# The Creative Class on Hunter Street: Neo-Bohemia in a Small City

**Alan O'Connor**
**Ian McLachlan**
**Paul Longhurst**

Trent University
West Bank Drive, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7B8
Canada

In an article published in the Journal of Economic Geography, Richard Florida (2002) advances his now famous argument about a relationship between bohemia and the geographical location of high-technology industries. In that article he is careful to say that he has not shown a causal relationship, just that they tend to be found together. Cities with relatively high numbers of musicians and artists also happen to be cities with a lot of computer programmers. Given that there is a counter-cultural tendency among computer programmers the elective affinity that Florida describes is quite convincing.

When Florida expands his argument in his famous book The Rise of the Creative Class (2004) the interpretative understanding of an elective affinity is thrown to the winds and the book advances a strong thesis about the emergence of a new "creative class." Thirty-eight million people (30 percent of all employed people) apparently belong to this class in the United States. Florida has been widely criticized for seeming to count as creative workers those in such diverse occupations as high-end sales agents, engineers, lawyers, computer scientists and entrepreneurs, as well as artists and musicians. Even being a house cleaner can count, when the domestic employee turns her hand to home decoration. More exactly, in The Rise of the Creative Class he says:

> I define the core of the Creative Class to include people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or a new creative content. Around the core, the Creative Class also includes a broader group of *creative professionals* in business in business and finance, law, health care and related fields. These people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgement and requires high levels of education or human capital. (Florida 2004: 8)

What all these people have in common is that they value creativity and individuality, problem-solving and merit. Sociologists who study social inequality point out that Florida's cheery analysis of the new importance of human creativity seems to ignore increasing divides of social class (Peck, 2005; McGuigan 2009). There is a wide gap between the incomes of lawyers, doctors, computer engineers and entrepreneurs and an army of service workers that cleans offices, serves coffee, and cuts hair. There is a huge gap between the social class of the business elite and those who work in retail or as security guards. In the Preface to the paperback edition of The Rise of the Creative Class there is some discussion of this widening gap. Florida briefly calls for a more equitable treatment of service workers. He returns to this theme in the final chapter of the book, in which he calls on the Creative Class to do more about solving problems of social inequality.

Part of the problem of Florida's analysis is that he has a substantive and not a relational theory of social class. The point of The Rise of the Creative Class is to describe the characteristics of an emerging social group. What Florida provides is a model of a new entity: the creative class. To be sure there are some variations on the general theme. A lawyer is not the same as a successful television show host. But Florida's main purpose is to describe an entity: this is a substantive theory of an emergent group called the "creative class" and it includes thirty percent of all employed people in the USA. By comparison, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposes a relational theory of social class. In his famous book Distinction (published in France in 1979) he describes a complex social field. He does not treat the elite, the middle class and the working class as entities or social groups but as positions in a social field.

---

The authors would like to thank our research project manager Ziysah Markson and everyone who worked on interviews and transcripts. Research funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Within each sector of the field, he describes further relations or positions such as the (declining) old petit bourgeois of shopkeepers and trades; the (expanding) petit bourgeois of office workers, commercial employees and technicians, also school teachers and nurses; and a (new) petit-bourgeoisie of cultural intermediaries. In a famous passage in Distinction, Bourdieu describes how:

> The new petite bourgeoisie comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic good and services. These include the various jobs in medical and social assistance (marriage guidance, sex therapy, dietetics, vocational guidance, paediatric advice etc.) and in cultural production and organization (youth leaders, play leaders, tutors and monitors, radio and TV producers and presenters, magazines journalists), which have expanded considerably in recent years; but also some established occupations, such as art craftsmen or nurses (Bourdieu 1984: 359).

In Bourdieu's analysis this sector of the social field is made up of people with heterogeneous class backgrounds. It may include an interior designer from an upper-bourgeois family, and also a youth-club leader whose father worked in a factory. The expansion of this section of the social field from the 1960s is part of social and cultural changes widely commented upon. For Bourdieu it is part of a shift from an ethics of duty to a craft or profession to an ethics of fun. Sociologists have pointed out that such an emphasis on fun, individuality and creativity can also be a form of social control (Banks, 2008). Bourdieu also makes the point that "alternative" cultural and creative activities often provide precarious employment. Bourdieu provides a highly controversial alphabetical list of the counter culture from aikido to Zen. This is all "An inventory of thinly disguised expressions of a sort of dream of social flying, a desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field" (Bourdieu 1984: 370).

