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CULTURE

The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited

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The following is an abridged version of the preface to [The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited](#), out this month from Basic Books.

It's been ten years since I published – and a bit longer than that since I wrote – [The Rise of the Creative Class](#). It would be an understatement to say that a lot has changed since then. We've seen a whole series of world-shattering events—from the collapse of the tech bubble and 9/11, to the economic and financial meltdown of 2008, any one of which might have been sufficient to derail or reverse the changes in America's class structure and the economic, cultural, and social trends I described in that book. Instead, they have only become more deeply ensconced. At a time when the U.S. unemployment rate topped 10 percent, the rate of unemployment for the Creative Class did not hit even 5 percent. By late 2011, the social media site LinkedIn reported that the word most used by its members to describe themselves was "creative." As [TechCrunch](#) put it: "In a time of high unemployment, when traditional skills can be outsourced or automated, creative skills remain highly sought after and highly valuable. We all want to be part of the Creative Class of programmers, designers, and information workers. The term used to mean artists and writers. Today, it means job stability." The Creative Class has become truly global, numbering between one-third to nearly one-half of the workforce in the advanced nations of North America, Europe, Asia, and around the world.

The Rise of the Creative Class was never about the new, the trendy or the faddish. It was—and is—my attempt to explain the key forces that have been transforming our economy and culture over the past several decades. Our world, it seemed to me, was changing as dramatically as it had since the early days of the Industrial Revolution. It wasn't just the Internet, or the rise of new technologies, or even globalization that were upending our jobs, lives, and communities, though all those things were important. Beneath the surface, unnoticed by many, was something truly tectonic: the rise of creativity as a fundamental economic force, and the rise of a new social class, the Creative Class.

Spanning science and technology, arts, media, and culture, traditional knowledge workers, and the professions, this new class made up nearly one-third of the workforce across the United States and considerably more than that in many communities. It was the rise of this new class and of creativity as an economic force that was the underlying factor powering so many of the seemingly unrelated and epiphenomenal trends we had been witnessing; from the advent of whole new industries and businesses, to changes in the way we lived, worked, and consumed, extending even into the rhythms, patterns, desires, and expectations that governed our daily lives.

So much of what seemed shockingly new and outlandish when the book was originally published has come to be viewed as the norm. My ideas that the talented were beginning to favor cities over suburbs,

that urban centers were challenging suburban industrial park neighborhoods as locations for high-tech industry, that older cities were starting to regain some of the ground they'd lost to Sun Belt boomtowns, were widely derided when I first began to write about them. Ten years later, they are taken for granted.

A decade ago, many critics dismissed my notion that a vibrant local music scene can signal that a place has the underlying preconditions associated with technological innovation and economic growth. I caught a lot of flak for proposing that diversity—an openness to all kinds of people, no matter their gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, or just plain geekiness—was not just a private virtue but an economic necessity. I earned a certain measure of notoriety for suggesting that a visible gay presence in a city can be seen as a leading indicator for rising housing values and high tech.

I was accused of confusing chickens and eggs when I said that the secret to building better, more vibrant locations was not just attracting companies with handouts and tax breaks, but building a "people climate"—and not with stadiums and generic malls, but with parks and bike paths and street-level culture that would make people's everyday lives better, improve the underlying quality of place, and signal a community that is open, energized, and diverse. The conventional wisdom insisted such things were but "frills and frivolities" that come about *as products* of economic development, not a way to spur it. Ten years later, forward-looking communities, large and small alike, are busily reclaiming their disused waterfronts and industrial areas and transforming them into green spaces; at the same time, suburbs are seeking to remake themselves into better, more livable communities by adding transit, shoring up their own arts and culture scenes, and developing pedestrian-friendly town centers that are filled with the best features of cities.

Hand in hand with the revival of cities and the densification of suburbia, the dawning of the Creative Age has ushered in a newfound respect for livability and sustainability. This too is part and parcel of the deeper shift. The quest for clean and green is powered by the same underlying ethos that powers the Creative Economy. Where the green agenda is driven by the need to conserve natural assets, the Creative Economy is driven by the logic to fully harness—and no longer waste—human resources and talent.

Some have dubbed the very concept of the Creative Class as elitist and accused me of privileging it over other classes, or called me a "neo-liberal" with a naively optimistic faith in the power of markets. I assure you that neither is the case. The key thesis of my argument is as simple as it is basic: Every human being is creative. That the Creative Class enjoys vast privileges is true, but to acknowledge that fact is not to endorse it. The essential task before us is to unleash the creative energies, talent, and potential of everyone else—to build a society that acknowledges and nurtures the innate creativity of each and every human being.

