



“The Creative Class”

from *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (2002)

Richard Florida

Editors' Introduction



In *The Condition of the Working Class in 1844* (p. 46), and in subsequent collaborations with his colleague Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels announced the emergence of a new social class – the proletariat or industrial working class – that was destined to have a world-historical impact on the shape and content of human society at the time of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the industrial city. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida describes the emergence of a new socio-economic class, one that creates ideas and innovations rather than products and is the driving force of post-industrialism rather than industrialism. Florida asks us to ask ourselves: will the new “creative class” have as important and revolutionary an impact on the twenty-first-century information-based economy and society as the working class had in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

According to Florida, there are two layers to the creative class. First, there is a “Super-Creative Core” consisting of “scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, as well as the thought leadership of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts and other opinion-makers.” Second, there are “creative professionals” – those who “work in a wide range of knowledge-intensive industries such as high-tech sectors, financial services, the legal and health care professions, and business management” – as well as many technicians and paraprofessionals who now add “creative value” to an enterprise by having to think for themselves. All these, taken together, constitute a true economic class that “both underpins and informs its members’ social, cultural and lifestyle choices.”

Florida is quick to note that he is not using the term class to denote “the ownership of property, capital or the means of production.” On the contrary, he argues, if we use those old Marxist categories, we are still talking about old-style, bourgeoisie-and-proletarian capitalism. In the new postmodern, post-industrial economic order, the “members of the Creative Class do not own and control any significant property in the physical sense. Their property – which stems from their creative capacity – is an intangible because it is literally in their heads.”

Many cities have embraced Florida’s thesis about the creative class. Eager to attract “creative class” residents, some cities have sponsored special arts districts and diversity festivals as a part of their redevelopment policies in an attempt to jump-start lagging economies. In some cases, such as Denver’s LoDo neighborhood, arts-friendly policies – along with new light-rail transit and a downtown baseball stadium – succeeded in revivifying what had been a decaying warehouse district. In other cases, such as San Francisco’s adoption of planning regulations supporting the building of “live-work” lofts for artists and other creatives, was arguably just another ploy on the part of housing developers with connections at City Hall.

Inevitably, a critical opposition to “creative class” theory has developed. Some have called Florida “elitist,” and Steven Malanga, a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, has called Florida the peddler of “economic snake oil” and the developer of “trendy, New Age theories” that are just

"plain wrong." It is lower taxes and public safety, not arts festivals and lively gay neighborhoods, according to Malanga, that attract the industries that bring high employment and robust tax revenues for municipalities.

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For intellectual sources of Florida's thesis about the creative class, see Fritz Machlup, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), and Peter Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: Harper Business, 1995). For critiques of the Florida thesis, see Allen J. Scott, "Creative Cities: Conceptual Issues and Policy Questions" (*Journal of Urban Affairs*, 28, 2006) and Michele Heyman and Christopher Fartacy, "It Takes a Village: A Test of the Creative Class, Social Capital and Human Capital Theories" (*Journal of Urban Affairs*, 44, 2009).



The rise of the Creative Economy has had a profound effect on the sorting of people into social groups or classes. Others have speculated over the years on the rise of new classes in the advanced industrial economies. During the 1960s, Peter Drucker and Fritz Machlup described the growing role and importance of the new group of workers they dubbed "knowledge workers." Writing in the 1970s, Daniel Bell pointed to a new, more meritocratic class structure of scientists, engineers, managers and administrators brought on by the shift from a manufacturing to a "postindustrial" economy. The sociologist Erik Olin Wright has written for decades about the rise of what he called a new "professional-managerial" class. Robert Reich more recently advanced the term "symbolic analysts" to describe the members of the workforce who manipulate ideas and symbols. All of these observers caught economic aspects of the emerging class structure that I describe here.