Richard Florida has a substantive theory of social class. The point of his work is to describe a new state of affairs: the rise of the "creative class." Like many substantive approaches to social class he lacks a sense of social practice. In his writings we actually hear very little about the activities of these creative workers: their education, job searches and conditions of work (Ho, 2009). An architect in Toronto who works on contract assessing commercial and institutional buildings for long-term maintenance (counted in Florida's core Creative Class) works at home in a one-bedroom apartment and can barely afford the cheapest condo in downtown Toronto. The conditions of work of interns, who are widely used in the creative industries (theme parks, weekly magazines, even financial services) have been widely criticized (Perlin, 2012). Governments in Canada have looked away as these internships violate established labour laws.

In his ethnographic study of cultural workers in the trendy Wicker Park district of Chicago, Richard Lloyd (2006) has an eye for the practices of social transformation and cultural work. For example, he describes the importance of an alternative coffee shop, the Urbus Orbis Café, in the transformation of the neighbourhood from working-class homes to cultural bohemia. The café started in 1989 and was itself a victim of gentrification and rising rents by 1998. Alternative spaces like this play an important role in consolidating hip neo-bohemian neighbourhoods in post-industrial cities such as Chicago.

In one of the most fascinating sections of his book, Lloyd describes how many artists and musicians pay their way by working in trendy bars (Lloyd 2006: 181-204). Starting with a play on the title of a famous book, Lloyd describes how middle-class kids get working-class jobs. Artists and musicians with university educations end up working as bartenders and servers. They do the kind of performative labour that Bourdieu describes for the new petit-bourgeois. Working a bar or restaurant is hard work. But what the employer really wants is bartender or server who can create a casual hip ambiance that will fill the bar with similar bohemian customers. Of course, when the venue becomes known as a cool bar or nightclub it starts to attract people from the suburbs who are not familiar with the subcultural norms and behave in inappropriate ways (getting obviously drunk, annoying women). Then part of the bohemian employee's skill is to deal with these suburban "amateurs." In a fascinating analysis of their earnings, Lloyd shows that the actual net income (mostly in tips) is much lower than many of these bohemian workers realize. The long hours worked often leave them too exhausted to do their creative work in art or music. And there are widespread problems of alcohol and substance abuse that take their toll. Most artists and musicians make little money from their art. A very small number actually have successful careers selling their artwork and music.

**The Creative Class on Hunter Street**

Richard Lloyd's description of neo-bohemia in Chicago is pertinent for the study of a similar scene in a small Canadian city. The analysis that follows is based on our research in Peterborough, a city of 70,000 people. The aim of the research is to describe how the arts scene of a small Canadian city works. It takes as a case study The Union, a community theatre and punk venue that existed in downtown Peterborough from 1989 to 1997. During this period of almost nine years the space was in constant use for a wide variety of theatre (from a student production of Shakespeare to an avant-garde production of Brecht), cabaret, and folk music.

It was also an important venue for punk, heavy metal and Industrial music of the 1990s. It hosted local bands and those from Toronto and was also on the touring circuit for hardcore punk. In 1991 three prominent anarcho-punk bands from the United States played for 30 or 40 local kids.

The research is based on about a hundred in-depth unstructured interviews, on participant observation (Ian McLachlan was one of the founders of The Union; Paul Longhurst attended punk shows there as a teenager), archival material still in the possession of many participants, and some videos and recordings. In many interviews we collected information on the participant's cultural capital: parents' occupations, parents' attitude to drama and music, own level of education, own occupation at the time of The Union and own occupation today. This gives us a unique data set on bohemian activities by those in their teens and twenties (avant-garde theatre, punk rock) and their subsequent career or employment twenty years later. This data set allows us to replace what is missing in Richard Florida's description of the "creative class." We are able to look in detail at creative activities and subsequent career patterns twenty years later. With this emphasis on practice we may be able to shed some light on the actual relationship between cultural creativity and occupation or profession.

