

Book Review:

The New Urban Crisis – A review

Florida R. (2017). *The New Urban Crisis*. New York: Basic Books.
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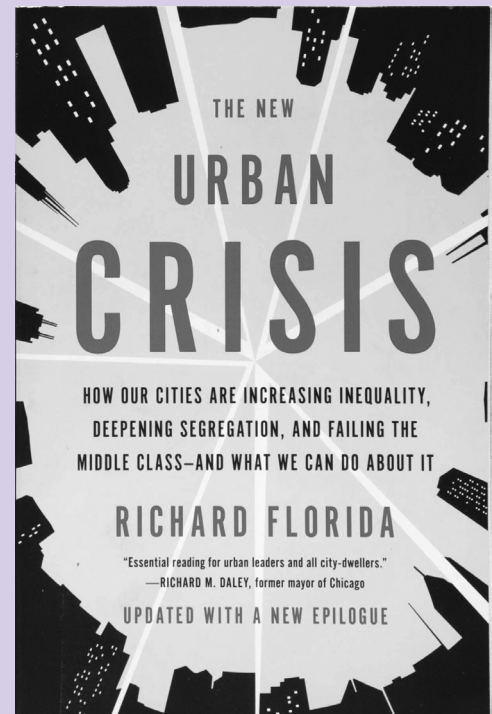
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Abstract

Many socio-economical shifts occurred after 2002, year of the publication of Richard Florida's "The Flight of the Creative Class": crucial years that shaped the actual geo-political balance and the global economy. In the full 9/11 and dot-com's crash aftermaths, Florida's topics have been seen as beacons from scholars, economists, and tech-enthusiasts, and an enlightened part of the society saw in his words a road towards a brighter future. At the same time, slowly, the turbo-capitalism economic system increased its power, spreading around inequalities and contradictions that lead the Western world to the dramatic 2008's financial crisis. What consequences did all these events have on the urban scenario, today? Was the creative class a part of it, and in which way?

Fifteen year after, with another best-seller, Florida tries to answer these unsolved questions, giving new keys (and a new toolbox) to read, identify, understand and solve a (so called) "New Urban Crisis".



Text

It's not a mystery that Florida's dissertations approach involves also several storytelling elements. Private facts and anecdotes related to his personal experiences, his personal path or his personal education become often starting points of paragraph and chapters. A fluid writing that from his deposit of memories drive the readers towards data, facts, urban situations and the proper argumentation of the facts. It happens also that the personal anecdotal rhetoric connects different stories and explains the books' genesis. In the preface of "The New Urban Crisis" (Florida, 2017) the Author reveals that he passed over a period of rethinking due to the criticism generated around "The Rise of The Creative Class" (Florida, 2002). Altogether with the changes in the world's geopolitical equilibrium, the Author elaborated a complex answer to many of the unsolved problems that The Rise generated. This answer is the book itself, seen as a continuation (not as a break) with The Rise.

The topic of the Creative Class upturned by The Rise was surely the beginning of a success. Soon, with several strategic actions, Florida's success become international and branded: seminars, expertise, creation of research spin-off, high-profile conferences (with high expensive cachet and participation fee) and a broad activity of declination of the theory to regional (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2015) and national context (i.e. the writing of additional chapters in The Rise's different translations).

But all of this success had a double-fold face, since it becomes also a consistent baseline for a specific kind of criticism. In the politically polarized context of the United States the Marxism and Socialism allegations gained a strong echo, but weren't the only problem for the writer. In "The New Urban Crisis" he argues that, among all the critics received after 2002, a general mea culpa was necessary, and has been based mostly on a specific aspect: The Rise's optimistic excess.

In fact, the enthusiasm generated by his bestseller made possible the application of the "3Ts of economic development", one of the theoretical cores of the book, in all the scales, in all the places and in both public and private sectors: from small business/small municipalities-local authorities to big companies/big metro areas. This wave of success is consequence of three factors external to the book.

