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the wrong stuff

creative class theory, diversity
and city performance

Max Nathan

Abstract

Richard Florida's well-known 'creative class' theory suggests that diverse, tolerant and cool cities will outperform other places. Cities with more ethnic minorities, gay people and counter-culturalists will attract high-skilled professionals: the presence of this 'creative class' ensures cities get the best jobs and most dynamic companies. Much of Florida's research concentrates on American cities. Does it work in the UK?

This paper examines Florida's ideas, focusing on the evidence in British cities. It finds little evidence of a 'creative class', and little evidence that 'creative' cities do better. Businesses look for skilled workers when making location decisions, but skilled people also move to where the jobs are. Buzz attracts young people to city centres for a short time, after which most move out to suburbs.

The paper concludes that the creative class model is a poor predictor of UK city performance. There is other, stronger evidence that diversity and creativity are linked to economic growth in cities, not least through rebranding and boosting tourism. Decisionmakers should focus on the basics: creativity is the icing, not the cake.

Introduction

A few years ago, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote an instructive guide on 'How to Be an Intellectual Giant'.

Amongst the advice on tone, subject niche, demeanour, how to title one's first book and cadge the next newspaper column, Brooks includes one crucial insight: be wrong. But be wrong in the right way – your ideas should be eye-catching and controversial enough to get everyone paying attention. That way lies fame – or at least infamy.

A lot of people would accuse US academic Richard Florida of being wrong in the right way. For cities and the urban policy world, the biggest idea for years is Florida's 'creative class' theory, as set out in his best-seller *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Florida, 2003) and just-out sequel, *The Flight of the Creative Class* (Florida, 2005).

Florida has a striking take on city performance: diverse, tolerant, cool cities do better. Places with more ethnic minorities, gay people and counter-culturalists will attract high-skilled professionals, and thus get the best jobs and most dynamic companies. And Florida seems to have sheaves of data to back it all up.

These ideas are novel, controversial – and for progressive commentators, politicians and policy-makers, highly attractive. On both sides of the Atlantic, Richard Florida's work has been met with much interest and some scepticism. Not surprisingly, Florida's ideas have taken him from academic obscurity to worldwide recognition. And so the author

has developed a glamorous new niche as public intellectual, consultant and urban policy guru.¹

About this paper

It is important to understand the creative class approach, and what it means for British cities. First, because if it is correct, urban policy in the UK needs a substantial rethink.

And second, because without much examination it is becoming part of the conventional wisdom about how to make cities work better.

Some cities and states are already putting Florida's ideas into practice – Michigan, Cleveland and Philadelphia have all launched 'cool cities' initiatives, for example. In the UK, Liverpool is now considering creating a 'Gay Quarter'. Dundee has zoned a new 'Cultural Quarter' next to the city centre.

In the US, creative class ideas have generated headlines like 'Cities Need Gays To Thrive' and 'Be Creative or Die'. They have also been slated, attacked and written off by a mob of angry academics, wonks and other pundits (e.g. Kotkin, 2005; Markusen, 2005; Hannigan, 2004 and Malanga, 2004).

So has Florida hit on something profound about how cities work, or is he just wrong in the right way? And what are the lessons for Britain? This paper examines the creative class theory in more detail, and its implications for cities and urban policy in the UK. It then explores some broader themes in diversity, economics and city performance.

The geography of bohemia

Richard Florida's ideas develop in two distinct phases. His academic work links social diversity, high human capital and the presence of high-tech industry (Florida, 2001). He tests these connections across 50 US metro areas, using:

- A Bohemian Index, measuring the share of creative people in a given area (e.g.

authors, designers, musicians, actors, visual artists and dancers)

- A Talent Index, measuring the population share with a four-year degree or above
- A Melting Pot Index, measuring the foreign-born population share
- A Gay Index, measuring the number of households with co-habiting same-sex partners.

