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Interview: Richard Florida - Talent loves Tolerance

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Viewed by many as the world's leading urban theorist, Richard Florida was in Ireland this summer, and told Ann O'Dea that tolerance was a key ingredient in any creative economy.

Author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and many other tomes along similar themes, since his self-described conversion in the late Nineties, he has preached to all who will listen his doctrine of creative progress, and the necessity to 'creatify' even our most lowly service jobs. On stage in Derry addressing the Noribic-hosted EBN



Photo by Lorcan Doherty

(European Business Network) Congress in May, Florida paced the boards looking every bit the “intellectual rock star”, as described by *Fast Company*. Having devoured his books over the years, I was delighted to finally meet up with him after his talk.

Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, Global Research professor at New York University, and the founder of the Creative Class Group, *The Economist* describes Florida “as close to a household name as it is possible for an urban theorist to be in America”, and the plaudits go on, but his progressive theories of the Three Ts - Talent, Technology and Tolerance - have earned him critics among more conservative Americans, he says.

Lead or lose

As you might expect, Florida is very active on microblogging site Twitter, and his feed has been recognised by *TIME* magazine as one of the 140 most influential in the world. He has tweeted extensively and vocally on Toronto's current mayor, Rob Ford, and it is the first subject we tackle when we sit down to talk after his address. He describes Toronto's current flourishing state as occurring 'despite' its mayor rather than because of him.

"Whether at country or city level, public policy does make a difference, and one thing we do know from our studies of Europe, is that good mayors - Mike Bloomberg is an example in the US - can do a lot of good things and can speed progress up."

"But bad mayors are horrible and the study of Europe shows pretty significantly that a bad mayor not only does direct damage by derailing initiatives, but indirectly by squashing the public spirit, acting as what Jane Jacobs describes as the squelcher." Florida regularly cites Jacobs, the American-Canadian author and activist who specialised in urban studies, as an influence.

However, it is not public leadership alone that creates flourishing, progressive cities, Florida argues. "I think a lot of it comes from what we in America call public-private partnerships, with business making real investments in the city," he says. "And of course from the history of a place."

Irish cities like Dublin have the latter in spades, he says. "What an asset to have - this combination of natural environment and glorious history embedded in the built environment."

Returning to the public-private theme, he extols the virtues of decentralisation of power. "Countries and cities that have more porous leadership structures where there's a lot of business and civic engagement, where they have routes around ineffective leadership - that can make a big difference."

He recalls a Korean student telling him he had figured out what made the US such an innovative place. "He said, 'In Korea, we have one plan, and if it goes screwy, we're done. In the US you have 50 states, you have thousands of municipalities and cities, and if your country gets it wrong, there are many other points of porous entry and change'.

"So I do think the way around that is to make your city more of a ground up operation, to create greater ability for people and communities to shape their own destiny."

An Ideas Economy

According to Florida, the great western countries lost their way during the Industrial Age. "We just got distracted. The heaviness, if you will, the weight of heavy production, whether here in Ireland or England, Wales and the US confused us. We began to think that bigger was better. What we forgot was that what made us great, and created the advances, was human creativity. Those entrepreneurs were actually creative people. It wasn't the bulky stuff that mattered. It was the ideas."

Now, says Florida, we are returning to a post-industrial age, and we are beginning to understand that much technology and innovation doesn't necessarily require large factories. And creativity goes well beyond just these sectors.

"When I look at music and great innovation centres like Dublin or Nashville, there's no big factory needed. It's just a collection of creative people that want to be part of something. I think we are now opening our eyes that places have to be more meaningful, they have to act like this to collect great people - to inspire them."

Our mistake in trying to create centres of creativity and innovation has often been to think in silos, he says. "We speak of having a technology this, an innovation that, a cultural the other. And what we forget is that creative people need one another. Technologists don't always marry other technologists. We're typically attracted to people unlike ourselves. Your friends aren't all reporters or writers.

"What makes a truly great community is that people have different ways and walks of life and there's not a hierarchy - where everyone has status and meaning in their community. We need to build communities where all creative people can be admired - whether a musician, an inventor a writer, a technologist. It's not just how big the pile of money, about yachts and private jets. Where creative people can be admired, that's what creative people will be attracted to."

Tolerance rules

And of course key to this kind of community is tolerance. We return to the question of gay marriage as an example of such an environment. I tell Florida that polls in Ireland show that the majority of the people would be behind gay marriage, but that current or previous Governments have not yet made a move on this. He insists politicians who don't understand the value of such progress are "hurting their country".