First, the aftermath of the 2002's so-called dot-com crash made possible the invention of new different economic assets which relied not only on technological progress: the talent and the tolerance. These assets were the Creative Class' theories real boost, new energies seen as a way to overcome the economic deadlock and create practical benefits to companies, cities, offices. Then, the technological fast development, that has progressively reduced the physical ground below the stakeholders in all the economical fields. Shifting on digital bases, the service economy and the role of the creativity boomed and still characterize the world until today. Lastly, the global change in the geopolitical atlas, with the well-known role of the United States and the western countries against the terror, which led US' creative economies as world prominent ones.

But all of this, suddenly, stopped to look like a golden solution. With the 2008's economic crisis America showed suddenly its contradictions, and the economic power showed its real size in the world's political life. And it's precisely now that Florida's research activities saw "the urban dimension" as a new core of problems, as has been stated several times in The Rise's revised edition (Florida, 2012). Racial and economic segregations, divisions, gentrification-effects, poverty, diffused urban growth, incredibly high rents, commuters, traffic: all is connected in a new big urban crisis. But, in fact, urban is the problem — he claims now, so urban should be its solution.

"The New Urban Crisis" chapter bases its analysis mostly in the US cities. The American city is seen as a laboratory that can explain a global empiric trend: the system which pulls the poorest and the weakest down and lifts the richest and powerful up in all the urban life's conditions. Throughout the entire book, dataset and considerations tries to express this in terms of statistics, economies, rents, displacements, spaces, incomes, segregations of classes. And this is a city's phenomenon, which happens in a complex dynamic of contradictions, since it's stated the cities are at the same time "the great engine of innovation, the models of economies and social progress" and the "zones of gaping inequality and class division" (Florida, 2019, p.4). It's the city, seen as complex node of relationships and interactions, that all of the book's analysis points to, and is clear since in the first chapter's title, "The Urban Contradiction". Here, the Author identifies "The New Urban Crisis" as a phenomenon different from the "old" urban crisis (the tragic urban effects of the 60s – 70s industrial sector's crisis). This time the problem isn't

only based inside the city centres but it relates with the relationships between inside and outside of the cities. This new crisis is identified by five factors: (1) the gap between the superstar cities and the others cities across the world, (2) these cities' peaks of unaffordability, which lead to the "plutocratization" of the urban settlements and hard condition of life for an enormous share of their populations all around, (3) the growing inequalities, pictured with the disappearance of the Middle Class, (4) the unsolved problem of American suburbs, and the general worsening of their quality of life. Last aspect of the crisis, (5) the worldwide broken relationships between standards of living, growth (intended as improvement of the people's quality of life) and urbanisation.

In this new perspective, the scale of the city works as multiplying factor of the contradictions' level: bigger the success of the city, bigger the inequalities that are created. This ratio is exponential and all the cities and all the territories, in fact, pay the consequence of their success.

This concept is widely exposed in the second chapter, "Winner-Take-All-Urbanism": with this tailored definition, Florida intends to express how the clustering force created (and keeps on creating every day more) strong economical inequalities. And as previously stated, these are more visible in the big-scale cities, the so-called superstar cities: "they are not just the places where the most ambitious and talented people want to be — they are where such people needed to be" (Florida, 2017, p.15). This is a self-reinforcing dynamic, stronger and much more destructive in some particular cities which can be considered worldwide leading hubs in their own creative sector (a big umbrella, directly connected with "The Rise" book, which can put in the same group financial and economic activities and as well media and entertainment industries, allowing a homogeneous comparison between New York, London, Singapore, Vienna, Zurich, Osaka, Moscow, etc.). The gap that this superstar cities hosts has been measured with economic indicators (housing prices, overall real estate value in the cities), strongly affected by the speculative aspects of it, such as the NIMBYs dynamics and "The New Urban Luddism" phenomenon (the vetoes exercised by owners or lobbies against future constructions and/or land development projects, related to choices not taken in the interest of the collective needs). So, the consequences composes that aforesaid self-reinforcing dynamic: bigger the scale of the city's success, bigger the gap, more destructive are the inequalities; and bigger and more

exploited are the real winners, these owners/real estate stakeholders, richer and considerable is the valuable real-estate surplus, the real fuel of the city's urban value.

