

Richard Florida Is Sorry

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- [Sam Wetherell](#)

For years, Richard Florida preached the gospel of the creative class. His new book is a mea culpa.

[Richard Florida](#), one of the most influential thinkers about cities in postwar America, wants you to know that he got almost everything about cities wrong.

If you live in an urban center in North America, the United Kingdom, or Australia, you are living in Richard Florida's world. Fifteen years ago, he argued that an influx of what he called the "[creative classes](#)" — artists, hipsters, tech workers — were sparking economic growth in places like the Bay Area. Their tolerance, flexibility, and eccentricity dissolved the rigid structures of industrial production and replaced them with the kinds of workplaces and neighborhoods that attracted more young people and, importantly, more investment.

His observations quickly formed the basis of a set of breezy technical solutions. If decaying cities wanted to survive, they had to open cool bars, shabby-chic coffee shops, and art venues that attract young, educated, and tolerant residents. Eventually, the mysterious alchemy of the creative economy would build a new and prosperous urban core.

Today, even Florida recognizes that he was wrong. The rise of the creative class in places like New York, London, and San Francisco created economic growth [only](#) for the already rich, displacing the poor and working classes. The problems that once plagued inner cities have [moved to the suburbs](#).

The Creative Class Unleashed

To make his case for the creative class, Florida subjected it to strange quantifications. Combining census data on occupation, education, "coolness factor" (based on the number of young people and the quality of "nightlife and culture") and, bizarrely, the number of gay male residents, he developed a "[Bohemia Index](#)" to calculate this group's magical effect on urban economic growth.

Florida reassures readers that all human beings are fundamentally creative animals, but only a third of us can make a living that way. The creative classes — to which you may, unknowingly, belong — include journalists, college professors, tech workers, graphic designers, and artists of any kind: basically anyone not working in the repetitious and decidedly *uncreative* manufacturing or service sectors.

The "creative classes" both diagnosed the present state of cities and offered recommendations for future action. Along with [Jane Jacobs](#), Richard Florida has served as an inspiration for mayors, developers, and planners who pedestrianized streets, built bike lanes, and courted cultural attractions like art galleries and theaters.

Setting aside the rhetoric of innovation, economic growth, and entrepreneurship, we can locate something ironically Marxist about Florida's ideas: human beings *are* fundamentally creative, which is the source of economic value, and people become alienated when they cannot control the fruits of their creativity.

But Florida's writing narrows human potential. His theory of art and creativity only acknowledges its contribution to economic growth. The insistence on tolerance's benefits has a similarly utilitarian purpose: we should celebrate diverse communities not for their own sake but because they spur innovation.

After fifteen years of development plans tailored to the creative classes, Florida surveys an urban landscape in ruins. The story of London is the story of Austin, the Bay Area, Chicago, New York, Toronto, and Sydney. When

the rich, the young, and the (mostly) white rediscovered the city, they created rampant property speculation, soaring home prices, and mass displacement. The “creative class” were just the rich all along, or at least the college-educated children of the rich.

In 1979, Pierre Bourdieu wrote that the consumption and production of art gave the upper middle classes a “dream of social flying,” a feeling that their tastes and beliefs were somehow untethered from their objective class positions. The creative classes of major western cities were better at this than anyone.

Over the last decade, Florida has been beating a retreat away from some of his early optimism. As early as 2005 he described the “externalities” of the rise of the creative classes — namely, they brought dizzying levels of income inequality into every city that they’ve inhabited. As his work evolved, the “creative economy” has ceased to be a goal and instead become an unstoppable force, something that governments need to be tame rather than encourage.

His latest book, *The New Urban Crisis*, represents the culmination of this long mea culpa. Though he stops just short of saying it, he all but admits that he was wrong. He argues that the creative classes have grabbed hold of many of the world’s great cities and choked them to death. As a result, the fifty largest metropolitan areas house just 7 percent of the world’s population but generate 40 percent of its growth. These “superstar” cities are becoming gated communities, their vibrancy replaced with deracinated streets full of Airbnbs and empty summer homes.

