

## **The European Creative Class: A Challenge for the European Capitals of Culture**

**Ioan Vulpescu**

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, București,  
Romania

## **Европейската креативна класа: предизвикателство за европейските столици на културата**

**Йоан Вулпеску**

Национален университет за политически науки и публична администрация, Букурещ,  
Румъния

### **Author Note**

Ioan Vulpescu  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7708-7827>

Ioan Vulpescu is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at SNSPA, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ioan Vulpescu, SNSPA, Bucharest 012244, Romania, boulevard Expozitiei 30A, Email: vulpescu@gmail.com

### **Бележки за автора**

Йоан Вулпеску  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7708-7827>

Йоан Вулпеску е докторант по социология в Национален университет за политически изследвания и публична администрация, Букурещ, Румъния.

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### Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the concept of the creative class, beginning with R. Florida's interpretations and questioning its role in shaping culture as a profit-generating factor within cities designated as European Capitals of Culture. The research presents a critical examination of the approaches various authors have taken in developing taxonomies of cultural capital, focusing exclusively on the social dynamics of *the cultural class* and its role in transforming cultural capital into economic capital. By closely examining the contexts in which the concept of "creative class" has been used either too restrictively, or conflated with that of the "cultural class" in an overly broad extension, I argue that these distinctions are fundamental to recovering and understanding the phenomenon of social inequality—manifested, on the one hand, between residents and the creative class *per se*, and on the other hand, among different creative communities within this class. Finally, the study identifies several defining features of the European cultural class and observes the priorities assumed by the European Capitals of Culture in fostering and supporting this social nucleus.

*Keywords:* cultural class, creative class, creative city, European Capital of Culture, capital, culture

### Резюме

В статията се разглежда еволюцията на концепцията за креативната класа, започвайки с интерпретациите на Р. Флорида и поставяйки под въпрос нейната роля във формирането на културата като фактор, генериращ печалба, в градовете, определени за Европейски столици на културата. Изследването представя критичен анализ на подходите, които различни автори са възприели при разработването на таксономии на културния капитал, като се фокусира изключително върху социалната динамика на културната класа и нейната роля в трансформирането на културния капитал в икономически капитал. Чрез внимателно изследване на контекстите, в които концепцията за „креативна класа“ е била използвана или твърде рестриктивно, или е смесвана с тази на „културната класа“ в твърде широк смисъл, аз твърдя, че тези разграничения са фундаментални за възстановяването и разбирането на феномена на социалното неравенство – проявяващо се, от една страна, между жителите и самата креативна класа, а от друга страна, между различните креативни общности в рамките на тази класа. Накрая, изследването идентифицира няколко определящи характеристики на европейската културна класа и наблюдава приоритетите, поети от Европейските столици на културата в насърчаването и подкрепата на това социално ядро.

*Ключови думи:* културна класа, креативна класа, креативен град, Европейска столица на културата, капитал, култура

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### **The European Cultural Class: A Challenge**

The designation of 'European Capital of Culture' (ECoC) has evolved into a cultural competition that, over the past three decades, has played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of European belonging and strengthening a cohesive European identity among candidate cities. However, within the public sphere, the competition for the ECoC title is often perceived as a matter of European vanity. The impacts of holding this title have predominantly been examined from the perspective of developing local cultural capital and evaluating its significance on a European scale. Nonetheless, existing studies reveal substantial gaps in assessing the title's effects on residents' quality of life, the medium- and long-term economic and social consequences, and the intensification of the Europeanization process. These aspects revolve around a central hypothesis: the assumption of culture as a profit-generating factor.

From the perspective of the cultural capital accumulated by each candidate city through participation in this competition, analyses have highlighted the individuality of these communities and the role of cultural heritage—predominantly tangible—in evoking a sense of belonging to European culture. From a European profile standpoint, social and economic implications have been foregrounded, speculating on the capacity of (post-)industrial cities to adapt to a cultural life marked by European values such as diversity, inclusion, solidarity, and tolerance.

This analysis aims to identify the gaps between these two levels that reflect the consequences of holding the ECoC title, and to argue that to achieve durable effects and sustainable development after holding the title, it is essential to stimulate a “creative class” capable of ensuring, through various activities and processes, both the improvement of quality of life and a new model of well-being at the local level—albeit one inspired by European ideals. By examining the interventions of this creative class from a sociological perspective, we can gain a better understanding of the historical dynamics of the competition itself and, more importantly, of the possibility of classifying the “winning” cities through clusters of communities that achieved sustainable development and viable socio-economic impact, depending on the work that the creative class engaged while the city hold the title of ECoC.

