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The Creative Economy And The Kardashianization Of Society. An Interview With Richard Florida

BUDAPEST – When I see Richard Florida, author of “[The Rise of the Creative Class](#)” on stage at the [Brain Bar Budapest Festival](#), I can’t help but think of Bruce Springsteen.

Not that there’s any physical similarity between the two. But there other similarities. Partly because he, like the Boss, has some Italian roots (Springsteen’s mother surname was Zirilli); but most of all because, when he talks about his father’s working class job, and of how he spent his life doing something he didn’t like, just to give his son a better future, the jukebox in my head starts playing songs like [Factory](#).

You know the first lines, when it goes “Early in the morning factory whistle blows/
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes/Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning
light/It’s the working, the working, just the working life.”



Image credits: Design Terminal

Florida's family story turns up again again in his talk, as a reminder of an America where [manufacturing jobs](#) hadn't dried up yet, and could offer a launchpad, for the son or nephew of immigrants, to climb up the social ladder.

It seemed appropriate, therefore, to start the interview with him with a question about immigration.

What do you think, professor, of Silicon Valley's idea of having fast track [visas for talented immigrants](#). Does that make sense?

Immigrants are of course a key factor in economic success. After the war, the United States attracted all of these great Jewish scientists and lots of European artists. We wouldn't have, really, a modern Hollywood without people from this part of the world.

You can think you can cherry pick, that might work; but the thing is, we don't know.

We did a study when I lived in Pittsburgh, we wanted to understand how we could boost the immigration. We interviewed many of these highly skilled immigrants, software developer, biotech scientist.

To a person, they said, "We want to go to a place that welcomes all immigrants for two reasons. One, we want to go to a place that's welcoming and open minded, but two, we want our culture represented: we want food. We want restaurants. We want anything, and that comes with a mixture of low and high skills." Immigrants tend to be additives. One thing that I think is being an open minded, and tolerant society, is looking at immigrants not as a cost, but as a benefit to society.

Sounds great, but will those immigrants now be able to find any job at all? Low skilled industrial jobs seem particularly prone to disappearance due to automation, but even technological startups need to hire less. Instagram is not Apple.

I see two questions here. One about the nature of startups and the answer is, yes, there's a change in the nature of startups. I asked Fred Wilson the great venture capitalist about this. He said, "In the old days, what it took to be successful was an engineer. What it takes to build a great company now is not only engineering talent, but artistic creative talent, broad minded talent whether that's Instagram, or Twitter, whatever. His view was those kinds of minds, or that mixture of minds is much more attractive for a company.

The second question you raised is a question about the future of work. There are two views on this by very smart people: one, is that there's going to be no work left over. The other view, which I think I subscribe more to, is that human beings continuously invent new divisions of labor. That's what happened in the past. This time it looks perhaps more though because everything's happening so quickly.

So, I think it's more a social question and has to do more with work policy than with economic logic. Why are we working an eight-hour day, a five-day week? Why aren't we talking about a shorter work week? Why aren't we talking about a shorter work day? Why aren't we talking about work sharing? Actually, leisure is a big part of our economy. Tourism, travel, experience, and consumption.

Also, we do not have necessarily to bring back the old jobs, but can create new ones, that give more people the opportunity to follow a dream, and do meaningful and purposeful work. You and I are really lucky. We get to do these kind of jobs. My dad didn't. My dad did work in a factory, and he didn't much like it.

Let's talk about this "creative economy". One thing many observers have noted is that, while there are millions of people engaged in activities that are "creative" in a way (from posting videos on YouTube, to writing articles for blogs) very few of them are able to make a living out of that. All of the revenues seem to go the hosting platforms. How could we bridge this gap?

I think that we still have the old relationships of owners of the means of production and not. The creative class is, in a way, like a new working class or a variant of a working class. The real contradiction of capitalism is between the collective production of creativity and the class-based individual appropriation of creativity.

You see that not only in YouTube but in science. All of these scientists create a new idea, and then one technology company takes it and makes billions. This is coming from a scientific pool of thousands and thousands of brilliant researchers who created that. Then a "Jobs" comes and says, "OK. I'm going to take that." Don't get me wrong. He's done a great thing. He deserves some reward. The point is, we now have to think about the way of dividing those royalties.

Another thing that really worries me, is that in a creative economy, it seems, low quality content starts to rise to the top. The “Kardashianization,” the ability of these popular cultures to grab a lot of attention in a YouTube world, that’s worrying. I don’t want to sound like an old curmudgeon, but I wonder if we are just ‘dumbifying’ our society. It has become such a big thing for young people, what Lasch would have called, “[The Culture of Narcissism](#)“, so many of them now say, “I want to be a celebrity”. That’s scary.