The Union was made possible by several factors. The first is the existence in Peterborough of an established generation of cultural activists from the 1960s. Peterborough had one of the most vibrant artist-run centres in Canada and (before the ascendency of the Toronto Film Festival) a film festival that attracted large numbers of people to the city. The Union was started in 1989 by a group of people who were part of this art scene who were protesting the increasing reluctance of the artist-run gallery to permit theatre or even performance art. The existence of Trent University was also a factor in bringing in new generations of young people interested in experimental culture. (This was a period when Trent still had a reputation as an "alternative" institution that attracted environmental activists and others.) The Union was also made possible by relatively low rents in Peterborough. The space itself was rented for $640 a month. Through a fascinating process, once The Union was established as a venue it started to attract people in clusters from other cities such as Kingston and Toronto. These people moved to Peterborough specifically to participate, often on a fulltime volunteer basis. The final factor that made The Union possible was the availability of welfare, described in one of our interviews as a "bi-weekly arts grant."

As in Chicago, the establishment of an alternative café kickstarted the bohemian scene in Peterborough. About a year before The Union, a café and bar called The Only Café was opened on Hunter Street by a businessman from Toronto. He also had a genuine love for theatre. The Only Café had good rock music, played loud, a collage of art and rock posters on the wall, pints of craft beer and falafel sandwiches. It quickly became a hangout for "alternative" Trent University students (Cultural Studies, Women's Studies, Environmental Studies) and local artists. It was always crowded, with local actors unwinding from a show at one table and a lone Trent freshman reading Nietzsche at another. One of the surprises of our research was the close relationship between this café and The Union venue located just a few doors away on Hunter Street. Many participants in the theatre worked shifts in the bar, some rented the cheap apartments above the bar, and the owner was generally supportive of the theatre scene that was exploding a few door up the street—and helping to fill his bar each night. There was so much back and forth that we have even recorded stories of the bar owner storming into the theatre to demand his empty pint glasses be returned.