Others have examined emerging social norms and value systems. Paul Fussell presciently captured many that I now attribute to the Creative Class in his theory of the "X Class." Near the end of his 1983 book *Class* – after a witty romp through status markers that delineate, say, the upper middle class from "high proles" – Fussell noted the presence of a growing "X" group that seemed to defy existing categories:

[Y]ou are not born an X person . . . you earn X-personhood by a strenuous effort of discovery in

which curiosity and originality are indispensable. . . . The young flocking to the cities to devote themselves to "art," "writing," "creative work" – anything, virtually, that liberates them from the presence of a boss or superior – are aspirant X people. . . . If, as [C. Wright] Mills has said, the middle-class person is "always somebody's man," the X person is nobody's. . . . X people are independent-minded. . . . They adore the work they do, and they do it until they are finally carried out, "retirement" being a concept meaningful only to hired personnel or wage slaves who despise their work.

Writing in 2000, David Brooks outlined the blending of bohemian and bourgeois values in a new social grouping he dubbed the Bobos. My take on Brooks's synthesis . . . is rather different, stressing the very transcendence of these two categories in a new creative ethos.

The main point I want to make here is that the basis of the Creative Class is economic. I define it as an economic class and argue that its economic function both underpins and informs its members' social, cultural and lifestyle choices. The Creative Class consists of people who add economic value through their creativity. It thus includes a great many knowledge workers, symbolic analysts and professional and technical workers, but emphasizes their true role in the economy. My definition of class emphasizes the way people organize themselves into social groupings

and common identities based principally on their economic function. Their social and cultural preferences, consumption and buying habits, and their social identities all flow from this.

I am not talking here about economic class in terms of the ownership of property, capital or the means of production. If we use class in this traditional Marxian sense, we are still talking about a basic structure of capitalists who own and control the means of production, and workers under their employ. But little analytical utility remains in these broad categories of bourgeoisie and proletarian, capitalist and worker. Most members of the Creative Class do not own and control any significant property in the physical sense. Their property – which stems from their creative capacity – is an intangible because it is literally in their heads. And it is increasingly clear from my field research and interviews that while the members of the Creative Class do not yet see themselves as a unique social grouping, they actually share many similar tastes, desires and preferences. This new class may not be as distinct in this regard as the industrial Working Class in its heyday, but it has an emerging coherence.

THE NEW CLASS STRUCTURE

The distinguishing characteristic of the Creative Class is that its members engage in work whose function is to “create meaningful new forms.” I define the Creative Class as consisting of two components. The Super-Creative Core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, as well as the thought leadership of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts and other opinion-makers. Whether they are software programmers or engineers, architects or filmmakers, they fully engage in the creative process. I define the highest order of creative work as producing new forms or designs that are readily transferable and widely useful – such as designing a product that can be widely made, sold and used; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again. People at the core of the Creative Class engage in this kind of work regularly; it’s what they are paid to do. Along with problem solving, their work may entail problem finding: not just

building a better mousetrap, but noticing first that a better mousetrap would be a handy thing to have.

Beyond this core group, the Creative Class also includes “creative professionals” who work in a wide range of knowledge-intensive industries such as high-tech sectors, financial services, the legal and health care professions, and business management. These people engage in creative problem solving, drawing on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems. Doing so typically requires a high degree of formal education and thus a high level of human capital. People who do this kind of work may sometimes come up with methods or products that turn out to be widely useful, but it’s not part of the basic job description. What they *are* required to do regularly is think on their own. They apply or combine standard approaches in unique ways to fit the situation, exercise a great deal of judgment, perhaps try something radically new from time to time. Creative Class people such as physicians, lawyers and managers do this kind of work in dealing with the many varied cases they encounter. In the course of their work, they may also be involved in testing and designing new techniques, new treatment protocols, or new management methods and even develop such things themselves. As a person continues to do more of this latter work, perhaps through a career shift or promotion, that person moves up to the Super-Creative Core: producing transferable, widely usable new forms is now their primary function.