A few clarifications are necessary before proceeding with this analysis. The concept of the “creative class” has not been coined by me; it was advanced by Richard Florida in several articles and in his seminal book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, a socio-economic analysis confined to the American context (Florida, 2002). In this study, I propose to implement the

valences of this concept in order to examine the role played by creative classes within European Capitals of Culture, primarily from the perspective of generating medium- and long-term social and economic impact right after ending the ownership of the title.

Florida's (2002) framework does not reference the context of the European Capitals of Culture, and the concept of the "creative class" has not been validated or applied within the European paradigm. Nevertheless, I contend that it remains a crucial analytical tool for understanding the social morphology of these cities and their capacity to generate new forms of social well-being through a profitable cultural life. Moreover, if we aim to deduce a common profile of European Capitals of Culture or to enhance the sense of European belonging, the concept of the "creative class" may prove decisive. To date, there has been no discourse on a "European creative class" akin to Florida's articulation of the concept in the United States. Instead, the European space has been shaped by what might be termed a creative ethos, where ideological orientations, cultural revolutions, or marginal groups composed of cultural figures have monopolized the creative potential of urban spaces. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance—the century of artistic revolutions, perhaps the most concentrated and spectacular in Europe's cultural consciousness—is often viewed homogenously: as the century of renewal, of avant-gardes, encompassing Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Pop Art, etc. Yet it is not necessarily the century of Tzara, Marcel Janco, Dalí, or Debord. If we accept this unifying vision, the avant-gardists were themselves a creative class, arguably more cohesive and solidaristic than what the 21<sup>st</sup> century reveals—an age in which the role of cultural operators is tied more to the vocation of independent, often individual, enterprises rather than groups, leaving open to question the communal prestige of a creative class capable of developing communities and ensuring economic profit.

On the other hand, if the purpose of the competition for the title of *European Capital of Culture* is to forge a European identity, it must be acknowledged that culture is one of the cohesive factors of this identity. Yet, to perform, culture requires a "class" capable of transitioning from the "disinterested" character of artistic and cultural life to the "interested," profit-oriented logic of economic life. The European Union itself is fundamentally an economic community, oriented toward collaboration, conviviality, and the co-participation of social classes in a model of European well-being. Therefore, the focus on a "creative class" should not be viewed skeptically in this context; rather, the recourse to this concept can provide a valid criterion for retrospectively understanding the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of

European Capitals of Culture, revealing, according to these criteria, certain community patterns.

The competition for the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) title over the past thirty years has shown a shift in preference from metropolitan cities to post-industrial ones. Cities like Liverpool and Košice, known for their remarkable urban transformation and sustainable development models, have successfully undergone strong cultural rebranding despite their post-industrial character. Urbančíková (2018) notes that following the success of these cities, the EU's recruitment criteria for candidate cities became more heterogeneous.

To determine what makes a city ideal for holding the ECoC title, one should focus on its resources for attracting global talent and mobilizing territorial and administrative assets to foster an economic life where culture generates profit. Competitive advantages include the capacity for institutional cooperation (Urbančíková, 2018, Landry & Bianchini, 1995), the generation of creative knowledge (Florida, 2002), and the development of new types of cultural and social services (Rehak, 2014). However, the pre-existence of a creative class capable of transforming the opportunity of holding the ECoC title into a long-term engine of sustainable development is crucial. This creative class can empower cultural entrepreneurship and creative industries through regional cooperation and enhance the quality of life. The idea that residents must maintain a positive relationship with tourists during the title year is only partially relevant; beyond inclusion and hospitality, residents must form new communities and conviviality supported by the creative class.

### **A Taxonomy of European Capitals of Culture Based on the Creative Cultural Class**

Considerable effort has been devoted to identifying patterns among European Capitals of Culture—“recipes” for an ideal profile. This study aims to highlight the omission of a crucial criterion in the stereotyping of this profile: the existence of a *creative class*. Such a class ensures heterogeneity, openness to cultural ecosystems, and social diversity, and together with an academic class that guarantees a knowledge-based society for the candidate city, it can stimulate technological superiority, innovation, and improvements in quality of life (Florida, 2002).

My thesis is that it is precisely this *creative class* the one who can transform cultural prestige into economic capital, connecting local communities with similar or homologous communities in other European Capitals of Culture or metropolises. The mere fact that this European competition has been an excellent opportunity to recover and promote figures of

*genius loci* is not sufficient. The superior identity profile constructed through the holding of this title can lead to cultural differences and cultural hegemony, a transgressive and undesired effect of the European prestige race.

