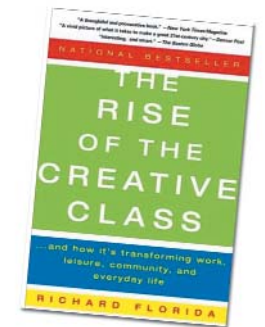


EMPOWERMENT

THROUGH ENTITLEMENT

by Ursula Gullow

North Carolina city encounters the
“Rise of the Creative Class”



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"Working class," "ruling class," "upper class," and "lower class," are terms many of us are familiar with by now. But have you ever heard of the "creative class?" Don't be alarmed if you haven't it's a brand new idea coined by Richard Florida in his recent book, "The Rise of the Creative Class." According to Florida, the creative class makes up more than 30 percent of the nation's workforce. Rather than defining its basis in economics, the creative class "derives its identity from its members' roles as purveyors of creativity." Florida has ambitiously lumped a huge assortment of folk into this category from artists, musicians, and designers, to dentists, engineers, scientists, and yes, even CEOs. To be clear, the Creative Class is essentially affluent white-collar workers with college degrees who fancy a so-called "alternative" lifestyle.

"The Rise of the Creative Class" I've discovered, is an enormously popular book and Florida has been given rave write-ups in such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Wired*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*, among countless other journals nationwide. The book's basic assertion is that cities must nurture their cultural climate to attract members of the Creative Class, who will thereby attract business and commerce to the city, and ultimately improve the overall economic condition of that city.

It seems like a pretty straightforward and progressive recipe for success, and the name is genius. Who wouldn't want to be a member of the Creative Class? But why, I wondered, is this idea receiving so much praise from the corporate media, and just who is the local Creative Class? Am I one of them? To find

acterizations such as these are believed to be useful to convey a veneer of officialdom, expertise and authority to sell an idea. Sound familiar?

What better tonic in uncertain times than the Creative Class for an infamous community of self-described "seekers" and "cutting edge" technocrats and condo developers still hung-over from yesteryear's yearnings for a dot.com utopia in the mountains. The Creative Class concept may in fact perfectly enshrine the ambitions of some strata of Asheville folks, and may even eclipse another demographic concept similar in habits and vocations and once commonly invoked self-referentially without embarrassment: The Yuppie. And if the legacy of the Yuppie is any lesson, it would be that to ordain a distinguished class of people infused with a glorified sense of entitled "self-empowerment" defined by material self-enrichment and it's accompanying mythological, Horatio Alger visions of frontier capitalist predestination (see Max Weber's sociology classic *The Protestant Work Ethic* for more on this) and technotopias, is to potentially put at risk or in jeopardy members of the community not invited to the party.

This tonic may taste more like Evian than tap water, but please, for those who should choose to consume it, after promises are made, and all is said and done, will you really not raise the rents and run us off a cliff with stars in your eyes? Honest...?

*Eamon Martin contributed to this article.
Asheville Global Report, www.agrnews.org*

economic chances of one's community is, no doubt, a necessary task. The danger is of embracing what may ultimately amount to a social engineering formula, packaged and bound in a classist ideology, which favors a newly entrenched and privileged, nouveau riche bourgeoisie consumer Creative Class over a larger, and apparently less deserving and servile underclass of citizens pushed further to the margins.

The only thing perhaps more insipid about Florida's demographic boosterism is that it does what the Madison Ave. racketeers of advertising do best: prey on people's most narcissistic insecurities. Everyone's a rock star in the Creative Class; just ask it's previous incarnation, "Generation X," as worn-out a marketing concept as the Chuck Taylor sneakers you may agonize over symbolically ditching. If Gen-X made you feel appropriately awkward, self-conscious, and emasculated, have no fear, the parochial but soothing moniker of the Creative Class is here, softening the blow of the infamous classist refrain: "isn't it time you found a real job, son ..."

Aggressively lobbying the public trust for the Creative Class with features and editorials, the Gannet Corporation's *Asheville Citizen-Times*, no strangers to demographic exploitation themselves, have commissioned their own "market profile" studies of the regional population, and, oh, are they revealing. Prior to the arrival of Florida's alleged Creatives, the AC-T had discovered in one recent study, evidence of locals they referred to as the "Hard Scrabble" whose "lifestyle preferences" included "packaged meat snacks" and "gun racks." Accompanying the profile, along with other regional stereotypes depicted in the study, is a tiny computer graphic icon with regional folk reduced to caricatures of form not dissimilar to the ones usually found in public beneath the words "Men" and "Women".

The "Mountain Folk" icon is a standout: human shape slouches lazily on fold out chair in front of double-wide house accompanied by satellite dish.

