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- 1 Betsy Donald is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She has degrees in history, environmental studies, planning and geography from McGill, York and Toronto respectively. She teaches and does research on the urban creative economy, with recent publications in **Economic Geography**, **Environment and Planning A**, and **Space and Polity**. She is also a **Registered Professional Planner** and has consulted on a wide-range of public policy issues for all levels of government. Her report, *Competing for Talent: implications for social and cultural policy in Canadian city-regions* was commissioned by Heritage Canada. Dr. Donald currently has two SSHRC-funded research projects: one on creative class politics in Toronto and Boston, and the other on the urban creative food economy. As a Visiting Scholar at **Harvard University's Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston in the Kennedy School of Government**, Dr. Donald has been examining the politics of the new economy in Boston.

Remy Tremblay (RT): Betsy Donald, what is your opinion on Richard Florida's creative class? Is it realistic? Has it been empirically demonstrated?

Betsy Donald (BD): Well I think that obviously Richard Florida's work, particularly his 2002 book *Rise of the Creative Class*, and all the work he has been doing on the 3 Ts and the role that place plays in local economic development is probably the most significant work to come out of the regional economic development field in about 20 or 30 years. And I think that you first have to give him credit for starting a debate again about the role of place and the importance of measures, subjective measures like quality of life to the economic health and stability of cities, especially knowledge-intensive cities. So I think that you know absolutely he is important, whether you agree with his work or not. He absolutely has had such an important impact. All you have to do is look at all the cities across North America, and now Europe and even Asia that are starting to fashion policies after his work. So you know cities that are now interested in looking at quality of life measures for their people. And one of the difficulties obviously is that quality of place as Richard Florida has articulated in his books is really his own views of what he thinks it is. Yes it is based on empirical research he did in the late 90s with IT workers, information technology workers aged

20 to about 28. So, the problem is that here we are in 2005, almost 2006, our economy has changed a lot, he hasn't looked at a lot of other people in the economy, so his version, he has really kind of individualized quality of place, depoliticized the concept. He has got one vision but there are clearly so many different visions of what quality of life is for different people, for women, for people who are in different lifecycles, for retired people, for people who are in their 30s who have got children, I mean there are so many different aspects that have yet to be explored.

RT: I think Richard Florida mentioned in a footnote in his latest book, *The Flight of the Creative Class*, that while you can have a strong high-tech economy it brings social inequality.

BD: I think that what his research found, and this is one of the most disturbing aspects of the knowledge-intensive economy, is that where you seem to have very high growth in cities, for example, I know North America better than other places, but in San Francisco, Boston, New York City, Toronto, Vancouver, even Montréal to some extent although it is not growing as intensely as those other places, is that what comes with that is increasing social and spatial polarization. So you are starting to see that as the rich get richer, the poorer get poorer, and I think that seems to be a function of our knowledge-intensive society. And when you think about it, nowadays you need a credit card for everything, everything is on the Internet, you can Internet bank, you know, you need to have good credit to get groceries (laughter); so there are all these technological changes that are great for people who have the skills and the know-how and the resources to use them but there are a lot of people left behind. So, I think that is the biggest challenge facing a lot of these knowledge-based cities now in North America --is this the kind of society we want, where we have this increasing haves and have-nots, and I think that Richard Florida has demonstrated in his latest book that we are seeing those places that happen to be growing the fastest are also polarizing. So I think that is definitely a key characteristic of globalization in the global city.

RT: Do you think that he forgot to look at the suburbs?