In the long term, an unassailable European identity promotes the sustainable development of a community through recourse to EU values. What must be recognized, however, is that “different ECoCs have similar discursive understandings of the social and cultural impacts of the title” (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 77); overall, the effects on social cohesion, rebranding, and urban investments count toward measuring the impact of holding the title, while cross-border cooperation, for example, is often underemphasized despite its relevance. Precisely because these interpretations vary so widely, an objective construct is needed to gauge these effects—namely, the creative class. With a cultural and entrepreneurial profile, the cultural class can overturn popular skepticism in academic circles regarding the role of culture in urban regeneration and development, as the only “sustainable” legacy of European Capitals of Culture (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 78).

But what constitutes a sustainable legacy? The model of ephemeral, event-driven culture associated with the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) is well-documented: for economic reasons, festivals and temporary projects are often favored over permanent ones, which could benefit from durable infrastructure and create more facilities depending on investment. According to Turşie and Perrin (2020, p. 79), there is even a generation of festival-oriented ECoCs, for which the creative class does not make a significant long-term difference. They argue that ECoC generations are theoretically distinguished based on the EU framework legislation governing the competition—1985–1996, 1997–2004, 2005–2019, 2020–2033—but in practice, the first generation was festival-driven and had only modest long-term impact (e.g., Athens, Paris, Madrid, metropolises with vibrant cultural life independent of the title); the second generation focused on a restrictive interpretation of culture as high culture (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 80) and on implementing Western approaches to urban policy (Glasgow being a successful example); the third generation instrumentalized culture for economic purposes (as seen in Rotterdam, Porto, Genoa, Lille, Liverpool, Pilsen, Mons).

Only the fourth generation, expected to develop over the next decade, is normatively obliged to quantify and monitor its impact. It should be noted, however, that the impact of holding the ECoC title must be correlated with levels of cultural production and labor, as well

as with residents' social well-being—factors that the creative class can stimulate over time, not immediately after the title year (Florida, 2002; Porter, 1990).

Of course, reliance on the criterion of creative class dynamics has not been uncontested. Some argue that such a perspective might be risky as it ends up promoting hyperbolic and excessive “cultural over-engineering,” diverting culture from its classical meanings and functions (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 81). Other scholars suggest that the impact of the creative class has already become institutionalized (Florida, 2014). I would argue, however, that this interpretation is valid in the West; the East remains reluctant to recognize a creative class *per se* (both legally and culturally). Considering the gaps faced by the cultural sector during the pandemic, it becomes obvious that the failure to recognize culture as an essential domain was not symptomatic only in the East but across Europe. For this study, however, it is not the theoretical exhaustion or limitations of the creative class concept that are of interest, but rather its profile—so belatedly recognized in the East.

From this perspective, I consider several sociological observations regarding the nature of the creative class to be necessary. In the context of the *European Capital of Culture* title, considerable discussion has centered on the strategic reconversion of spaces important for the local memory of candidate cities. Yet these spaces are not simply memorial platforms; they are also sites of aggregation for competence and human capital. It should be remembered that, according to Porter's (1990) theory of competitiveness, the spatial clustering of productive activities generates a spillover effect of curiosity and interest in coalescing professional environments capable of ensuring knowledge transfer.

If we also take into account the less visible aspect of cultural heritage—namely, intangible heritage—we can appreciate the importance of a creative class to conserve and transmit the knowledge that ensures the production of intangible culture. On one hand, social coalescence in guilds, creative groups, and communities of creators—stronger in rural environments than urban ones, where cultural activities tend to cluster in neighbourhoods or cultural districts, especially in post-industrial cities—indicates the need to correlate human and cultural capital in any attempt to quantify the long-term social, economic, and cultural impact of this European competition. On the other hand, a difference indeed exists between the Western and Eastern contexts in monitoring social impact through alternative cultural lenses: it is not the quality of events that is measured, but rather, in a highly pragmatic and statistical sense, the capacity of events to recruit volunteers, foster community development, and enhance

cultural inclusion—especially where multiple ethnic minorities are concentrated in a socially traumatic space with strong memorial potential (Turşie & Perrin, 2020).

Two points from the analysis by Turşie and Perrin (2020) caught my attention. The first suggests that evaluating human capital influenced by holding the ECoC title echoes Sen's (1999) capability theory regarding knowledge accumulation and capacity development: “endogenous development sparks up when a critical mass of cultural demand is reached, based on residents' motivation to invest in cultural capability building” (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 81). A critical mass, however, only forms if residents have extensive prior experience of cultural consumption and, more importantly, if they are educated without prejudice toward diverse cultural consumption. For residents to invest in cultural consumption, a habitus must exist, cultivated over time. There may be a natural (*hexis*), virtuous, communal disposition embedded in a civilization's ethos toward a particular form of cultural consumption, but in contemporary societies, cultural consumption must be educated and trained over time. Thus, it is unrealistic to expect a substantial critical mass of residents immediately after a city holds the ECoC title if no predisposition toward cultural engagement existed beforehand.