In today's lexicon of capitalist folklore, in which people are reduced to their raw, instrumental value as "human resources" and gauged by their lowest common denominators, crass char-

some answers, I recently attended what some obviously considered to be an important, happening thing: a world premier screening of the book's complimentary film, "The Rise of the Creative Class" at the Orange Peel in downtown Asheville. The *Asheville Citizen-Times*, The Blue Ridge Entrepreneurial Council, BB&T, and The Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce all sponsored the event. Admission was free, but a reservation was required to get through the doors. I kind of felt like a superstar after seeing my name on a list and being handed two free drink tickets to loosen up to the posh ambience of hobnobbing local City Councilpersons, Area Chamber of Commerce officials, Atlanta bankers, and assorted others seduced or intrigued by Florida's pitch of urban upward mobility. Some electronic music was playing, the lights were dimmed, and very well dressed people were milling about. "So this is the creative class!" I heard someone remark, echoing my sentiment exactly.

The film turned out to be a promotional piece about Richard Florida and offered almost no new insights or answers to questions I had regarding the Creative Class. If anything, I came away more confused by the spectacle of this young entrepreneur's cult-like following. "Everything he said went straight to my heart!" gushes one interviewee, another simply exclaims, "He's marvelous!" The video includes shots of Florida playing licks on his electric guitar and chatting with young, seemingly hip, creative people.

At one point, his brother quips: "Rich has phenomenal physical and intellectual energy." And later, a reflective Florida states: "I really believe this is what I'm supposed to do ... I understand the nature of capitalism really well."

In fact, Florida is the founder of Catalytix, a research company that advises cities on how to sow the seeds and grow their own Creative Classes. For a nominal fee of \$495, anybody can receive a detailed report on the "creative potential" of their city or region, and for a whole lot more money they can be advised on how to empower their community to become a more creative place.

The film, and its viewers, led me to the conclusion that

Florida is merely offering a watery, feel-good, and flattering recipe for success to cities with flailing economies. I was ready to dismiss the whole scene as the latest snake oil for a failed economy, but a friend urged that I examine Florida's ideas further, insisting that his ideas make sense and deserve proper consideration in spite of the superficial riff raff.

It's true. There are some things about the book that seem to make common sense. For example, Florida asserts that in order to nurture the Creative Class, a city must nurture its diverse and so-called "fringe" elements, because these are the factors that lure creative types. To his credit, he argues heartily against increasing homogeneity and monoculturalism. He argues for the preservation of public spaces and community centers. He argues against high-rent development, and in favor of affordable housing. He supports increased funding for the arts and libraries. He aggressively promotes tolerance for queer communities and racial diversity. These are all factors, he claims, that lure "creative types." And wherever the Creatives move, or so the theory goes, the companies will follow. He bases this notion on the fact that a multi-million dollar Internet business called Lycos moved from his hometown of Pittsburgh to Boston simply because, as he saw it, there were more creative people living in Boston to keep the company afloat.

It sounds good on paper, but given the track record of cities Florida holds up as models for creative investment, I strongly question the implications of his argument. According to Florida, San Francisco is one of the top cultural centers for creative types. But the documentation of gentrification in that city is easy to find. Census Data and *Poor Magazine Online* reports that: "the African American population in San Francisco has dropped by 23 percent since 1990. The dot-com (now a dot-bust) growth, and all of the residual industries associated with it, eliminated many people from their homes as landlords rode the wave of excess to evict people ... Homes that had been occupied by many Black families since the early-1900's were either bulldozed for the sake of redevelopment and

high-rises or "bought out" by new money... No effort has been made to preserve the history and presence of African Americans in San Francisco."

Furthermore, Latino communities in the Mission district as well as artists, community groups, and local businesses have faced pressure in the last 10 years as the Mission's commercial rents increased by nearly 41 percent.

Florida does not deny that gentrification is a problem in San Francisco. He also acknowledges "there is a great deal of creative potential going un-tapped in so-called underclass communities." But he seems to be at a loss for what to do about it, saying only: "We must tap the creative energies of each American. We must continue to be a tolerant and inclusive society, welcoming many kinds of people and ideas."

As a recent transplant from Seattle — a city Florida deems very Creative Class-friendly — I can attest to the fact that increased costs of living, and false expectations placed on the back of a co-opted "grunge" culture led to the demise of a once vital do-it-yourself music scene. While it appeared that "creative" dot comers were invigorating the local economy, the city was held hostage by a poster ban; until recently, it was actually against the law to hang posters on telephone poles and other public places. In addition, the city passed an all-ages dance ordinance, which made it nearly impossible for local venues to hold all-ages music shows at local clubs. Art Chantry, Seattle's famed graphic designer, (and probably a candidate for Creative Class status) wound up leaving the city in disgust.

I agree with Florida's assertion that diversity must be encouraged within a community. I would never discourage the funding of a community multimedia center, for example, but it shouldn't be funded under the guise of economic development it should be funded because the people and the project are worth funding. I am concerned that if a city invests its resources in pleasing a group of people who don't even reside in it yet, the true creative element and social cohesion of the city will be sacrificed.

Investigating ways to evaluate, sustain, and enhance the