Introduction: Concerning the Creative Class

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Since the release in 2002 of his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida has given conferences in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere in the world expounding on the blessings of the creative class (a theory of his own yet noticeably inspired by Jane Jacobs and Claude Fischer). The conferences were attended by Chambers of Commerce and other audiences seeking political strategies or competitive approaches applicable to economic development and growth in large urban and metropolitan areas. According to this theory, the new development process is fuelled by a set of three T’s: technology, talent and tolerance. Researchers in the United States and Europe have scrutinised the creative class theory, its methodology and related statistics; empirical results demonstrate that there is no generalizable rule through which talent leads urban growth and urban or regional competitiveness, at least in Canada. The creative class model is in effect a predictor that does not account for the performance of British cities, yet it remains adaptable. For example, sociologist Robert Lang (2006) berates Florida’s creative class theory as a vague metatheory. The theory proposes a causal bond between the location of talent and regional economic development: “Regional economic growth is powered by creative people, who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to new ideas. […] Greater and more diverse concentrations of creative capital in turn lead to higher rates of innovation, high technology business formation, job generation and economic growth” (Stolarick et al 2005).

In order to assess and classify urban centres’ or population clusters’ competitiveness and vitality in the dynamic context of globalisation involving both commerce and knowledge, this regional economic development theory is governed by a trio of truisms – technology, talent and tolerance. In fact, the parameters used by the author are: (i) talents (including the ratio of university graduates), (ii) bohemia (jobs in the creative arts – authors and writers, producers and directors, choreographers, orchestra conductors and music composers, musicians and
singers, dancers, actors, painters and sculptors, visual artists, photographers, graphic designers and illustrators, decorators, occupations connected with the performing arts, with fashion, with art shows or exhibitions, and with handicraft and traditional fine crafts), (iii) ethnic and social diversity (more on this below), and (iv) technologies (export of hi-tech goods and services – aeronautics, electronics, pharmaceutical and medical, scientific equipment, telecommunications, computing and computers, architecture and engineering, laboratories, and TV, movie and audio-visual production). For anyone wishing to take advantage of the theory in the competitive urban arena, the first hurdle lies in the fuzziness of its key concepts, and chiefly that of creative class. In the U.S., the creative class would bring together more than 30% of the active population, i.e. approximately 38 million individuals. Furthermore, the theory is partial to a certain professional elite – young, unmarried, mobile citizens of the world (cosmopolitan) who have an appetite for technology. Florida’s prospective theory of the avant-garde metropolis is confronted by objections concerning the use he makes of a secondary indicator that is intended to assess the tolerance of cities, i.e. his Gay Index based on data on unmarried partner households available in the U.S. 2000 Census. Levine’s analysis (2004) of this question is pertinent; he informs us that “in the largest metropolitan areas in the country, San Francisco accounted for the largest percentage of gay households (1.8%) and Buffalo the lowest (0.4%) in 2000.” Although Florida’s idea seems disproportionate with respect to its economic scale, the statement uncovers a unique evolution in American culture and values, namely the organisation of groups that have always been marginalised, more or less tolerated, brought into disrepute or otherwise stigmatised (alcoholics, compulsive gamblers, drug dependent persons, homosexuals, cross-dressers and transvestites, transsexuals, inmates and ex-convicts, dwarfs, psychiatric patients or mentally disturbed persons, blind, deaf and mute persons including left-handers whose special feature is deemed socially unimportant today): “When one recalls that [homosexuals] never wanted for educated and intellectual adherents, it is all the more puzzling that no homophile organization appeared in America until after the Second World War” (Sagarin 1969: 79).

As Edward Sagarin (1969) explains in Odd Man In, these groups are part of the social fabric, they receive their share of media attention and the social sciences do not discount them. It is through the mediation of activist organisations or informal constituencies that so many marginal groups are given a visibility that is denied to the average person. The new creative class aggregates all these hardly new bohemians who have not resisted the temptation of advocating nothing else but their marginality:

“In addition, there are other marginal groups who are not quite aware of their marginality, by virtue of living together a somewhat insulated life, but who are, furthermore, made up of people of the most diverse backgrounds; people who have in common, to start with, nothing but their marginality. They are to be found in cities and especially among young people. They are the American Bohemians.” (Hughes 1949, quoted in Sagarin 1969: 243-244).
In other words, what has been identified throughout the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as a claim to equality would turn out today, if we judge by the impact of Florida’s theory, to be seeking not only a social status sheltered in the creative class sanctuary but also a similarly enhanced economic role in regional economic development. The Florida approach aggregates artists and the young (bohemia), marginals and other bearers or icons of social diversity – and these account for at least half the parameters or criteria that are at the base of the creative class concept. The other two criteria or parameters are talent and technologies, i.e. university graduates and technological advances.

The articles drawn together in this special issue exemplify the extent to which the creative class theory can be applied to a wide range of differentiated sociospatial concerns. In that respect, the articles by T. Gade on the potential contribution of the creative class concept in rural settings and that of A. Petrov in the Canadian North are noteworthy. Feminine entrepreneurship is dealt with in the text by H. Mayer, H. Hackler and C. MacFarland, and it is with much sensitivity that T. Pilati and D.-G. Tremblay call upon the creative class theory to visualise the sociocultural aspects of urban economic development through the eyes of Montreal artists. Finally, an article by M. Nathan and another by R. Tremblay and H. Chicoine present a critique of the creative class.

References