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As the creative content of other lines of work increases – as the relevant body of knowledge becomes more complex, and people are more valued for their ingenuity in applying it – some now in the Working Class or Service Class may move into the Creative Class and even the Super-Creative Core. Alongside the growth in essentially creative occupations, then, we are also seeing growth in creative content across other occupations. A prime example is the secretary in today’s pared-down offices. In many cases this person not only takes on a host of tasks once performed by a large secretarial staff, but becomes a true office manager – channeling flows of information, devising and setting up new systems, often making key decisions on the fly. This person contributes more than “intelligence” or computer skills. She or he adds creative value. Everywhere we look, creativity is increasingly valued. Firms and organizations value it for the results that it can produce and individuals

value it as a route to self-expression and job satisfaction. Bottom line: As creativity becomes more valued, the Creative Class grows.

Not all workers are on track to join, however. For instance in many lower-end service jobs we find the trend running the opposite way; the jobs continue to be “de-skilled” or “de-creativified.” For a counter worker at a fast-food chain, literally every word and move is dictated by a corporate template: “Welcome to Food Fix, sir, may I take your order? Would you like nachos with that?” This job has been thoroughly taylorized – the worker is given far less latitude for exercising creativity than the waitress at the old, independent neighborhood diner enjoyed. Worse yet, there are many people who do not have jobs, and who are being left behind because they do not have the background and training to be part of this new system.

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COUNTING THE CREATIVE CLASS

It is one thing to provide a compelling description of the changing class composition of society, as writers like Bell, Fussell or Reich have done. But I believe it is also important to calibrate and quantify the magnitude of the change at hand. . . . Let's take a look at the key trends.

- The *Creative Class* now includes some 38.3 million Americans, roughly 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce. It has grown from roughly 3 million workers in 1900, an increase of more than tenfold. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Creative Class made up just 10 percent of the workforce, where it hovered until 1950 when it began a slow rise; it held steady around 20 percent in the 1970s and 1980s. Since that time, this new class has virtually exploded, increasing from less than 20 million to its current total, reaching 25 percent of the working population in 1991 before climbing to 30 percent by 1999.
- At the heart of the Creative Class is the *Super-Creative Core*, comprising 15 million workers, or 12 percent of the workforce. It is made up of people who work in science and engineering, computers and mathematics, education, and the arts, design and entertainment, people who work in directly creative activity, as we have seen. Over the past century, this segment rose from less than 1 million

workers in 1900 to 2.3 million in 1950 before crossing 10 million in 1991. In doing so, it increased its share of the workforce from 2.5 percent in 1900 to 5 percent in 1960, 8 percent in 1980 and 9 percent in 1990, before reaching 12 percent by 1999.

- The traditional *Working Class* has today 33 million workers, or a quarter of the U.S. workforce. It consists of people in production operations, transportation and materials moving, and repair and maintenance and construction work. The percentage of the workforce in working-class occupations peaked at 40 percent in 1920, where it hovered until 1950, before slipping to 36 percent in 1970, and then declining sharply over the past two decades.
- The *Service Class* includes 55.2 million workers or 43 percent of the U.S. workforce, making it the largest group of all. It includes workers in lower-wage, lower-autonomy service occupations such as health care, food preparation, personal care, clerical work and other lower-end office work. Alongside the decline of the Working Class, the past century has seen a tremendous rise in the Service Class, from 5 million workers in 1900 to its current total of more than ten times that amount.

It's also useful to look at the changing composite picture of the U.S. class structure over the twentieth century. In 1900, there were some 10 million people in the Working Class, compared to 2.9 million in the Creative Class and 4.8 million in the Service Class. The Working Class was thus larger than the two other classes combined. Yet the largest class at that time was agricultural workers, who composed nearly 40 percent of the workforce but whose numbers rapidly declined to just a very small percentage today. In 1920, the Working Class accounted for 40 percent of the workforce, compared to slightly more than 12 percent for the Creative Class and 21 percent for the Service Class.

In 1950, the class structure remained remarkably similar. The Working Class was still in the majority, with 25 million workers, some 40 percent of the workforce, compared to 10 million in the Creative Class (16.5 percent) and 18 million in the Service Class (30 percent). In relative terms, the Working Class was as large as it was in 1920 and bigger than it was in 1900. Though the Creative Class had grown slightly in percentage terms, the Service Class had grown considerably, taking up much of the slack coming from the steep decline in agriculture.