Not surprisingly, Florida finds that bohemianism is spatially concentrated. He also finds areas with a large bohemian population tend to have a large skilled population, are ethnically and sexually diverse, and have concentrations of high-tech industry. What explains this? Florida suggests a causal connection between bohemia, diversity, technology and talent:

The presence and concentration of bohemians in an area creates an environment or milieu that attracts other types of talented or high human capital individuals. The presence of such human capital in turn attracts and generates innovative, technology-based industries. (Florida, 2001)

The creative class

Florida's later work staples a second argument onto the first. He now argues that advanced economies are driven by 'creativity', and are dominated by a 'Creative Class' at the top end of the labour market (Florida, 2003). Florida splits this Creative Class into two groups: a 'Super-Creative Core' and a larger 'Creative Professional' group. The first group includes scientists, engineers, actors, poets, novelists; the second group covers high-tech service professionals, legal and health care professionals. Both groups are highly qualified, and either generate new ideas or apply them. Together, the creative class comprises 38m people, over 30% of the US labour force.

Drawing on interviews and focus groups, Florida suggests the creative class is overwhelmingly liberal and cosmopolitan, with a strong preference for city living. Creative people seek ethnic and sexual diversity, open-

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ness to others, vibrant cultural life, a good environment and excellent amenities. As before, bohemian types pull in high-skilled creative types. Organisations compete for creative people, and business increasingly locates where the best people are.

Cities that can attract and keep the creative classes will do well in this new economy. Places like New York, San Francisco, Boston, Austin, Seattle and Portland – top of the US Creativity Index, offering a mix of ‘technology, talent and tolerance’ – will thrive in years to come. As Florida (2003) puts it:

My message is simple. Without diversity, without weirdness, without tolerance, without difference, a city will die. Cities don't need shopping malls and convention centres to be economically successful, they need eccentric and creative people.

“ Traditional manufacturing is becoming less important. In the UK high-tech manufacturing, science, services and the public sector now form a larger share of the economy ”

Working with Demos, Florida has also produced a stripped-down ‘UK Creativity Index’ illustrating the ‘creative potential’ of Britain’s largest 40 cities (Demos, 2003). Cities were weighted according to patent applications per head, non-white residents and levels of gay-friendly services. The top 10 are Manchester, Leicester and London (equal second), Nottingham, Bristol, Brighton, Birmingham, Coventry, Cardiff and Edinburgh.²

The creative class theory of city growth

Let’s sum up. Overall, Florida is making three big claims about the connections between diversity, creativity and city performance.

These are:

- There is a creative class in Western societies, which wants to live in diverse, tolerant, cool cities.
- The creative class shapes the economy of many cities. Increasingly, jobs move where the skilled people are.
- Cities which attract and retain the creative classes do better. Creativity is driving their development.

So how does it stack up? The rest of this paper assesses each claim in turn, drawing on evidence from the US and the UK.³

A Creative Class?

How important is creativity? Florida is certainly on to something here. Western economies are changing. Returns to human capital are rising, and many companies are competing harder for the most able people (Machin and Vignoles, 2001). Traditional manufacturing is becoming less important. In the UK high-tech manufacturing, science, services and the public sector now form a larger share of the economy. Between 1971 and 2001, Britain lost 4m manufacturing jobs – but gained 3m business service jobs, 2.3m jobs in distribution and leisure, and 2m positions in the public sector (Moore and Begg, 2004).

This is nothing new. The problem has always been the language we use to describe such changes – phrases like ‘the knowledge economy’ aren’t always helpful. Sadly, neither is ‘the creative class’.

For starters, the concept feels large and a bit unwieldy. Florida includes claims adjusters and funeral directors, but not airline pilots, ship engineers or tailors. Many of those working in ‘non-creative’ professions will exhibit creative behaviour day to day, even if they lack high educational qualifications. It’s hard to see why some are ‘creative’ and others not (Markusen, 2005).

And in practice, things may not add up. First, the Gay Index is not as straightforward as it looks. Florida proxies ‘gay’ households by the number of same-sex households – so university cities with a lot of shared student houses are likely to score high on ‘gayness’ and human capital. (In which case, the result simply reiterates the well-known relationship between high human capital and urban growth. We’ll return to this later.)

Second, US Metro Areas cover city cores and suburban areas.⁴ Many of the creative class will choose to live in suburbs, not cities. So it is also unlikely Florida’s creative class has the common progressive outlook

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he suggests. Engineers, accountants, designers and social workers might all be professionals, but won't all share the same values, politics, preferences and behaviour as artists, musicians and dancers – or choose to spend time with them (Markusen, 2005, Hannigan, 2004).