"I'm just so glad that (US President Barack) Obama finally got with it," he says. "I don't come at this from a gay marriage or an arts and culture advocacy point of view. I come at this as somebody who believes in economic growth," he insists.

"And finally my colleagues in economics are coming around to seeing this. Through international studies of economic performance, they are seeing attitudes towards homophobia actually are positive and significant, that homophobic countries don't grow. It's not because they're homophobic, it's because they don't embrace the world, and don't embrace new people and they're scared of outsiders."

Happily, he says that has not been the case in Ireland, which scores highly on his own research teams' "tolerance indicators", but adds that governments do not always reflect their peoples. "They didn't reflect George Bush in the US, and they certainly don't reflect the current mayor of Toronto in Canada," he says.

According to Florida, great centres for innovation and creativity can overcome these challenges, but leadership is crucial in removing such attitudes that generally come from fear. It is vital to bridge the divide between the prosperous creative class and the rest of society, he says.

“Even when we talk about the destitute artist, they are in a qualitatively different place than the working person in the service economy, the person who is working two or three jobs, or in a Wal-Mart store with no job security. An artist may not be rich but at least they’re doing something that’s personally enriching and they’ve made a choice.

“When the people are scared and anxious, they just see spoilt, rich, urban, gay, lesbian, artist, musician, student, banker and, to them, they’re all the same. They don’t see any nuance. They just see advantaged people and them, and their anger comes out, like in any period of reaction, in terrible ways. So I think the real task of leadership has to be to show that each person has to have a way to fit into this new creative economy, and that there’s a future for them. If this divide remains between the creative classes and the others we are all in trouble.”

Immigration is key

His theme of diversity extends to immigration, and he describes himself as a “huge supporter” of the current March for Innovation movement in the US, which is fighting for immigration reform and which counts Bloomberg and many of the US’ top tech leaders among its numbers. “Indeed I hope it was partly inspired by my early work on the subject,” says Florida.

“I think that immigration or open migration is the key. I’m the grandchild of emigrants and my grandparents had zero education but their grandkids have a lot. I think what creates a vibrancy in a society is this inflow and outflow of people. I think that immigration and innovation go together.”

Ireland, he says, is a case in point, in that it has always been a creative community, but retaining that openness and tolerance will be key in the country, too, if it is to further prosper. He points to his Pauline moment in the late Nineties, when he realised that people and communities matter as much as companies, a realisation that led to the publication of the *The Rise of the Creative Class* back in 2002.

“Our economy was and is going through a fundamental transformation. This isn’t a minor shift. When I talked of the rise in the creative economy, there were many who thought I had lost the plot and they were sure that the advance of the decade would derail this approach,” he says. “But these aren’t trends and fads. These are the fundamentals of a modern economy.

“It is not physical labour that differentiates us from other species, that makes us different from others who populate this planet. There is something more basic and intrinsically human. You see it in every little boy and girl in the playground. It comes equally in men and women, it doesn’t care about ethnicity, doesn’t care about where you were born, it doesn’t care about the sexual orientation of your parents, doesn’t care if you are single or married or divorced, straight or gay, able bodied or physically disabled. Creativity is the great leveller. It will not withstand to be bound by the social categories we impose on ourselves.

“And it comes in everybody. Every single human being is creative. That’s the real stuff of economic growth and the logic of economic development in our time means that those individuals, companies and places that can accelerate the harnessing of that creative energy, the places that can tap deepest into that mine of creativity and attract it from elsewhere, they gain competitive advantage.”

He describes the mission of himself and his team as being “to creatify everything”. At present, around 40 to 50pc of the workforce in the US and Northern Europe can be described as part of the creative class, he says, but it’s time that expanded rapidly.

“You can see it here in this great country in things like agriculture, with artisan production. Farming is turning into a creative industry. Now we have to creatify the jobs of the people who take care of our parents, of our kids, who serve us in hotels, in restaurants - that’s the next frontier. We’ve got to creatify those jobs.

“The places that do that first will have competitive advantage because they will have more innovative, more creative workers, more efficient workers and higher wages,” he says.

He points to the austerity drive in Europe at present and says government spending, while not the solution to the crisis, can be a short-term solution and extremely important to stimulate demand short term, referring to Keynes.

“However, it is not what will solve crises in the long-term. Demand in the long run comes from building a class system of workers who can stimulate demand because their wages are high enough to buy the products we produce. It’s good for our cities, for our communities for our economies.”

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