The second relevant point from the cited analysis posits that applying Sen's (1999) theory, in combination with cultural policy, favors “a bottom-up, non-market-oriented view of cultural development by which social participation, social capital and community cohesion gain priority over economic considerations” (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 81). This exclusive vision produced no tangible benefit for either the cultural or the economic environment, and it is not as if the two cannot coexist. Because this exclusive vision dominated public rhetoric for an extended period, the mistaken conclusion emerged that the cultural sector is unprofitable, reducible to entertainment, subsumed under tourism, and at times economically unviable. Another critique concerns what the authors describe as the inadequate integration of economic and cultural policies in sustainable development—a gap between economic regeneration and community engagement. The solution recommended by the authors is inspired by Throsby's (1999) theory, who proposed “three frameworks about culture and sustainability: cultural capital as a sustainable resource, interaction between culture and the environment and sustainability of urban cultural heritage. He uses the term ‘cultural ecosystems’, meaning shared cultural networks and relationships.” (Turşie & Perrin, 2020, p. 82). I argue, however, that even this vision is unsatisfactory, as it omits precisely human capital and the role of the creative class as a mediator among all three of these resources.

### **From the Creative Class to the Creative Economy: Cultural Agents in Cooperation and Conflict**

Why should the growth of the creative class be one of the main concerns of the ECoC and a criterion for validating the long-term impact of holding the title?

First, contemporary capitalism is dominated by the “creative economy” (Florida, 2011, p. 15): we are part of a creative ethos, marked by the value of innovation, and the model of economic welfare is formed not by producing more resources, but by producing the same resources through more ingenious methods. Closer to the Aristotelian vision outlined above, but developed in Bourdieu’s style, Florida acknowledges that creativity cannot exist without cultivating certain habitus and social reflexes. The idea that the level of a community’s creativity can be quantified solely through innovative technological output is a trap. For an ethos to be creative, cultural spaces must shape values and communities. However, Florida observes a fundamental tension between creativity and organization, arguing that the task of building a creative society is more like a team game, not an individual, isolated undertaking.

Secondly, as early as 1940, in a turbulent global historical context, Schumpeter warned in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* that entrepreneurs play a fundamental role in revitalizing production patterns, and that without an entrepreneurial mass, it is highly unlikely to stimulate a critical, creative mass. It is true that, in the collective mindset, creativity is generally seen as a “mystical enterprise” (Florida, 2011, p. 18); here, Florida considers it a form of intelligence involving the ability to synthesize and take risks. An analysis of disagreements with this view or with the manner in which the author employs the concept of “intelligence” would exceed the scope of this study. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that without both emotional and epistemic intelligence, creativity is not considered a value in itself.

Creativity has, however, earned a solid economic reputation: Schumpeter himself spoke of “creative destruction,” which accompanies the peculiarities of capitalist systems of production, consumption, and distribution. Florida, the architect of the creative class theory, recalls the observation of economist Joel Mokyr, noting that the paradigms of the entrepreneurial individual and the creative individual appear as two robust paradigms of contemporary individualism, with distinct objectives in a functional society. “Perhaps we are indeed witnessing the rise of what economic historian Joel Mokyr has dubbed *homo creativus*. We live differently and pursue new lifestyles because we see ourselves as a new kind of person” (Florida, 2011, pp. 18–19). In my view, the ECoC title aligns these two paradigms, that of *homo*

*creativus* and that of *homo economicus*, placing pressure on social actors to associate the multidisciplinary character of creativity with increasingly diverse economic domains.

The fact that cultural vehicles were long considered socially revolutionary and economically costly—merely because the results of cultural consumption are often intangible and measurable only over time—has generated a toxic mentality that has long plagued the cultural creative sectors: underfunding. At the extreme, for a considerable period, even the economic sector was hostile to creativity. Florida observed: “Some environments squelch creativity. Others seem to amplify it” (Florida, 2002, p. 7) Only now, in fully post-industrial and post-humanist society, has discourse on talent recruitment and the role of creativity in sustainable development become dominant. Opinions such as those of Peter Drucker have disseminated the view that knowledge, not labor, is a fundamental economic resource (Florida, 2011, p. 30). Creativity was acknowledged and desirable, yet the creative class remained unrecognized. One could argue, in summarizing this context, that the economic success of creativity was delayed in part by the failure to recognize the existence of a creative class as such.

