produce as users, traders, visitors and webpage builders. So just as supermarket owners charge grocery producers for space on their shelves (because they have been able to assemble an audience of 'passers-by'), market square owners charge traders for space to sell goods, television companies charge advertisers on the basis of the number of watchers they have assembled into an audience, and press barons get rich filling newspapers with small ads, these new economy businesses have found cyber-spatial ways of appropriating value from the activity of others (those that once watched, now 'click'). Of course doing the 'same again' in a new space isn't easy. There is a lot of hard work to do and some very difficult problems to solve but there's nothing particularly mystifying about this. If you read Florida's books, and Morgan's column, such processes seem to be regarded as 'magic'!

What we might suggest is that Morgan and Florida are simply doing a particular kind of job here. They have been seduced by a cloud of '*creativity*' (see for extended discussion Bill, 2004, Prichard, 2003) that makes the rather more mundane economic relations at stake more engaging. And then, for good measure, they put themselves in the position of arbiters of truth about these 'magicians'. In both cases they then also go a little further and offer guidance to politicians, policy makers and business

analysts on how to pander to the seemingly idiosyncratic life-styles of these new receivers of surplus.

This is not to say that Florida's presentation of the 'creative class' and his guidance on how to woo or keep them to one's city, region or nation is not without novelty. For Florida the 'creative class' is a reincarnation of the bohemian spirit of 'subversion'. This is not bohemian depravity or debauchery however. It is the subversion of established institutional processes (functionaries in 'Dronesville', as Morgan noted) and the 'evils' that these create. For the creative class '(t)he real enemy was not the oppressive capitalist economic order but the suppression of key elements of the human spirit by the prevailing culture'(2003: 194). With the enemy identified the tools for combating it are clear. In his three books Florida advises managers and policy analysts to build into their cities, regions and nations a subversive, bohemian ethic that mirrors the same bohemian style of economic production. 'The Big Morph [change]...encompasses the sphere of work and involves an interpenetration of new work forms with new lifestyle forms' (Florida, 2003: 192). The aim then is to create cultural and physical environments where there is greater continuity between economic and social identities. Florida offers the same kind of advice for managers. But this is rather more humdrum. It amounts to support for familiar calls for the dismantling of the boundary between work and home (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; du Gay, 1991; Kanter, 1990).

Our next problem is with Florida's 'class structure'. In staking out the rise of the creative class Richard Florida puts himself in a position of having to delineate the shape of the new class society. His typology includes three categories: the super creative core (SCC), the creative professional (CP), and non-creative class (NC). The latter is the service (or servant) class. They take out the Creative Class' rubbish, make them their coffee, iron their collarless shirts, and generally supply the labour necessary to keep them in place. Meanwhile Florida's creative class is divided into two. At the top of the heap is the elite 'Super Creative Core' (SSC) of scientists, engineers, novelists and those that supply the 'thought leadership of modern society'. These super creatives owe their position to their ability to

produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and widely useful – such as designing a product that can be widely made, sold and used; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again. (2003: 69).

Second tier 'creative professionals' (CP) are those in business, finance, law, health care and related fields that make the Super creative core's work possible and valuable. Florida suggests their subordinate positioning is due to their *lower* levels of useful (meaning 'surplus' realizing) output. The line between super creatives and the (average) creatives is fuzzy. But the line between the creatives and the non-creatives is more indelible. Non-creatives are in manufacturing, construction, transportation and the myriad of service industries e.g. personal care, food service and clerical occupations who seemingly do, compliantly, what the creatives ask. As a corollary to this typology Florida also offers some notes on mobility between classes. One form of mobility is clearly downward. Many fall through the creative gaps and into the service/servant class, he says. Not only are certain jobs continuing to be de-skilled, or as he puts it 'de-creatified', the rise of the well paid but busy creative class has

created a demand for a service/servant class who will 'take care of them and do their chores' (Florida, 2003: 71).