The elites of billionaires and wealth concentrations, in terms of number and international distributions, household total net worth and financial venture capital investment is deepened in the third chapter, "City of Elites". These factors lead the reader to frame the main point of the book (the New Urban Crisis) in their synthetic conceptual core: the cities' wealth indicators aren't themselves the ones that made superstar cities' life unbearable for the most, but are the basis on which the economic powers distribute the displacement of the population. This is clearly deepened in the consequent section, "Gentrification and Its Discontents", which relies less on measurable factors and more on a descriptive basis, due the complex nature of the gentrification and the risk to make a long off-topic dissertation. Many other contemporary texts like the notable "How to Kill a City" (Moscowitz, 2017) studied the topic, for instance, from the investigative-journalism point of view, referring in similar descriptive basis to the people's daily experience in some of the cities described in "The New Urban Crisis". Florida, anyway, doesn't lose the book's main goal: after a historical overview, framing the gentrification in terms of clustering elements, zoning and urban-design choices in the total balance of the city, giving a transversal reading of the gentrification. The study area is still the United States, due to the uniformity of data gathered, with a final insight on New York City, that connects the reader to the subsequent part, "The Inequalities of Cities". Bill de Blasio's election in the 2013 mayoral elections of New York City is seen as a practical case of The New Urban Crisis: his interception of the popular vote (minorities, less wealth shares of population, discontent) is somehow comparable to 2010 Ford's winning in Toronto or the 2017 Trump's election. All three are framed as evidence of the unsustainable life conditions suffered by a growing population's share which lives in very different state from that of the powerful superrich whose concentrate the wealth. If Michael Bloomberg's policies allowed New York to recover from the 2008 crisis and to limit its damages, they also made the inequalities rise; Florida juxtaposes economic and demographic indicators to prove this, extending then to the whole Country. Combining them analytically into a Composite Inequality Index, he tries to reflect an overall (American) numeric geography of the inequalities in the urban scenario, main evidence to prove that the New Urban Crisis is undergoing:

“The places that are the most productive and offer the highest wages, that have the largest concentrations of high tech industries and the most talented people, that are the densest and offer the most abundant mass transit options, that are the most diverse, and that are the most liberal in their political leaning nonetheless face the harshest levels of economic inequality and economic segregation” (Florida 2017, p.120).

This is called, through the book, “The Bigger Sort”, and is outlined better in the homonymous chapter. It serves as a base for more detailed snapshots of the urban composition of the segregations, highlighting how indicatively they occur in the American cities. However, in the consecutive “Patchwork Metropolis”, he details these cities’ geography defining which class (Creative, Service, Working) is the predominant one in terms of shares of population. Keeping as a baseline the Chicago’s school models to describe the city’s growth (based in historical overlapping and physical sorting of paths, infrastructures, industries, public centres, etc.), Florida and his team offer the models of the aforementioned three class’s displacement in the city. The four recurring different patterns of the “Patchwork Metropolis” are the reflection of several physical (like the most basic one, the orography of the land and the presence of water bodies) and urban factors (presence of certain functions like educational complex, colleges and universities). All these studies had been presented previously in a more complex form (Florida R., Matheson R., Adler P., & Brydges T., 2014), but here are updated and make profitable in the book’s logic: establish and clarify the relationships between inequalities and urban spaces. The general emerging trend is the difference of what has been stated in the first part of the book regarding the difference between the “old” and the “new” urban crisis: nowadays the city is not anymore disadvantaged, and the suburb is not anymore the dreamy place of the previous decades; all lays under a more complex relationship, which only a class-based reading of the city may picture clearly. Obviously, this alone can’t reflect the suburban crisis, which is part of another chapter, where the topics are the dream of the suburb -and its end, the shrinkage of the middle class, the mall-based city planning failure and the sprawling cities. In this chronicle, these topics are signs to expose the variegated composition of the creative class today, which is not only suffering but nonetheless able to drive the real estate market to very top levels. Because the high-end suburbs, the high-profile gated communities of some cities are also the wealthiest neighbourhoods of America, considering the mean household income and

