

# THE WALRUS

## The Florida Dilemma

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VANCOUVER—Everything is wet here. Richard Florida came to campus. Hundreds of rain-soaked academics crowded into a large UBC lecture hall to hear what he had to say. But they were also there just to see him in the flesh. That's what you do when someone famous comes to town. Florida possesses that aura of royal jelly some people get when they are constantly under a spotlight or microphone. He's become the go-to guy for evidence of the economic benefits of the arts. No one has quite managed to put together an argument, backed up with evidence, of how cities thrive as magnets for what he has coined the "creative class." That's me and you, yuppies, and gays and lesbians, designers, artists of all kinds—educated people who have acquired a taste of urban cool. It's not about suburbs and strip malls and the ugly, numbing tedium of sameness. It's about the aesthetics of hipness.

Of course, Florida is admired but he also reviled because he has emerged not only as a public intellectual, but also as a popular one, and a lot of academics are uncomfortable with that sort of rock-star status. I think his lecture helped them get over it. He's one of

the smoothest presenters I've ever seen or heard, highly conscious of the criticisms of his work and quick to admit his flaws, apologize for the weakness of his research, and then move on to a defense of what he has managed to accomplish. It's a pretty disarming strategy and it worked—on this listener, anyway.



It helps when you begin by telling your audience you're basically an Italian working-class kid from New Jersey. A big charge against Florida is that he promotes an elitist view of society, that his creative class is a self-entitling one. So when he offers up his own working-class childhood as the springboard for thinking about the benefits of being smart and rooted in family, place, and culture, even the most hardened skeptic has to grant him a little credit. And, man, is he ever sharp about building credit.

It occurred to me that male academics might just be jealous of Florida's charismatic power. It's not every day a guy with a Ph.D walks into a party like he was walking onto a yacht, to borrow from Carly Simon. There's a lot of bad dressing in the academy. Like monks, we're not supposed to be calling too much attention to our physical bodies.

Florida is the living emblem of the creative class, all about brains and fashion. He wore an expensive black suit jacket with lapels just wide enough to suggest his Italian rat-pack roots. It was buttoned over a gorgeous white shirt with French cuffs, open collar, no tie. His jeans were rich and dark, could almost pass for trousers, and his hair was perfect. He had one eye in the mirror as he watched himself gavotte, sure, but he played to the audience's belief in the power of the creative life and ultimately validated our attempts to prove the value of the life of the mind. How can you argue with that?