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- 1 Robert E. Lang is Director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech in Alexandria, Virginia, and an Associate Professor in Urban Affairs and Planning in Virginia Tech's School of Planning and International Affairs. Dr. Lang is also the new Editor of the scholarly journal *Housing Policy Debate*, which until recently was published by the Fannie Mae Foundation. Dr. Lang received a Ph.D. in Sociology from Rutgers University, where he also taught sociology and urban studies. He was a Research Associate at the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University. Dr. Lang's research specialties include suburban studies, demographic and spatial analysis, housing and the built environment, and metropolitan governance. He has authored over 100 academic and professional publications on a wide range of topics, and has developed many new urban planning concepts such as "Boomburbs," "Edgeless Cities," and "Megapolitan Areas."

Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay (DGT): I'd like you to give me your views on Richard Florida's thesis of the creative class. How do you see this ?

Robert Lang (RL): You mean the big idea of the creative class? I see it as an extension of the sociological work of previous people that tried to identify new classes, like in the mid-20th century, someone identifies white-collar workers for the first time and this is a kind of follow up on that work. Florida is not quite explicit about it.

DGT: Do you think it's something which is realistic? Is it useful or could we have done without it ?

RL: It varies in its usefulness. It's based on kind of sociological propos. Sociology is when you try to identify new phenomena. You come up with an exemplar case, like the software engineers that surfs at lunch, that kind of things. And it typically is not the most common representation of that phenomenon. For example, when they were considering the white-collar workers, C. Wright Mills was the sociologist, he was interviewing people out of Wall Street and Madison Avenue, and there was all that popular culture about people in great flannel suits. It was a small share of who's white-collar, but it was the one that the public could easily understand and that the media could understand. But it was kind of a caricature and just a contemporary understanding of the creative class, it's a caricature. Because he's saying it's a third of

the work force, anytime you term a third of the workforce, a lot of people whose work with not look immediately creative. So it's kind of overbalanced, but not useless, it's just of limited use.

DGT: Do you see it linked to the knowledge economy or new economy? How do you see the links between the two ?

RL: Well, it's supposed to be part of the knowledge economy and the new economy, it's supposed to be part of urban revitalization. What was useful about it is that in the economic development world, they were doing things like stimulating growth by putting an aquarium in. And that world was pretty stale, it wasn't focusing on what's the quality of life in the city, what kind of workforce are we trying to attract ? This was very useful that way, because it changed the conversation and shifted it away from projects, like an aquarium or convention center and bricks and mortar. And it shifted back to what are cities like, where do you go as a worker ? Where would you have a good quality of life ? Where would you have fun ? And cities do well by focusing on that. They don't have to buy the whole creative class concept, to change their policy, but it was a way to promote a change in their policy.

DGT: Have many US cities have gone that way?

RL : It's funny. The US cities that have mostly adopted Florida are not the ones that already have the creative class. It's in New York, it's in San Francisco, in Boston, in Washington, pretty much the northeast. But the places that buy into it are small cities, like Roanoke, Virginia, Memphis, Tennessee, places that aren't immediately associated with creative class, but are slower growing. And it's very hard for them to really build momentum in this regard, because they're stuck with doing things like extreme skateboard parks or something crazy like that, it's not that immediately connected. The other thing is Florida's preaching the idea of tolerance and some of these places do not have a history of being very receptive to, say, gay population.

DGT: Has there been any evolution in any of the cities or are they really trying to change the image or it's impossible to do that?

RL: I don't know which would be touted as a success story. The other thing is, Florida will turn around saying like Austin, Texas. Let's look at Austin, Texas. Austin, Texas, isn't really Texas. First of, it wasn't settled by people who were from the south, who were Scotch-Irish, who are out of Kentucky, deeply religious and all the rest of that. It was settled by Germans. Palatine Germans. And it had breweries. It had a whole different politic, it was always progressive, like northern Germany's progressive politics. So the fact that a place like Austin, Texas, emerged as the center of the creative class, to me, speaks less about public policies that promoted the idea and more to the fact that it was never part of Texas. It doesn't even have Texas music. It's got a fusion. Instead of music that you'd get, country and western in Nashville, the mainstream country and western, people listen to in pickups, all over America, instead, you've got this kind of odd kind of fusion of blues and western sounds, it's a different world. So I don't think that what it is, is that policies promoting creative class that made Austin. It's that Austin was a different place that became apparent in terms of creativity, cause it was on a different part of the economy with a huge university system and all these idiosyncrasies about it.