The tectonic shift in the U.S. class structure has taken place over the past two decades. In 1970, the Service Class pulled ahead of the Working Class, and by 1980 it was much larger (46 versus 32 percent), marking the first time in the twentieth century that the Working Class was not the dominant class. By 1999, both the Creative Class and the Service Class had pulled ahead of the Working Class. The Service Class, with 55 million workers (43.4 percent), was bigger in relative terms than the Working Class had been at any time in the past century.

These changes in American class structure reflect a deeper, more general process of economic and social change. The decline of the old Working Class is part and parcel of the decline of the industrial economy on which it was based, and of the social and demographic patterns upon which that old society was premised. The Working Class no longer has the hand it once did in setting the tone or establishing the values of American life – for that matter neither does the 1950s managerial class. Why, then, have the social functions of the Working Class not been taken over by the new largest class, the Service Class? As we have seen, the Service Class has little clout and its rise in numbers can be understood only alongside the rise of the Creative Class. The Creative Class – and the modern Creative Economy writ large – depends on this ever-larger Service Class to “outsource” functions that were previously provided within the family. The Service Class exists mainly as a supporting infrastructure for the Creative Class and the Creative Economy. The Creative Class also has considerably more economic power. Members earn substantially more than those in other classes. In 1999, the average salary for a member of the Creative Class was nearly \$50,000 (\$48,752) compared to roughly \$28,000 for a Working Class member and \$22,000 for a Service Class worker. . . .

I see these trends vividly played out in my own life. I have a nice house with a nice kitchen but it's often mostly a fantasy kitchen – I eat out a lot, with “servants” preparing my food and waiting on me. My house is clean, but I don't clean it, a housekeeper does. I also have a gardener and a pool service; and (when I take a taxi) a chauffeur. I have, in short, just about all the servants of an English lord except that they're not mine full-time and they don't live below stairs; they are part-time and distributed in the local area. Not all of these “servants” are lowly serfs. The person who cuts my hair is a very creative stylist much in demand, and drives a new BMW. The woman who cleans my house is a

gem: I trust her not only to clean but to rearrange and suggest ideas for redecorating; she takes on these things in an entrepreneurial manner. Her husband drives a Porsche. To some degree, these members of the Service Class have adopted many of the functions along with the tastes and values of the Creative Class, with which they see themselves sharing much in common. Both my hairdresser and my housekeeper have taken up their lines of work to get away from the regimentation of large organizations; both of them relish creative pursuits. Service Class people such as these are close to the mainstream of the Creative Economy and prime candidates for reclassification.

CREATIVE CLASS VALUES

The rise of the Creative Class is reflected in powerful and significant shifts in values, norms and attitudes. Although these changes are still in process and certainly not fully played out, a number of key trends have been discerned by researchers who study values, and I have seen them displayed in my field research across the United States. Not all of these attitudes break with the past: Some represent a melding of traditional values and newer ones. They are also values that have long been associated with more highly educated and creative people. On the basis of my own interviews and focus groups, along with a close reading of statistical surveys conducted by others, I cluster these values along three basic lines.

Individuality. The members of the Creative Class exhibit a strong preference for individuality and self-statement. They do not want to conform to organizational or institutional directives and resist traditional group-oriented norms. This has always been the case among creative people from “quirky” artists to “eccentric” scientists. But it has now become far more pervasive. In this sense, the increasing nonconformity to organizational norms may represent a new mainstream value. Members of the Creative Class endeavor to create individualistic identities that reflect their creativity. This can entail a mixing of multiple creative identities.

Meritocracy. Merit is very strongly valued by the Creative Class, a quality shared with Whyte's class of organization men. The Creative Class favors hard work, challenge and stimulation. Its members have

a propensity for goal-setting and achievement. They want to get ahead because they are good at what they do.

Creative Class people no longer define themselves mainly by the amount of money they make or their position in a financially delineated status order. While money may be looked upon as a marker of achievement, it is not the whole story. In interviews and focus groups, I consistently come across people valiantly trying to defy an economic class into which they were born. This is particularly true of the young descendants of the truly wealthy – the capitalist class – who frequently describe themselves as just “ordinary” creative people working on music, film or intellectual endeavors of one sort or another. Having absorbed the Creative Class value of merit, they no longer find true status in their wealth and thus try to downplay it.