British evidence tells a similar story. Studies of the middle classes in UK cities find that professionals and managers have diverse attitudes to cities, live in different neighbourhoods – and use them very differently (Jarvis et al, 2001).

Experian's 'Chattering Classes' study found seven distinct socio-economic types across UK cities (Doward, 2004). Recent work on London neighbourhoods found significant differences in politics and outlook (Butler, 2004). In the same way, research on Manchester's financial and business services sector found most employees lived in suburban areas, wanted to move out to the countryside and showed little interest in loft living (Halfpenny et al, 2004). During the 1990s, professionals, managers and technical staff were more likely to leave big conurbations than any other economic group (Champion and Fisher, 2004).

Our own research on city centre living finds more encouraging evidence. Shops, bars and buzz pull students and young professionals into big city centres, boosting the property market and the local service economy. However, this is not Florida's 'creative class'. First, most residents stay for a few years at most. Their lives and preferences change, and many move out to suburban areas. The continued growth of city centre living has not yet changed the basic patterns of lifecycle migration – people come to big cities as young singles and leave as older families. Second, it is consumerism as much as culture that is the attractor. People move into city centres to have a good time. Shopping and going out are the big pulls, not museums, artists or performance spaces (Nathan and Urwin, forthcoming).

Where does this leave Florida's ideas? Some of them work. Human capital is increasingly important. Cosmopolitan and

bohemian values are becoming mainstream, in some sections of society (Brooks, 2000). But there's not much evidence for a single creative class in the US or the UK. And although knowledge, creativity and human capital are becoming more important in today's economy, more than 20 years of endogenous growth theory already tells us this.

Do jobs follow people?

Even if managers and professionals don't see the world the same way, maybe they still shape cities' economic futures. Personal mobility in the US is much higher than in Europe. Rich and poor travel greater distances, and make more moves during their lifetimes. Across the West, the most mobile workers are those at the top of the labour market. Professional and business services firms routinely search in national or international jobs pools (Nathan and Doyle, 2001).

So some jobs may follow people. But even the most mobile workers are unlikely to make location choices without thinking about the different employment bases and career structures in different locations (Markusen, 2005). People follow jobs too. Turok suggests that Florida 'contradicts the overwhelming evidence that employment is the main determinant of migration patterns' – especially in the UK (Turok, 2004).

Business surveys tell us the same thing. Cushman Wakefield Healey and Baker's *European Cities Monitor* is a survey of 500 senior staff across 30 cities (CWHB, 2004). For organisations, availability of qualified staff is the single most important location factor – but communications, low costs, access to markets and good transport links are also essential. Quality of life is the least important factor.

Again, Florida is half right. The best-qualified, highest-paid workers are most able to choose where to live. Firms take this into account when making location decisions. But all this is well-established. And the true picture is more complex than

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Florida suggests. Organisations and workers juggle several location factors, and they don't appear to rank 'creativity' or amenities that highly.

Do creative cities do better?

The real test of the creative class approach is how well it performs in the real world. Do Florida's 'creative cities' actually do better?

Florida makes links between diversity, skills and high-tech sectors. Much of his substantial work was done in the late 1990s, where high-tech and new media was a good proxy for employment growth. After the dotcom collapse, this works less well: for example, San Francisco lost 17% of its business services jobs and 9% of financial service jobs between 2001 and 2004 (Kotkin, 2005). Many firms and jobs are leaving big city cores and migrating to lower density suburban 'Nerdistans' in smaller cities and towns.

The US economy was in recession post-2001, and this will explain much of these job losses. But more seriously for Florida, these patterns stretch well back beyond that business cycle. The city of San Francisco lost 5% of higher-paying jobs between 1995 and 2004, while the surrounding suburbs gained 3.3%. New York's share of securities jobs fell from 37% to 23% between 1981 and 2004 (Kotkin, 2005). And overall, the cities Florida ranks as most creative created less jobs than the least creative over the 1980s and 1990s (Malanga, 2004).

Ed Glaeser uses a different measure, population growth, to check the effects of diversity and bohemianism on city performance (Glaeser, 2004). Using Florida's own data, he finds a significant link between high skills and population growth. But the presence of artists, gays or bohemian types has no effect.⁵ So a simple link between skills and city performance may do a better job of explaining urban growth than the Florida theory.