DGT: Are universities maybe more determinant? I know that there were some references to the fact that a lot of pretty small US cities have a college or university. Is this maybe a more determinant dimension ?

RL: If you're saying its knowledge workers and then you're talking about that part of the economy, even Madison, Wisconsin, and places that are pretty small suddenly have a disproportionally high share of creative class workers, as he would call them. And that's been noted before that, it didn't take the creative class to understand the dynamic, in fact. One of the things people have been noticing for years is that state university towns are doing better. When you combine with a state capital, Columbus, Ohio, it's even better ; you have a large share of white-collar workers. Columbus is the only city in major metropolitan area in Ohio that isn't losing population, that's actually thriving.

DGT: How do you see a lot of these writings and some of them say: place makes innovation. Do you agree with this vision ?

RL: The relation between place and innovation is more complicated than that and one of the things I make issue with Florida is this: that he has no mechanism. And it's a shame to show that relationship, because it's a well developed mechanism in sociology. There is a theorist, Claude Fisher, who developed, in the 1970s, at the University of California, Berkeley, the relationship between size and density. And creativity, and what would it be alternative lifestyles, and big places have a kind of completeness to them. Let's say, for example, two Korean brothers and they immigrate to the USA and one goes to Duluth, Minnesota and the other goes to Los Angeles. The one that goes to Los Angeles goes to a fully made Korea town and can maintain distinctness, because there are institutions, restaurants, Korean language newspapers. The one that goes to Duluth, assimilates into general American culture. So large cities, dense cities, with a lot of communications create these enduring neighbourhoods. And this is true of dissident communities with gay populations, on a large scale, are nurtured there as well. And there's also a self-selection, people will go to these places. The leading cities in the creative class, by Florida's definition, happen to be, basically, the largest metropolitan areas in the USA, big metropolitan areas, or big complicated entities that produce all sorts of little subcultures within them and sustain them at the metropolitan level. And that is how place would make a community. If you're the offbeat kid in Iowa, where no one gets you, you want to go to theses places. And you add to that kind of differentiations in the rest of the society.

DGT: Is there also a negative impact in this idea that cities should be thriving to attract the best talent, the most educated and the like? Is there a risk of more income polarization or is there no preoccupation for the excluded ?

RL: That's one of the criticisms, always focusing in on high end and I suppose it would be accurate if it was effective. I don't think they had much movement that way. There's not many places that I can think that have said we're going to go after this as a policy and have scored, compared to places where it was part of the process, where it was occurring already, where they are lucky from history or the location of the large university.

DGT: Is there any preoccupation in including the excluded, especially I think of large metropolitan areas that have had difficulties? Is this a preoccupation that is rising or is the Florida perspective the only discourse you're hearing ?

RL: I think it's part of the discourse, because it's part of the contested nature of urban politics. And some of the people that poll Florida as a consultant have to answer to

constituents about why we should put so much emphasis about attracting this class of people. Their rationale is : these are high tax payers, these are people who would stimulate economic development of the region. It's a very similar debate that touches on gentrification, but you know the thing about gentrification is that the most recent studies in the USA show that, surprise, surprise very few people are displaced due to the gentrification. There are cities where it's an issue, as San Francisco or Boston. Gentrification in Detroit ? They should be so lucky ! It's not like this huge middle class clamouring to get in to some of these distressed cities. The places that would not even bother with the creative class, because they're creative, don't even have this. This is part of the mix, it's not part of the policy issue. The places that would invite Florida in need of this kind of stimulation, have so little going for them that any stimulus in that direction would not upset anybody's neighbourhood, essentially.