There are many reasons for the emphasis on merit. Creative Class people are ambitious and want to move up based on their abilities and effort. Creative people have always been motivated by the respect of their peers. The companies that employ them are often under tremendous competitive pressure and thus cannot afford much dead wood on staff: everyone has to contribute. The pressure is more intense than ever to hire the best people regardless of race, creed, sexual preference or other factors.

But meritocracy also has its dark side. Qualities that confer merit, such as technical knowledge and mental discipline, are socially acquired and cultivated. Yet those who have these qualities may easily start thinking they were born with them, or acquired them all on their own, or that others just “don’t have it.” By papering over the causes of cultural and educational advantage, meritocracy may subtly perpetuate the very prejudices it claims to renounce. On the bright side, of course, meritocracy ties into a host of values and beliefs we’d all agree are positive – from faith that virtue will be rewarded, to valuing self-determination and mistrusting rigid caste systems. Researchers have found such values to be on the rise, not only among the Creative Class in the United States, but throughout our society and other societies.

Diversity and Openness. Diversity has become a politically charged buzzword. To some it is an ideal and rallying cry, to others a Trojan-horse concept that has brought us affirmative action and other liberal abominations. The Creative Class people I study use the word a lot, but not to press any political hot buttons. Diversity

is simply something they value in all its manifestations. This is spoken of so often, and so matter-of-factly, that I take it to be a fundamental marker of Creative Class values. As my focus groups and interviews reveal, members of this class strongly favor organizations and environments in which they feel that anyone can fit in and can get ahead.

Diversity of peoples is favored first of all out of self-interest. Diversity can be a signal of meritocratic norms at work. Talented people defy classification based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference or appearance. One indicator of this preference for diversity is reflected in the fact that Creative Class people tell me that at job interviews they like to ask if the company offers same-sex partner benefits, even when they are not themselves gay. What they’re seeking is an environment open to differences. Many highly creative people, regardless of ethnic background or sexual orientation, grew up feeling like outsiders, different in some way from most of their schoolmates. They may have odd personal habits or extreme styles of dress. Also, Creative Class people are mobile and tend to move around to different parts of the country; they may not be “natives” of the place they live even if they are American-born. When they are sizing up a new company and community, acceptance of diversity and of gays in particular is a sign that reads “nonstandard people welcome here.” It also registers itself in changed behaviors and organizational policies. For example, in some Creative Class centers like Silicon Valley and Austin, the traditional office Christmas party is giving way to more secular, inclusive celebrations. The big event at many firms is now the Halloween party: Just about anyone can relate to a holiday that involves dressing up in costume.

While the Creative Class favors openness and diversity, to some degree it is a diversity of elites, limited to highly educated, creative people. Even though the rise of the Creative Class has opened up new avenues of advancement for women and members of ethnic minorities, its existence has certainly failed to put an end to long-standing divisions of race and gender. Within high-tech industries in particular these divisions still seem to hold. The world of high-tech creativity doesn’t include many African-Americans. Several of my interviewees noted that a typical high-tech company “looks like the United Nations minus the black faces.” This is unfortunate but not surprising. For several reasons, U.S. blacks are under-represented in many professions, and this may be compounded

today by the so-called digital divide – black families in the United States tend to be poorer than average, and thus their children are less likely to have access to computers. My own research shows a negative statistical correlation between concentrations of high-tech firms in a region and nonwhites as a percentage of the population, which is particularly disturbing in light of my other findings on the positive relationship between high-tech and other kinds of diversity – from foreign-born people to gays.

There are intriguing challenges to the kind of diversity that the members of the Creative Class are drawn to. Speaking of a small software company that had the usual assortment of Indian, Chinese, Arabic and other employees, an Indian technology professional said: "That's not diversity! They're all software engineers." Yet despite the holes in the picture, distinctive value changes are indeed afoot. . . .

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