The third argument concerns the long-dominant, radical opposition between the working class, canonized by Marxism, and this new creative class. The Marxist context rendered culture a superstructure, an annex of the political sphere. Contemporary democracies, imperfect but perfectible, have understood that without culture, no political construction can endure, yet politicizing any form of culture undermines creativity, profit, and long-term sustainable development. For the supposed creative class to be recognized, the sociological and economic dynamics of the concept have undergone countless adjustments and revisions: Peter Drucker and Fritz Machlup proposed economic growth through creative workers, while Daniel Bell praised the potential of a culturally trained meritocratic class. Only recently has sociologist Steven Brint published a study showing that 35% of the U.S. workforce consists of creative groups (Florida, 2011, p. 35). Nevertheless, little has been written and even less speculated about a European creative class, which could represent one of the pragmatic long-term outcomes of the competition for the European Capital of Culture.

Let us now examine what constitutes a creative class and which social actors comprise it. Even Florida’s own definition has undergone extensive revision. Initially, Florida defined the class by profession, assuming it was divided into two groups: the super-creative core of the creative class “includes 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 new creative content” (Florida, 2002, p. 8), and the group of creative professionals working in knowledge-based industries, high-tech, and financial services (Florida, 2011, p. 39). Combining these two layers, the U.S. creative class encompasses three-quarters of the population. Configured in this way, the profile of the creative class is not unassailable. From that hardcore, presented by Florida, an elite, high-performing, almost technocratic social pool appears to emerge.

The second communal layer seems to support a corporate class, rescued from what is referred to in the public sphere as “the new proletariat.” Between culture harnessed for corporate innovation—thus instrumentalized culture—and elitism, there should exist an intermediate space for independent cultural operators, who engage in cultural entrepreneurship that capitalizes on creativity without necessarily instrumentalizing it through new technologies or relying on industries. Beyond the absence of this transitional zone, a durable middle ground that would make the creative class a long-lasting class, a relevant question in deconstructing Florida’s arguments is how to avoid trivializing creativity while attempting to elevate it. For Florida, this was never a concern. Economically oriented, he wagered that it would be an enduring class, and that the creativity it possessed would allow it to survive global financial collapses; in other words, that the creative class faces a lower risk of unemployment during financial crises (Florida, 2011, p. 51).

Among all serious objections raised against him, Florida chose to respond only to the dispute initiated on October 1, 2011, when Scott Timberg published the article “*The Creative Class Is a Lie*”, arguing that the creative class was supposed to be the engine of industrial society. Paraphrasing Timberg’s amendments, he advocated acknowledging that for those engaged with ideas, culture, and street-level creativity—the working and middle-class segments within the creative class—things are less rosy. Book editors, journalists, video store clerks, musicians, and unaffiliated novelists are among the many groups struggling to navigate the sad combination of economic crisis and the internet reset. The creative class is melting, and the story largely remains untold (see Florida, 2011, p. 53).

At the time of this dispute, digital society was neither as powerful nor were discussions of cultural digitization as resonant. Using the means available to him, Florida argued that not all professional categories within the creative class faced the difficulties Timberg described; only some experienced unemployment (analysts, reporters, correspondents, musicians), while others grew significantly: artistic managers (+45%) or graphic and digital designers (+45%), with the creative class generating an additional three million jobs between 2001 and 2010.

Florida's arguments, constructed ostensibly and statistically through extensive interdisciplinary research by sociologists and economists, seem necessary and sufficient to counter public hostility toward the creative class, primarily stemming from those who paradoxically exploit creativity for innovation while privatizing it and reducing it to a mere instrument rather than an end in itself (*e.g.*, corporate communities in high-tech industries).

Yet perhaps more noble is the seemingly altruistic, though ultimately profitable, approach of the creative class that views creativity as an end in itself. Beyond the economic implications proposed by the morphology of this class, I argue that its social impact is far stronger in terms of the values it imposes on societies. Axiologically, creative classes are focused on individuality, meritocracy, diversity, and openness (Florida, 2011, pp. 56–57). These four cardinal values, articulated by Florida, are what forge European mentalities oriented toward tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, and competence. Moreover, it is only through these values that the instinctive insularity of closed, traditional societies can be countered in an accelerated space of globalization and inclusion, as in the European context, and only from a certain point onward can they sustain respect for competence.