DGT: What about the suburbs? North American cities are known developing suburbs, what's their place ?

RL: Here is the big problem. The creative class is region-wide. It is not located within the central city. The Silicon Valley of San Francisco, last I checked, was suburban. The high-tech belts around Washington are suburban. That's been one of the weaknesses in Florida's analysis and he talks about this kind of urban dwellers, very talented persons. And the reality is, if you look around Washington, D.C., and you visit the National Institute of Health, where people sit and invent new life forms, they look very conventionalized, they live in the suburbs, they shop at big box retails, they eat at formula restaurants, they might have moderate politics and yet, they fit all the definition of the creative class. They might be terribly creative at work ; they might have very pedestrian tastes outside of work.

DGT: What about the ethnic issue? The blacks and the Hispanics in the US, how does that fit into his vision of attracting talent ? Are they anywhere in there ?

RL: I think to the extent they're in there, there's a high regard for diversity. And that metropolitan areas that are exclusively white, or predominantly white, are not particularly interesting sort of blandish, or are not going to appeal to people seeking that difference and seeking out liveliness. In his view, a creative class type is an exemplar case of the creative class, that would be outwardly looking, would seek out people of different backgrounds, would not be affronted by diversity, would seek diversity.

DGT: You mentioned the methodology issue and the fact that it's not necessarily scientifically based. Do you think it is possible to prove or is it interesting to prove such a theory ?

RL: No social science is necessarily scientifically based, let's just start with that. It's a different kind of science approach. I'm a social scientist, so I'm saying that openly. What Florida does is that he creates a series of rankings and he correlates it with place. And what's missing is analytic reason, analytic frame to describe why. Why would X place produce Y outcome ? What would be the specific reason for it. It's been weak on that, weak enough to raise criticisms and I think I can easily be squared. That's the paper I'm giving which is : you could just put this in sociology. The funny thing is that we did a review of his book. I'm an editor for the Journal of the American Planning Association and we did a round table on his book. We invited his response and we had people contribute to it. We described some of these deficiencies relating to atheoretical approach, just the lack of analytic frame. And his response was

interesting ; he said more or less “no, it’s in there.” And I’ve read this guy and it was like a series of name dropping, but literally he’s missing a formal axiom, like a proposition : this would lead to that. It’s nowhere in the writing. This all ends up : these are the places that have this quality. So he’s created a vulnerability that, in my way of thinking, he doesn’t have to have. And it wouldn’t be necessarily that he would prove or disprove it. It would more like he would have an indication, predictability, or at least a specificity about where it would happen and not happen.

DGT: What would be the policy impacts over the coming years or decades, do you think this will have an important policy impact or will it not?

RL: Well, the impact is probably now. And the impact is that it shifted the discourse, shifted the discussion in economic development, which was stale. From, as I said, bricks and mortar, to this idea of people, that’s the lasting impact, because probably that would be asserted now. In other words, people who raise just bricks and mortar solutions will be asked to address this alternative concern of putting another aquarium, and it doesn’t change the mix of people in the city, it’s kind of an easy thing to understand, because you sell bonds for, and you get the State to help with it, but what do we get for it ? Not much.

DGT: What about cluster theories, which seem to be sometimes in the similar perspectives? How do you see those ? Are they also a proposal for cities ?

- 2 **RL :** Industrial clusters ? Well, they’re based on some older notion of agglomeration economies ; if one firm’s located there and several firms are there, there’s producers’ services firms that help them, and they create efficiencies. I think it’s true to some extent, but it’s different than it was years ago, in that you needed much greater proximity in the cluster than you do now. You can do this across much greater distances, because of the nature of improved telecommunications, Internet, you name it. And the scale at which that exists might be even larger than an individual metropolitan area. It could extend for thousands of square miles, in which that concentration would exist. There’s a belt of pharmaceutical firms in the eastern US that runs from suburban Philadelphia to New Jersey to Connecticut, off to Boston, it’s kind of a speciality of the Northeast US. And again true enormous amount of space.