What about mobility into the creative class? College students or highly educated immigrants get a mention here but for those without access to the privileges of education and/or creative social networks, the opportunities for being recognised as (and rewarded for) being creative are extremely limited. 'At its minimum-wage worst, life in the Service Class is a gruelling struggle for existence amid the wealth of others' (Florida, 2003: 71).

Florida's 'class structure' is effectively a simple delineation between those who 'think' and those who 'do'. But how does 'thinking' (or rather 'creating') translate into wealth? Florida's answer is that 'thinking' amounts to a reinvention of craft work. Unlike the low cost Scientific Management/Fordist response to competition, Florida claims that the new era of competition *reinvests* the creative worker with craft knowledge and this offers control over their means of production. Through creative craft knowledge 'more workers than ever control the means of production because it is inside their heads; they *are* the means of production'(2003: 37). Of course to a point this has always been the case. Some groups of workers do at certain points and under certain circumstances manage to extend their control of the production process and successfully exercise a claim on the surplus value they have produced. It is clearly ludicrous to suggest that Peter Jackson and his chums are not without control over their production processes and through this extend their claim over the value produced by their work. But this is some way short of control of the means of production of the film industry or, in the case of the whole creative class', of economic activity in general. In Jackson's case for instance he continues to wrestle NewLine Cinema (a subsidiary of Time-Warner) via legal means for his share of returns from the first Lord of the Rings movie (Johnson, 2005). Time Warner financed the movies and did the distribution and marketing. Jackson's argument is that Time Warner manipulated the movie's total value figure (upon which Jackson's share is based) by selling movie rights at discounted rates to Time Warner subsidiaries. In other words, the creatives might control the production processes but this matters for little if they are unable to extend control to those moments and spaces where value is realized. This issue leads us to question Florida's claim that the rise of the 'creative class' is akin to the rise of the bourgeoisie or feudal aristocracy. There is a significant qualitative difference between a the rise of a certain group of high value labourers, such as Florida's creative class, and the position of being primary or first receivers of the surpluses produced and realized from that work.

What Florida gains from using terms like 'means of production' and the 'bourgeoisie' is some rhetorical leverage on his claims while ultimately class for him is found in the cultural and social identity of particular groups and he distances himself from discussion of the economic relations at stake. For example he writes:

I am not talking here about economic class in terms of the ownership of property, capital or the means of production. If we use class in this traditional Marxian sense, we are still talking about a basic structure of capitalists who own and control the means of production, and workers under their employ. But little analytical utility remains in these broad categories of bourgeoisie and proletarian, capitalist and worker. (Florida, 2003: 68).

In other words, Florida wants it both ways. He leverages the rhetorical appeal of a Marxian approach to class in general ('means of production' etc) and then says that traditional Marxian approach to class has little remaining utility. One could simply see this as shoddy scholarship. We would prefer to see it as opting for a singular form of class analysis when, in fact, there are others that might have been considered. Contrary to Florida's claim, the Marxian tradition includes many more forms of class analysis. 'Class' can refer to 'ownership', of course, but it can also refer to 'consciousnesses', or to 'struggle', or to a particular group or to the positions in relations of distribution (of surplus value). In other words class is not a noun, but an *adjective* as well (Resnick and Wolff, 1987). It describes things and names things. It can describe different forms of ownership, 'consciousnesses', 'struggle' and practices and positions in the distribution of value. At best Florida has simply ignored these other ways of understanding 'class'.

This is not to claim that Florida's work is not without some ethical or political sensibility. Despite his celebration of 'creativity', and his celebration of the group he ascribed it to, Richard Florida criticises his favoured class for its lack of direction and sense of purpose. The creative class is not doing enough to help others or to realize its social mission. This might be the case. From our perspective this 'tub thumping' is however a poor substitute for some critical commentary on the economic processes that help produce this group in the first instance.