BD: I think that again, his empirical work was really based on focus groups that he did with information technology, young people in their 20s who were living in these cities in the heyday of the late 90s and the year 2000 when everyone was going to bars, had tons of money, and there was this real, what is the word I am looking for, frenzy of economic activity and since then we have started to see a bit of a clearout in these cities because of the dot.com bust. But also, again I think that Robert Lang's work on the sociology of the creative class is very good because he talks about how Florida hasn't really developed a sociology of this class, I mean is it really a class? Class is often defined as a socio-economic group but he sort of adds this kind of sociological anecdotal kind of stuff. So assuming that everyone wants to live downtown, everyone wants to live in the cities, but again, if you look at the empirical work, the suburbs in North America are continuing to grow. That is where people tend to live. Certainly a lot of people that move into the family lifecycle stage are looking for larger homes with backyards and parking, close to schools. You know there is evidence in Toronto that certain immigrant groups tend to prefer the newer suburbs over the older suburbs, so I think that it is definitely misleading to assume that everybody wants to live in the urban cores. And I think that the reason why he has popularized that notion is that, his main audience has been local economic

development planners who are trying to revitalize the old American city. And again, there is a huge difference between the Canadian tradition versus the American tradition of urban life and that Canada had always put in much more strategic investments, and Québec, the Québec government too, in terms of investing in urban areas in terms of transit and transportation and schools. We have a whole different tax structure around our school system which has enabled a much more even educational system across space. Whereas in the US of course, one of the key difference is that they have whole world status, towns and cities have much more local power to make their own decisions. There is not a lot of regional thinking down in the US so you've got a lot of fragmentation and metropolitan fragmentation, and they also have a history of racial conflict, obviously much deeper than ours in Canada, and class, so you really saw the white middle-classes fleeing the cities in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. So they have a contemporary history of a lot of white flight and suburbanization, so when Richard Florida came up with his thesis that there is new interest in the cities and that people are starting to be attracted.

I think the important context you have to remember about why Richard Florida's work has been taken up by so many policy makers in the US in the American city is because the American city has a history of white flight to the suburbs so the very idea is that he is trying to give hope I think back to a lot of cities that have been on the decline, that have seen their inner cities pretty much fall apart. But the question is, are the policy "fixes" actually the right ones? And I think this is where, you know the paper I wrote on competing for talent, the implications for the social and cultural planning of city regions is important because it really says it is important to think about. What I am trying to say there is that in many ways, Richard Florida's definition of the creative class is really a very narrow kind of talent elite that is interested in a very narrow band of cultural consumption activities, and really, if you want to really be interested in a long-term health and sustainability of a city or city region, you have to have more strategic investments in things like health care and immigration settlement and education. Concerning the public education system, it is absolutely imperative that we invest in that, and that we invest evenly in it. I think it is very interesting to think about how we in Canada have funded education services. Basically we take people's property taxes and the business portion of property taxes and we collect from all on a regional scale, or even on a provincial scale, and we redistribute it, and the idea is that every student has about the same amount of money and that schools should be relatively even in terms of their educational contribution. There are variations but the idea is that there are not huge discrepancies. In the US, the education funding is much different, it is very localized, so it is all on the local property tax. So what people do there, and this is why we are seeing such a huge increase in housing prices in the US, is that you go to a neighbourhood if you want to send your kid to a certain school. So you pay for your schooling essentially through your housing cost. It is also why you get such unevenness in space there, where you've got very bad schools in one area and really really good schools in another area. I was just in Boston and it's really interesting to see how in one small city in the Boston region (Brookline), the entry level house is a million dollars. I was talking to people there and they were saying well you know that's because we want to get our kids in these public schools that are thought to be the best in the US. So of course if you're poor, if you're black, if you're someone who hasn't got the resources to do that, you're sending you kid to the local school. So you