What about British cities, especially those Demos and Florida ranked highly?

Remember, these are Manchester, Leicester, London, Nottingham, Bristol, Brighton, Birmingham, Coventry, Cardiff and Edinburgh.

London skews the results. The capital has huge gravitational pull, and its hub role explains why so many of the highest performing cities lie around it. But London also has massively uneven growth: high unemployment, a low skills problem, areas of deprivation.

How about the rest? The top line is that while many are doing well, few are the top performers. Core cities like Manchester, Nottingham, Bristol and Birmingham are in recovery mode. Between 1995 and 2001, they've seen substantial increases in output and employment (SURF et al, 2004). And since 2001, they have been showing signs of population growth.⁶

Over the past 20 years, however, population, jobs and output growth has generally been highest in small, Southern, service-driven cities (Parkinson et al, 2005). And these relatively homogenous, uncreative, medium density locations have seen the biggest growth in high-end financial and business service jobs – jobs which Florida suggests should gravitate to the big creative cores. These smaller cities have caught the wave, and the bigger places are playing catch-up.

Between 1991 and 2001, for example, employment growth was highest in Milton Keynes, Reading, Warrington, Brighton, Crawley, Northampton, York, Cambridge and Worthing. For 2001, GVA per employee was highest in places like Aldershot, Bedford, High Wycombe, Oxford, Derby, Reading, Coventry and Swindon (Parkinson et al, 2005). Only Brighton and Coventry match up in Florida's list.

These results suggest Florida's model is a patchy predictor of real world city performance. It also suggests that there are many routes to success, not just the creative class approach. None of these models is perfect. But it looks as if others do just as well, or better at predicting performance: agglomeration in bigger places, clusters in smaller

places, or human capital in both (Glaeser, 2004; Simmie, 2004).

Right in the wrong way?

Florida's work makes many useful points. But many of these are basically well-established, well-known truths. And Florida's bolder claims seem shaky at best. So it's unlikely that creativity or the 'creative class' (should it exist) explain city performance in the way he suggests.

This is not to say that creativity, skills or diversity don't matter. Florida's work is probably best seen as an unsuccessful attempt to pull together a lot of good ideas about diversity, talent, creative activity and city performance.

First, quality of place is important. The right mix of physical, economic, social and cultural assets does probably help some cities. Glaeser and colleagues have done some work suggesting a link between consumer sectors, amenities and city growth (Glaeser, Kolko and Saiz, 2001). In fact, it's hard to argue that good architecture, a strong economic base, skilled people, vibrant cultural life and a pleasant environment *don't* matter (Nathan, Westwood and Cannon, 2003).

Second, there should be some positive links between prosperity and creative activity. Clearly, richer cities and citizens are able to spend a greater share of their income supporting creative activities and industries. But the two do not always go hand in hand. Renaissance Florence was rich; Liverpool had the Beatles, then years of industrial decline. Detroit techno has not helped Detroit much.

The relationship may work the other way too. Markusen argues that because spending on art and culture is predominantly local – it does not tend to flow out of the area – artists and art subsidies can boost indigenous economic growth in cities (Markusen, 2005). Zukin suggests that cultural industries have a number of direct and symbolic benefits to city economies, not least through rebranding and perceptions effects on tourism and inward

investment (Zukin, 1995). O'Connor and Banks argue that a distinctive local cultural identity is essential in a post-industrial economy (O'Connor and Banks, 2001). Barcelona, Bilbao and Glasgow show what can be achieved: but many of these ideas are unfinished, and a great deal of further work is required here.

Third, skills and talent matter. Glaeser points to the well-known link between human capital and city performance. Ideas and knowledge flow more easily through urban space; a skilled population helps the economic base grow (Glaeser, 2004). Similarly, the business world is clear there is a 'battle for talent', that companies do compete for the best individuals and that place-based strategies can help anchor talent in cities (Gertler, 2004). Our big cities need to turn the trick of attracting jobs and keep people, growing a skills base and an economic base at the same time. Again, it's not clear how best to do this – should cities try to be distinct, compete on the basics or try a little of both?