In this context, Inglehart argues that the role of the creative class is to accelerate self-expression and rational-secular values, recognizing even a “cultural shift,” a paradigm change, between the working class and the creative class: “Extensive evidence dence indicates that these values tap an intergenerational shift from an emphasis on economic and physical security toward an increased emphasis on self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality-of-life concern.” (Inglehart 2000, 26)

Therefore, we understand that the greatest opportunity for implementing the creative class in social dynamics lies within post-communist societies that have overcome a subsistence-oriented mentality and have placed culture at the center of governance. However, generational changes also require long time spans. Alone, new generations cannot independently sustain quality-of-life models based on creativity. In fact, they must belong to creative communities, which do not form spontaneously but require the support of educational actors. Florida considers that universities are the only institutions capable of sustaining the development of this model, ensuring the so-called “3Ts” of the creative community: technology, talent, and tolerance. The monopoly of knowledge-based societies should reside with universities and academic research communities. Considered creative hubs (Florida, 2011, pp. 309–312), these institutions accumulate recognition and prestige over time and can stimulate technological growth. From this perspective, Florida provides a solution to a problem

shared by Marx and Schumpeter: technology can catalyze the revolutionization of capitalism, yet capitalism can also remain stationary (Florida, 2011, p. 229). Talent represents a resource that must be continuously educated, in terms of skills and capabilities, to guarantee economic growth through human capital. Creativity intervenes here as the expression of a rare, talent-capable resource. Last but not least, tolerance transforms flexibility into a competitive advantage for communities seeking forms of cooperative progress.

Perhaps one of the successful models, which implemented—unconsciously—the 3T framework outlined by Florida, is Wrocław. Designated European Capital of Culture in 2016, it serves as an example of how residents' quality of life improved through the impact of creative industries on the city. According to Błaszczuk & Krysiński (2023), it is not the creative class *per se* that emerges socially from holding the ECoC title, but the paradigm of a creative city, which has departed from the established models of festival culture (Siebel, 1993) that focus on cultural events rather than infrastructure and development (Richards, 2017). Wrocław, by contrast, falls into one of the three generations of creative cities as classified by d'Ovidio (2019). The first generation consists of cities transitioning from a manufacturing to an urban economy, based on material production; the second generation comprises post-Fordist cities where a knowledge-based economy predominates; and the third generation includes large, cosmopolitan, metropolitan cities that leveraged creativity for rebranding purposes. Wrocław is considered the first city in Poland to base its development policy on Florida's approach to creative cities (Dutkiewicz, 2006). Of the 425 projects proposed in the year of holding the title, 200 were artistic events, and the remainder were urban regeneration and rebranding projects, designed by the municipality in partnership with the Sociology Department of the University of Wrocław (Błaszczuk & Krysiński, 2023).

Among the aforementioned generations, Wrocław belongs to the post-Fordist category, benefiting from being a “second-tier” European city that built its prestige exclusively from forms of heritage and creative industries. The city became creatively sustainable for two reasons, according to Błaszczuk and Krysiński (2023): entrepreneurs understood that the ECoC title ideologically impacts the alignment of cultural events and urban policies, and cultural sector development was conceived from the perspective of economic stakeholder conditions. The city thus implemented the model of cultural industries as a driver of progress to transform not only the entrepreneurial climate but also the social and political environment of communities.

Therefore, should the monopoly in public discourse surrounding urban regeneration projects focus exclusively on creative cities? No, without emphasizing the importance of a preexisting core that makes this paradigm possible, namely, the creative class *per se*. The fortification of the creative city paradigm has been attributed to the development of peripheries borrowing the model imposed by centers, in a Wallerstein-type theory (see, *e.g.*, Bonet et al., 2011 on the shift from creative nations to creative cities). Cities are indeed poles of creativity and innovation, but not all become creative cities in the discussed paradigm, as not all adequately capacitate the creative class.

Following a question advanced by Florida (2003), we can evaluate the critical functions of cities in 21st-century creative capitalism. The author draws on several arguments from sociology and economics. Recalling Park's century-old theory (1925), cities are spaces of fusion of races and cultures ("melting pots of races and cultures"); Florida identifies here a space of interculturality that imparts values and benchmarks from different geographies and mindsets to progress and welfare. Additionally, the morphology of cities clusters centers of expertise into neighbourhoods, which have an incontestable social function in attracting human capital, as noted in sociology by Terry Clark (2001, p. 357), proposing the city as an "entertainment machine." Ultimately, cities exemplify that spaces are more important than places (Florida, 2003, p. 4), forming concentrated clusters of performance and excellence.