actually see incredible amount of racial tension in the school system there too. I think that we could be going down that kind of slippery slope here if we don't think about innovative ways to fund our system in order to make sure that we've got the sort of regional or national provincial thinking around funding public schools. That's just one example. I think that's where we need to be putting your strategic investments. Immigration settlement is another area that the federal government is become much more interested in making sure that our cities in Canada are able to manage the influx of immigrants, and some of the special needs people have around English or French as a second language. I think that those are kinds of things we have to be thinking about. In terms of culture, one of the things Richard Florida is so known about is talking about, in his findings, he found that capital C culture, which is very formal culture, i.e., museums and opera, those are in his view almost old economy types of cultural activities and that while they are important and they're a good indicator of cultural kind of make up of a city, The other that we have to think about is small "C" culture, more informal culture, like art in the parks, just walking around the neighbourhoods, the streetscapes and the ability to go into a shop or go into a bar or we've called just in time amenities, you know this idea of your working late and you just want to go run up the mountain or you know, have a break of just go sit in a bar or just go for a little shop. So this kind of more informal cultural experience, which obviously Montréal is probably one of the best example in the world of this kind of informal cultural milieu that is very attractive and I think that is why Richard Florida was so attracted to writing about Montréal because it's such a fun city to be in. But that's what a lot of cities are trying to copy and they're doing it through things like marketing gay pride, gay festivals or "hey we're cool we've got lofts now in our city". But the question is, how far is that really going to go, you have to really make sure that you don't do those things at the expense of those long term strategic investments in place. And again if I can just reiterate, for people who would be listening to this: housing, transit, really sustainable land-use, all those things are really important when you're thinking about governing the city.

RT: Of course Richard Florida's theory has been discussed a lot over the last 5 years at least. Are there any other theories we should think about, or consider?

BD: Sure, I think again he's the most popular. In the fields of urban geography, economic geography, regional economic development, in all these fields there's a lot of really interesting research going on. I'm thinking of the work of Ann Markusen who has written about the quality of occupational theory, or occupational class. So her point similar to Florida is that firms are still very much important in the economic development of a city, you have to remember that people are increasingly identifying themselves not so much with « I work for Coca-Cola and I will for the next 30 years », but rather « I am a professor and that's my occupation ». Maybe professor is not a very good example, because you're not that movable. But a better example is "I'm a medical technician, and I can travel anywhere, my skills are desired anywhere and I will choose to live in the place that offers the things that I want." So again Richard Florida has popularized it. But this idea is that I will choose to go to a place that has a lot of economic opportunity, so that if I lose my job or I want to switch jobs, I can do that in a relatively deep labour market. I love that term, a thick or deep labour market. It's very important for a city to concentrate on. And then of course I'd like a place that has a quality of life, and that of course being the most contentious, because who defines quality of life? It's very much a subjective and individualized

process. Having said that, there are some general things and one would be again affordable housing, safe neighbourhoods, good education system, nice parks, all those kinds of things. So there are in some indicators that researches have shown that actually do make a difference in the quality of people's life. And then of course, Richard Florida who popularized it, but other people have been doing work on the diversity, the importance of tolerance and diversity. So this idea that you can feel accepted. Again Canadians are known for public policies that really try to promote tolerance and acceptance in a place. And I think that that's not a quick fix urban solution, but that is something that's imbedded in our charter of rights and freedom around issues of civil rights and human rights It's a very important dimension, or characteristic that is very important for understanding why our cities are desirable for many people from all over the world. Ann Markusen works on the occupational class, she's an excellent person I recommend reading anything of hers. And then Charles Landry from the UK has been doing work on the creative city and it's much more about he's more of a kind of architect, urban design thinker, so I think that his work is good. And actually, locally Anne-Marie Séguin who just wrote a book on the design city where she's actually referring to cities from all over the world but she's using Montréal's example. She's the design commissioner for the city of Montréal and she's using Montréal as an example of where the city is trying to encourage design in place. So that's something to look at. And then the other really great writer in this field is Jamie Peck. He comes from the regulation school of political economy and he's a very critical thinker and a very funny writer as well. He wrote a paper called *Banal Urbanism* critiquing all the Richard Florida work. And then another excellent researcher is Ed Glaeser who's at Harvard University, he's an economist. Glaeser basically took all of Richard Florida's empirical work and his argument is that he has looked at north American cities and growth patterns over the last 100 years and he prefers - he doesn't like the term creative class, because he said it's too fuzzy and kind of nebulous, so then actually after talking to him I tended to concur with him but I find it's too, people are able to hide in it, and it's not analytically clean - so he prefers the term skilled-city, because his research shows that really the only predictor of growth in the knowledge intensive city is education, formal education. So I think that really the creative stuff comes sort of as an afterthought in the growth city. But he thinks the consumption of creativity is really a by-product of often a lot of money by the elite classes. Having said that, other people will argue in fact that you have to be poor to be an artist because you have to, you know, you've got the angst that forces creativity and I think there's a wonderful literature there of course sociology area and the sociology of creativity.

