

Utterly baffled

by Richard Florida

People will always read books through the lenses of their own belief systems. Most who don't like *The Rise of the Creative Class* are social conservatives, unhappy with my evidence that regions which are open and tolerant do better economically. These folks have accused me of being anti-family and even of "undermining Judeo-Christian civilization."

But the critique in this newspaper, by Paul Maliszewski, comes from the left. Here I am painted as a vapid elitist and a starry-eyed huckster for creativity and flexibility-still promoting the New Economy while failing to see how the real economy exploits the masses.

That's really weird. The book takes aim at 1990s New-Economy fantasies and actually has little to do with making cities yuppie-friendly, though critics like Maliszewski have tried to frame it (and belittle its message) that way. Rather my core message is: Human creativity is the ultimate source of economic growth. Every single person is creative in some way. And to fully and tap and harness that creativity we must be tolerant, diverse and inclusive.

This message is having real impact. To cite just one case: In Cincinnati, Procter & Gamble has joined with civic activists and gays to try and overturn the heinous Article 12, which forbids the city from passing anti-discrimination legislation that would apply to gays and lesbians.

One way Maliszewski has distorted my work is by quoting highly selectively from the book. Every concern that he says I ignore is, in fact, dealt with extensively. A few examples:

In the preface, I decry "the naïve optimism of the so-called New Economy." The first chapter notes that "Not all is rosy" for workers today: "With no big company to provide security, we bear much more risk ... [We suffer] high levels of mental and emotional stress ... We crave flexibility but have less time ... The technologies that were supposed to liberate us have invaded our lives."

Later I write, "Flexibility does not mean the end of long hours ... In fact, the long trajectory of modern capitalism has involved the relentless extension of the working day across time and space..." A chapter called "The Time Warp" describes the many "insidious factors" that lead to overwork and stress. Moreover: "The real losers, in terms of overwork, are those holding two full-time minimum-wage jobs to support a family ... [They] are a modern-day equivalent of the nineteenth century's burned-out factory laborers."

The machine shop-hair salon story, the Judy Davis story (with which I'm quite familiar) and others are utterly misrepresented by Maliszewski. I actually know about working-class concerns not from research and books, but from life. My father worked in a factory in Newark for over four decades- until it was mismanaged into ruin. *The Rise of the Creative Class* contains many references to the incredible talents of both factory and service workers, and argues that harnessing the creative energy of people currently ignored and misused is crucial to our long-run economic prosperity.

Maliszewski implies that because I don't write by journalistic conventions, with lots of quotes and anecdotes from named sources, my research methods are suspect. I am not a journalist; I'm a social scientist. My job is to discern larger trends from many kinds of evidence and large samples of data. The book is based on over five years of systematic research, reported in peer-reviewed journals which included field visits and observations to dozens of cities; interviews and structured focus groups with hundreds of people across the country; plus detailed statistical analysis of changes in the American economy over the past

century and of the various factors associated with regional growth. And while there is certainly room to debate and to further test my findings, other researchers have since substantiated many of them in independent studies, and none have questioned my basic methods.

But there is a far more important issue at hand. The people I meet in travels across this country and abroad are becoming very nervous about where the U.S. seems to be headed-how we are abandoning many principles that have made the nation great. We are the country that has long been open to newcomers-the one that led the world into the creative economic age. And now we are on the verge of throwing it all away.

Our country is growing more unequal. In a recent article for Washington Monthly, I noted that income inequality is worst in leading "creative regions" such as San Francisco, Austin and Raleigh-Durham. This is a fundamental, nationwide problem. As my book observes: "Employing millions of people merely to do rote work like pushing brooms, stacking boxes or stuffing circuit boards is a monstrous waste of human capabilities. Someday it may be seen to be as retrograde, both ethically and economically, as compelling humans to pick cotton on a plantation."

Yet we can't begin to address this and other problems nationally because we are also increasingly divided and polarized. On one side is a creative America centered around our great metropolitan regions which are diverse, progressive and cosmopolitan-as well as being home to our leading industries and much of our wealth creation. On the other is George Bush's America which revolves around older-style industries and more traditional values. And to play to its base, the current administration is hell-bent on promoting policies which undermine our creative advantage. Our leaders are under-investing in education, in research, science and technology and arts and culture, while protecting old-line industries, bashing gays and defending "family values." By tightening rules on immigration and intruding politically into scientific work, they make us a less open society- while other nations open their gates wider, attracting the talented people who once came here to fuel our growth.

A new path is imperative if we are to get back on track. We must tap the creative energies of each and every American. We must continue to be a tolerant and inclusive society, welcoming many kinds of people and ideas. The upcoming election will choose the direction we take.