DGT: So it would not be limited to such small zones as many seem to pretend?

RL: There was a time when you needed a financial district and people had the face to face contact and they really needed to be proximate. And there’s still, in terms of certain kind of exchanges, some of that. It’s interesting since post 9-11, Lower Manhattan has not recovered economically from 9-11. It had no impact on the New York metropolitan area. The firms left for New Jersey and scattered pretty widely. 9-11, had it not happened, half of these firms by inertia would have remained there, but because you lost the World Trade Centers, you’ve had this instead pushed out to the metropolitan scale. It has had no impact on its productivity. If it had left the region, it would probably had an impact on productivity, cause you have to change the labour force, you know, who would be able to get to these jobs would have to cross, and this is the largest US metropolitan area, cross the New York metropolitan area. You can do this same function, so it can benefit several states, not just a few blocks or more in Manhattan.

DGT: So are the city regions going to be the concept which might be more useful?

RL: Yes, the scale at which all of this is functioning has to be at the metropolitan level. That's where, by the way, Florida reports his data from. He does something with ecological fallacy, which is to take from one unit of analysis, like a city, and then generalize to other spaces. You know, to talk about these bohemian enclaves and identify a third of the population, they cannot possibly be living in enclaves. By logic, a third of the US population, a third of US work force cannot be living in enclaves. They must be metropolitan wide. And all the high-tech stuff. What high-tech stuff is in downtown? Other than some of the content or the Internet, which could be downtown? And other than what they call Silicon Alleys, south of midtown Manhattan, the rest of it is in a series of low slung nondescript office parks that are interspersed with big box retail and formula restaurants !

DGT: And do you consider that there is a movement from the northeast or the southwest in the US, in terms of activity or is that not the case?

RL: That's been going on since the 19th century that was the US project, it was to take people and resources from denser parts of the settled land and distribute them more evenly across the whole expanse of the continent. And in fact, the Interstate system was never designed as a hub and spoke system to provide access to the northeast and the west of the country. It was built as a grid, with a series of east-west roads and north-south roads, so that you had uniform access, so I went through deserts, like Phoenix, but in the end, Phoenix would have as much access to the system as any big city in the northeast, Midwest, etc. That's been a public policy in the USA since the beginning of the republic. And you ride a state now where there's a virtual equalization, you know, east and west, north and south, it's starting to, actually, really fill out proportionally parts of the country and the pattern will keep going that way until it does. There are some counter movements, small bands of people leaving California and moving to Midwest, but that's because of the high costs.

DGT: So it was an objective to spread out the population?

RL: It's a national policy. Some of this was obtained through treaties, some of this was conquered land from Mexico, but the idea was that you would use the USA fully and its dated, even to the Interstate pattern, is really by President Roosevelt, who by hand sketches said, planners came by and showed him that the traffic in the US was concentrated between Chicago and New York. And that the US should take its resources to improve all the transportation infrastructures between those locals and all that satellites off of them. And Roosevelt said this isn't the US of the northeast, it's the US of America, drew a map and said the system, like the railroads, goes everywhere.

DGT: So would that tend to say that actually transport infrastructures are more determinant over almost anything else?

RL: In the post-war years, what it did was, you look at a place like the south, which after the Civil War until the mid 20th century had fallen almost out of the national picture because, not just the fact that it was economically underdeveloped rather than northeast, Midwest, but it was a racial problem, several kinds of things. And concurrently with the Civil Rights movement was the construction of the Interstate, suddenly, Greenville, South Carolina, was competitive with the northeast, Midwest, it had the same quality of infrastructure and had the same newness of that infrastructure, but it had less unions, lower labour cost, so before things left the USA,

they paid a visit to the south, like textiles, before it was China, and to this day now, the heart of auto parts manufacturing in the USA is shifted out of the heavily unionized Midwest and into the south, Charlotte, Atlanta, you know, in-between those spaces, eastern Tennessee, they manufacture BMW in Spartanburg, in South Carolina, there's a Mercedes plant in Alabama. It has happened.

DGT : Thank you very much.