RT: You said that Richard Florida interviewed young people in their 20s. Do you agree with him that they too want to live in cool downtowns?

BD: One of the debates of course in economics, urban economic development is: who is driving the economy of the cities? Is it firms? Is it people? What is the best way of thinking about it? And traditionally we've always thought about firms. If you can attract the Gillettes, or the GMs, or the Fords, bring those manufacturing plants to your city, excuse me, that's a good thing because they're bringing so many jobs and they're bringing in so much tax dollars for the local economy. One of the key things I always stress to my students when we're thinking about urban economic development is you have to think about where is the money coming from for these other services. So I highly recommend a basic course in public finance, like municipal

public finance. It's really important for students to understand, especially in the Canadian context, but most everywhere in the world, with few exceptions, local governments get their money through property taxes. That means that they're interested -- and that pays for all the services, like garbage collection and schools, the roads and the parks and all those things. So they're really interested in maximising that opportunity and the way the tax system works is, there's different classes and there's residential, and within residential there's apartment buildings plus single family and then there's commercial and industrial and retail taxes. Depending on jurisdiction, there are different classes. But one of the biggest drawers is industrial-commercial, so they're able to charge more per square foot for an industrial actor than they are for a single family home. And the other dynamic going on, of course, is that cities tend not to like, there're certain groups, certain more expensive than others so if they can build housing not for that group, they will, it's illegal to do it, but they do it another way, so they don't like a lot social housing, no they don't like a lot of people that can draw upon services. They tend not to like young families because they use the school system, especially in the US, for they have to pay for the school system out of those revenues. Those are really how a lot of local economic development or politicians are thinking. So if they can get a big company to come in, and stay there, they're just ecstatic, because they bring in a lot of revenues and jobs as well. So there's still a real interest in attracting this kind of players to these cities. So the question then becomes why would they want to attract young people, or why would they want to run into this Richard Florida type of thing. Well I think because the idea is that these young people are working at these really dynamic firms or they're creating their own, they've got a lot of energy, they've got the entrepreneurial spirit, these are the high knowledge workers who if they had a choice would live anywhere. So they're the ones that are creating the new technologies and creating the business activity. So that's the thinking. If they can get them. Sure they're not going to be like in the older economy a big sort of solid GM plant or Ford plant, but they've got a lot of other things they bring in the city in terms of vitality. And to some extent that's an indicator of economic activity. So again it's this idea there relatively, you know, a lot of these Richard Floridian kind of solutions are relatively cheap things for the cities to do. But this is only one way of thinking about economic development or social development of a city. Clearly lifestyle cycle has to come into play. It begs questions, but what kind of city do you want to live in, what kind of life do you want to live, do you want it to be all the same, or do you live in places with a lot of different types of people and lifestyles and life cycles. Personally, I would like to be in a place with both old people and young people and everyone in between and different races and classes and mixes. So is this idea of making sure that we don't ignore the very vulnerable in our society which really make our society. I can't remember who's the famous Supreme Court judge in the US always said that our policies are sort of tax policies define us as a civilization. But you know, our policies around even urban development define us as what kind of people we want to be or what kind of civilization we want or what society we want. And I think that's why I'm urging people to think about those longer term strategic investments in place that really make a place sustainable and value added for people who live in.

RT: Thank you very much for this interview.

2