Yet even as I write these words, all is far from well. The economic meltdown of 2008 was not just a crisis of Wall Street, of wanton financial speculation, and of an economy debt-bingeing on housing and consumer goods, though all of those things were implicated, but a deeper crisis that ran to the roots of the old Fordist order and the very way of life it had engendered. We are in that strange interregnum when the old order has collapsed and the new order is not yet born. The old order has failed; attempts to bail it out, to breathe new life into it or to somehow prop it back up are doomed to history's dustbin. A new global economic order is taking shape, but it is still confined within the brittle carapace of the old, with all of the outmoded, wasteful, oil-dependent, sprawling, unsustainable ways of life that went along with it.

The rise of a new economic and social order is a double-edged sword: it unleashes incredible energies, but it also causes tremendous hardships. We are in the midst of a painful and dangerous process, one that is full of unknowns; we tend to forget what a fraught and dangerous business childbirth is. My hope is that by understanding this new order, we can speed the transformation.

Still, that new order will not simply or automatically assert itself into existence. It will require new institutions, a new social compact, and a new way of life to bring it into being. We must turn our attention from a form of economic growth that is reflected in housing starts, automobile sales, energy consumption, and other crass material measures to a shared and sustainable prosperity that lifts human well-being and happiness across the board. We must shift from a way of life that valorizes consumption, in which we take our identities from the branded characteristics of the goods we purchase, to one that enables us to develop our talents and our individuality, finding purpose through our work and other meaningful kinds of activities. Our fledgling creative economy needs to give way to a fully creative society, one that is more just, more equitable, more sustainable, and more prosperous. Our economic future depends on it.

A great stumbling block in the United States has been the huge rise in inequality. Inequality reflects the stark divide in economic prospects between the classes—the demise of so many once high-paying Working Class jobs and the bifurcation of the labor market between higher-skilled, higher-wage Creative Class jobs and lower-skilled, lower-pay Service Class jobs in fields like food preparation, home health care, and retail sales, where more than 60 million Americans work, 45 percent of the labor force.

The United States is actually an outlier when it comes to inequality. Across most of the advanced nations, greater innovation and greater creativity tend to go hand in hand with *less* inequality. A new social compact—a *Creative Compact*—can turn our Creative Economy into a just and Creative Society too, in which prosperity is widely shared. But this won't happen on its own. While driven and shaped by economic logic, the key institutions and initiatives of the future will be shaped, as they always have, by human agency. For better or for worse, they will be the products of political choices, which turn on political power.

The Creative Class stands at the forefront of what the political scientist [Ronald Inglehart](#) has termed the transition to a “[post-materialist values](#)” —a shift from values that accord priority to meeting immediate material needs to ones that stress belonging, self-expression, opportunity, environmental quality, diversity, community, and quality of life. Although there are certainly divisions within this new class and its members do not fit neatly into the old left-right spectrum, its values are staunchly meritocratic. Many are offended by inequality of opportunity and repelled by a system that is rigged against so many. These attitudes and inclinations are political veins that can—and are—being tapped.

As the great historian [Eric Hobsbawm](#) noted, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street have more to do with the Creative Class than they do with traditional Working Class movements; as such they were harbingers of this new politics. “The traditional left was geared to a kind of society that is no longer in existence or is going out of business,” he [remarked](#). “It believed very largely in the mass labour movement as the carrier of the future. Well, we’ve been de-industrialised, so that’s no longer possible. The most effective mass mobilisations today are those which start from a new modernised middle class, and particularly the enormously swollen body of students.”

Like all periods of great change and transition, our times are fraught with difficulty, disruption, and challenge. But ultimately, I am optimistic. This time, perhaps for the first time in human history,

economic logic is on our side. Human creativity is the most spectacularly transformative force ever unleashed, and it is something that all of us can draw on to one degree or another. If the rise of this new order and new social class poses tremendous challenges, it carries the seeds of their resolution as well.

Over the next several weeks, I'll be sharing the key findings from [Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited](#) with Cities readers. Stay tuned.

Richard Florida is co-founder and editor at large at The Atlantic Cities. He's also a senior editor at The Atlantic and director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. He is a frequent speaker to communities, business and professional organizations, and founder of the Creative Class Group, whose current client list can be found [here](#).

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