Relations of meaning and relations of distribution

The key problem is that Florida has confused the appearance of a certain cultural and social identity with change in the economic processes of value distribution. It is certainly true that Sam Morgan's *Trade Me* articulated a certain cultural logic: no-collar workplaces full young workers with little respect for bureaucratic rules and traditional organizational practices. But we should not then assume that the rules of economic exchange followed from these new norms and identities. *Trade me* was also constituted in such a way that a certain group, when the time came, were able to assert their claim over and privatise a significant quantity of economic value sourced to the activity surrounding the *Trade Me* web environment. The staff might have never gone to work in a tie, but when the time came Sam Morgan and his business angels (as the press called his fellow investors) were securely in position to take possession of a truly handsome fortune. The point is that we should not confuse the social and cultural norms, behaviours and dispositions of a group of intellectually able workers with the class practices of asserting a claim on and receiving the economic value from the activities of others.

The final problem, and perhaps what finally sinks Florida's claim to have spotted the emergence of a new class to challenge the bourgeoisie, is the continuity of big business. Florida notes that 'companies, including very big ones, obviously still exist, [and] are still influential and probably always will be' (Florida, 2003: 6). He notes that

our money is managed not by upstarts but by large financial institutions. The resources that power our economy are similarly managed and controlled by giant corporations. (Florida, 2003: 27)

What Florida is observing here is little or no change in the core institutionalized formations. Big business (Microsoft, Intel etc) and finance capital not only continue to exist but are actually very important, as Florida admits, to the creative class. They provide useful services; bring creative products to mass markets faster and most importantly make the creative class materially rich with their acquisition strategies. So, one has to ask, just what has changed?

Concluding points

Ultimately Florida is a geographer who confused the appearances and dispositions of a social group with the relations and processes that produces them. The likes and dislikes, cultural and social identities, expectations and global mobility of a particular swathe of intellectually able workers is certainly a feature of contemporary capitalism. But this grouping has in no way changed the core relations and processes involved. Far from rivalling the bourgeoisie, as Florida claims, some members of this group have simply taken up positions as the new receivers of surpluses and thus are heir to established relations. Of course the particular social and cultural characteristics (and how they orchestrate productive relations) of this group may well differ to some degree from those who populate 'Corporate Dronesville' (to quote Gareth Morgan). Also the above normal surpluses he identifies are being appropriated from quite different sites e.g. software and internet real estate. But this is an empirical feature. The core distributive mechanisms, those that give some a living (or less than a living) and make others the beneficiaries of very serious fortunes, have changed little. Ultimately the likes of Sam Morgan and his eleven 'angels' are just the next generation of beneficiaries of the social formation that funnels extraordinary wealth into the pockets of those who by comparison with the numbers involved in actually producing this wealth – can (almost) fit on the head of a pin.

Of course Florida's work doesn't entirely ignore wealth appropriating mechanisms. The *Rise of the Creative Class* includes a few pages on the importance of a vibrant the venture capital system (2003:48-52) to the creative economy. But Florida's discussion of these mechanisms is disconnected from the problems they help to create. Late in the *Rise of the Creative Class* Florida worries that the 'worsening divides in our society' will 'eventually limit our long-run economic growth and development' (203:321). He calls on everyone to 'create new mechanisms for building social cohesion' (2003:323). Sadly Richard Florida himself seems unable to see any connection between the need to connect these mechanisms and the already established mechanisms of wealth distribution.

We could regard Florida's failure to connect these mechanisms as a weakness of the text. But it is much more than this. It is a systematic fault-line in this and other texts like it that link wealth and identity, but keep these features disconnected from the particular mechanisms of wealth production and distribution. But then is this where we find the value of Florida work? Maintaining this 'fault-line' allows his texts to flow effortlessly into the speeches of politicians, the programmes of policy makers and the column inches of economic journalists who, arguably, are in the same business of creating mystifying forms of knowledge (like the one named 'creativity') without attending to the particular mechanisms and processes that surround them.

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