Meanwhile, drug addiction and gang violence have spread to the suburbs. “Much more than a crisis of cities,” he writes, “the New Urban Crisis is the central crisis of our time” — “a crisis of the suburbs, of urbanization itself and of contemporary capitalism writ large.”

Florida’s offered solutions are modest. They range from the specific — more affordable housing, more investment in infrastructure, and higher pay for service jobs — to the vague — “engage in a global effort to build stronger, more prosperous cities in rapidly urbanizing parts of the world” and “empower communities and enable local leaders to strengthen their own economies.”

While Florida was once a guru, a font of urban-policy wisdom celebrated by liberal politicians and media darlings like Bono, he now has less to say. His diagnosis of the crisis he partly caused offers no new insights. He has replaced his airy projections of infinite, creativity-fueled growth with a tone of apocalyptic darkness. His shift is noteworthy, but the “creative economy” now has a life of its own.

The Creative Economy

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson [described](#), in probably overly romantic tones, the pre-industrial world of British handloom weavers — an essentially creative, spontaneous, and communal life. The workers sang and socialized, enjoying boundless leisure time. The monotony and time discipline that accompanied the industrial revolution tore apart their utopian existence.

Two hundred years later, the industrial working class in the global north has all but disappeared, and creativity is returning in a different guise. The creative economy has replaced the industrial one.

With vocal support from people like Richard Florida, cities and states have tried to use art for utilitarian purposes — hoping to transform human spontaneity into economic growth. Beginning in Bilbao in 1997, mayors and governments have tried to revitalize failing industrial cities with art and museum complexes designed to appeal to a global pool of tourists.

Tony Blair’s Labour government was particularly obsessed with turning factories into cultural attractions. In a fit of urban regeneration between 1998 and 2002, the United Kingdom constructed galleries in former industrial spaces all over the country, from London’s Tate Modern, housed in a former power station, to the BALTIC art gallery, an old flour mill in Gateshead, as well as the Manchester Lowry Museum and the Tate Liverpool, each built on former docks.

Everywhere creativity is expected to do the work that industry once did, sometimes explicitly. For a few months, a vast former warehouse in Manchester was emblazoned with the words “creativity, forged in Manchester on the anvil of the industrial revolution.” The warehouse now hosts “[corporate events with an urban edge](#).” The United Nation’s Conference on Trade and Development has a “[Creative Economy](#)” unit, which values the market in “creative goods” at \$547 billion.

Needless to say, these initiatives have not solved the structural problems that British cities face. The Sage, a vast concert venue built in Gateshead in 2004, exists just blocks away from [desperate poverty](#).

The results of last year’s Brexit vote show that these communities have enjoyed neither the promised economic revival nor growing tolerance: Gateshead voted leave by 56 percent, and Hull, designated the official “Capital of Culture” in 2013, rejected the European Union by 68 percent. Art is not delivering the goods.

People without independent wealth [struggle to make a living](#) from writing or from music. The northern, working-class music scene of a generation ago — Joy Division, Pulp, even The Beatles — has been replaced with the peevish aristocratic pomp of James Blunt or Mumford and Sons. (Britain’s [grime scene](#) represents one exception, but it takes place mostly out of sight of these spectacular and hollow urban interventions.)

Geographer David Harvey has argued that the biggest shift in urban economies over the last forty years has been the move from [managerialism to entrepreneurialism](#). City governments that once provided services for their residents in the form of welfare and infrastructure now market themselves to global pools of capital, tourists, and educated workforces.

The notion that creativity could solve these urban problems — either from above, with monumental art galleries, or from below, with bearded clusters of hipsters, is a symptom of this profound transformation.

Richard Florida was right when he said that the “creative economy” is the new way of the world. But its development didn’t happen how he imagined. Rather than launching humanity into a new phase of prosperity, the new economy simply holds the different elements of late capitalism together — making it palatable for some but deepening its crises and contradictions for others.