the median home value. Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Palo Alto are worldwide recognised landmarks that drives the city’s inequalities in the same way the superstar cities’ downtowns do. In this broad hypothesis which covers the USA, there’s the admitted need — in the second-to-last chapter — of a worldwide shared change in the urban sustainability and a more inclusive approach to the urbanism. This because the crisis of the urbanization is made mostly of inequalities, very big and very small numbers juxtaposed, enormous gaps and contrasts and the dichotomy between local-global can be another key factor in the game. Florida’s goal in this section of the book is to prepare the ideological ground to the series of solutions presented in the next pages; urbanisation should mean development again, states the Author, and not in physical numeric terms, but in terms of sustainability and inclusiveness. This should be inserted in the framework of the most important international megatrends for the urban design field, the rapid worldwide diffused urbanisation. It’s time for an urban solution that uses this megatrend in favour, not against the people’s quality of life needs to be on a world scale. A prologue of this and general global awareness has been showed previously in the Global Creative Index (Florida R., Mellander C. & King K., 2015) and in the detailed insights realised for South East Asia (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2015).

In the last part of the book, after an engaging construction and definition of the problem, Florida’s “recipe” appears (after a short brief interlude in the book’s preface). But defines it “a recipe” would be ungenerous, although the international medias picture the Author as an “intellectual (or urbanist) rock-star”, problem solver, pragmatic guru of the XXI century. The last section, “Urbanism for All”, appears more like an open toolbox than a recipe.

For the entire book, the essayist cornered progressively a complex problem and gave it a name; now he tries to give a complex solution. Maybe this attempt lies in Florida’s (and his researchers’ team) famous pragmatism: the ambitious need to give solutions in first person, no matter their complexity, no matter their involvement in a range of academic fields or different time spans. He shows a chance to the reader: a path to undertake in the near future, “take it or leave it”. An urban development theory which assumes the contours of a choice.

In this toolbox there are seven pillars that spans from the politics at national/general level to the local laws/policies: (1) “make clustering work for us and not against us”, (2) “invest in infrastructure for density and growth”, (3) “build more affordable rental housing”, (4) “upgrade low-wage service jobs”, (5) “investing in people and places”, (6) “build prosperous cities”, (7) “empower cities and communities” (Florida, 2017, p.191-216).

The common point among them is their urban implication, which can make them useful and effective for a wide spectre of the creative professionals which have to deal with the city. Several of these professionals are (unaware?) members of the Creative Class and now have been “called to the arms” again with this text. Although the Florida’s Creative Class theory is in the background, some of the points involve certain Marx’s “class awareness” – not only intended as Marxism’s reminiscence, but as a self-consciousness as starting point for the change itself. Almost all points transcend and bypass the top-bottom approach, and can be applied to the city in different ways, whereas some of the pillars include bigger scale political decisions (like to give more authority to the city at a national level).

The book represents a complete engaging dissertation about a precious key to read today’s cities and contextualize them in the general contemporary world shifts - where the challenges among the cities are globally shared and diffused.

Structured in a solid framework, keeping aside all the political references to the contemporary American’s scenario, the book reveals a deep attention to crucial themes for a shared, sustainable wellness of the cities of today. Despite the accent is put on the American cities, the broadness of the issues framed a common problem for all the Countries, opening different scenarios in every context. In fact, the contemporaneity of “The New Urban Crisis” covers an actual undergoing challenge which overpasses the limits of the urban-design and of the urban policies, referring directly to whoever has the civic responsibility to improve the cities’ quality of life; nobody can feel exempted from this.

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