



News, analysis and comment – arts

Creativity – the economy's key ingredient

By [Rita Dimasi](#) ArtsHub | Monday, October 17, 2011



Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 NIV)

Perhaps it was this thinking that inspired author Richard Florida, the famous professor of Regional Economic Development, when he wrote his US bestseller [The Rise of the Creative Class](#). Florida's proposition is straightforward: In this new millennium, the most influential class in society is something he calls the "Creative Class". The book has a broad agenda and clearly looks to wipe out the elitism of the multi nationals and empower a more egalitarian reach of the community.

And as pointed out by the book's US publishers Basic Books, every era has its hero and villains. The 1880s saw the factory worker emerge as a powerful force navigating his way through the Industrial Revolution. The 1950s produced what is known as the "company man" and the dark profile of trans nationals. The 1980s saw the graduation of the baby boomers and the beginning of the information age. Now the 21st century welcomes the creative class – and the rebuilding of an economic hierarchy – where ingenuity and vision make money.

To date the reception of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and its message has been without a doubt positive. The book won the Washington Monthly 2002 Annual Political Book Award. And Harvard University critics enthuse [that it] ‘is an insightful portrait of the values and lifestyles that will drive the 21st century economy, its technologies and social structures. To understand how scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and other self-motivated, creative people are challenging the traditional structures of 20th century society, read this book. It will convince you that success in the future is not about technology, government, management or even power; it is all about people and their dynamic and emergent patterns of relationships.’ (Lewis M. Branscomb, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University)

In a feature adapted from his book for www.washingtonmonthly.com, Florida subheads his commentary with ‘Why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race.’ This offers some insight into what he is saying, and why it is such an empowering message. And one review of the book begins by stating: ‘Would you suspect that a city’s subculture of artists, geeks, gays and rockers are key indicators of the local economic development potential?’

Yet who are these creatives? According to the author they are scientists, engineers, architects, educators, writers, artists, and entertainers. These are the demographics of the creative class and they boost the economy not through financial ability or skill alone, but rather through their ideas. The very fact that they think seems to be what can start that economic ball rolling.

Critics and supporters alike call the premise provocative. The fact that the author is able to place economic growth slap bang in the middle of creativity and call it a new economic class is certainly exciting. The profiteering times of the 1980s are well behind us and now in the 21st century the term “greed is good” is a thankfully ghostly reminder of an era when economic wealth was not necessarily about creativity, but rather largesse. Those baby boomers – born from post war calm – certainly had enrichment in mind, but it was a pure financial gain at all cost that they sought and not ingenuity.

According to an interview Florida did with www.salon.com the distinguishing feature between his creative class theory and the emergence of knowledge and new media expertise is ‘the fact that it isn’t just about knowledge workers, it isn’t just about scientists and engineers, it isn’t just technology people. It’s that creativity is multidimensional...there are people in other fields and other walks of life who use their creativity – in particular artists, entertainers, musicians and cultural producers.’

In the same interview, Florida maintains that ‘in order to harness creativity for economic ends, you need to harness creativity in all its forms. You can’t just generate a tech economy or information economy or knowledge economy; you have to harness the multi-dimensional aspects of creativity’. So the book says ‘there are three types of creativity: technological creativity, which is innovation, new products and ideas and technologies; economic creativity, which includes entrepreneurship, turning those things into new businesses and new industries; and cultural and artistic creativity, the ability to invent new ways of thinking about things, new art forms, new designs, new photos, new concepts. Those three things have to come together to spur economic growth.’

Yet is the existence of a creative class really new? Could it be argued that the creative class is this generation's baby-boomers morphed by new technology and new media into something that is 21st century funky? A class without shoulder pads and gluttony, but instead one with compassion and innovation.

As early as 1500 in renaissance Florence Michelangelo lifted artists from the lowly category of tradesmen, to practitioners of the highest form of achievement- artistic creativity. And his powerful and immensely rich patrons, Pope Julius II and the Medici dynasty, fully understood even then the transforming value of this artistic creativity for the status, prestige and economic potential of the works they commissioned.

The similarities begin and end with the shape of the modern economy. Today, we like to think we live in an age of miracles where constant innovation is richly rewarded. In fact most of the innovation we recognise is, on closer inspection, only a small incremental change over past practices, rather than large leaps. In Michelangelo's time, arguably a period of greater true innovation, materials were relatively scarce and costly in all fields – from wool and cotton, to marble, gold, even painters pigment and canvas.

In contrast ours is an age of relative surplus – where material goods are increasingly transacted at commodity prices in vast mass markets (eg computers – which used to be premium price are now flogged off at essentially near commodity price). Moreover today there is a relative surplus of capital allowing many organizations to compete in any given area of technical refinement on a global basis. As many companies have discovered, innovation is hard and higher economic value (and a premium price) comes more often not from the true innovativeness, but rather from the intangible gloss of creativity that is wrapped around highly successful ventures. It is this near intangible creativity that distinguishes an iPod from an ordinary MP3 player, or a great dance company from yet another group of well-trained dancers. Little wonder then that Florida's book found such a receptive global market – creativity is now almost a synonym for survival.

Though it is now nine years since the release of *The Rise of the Creative Class* Richard Florida's propositions show no sign of abating and remain a compelling narrative for explaining many of today's economic and social phenomena and for posing a way forward. While there were those keen to discredit Florida as the GFC gutted many American cities just as many are now clamouring to encourage the creative classes within their communities to help them rebuild. From the [London riots](#) to the [Arab Spring](#) earlier this year Florida has been able to show that as globalisation and urbanisation reshape the world having a vibrant and empowered creative class underpins innovation and economic growth.