Given that regional economic growth is generally associated, sociologically, with communities where people maintain strong social ties (Putnam, 2000), and considering creativity as the best factor for social cohesion, Florida concludes that the long-term decline of social capital will evidently arise from individuals' reluctance to culturally solidarize and to participate voluntarily in the civic life of the community. Two interesting aspects warrant brief analysis here: Florida considers that communities generally become passive and exhibit quasi-anonymity under capitalist conditions. In my view, cultural action and respect for cultural intellectual property can stimulate community adhesion, a sense of belonging, and a broader, stronger civic consciousness. On the other hand, Florida observes that, already in 1984, Jane Jacobs' theory formed the mentality that if a community attracts creative people, it will necessarily and sufficiently impact human capital, generating economic growth. However, the popularity of this mentality does not guarantee its implementability, given weak civic participation. From a certain point onward, Florida hopes for the mobilization of residents, animated by the prospect of social welfare through cultural means. What his analysis misses, however, is a closer link between creative human capital and regional growth.

### **The (Un)Success of the “3T’s Theory” in the Analysis of European Capitals of Culture through the Lens of the Creative Class Concept**

Therethrough, I would extend the meaning of my analysis to a macro level: we accept that local creative classes exist, but what happens at the European level? Is there a European creative class, and if so, what is its role in the process of Europeanization and in raising European consciousness in cities holding the European Capital of Culture title?

In 2004, Florida published an analytical report on the morphology of the European creative class, examining the extent to which European states—not just capitals of culture—implement the 3T’s theory in their development models. The analysis allowed him to compare the European creative class with the American one. The sociological study shows that in Europe “the creative class represents more than 25% of the workforce in over 14 European nations, and nearly 30% in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Finland” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 5). What is striking is that in Europe, the creative class grows with overwhelming momentum, Ireland surpassing all nations in creative class growth, “with over 7% annual growth since 1995” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 5).

However, the existence of a European creative class does not mean that states automatically follow a creative economy: the most pessimistic scenario belongs to Portugal and Italy, which have less than 15% of the workforce as part of the creative class, yet still lack a creative economy. Indeed, the morphology of the creative class influences not only cultural policies but also state policies: Sweden and the Netherlands appear in Florida’s study as examples of countries that have revised migration policies, enthusiastically accepting immigrants with cultural professions, both economically and socially. Externally, Canada and Australia have become platforms for absorbing immigrants with cultural professions, whereas the United States remained hostile to this type of migration as a form of talent recruitment (Florida & Tinagli, 2004).

I will dwell on some relevant aspects of this research, which, though illustrated here descriptively and synthetically, are important for my attempt to explain what recognizing a European creative class entails and why the absence of its correlation with European Capitals of Culture still represents a gap in the literature. Florida and Tinagli (2004) observe that in Europe, the cultural performance pole has shifted from the traditional powers, *i.e.*, nation-states (“France, Germany, and the UK”), to Scandinavia and Northern Europe, placing Sweden at the “top of performance in the Euro-Creativity Index,” surpassing even the USA, long observed and privileged in Florida’s analyses (p. 6).

What impresses in this analysis is the results of the Creative Class Euro-Index, which highlight that in Europe, the creative class accounts for a quarter of the workforce in five countries. At the state level, the creative class represents the following proportions of the national workforce: “29.97% in Belgium; 29.54% in the Netherlands; 28.61% in Finland; 26.73% in the UK; 26.01% in Ireland; 22.08% in Greece; 21.18% in Sweden; 21.05% in Denmark; 19.48% in Spain; 18.17% in Germany; 16.92% in Austria; 13.19% in Italy; and 13.14% in Portugal” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 14). Unfortunately, Romania is missing from Florida’s analysis, and Eastern Europe is generally underrepresented.

Florida continues the analysis with the Euro-Talent Index, according to which, on a scale from 0 to 15, Finland (13.22), the Netherlands (12.86), and Belgium (10.95) occupy the dominant positions, followed by the UK, Sweden, Ireland, and Germany, with France, Greece, Austria, Italy, and Portugal surprisingly scoring very low (below 7; Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 16). Although he does not make this correlation explicitly, one can infer correspondences based on Matthew’s principle of cumulative advantage: where a dominant creative class exists, developed talents grow as well, and the state hosting this creative class becomes stronger and wealthier over time in terms of talented human capital.

Similarly, the Euro-Technology Index shows Sweden and Finland in dominant positions, immediately after the global leader, the USA, while Portugal and Greece rank lowest (Florida & Tinagli, 2004). Thus, the absence of a creative class also affects the scientific and technological development of human capital: here is perhaps a less appreciated conclusion by cultural critics, yet without imagination and talent—without creativity—science and technology stagnate.