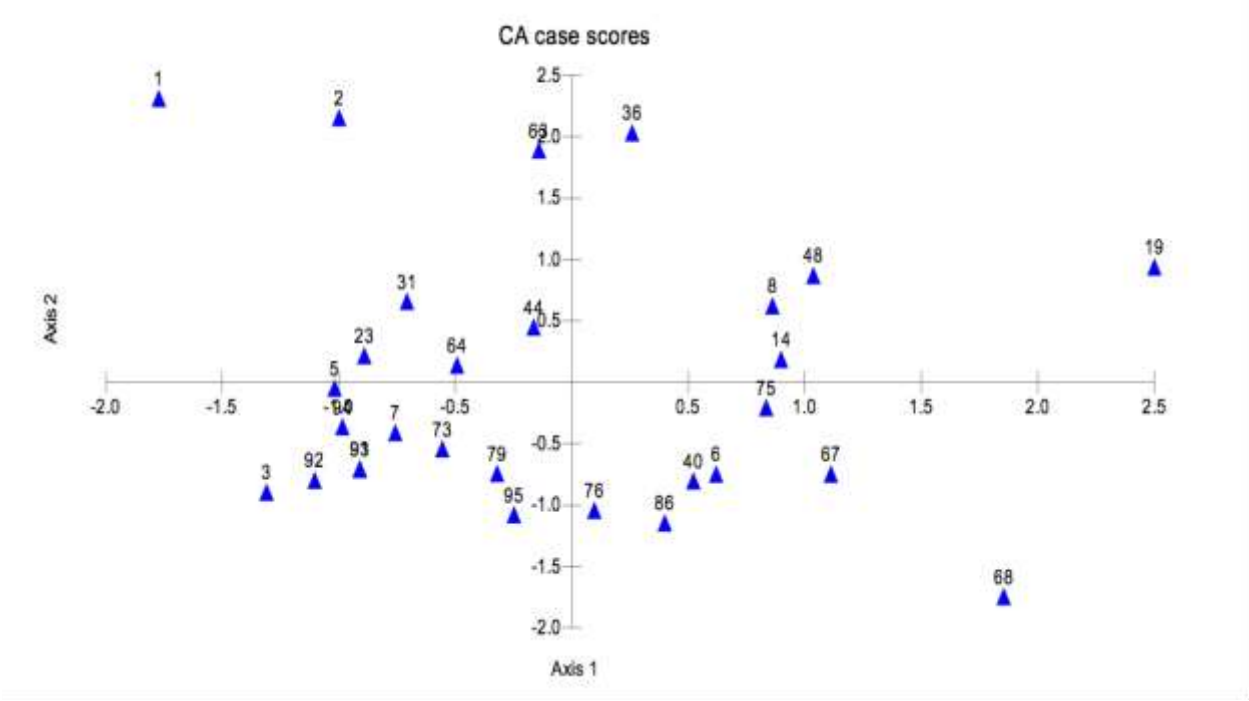
**Analysis of Participants In Music**

This section of the analysis focuses on a subsection of participants in The Union who were involved in music shows featuring punk, heavy metal and Industrial bands, as well as some local "alternative" rock bands. This section of our data base provides 29 cases for which we have information on age (first attended The Union), father's occupation, own highest level of education, occupation today, and support for DIY music ethics. The last is the most difficult measure.

It is based on the controversial but widely understood standard of ethical behavior set by independent punk bands, notably Fugazi in Washington D.C. This band did not generally have political lyrics, but insisted on cheap shows (normally $5), accessible to all ages (people under drinking age), and cheap recordings that were released by non-commercial record labels (often a friend), and advertised in non-promotional language ("Here are the records we sell"). Fugazi did not normally grant interviews to large rock magazines. The band did not sell merchandise such as t-shirts in order not to exploit their fans. They did all this in a quiet non-confrontational way, saying they were not telling anyone else what to do. This was their personal choice based on their own experiences and observations of the incompatibility of art and the music business.

Each interview has been carefully read and coded as support DIY ethics; in part DIY; unclear; and not DIY (e.g. signed a contract with a major record label). As in Bourdieu's work, Correspondence Analysis has been performed on the data and this produces a diagram of participants in music at The Union, arranged relationally in a field.

Diagram 1: Correspondence Analysis of 29 Participants in Music at The Union




Axis 1 = 50.89%
Axis 2 = 27.18%

A careful examination of the diagrams of cases and variables results in this analysis. The left side of the diagram gathers together participants who are younger, have higher levels of education (4 people have a Master's degree) and tend to be more DIY. The right side of the diagram gathers together people who are older, have lower levels of education (high school, community college) and are less DIY. There is a weak relationship between father's occupation and support / non-support for DIY ethics. This is in part explained by the fact that many of these musicians reject their parents' lifestyle and social status. However, there seems to be a strong relation between higher level of education and support for a DIY punk ethics of low cost shows and non-commercial record labels. There is also a relation between age and support for DIY reflecting the fact that those who participated in the punk scenes of the 1990s had a different perspective on punk than the original generation of 1977 (O'Connor 2008).

**Table 1 Participants in music at The Union**

| INTERVIEW | AGE | FATHER | OWN EDUCATION | OCCUPATION TODAY | DIY |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 12 years | Factory machinist | MA | Graduate student | Yes |
| 2 | 14 years | Heavy equipment mechanic | BA | Carpenter / grad student | Yes |
| 3 | 14 years | Bank assistant manager | BA | Semi-professional musician | Yes |
| 5 | 16 years | University professor | BA | NGO logistics | Yes |
| 6 | 18 years | Music promoter / studio owner | College | Print shop worker | In part |
| 7 | 19 years | Senior civil servant | MA | Part-time teacher | Yes |
| 8 | 30 years | Doctor | BA | Health services admin | Yes |
| 14 | 28 years | Truck mechanic | BA | Video production | Yes |
| 19 | 40 years | Factory worker | BA | Sound technician | Unclear |
| 23 | 15 years | Carpenter / chef | BA | Social worker | Yes |
| 31 | 13 years | Nurse (mother) | College | Construction worker | Yes |
| 36 | 19 years | Machinist (GE) | Some univ. | Disability | Yes |
| 40 | 16 years | Blue collar | College | Unknown | Unclear |
| 44 | 19 years | Ontario Hydro linesman | BA | Computer software | Yes |
| 48 | 21 years | Salesman | High school | Cook / musician | Yes |
| 63 | 22 years | Doctor | MA | Grad student | Yes |
| 64 | 19 years | Doctor | BA | Residence admin. | Yes |
| 67 | 23 years | Bank / insurance | University | Musician | Unclear |
| 68 | 17 years | Factory worker (GE) | High school | Hairdresser / musician | No |
| 73 | 18 years | High school teacher | BA | City arts administration | Yes |
| 75 | 20 years | Trent secretary (mother) | Some univ. | Carpenter / musician | In part |
| 76 | 20 years | Art teacher (College) | BA | Software quality manager | Unclear |
| 79 | 18 years | High school teacher | Some univ. | Video game producer | Yes |
| 86 | 22 years | Factory crane operator | MA | University librarian | In part |
| 91 | 16 years | Antique dealer | BA | Advertising project manager | Yes |
| 92 | 15 years | Antique dealer | BA | Interior design / college teacher | Yes |
| 93 | 16 years | French teacher | BA | Journalist | Yes |
| 94 | 16 years | Social worker (mother) | MA | Writer children's media | Yes |
| 95 | 18 years | Systems analyst (Ontario Gov.) | Some college | Partner in video store | Yes |