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, there is other work demonstrating positive links between cultural diversity and economic performance. In theory, cultural diversity could be a bad – for example, communication and cultural differences could make it harder for workers to get on, increasing the costs of doing business. Or it could be a good – by bringing together diverse products and skill sets, helping companies innovate (Pinelli, Ottaviano and Maignan, 2004).

Over time, greater prosperity should also help explain patterns of ethnic tolerance and tension. By and large, for example, community relations are better in the more prosperous parts of the UK. Does it work the other way round? In the UK, we already know that immigrants contribute more in taxes than UK-born citizens (Sriskandarajah, Cooley and Reed, 2005). And cultural diversity and intercultural spillovers could also be forces for longer term endogenous growth.

Much of this will take place in cities. One study of US cities finds that between 1970 and 1990, cultural diversity increased US citizens'

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wages and rents – immigrants bring complementary skills and provide new services (Ottoviano and Peri, 2004). Of course, in a growing economy immigrants could also bump the indigenous population up the employment ladder, taking the lowest paid jobs.

Immigration would benefit cities, but there might not be overall welfare gains. We simply don't know for sure yet. But there is a huge research agenda out here – and among others, we have Richard Florida to thank for it.

Lessons for policymakers

This paper has examined the case for Richard Florida's creative class model of city performance. The evidence we have stacks up heavily against it. What's true, we already knew. What's new is probably not true.

So much for the creative class approach – though not, perhaps, for some of the ideas and issues around it. What are the lessons for UK policymakers here?

First, beware of American imports. Not all urban policy ideas travel well, and UK decisionmakers should do due diligence on new concepts and proposals. This doesn't always happen – the UK has a particular weakness for looking to the US for ideas and ignoring Europe, even though many European cities perform demonstrably better than their American counterparts.

Second, remember that the UK is unusual: a small island dominated by one huge city and the 'mega-city region' around it (Hall, 2004). London's unique position in the UK urban system makes it the dominant city for creative types. This creative core exhibits increasing returns to scale, which is why very few cities have emerged as counterweights. Even if the creative class theory worked, in other words, it wouldn't be for everyone. If British cities did compete for the creative core, people could be spread too thinly across the rest of the country. They would be weak magnets for professionals and other creatives.

Third, Florida is not always wrong. Policymakers should pick out the insights and ignore the rest. British city centres are exhibit-

ing something like a creative class effect – but it is short term and consumerist. And it is no substitute for a strong economy. People will ultimately go where the jobs are: for most, a career structure is a more important factor than a cool city.

Similarly, cities should not rely solely on creativity, diversity and lifestyle as regeneration tools. In a few of our bigger cities – London, Manchester, Liverpool – creative and cultural industries are emerging as a small, but significant economic force. Everywhere, culture and creativity improve the quality of life; iconic buildings and good public spaces can help places reposition and rebrand.

But most cities – large and small – would be better off starting elsewhere: growing the economic base; sharpening skills, connectivity and access to markets; ensuring local people can access new opportunities, and improving key public services. Whitehall also needs to recognise the economic role of major conurbations, and give them the flexibility and powers to improve their performance further.

There may be important longer term advantages from cultural diversity and quality of place. Decisionmakers should be alive to this agenda and the policy implications that emerge from it. For now, though, they should begin with the basics. Creativity and cool are the icing, not the cake.

Notes

- 1 See the 'Richard Florida Creativity Group' at www.creative-class.org and www.catalytix.biz.
- 2 This Index does not actually test the creative class model in the UK. Rather, it illustrates what the model could show if it were true (as the authors are careful to point out).
- 3 Florida has not reproduced his results in Britain, so direct comparison with US findings is not possible. Nevertheless, we can usefully draw on a range of other UK research – on gentrification and city centre living, migration, business location decisions and overall city performance.
- 4 Markusen points out that in the Atlanta Metro Area, 'the creative class live North of the city and I-285'. Similarly, the Washington-Baltimore Metro Area includes at least 10 rural counties.
- 5 Although the Bohemian Index does explain some population growth in Las Vegas and Sarasota, Florida.
- 6 ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates, 1999-2004. www.statistics.gov.uk

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Max Nathan is a senior researcher at the Centre for Cities. He can be contacted at m.nathan@ippr.org