From an examination of the data set (see Table 1) we can see the occupation twenty years later of each participant in The Union. Have the participants moved into the occupations that Richard Florida counts as the creative class? Was participation in The Union a formative experience for a subsequent career in computer programming, theatre management or creative writing? It does actually seem that those who took part in The Union tend later to become part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the new petit bourgeoisie. Today they work in occupations such as computer programming, journalism, children's media, and teaching art. For some youthful participants in creative activities the most tangible rewards may be in the future. Richard Florida pays little attention to the likes of punk musicians. These marginal cultural activities may sometimes be a kind of informal education—for people who are sometimes dropouts from formal education—who may end up in a quite different occupation. (Bourdieu calls this process cultural reconversion.) A punk drummer ends up as a writer for children's media. The early activity has fostered audacity, self-confidence, skills in dealing with other creative people. Even disastrous experiences can be valuable lessons in how not to do things. This kind of retrospective is very common in books and interviews by older punks.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research do not support the claims made by Richard Florida in The Rise of the Creative Class. There is little evidence to support the idea that The Union theatre attracted computer programmers or creative entrepreneurs to the City of Peterborough. Florida's strategy of making cities more attractive with small coffee shops, live music scenes, and bicycle paths has little to do with the reality of what happened on Hunter Street from 1989 to 1996. Mark Binelli's recent book on Detroit, which describes the life of the city after most industry has left, is closer to the mark.

Binelli describes how some artists and theatre people are attracted by the very low cost of property in Detroit. (A long-standing example of this is the Trumbull Street theatre and punk venue which has some features in common with The Union.) Dirt cheap rent was also the attraction in New York in the 1970s. Richard Hell describes it this way in his recent autobiography:

> The streets of the city were smelly with both garbage—sanitation workers were striking—and dog shit (the scoop law wasn't passed until 1978). On the Lower East Side, people assumed their apartments would be burglarized every two or three years. Many buildings and sometimes whole buildings were burned out and abandoned, others staked by squatters. Drug-dealing gangs rules districts. Sidewalks for blocks would be matted with blankets of housewares and junk peddled by the jobless. It was a slum, but it was where we wanted to live because it was cheaper than anywhere else while also hosting the best bookstores and movies and drugs and people and music (Hell 2013: 137).

Peterborough is not the Lower East Side. But Richard Hell's description captures the reality of slum landlords, young people living on low incomes, and the possibilities of low-budget creative activities. Richard Florida's breathless enthusiasm about the creative class has little to do with a semi-legal theatre, low-rent apartments, and bar-tending for a modest living.

**References**

Banks, M. (2008) The Instrumental Leisure of the 'Creative Class. CRESC Working Paper Series, Working Paper No. 47. Milton Keynes: Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University.

Binelli, M. 2012. Detroit City Is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of An American Metropolis. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Florida, R. 2002. "Bohemia and Economic Geography." Journal of Economic Geography 2: 55-71.

Florida, R. 2004. The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life. New York: Basic Books.

Hell, R. (2013). I Dreamed I Was A Very Clean Tramp: An Autobiography. New York: HarperCollins.

Ho, K. (2009) Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Lloyd, R. 2006. Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City. New York and London: Routledge.

McGuigan, J. 2009, "Doing a Florida thing: the creative class thesis and cultural policy." International Journal of Cultural Policy 15(3): 291-300.

Peck, J, (2005), "Struggling with the Creative Class." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 29(4): 740–770.

Perlin, R. (2012) Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy. London and New York: Verso.