From the perspective of the Euro-Tolerance Index, Sweden and Denmark occupy the top positions (scores of 15 and 12.09, respectively), while the USA is penultimate—a state of exception, understandable through anti-migration policies, with a score of 3.07—and Portugal ranks last with 1.99 (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 26). Remarkably, three criteria make up these total Euro-Tolerance scores: attitudes, values, and self-expression capacity. For instance, although the Netherlands ranks third with a total score of 11.42, it reaches 12.66 in attitudes and only 7.59 on the value scale. The attitudes indicator primarily reflects attitudes toward cultural minorities and correlates with the Eurobarometer for monitoring racism and xenophobia. In this case, the Netherlands is hyper-tolerant toward cultural minorities, integrating them perfectly into the creative class. However, the values indicator measures a state’s traditional-conservative reaction to secular, modern values, shaping attitudes toward

“faith, religion, nationalism, authority, family, women’s rights, divorce, or abortion.” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 27). The last indicator, reflecting the capacity for self-expression, concerns how a state approaches freedom of expression and individual rights, including attitudes toward “quality of life, democracy, scientific progress, political protests, immigrants, sexual minorities, etc.” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 27). Portugal again scores the lowest (3.18), suggesting that the absence of a creative class impacts each of the 3 T’s, including the level of tolerance within a society.

Regarding the success of Florida’s theory, opinions are divided. Hansen *et al.* (2009) suggest that the theory cannot a priori be valid for Europe because regional developments sometimes defy the morphology of the creative class. Lorenzen and Andersen (2007), based on a study testing Florida’s theory across 445 European cities (including capitals of culture, though without specifically analyzing their impact), explain that cities hosting creative classes become even more creative through work, thus providing evidence for a Matthew-effect type outcome. The authors argue that, in principle, the creative class is more resistant to urban congestion, and cities with fewer than 70,000 inhabitants have a smaller market for creative jobs and minimal political representation from the creative class.

Martin-Brelot *et al.* (2010), in a study about the evolution of 11 European cities, conclude that the profile of the creative class is less flexible in terms of mobility than Florida suggested, and that “personal trajectories” often exceed the ideals of the creative class. More recent analyses note that although the creative class is unevenly distributed in Europe and exists mainly in “clusters” in culturally privileged areas, it is unclear whether “human capital, measured by creative occupation, surpasses indicators based on formal education or whether formal education has a stronger effect” (Boschma and Fritsch, 2015, p. 391).

Positive assessments reemerge in 2023, when a volume edited by Batabyal and Nijkamp appreciates that only now does research and analytical infrastructure allow for confirmation of Florida’s theory, which was proposed hypothetically and descriptively twenty years ago but was entirely visionary.

Personally, what I find relevant in this context is that most analyses ignore the paradoxical existence of funding programs dedicated to cultural interventions, such as *Creative Europe*, without much discussion of a European creative class or the need to protect it legislatively. I do not believe that reducing Florida’s theory to the “3 T’s” is necessary and sufficient to evaluate the impact of the creative class: beyond the homogeneity of the relationship among talent, technology, and tolerance, there may also be relevant “non-T’s” that

better explain such an impact—for example, increased cultural consumption, growth in the number of interdisciplinary study programs in cultural fields, and increased market shares for cultural products (suggesting a specific public demand). At the same time, while discussion of a European creative class remains tentative, analyses of European creative capital are considerably more abundant.

The concentration of creative capital in spaces where human capital is aggregated according to cultural interests and performance enables better relocation of non-residents who, over time, become permanent inhabitants. Florida's sociological studies indicate that, normally, quality of life and economic growth influence this choice, but for educated individuals, the inclusivity and diversity of cities are decisive. Florida (2003) argues for differentiating creative capital from human capital, claiming that the influence of creative individuals on regional economic growth is stronger, and that these individuals prefer innovative, diverse, and tolerant spaces. Not all human capital is linked to economic growth; only that formed of creative individuals has a significant impact. It is not that places are naturally endowed with competitive advantages influencing the movement of individuals to culturally marked spaces, but rather that people's decisions to choose these spaces as permanent residences make them significant.

There are patterns of the creative class (Florida, 2003, pp. 8–9): the creative class avoids settling in traditional corporate communities in favor of creative centers. Creative centers are the new champions of our time's economy, hosting not only creative individuals but also creative outputs (innovation, high-tech industries). Creative centers do not stagnate because they have access to transport and natural resources, but also because they are consistently chosen by creative individuals, who move there not “for traditional reasons” but for the openness to opportunities that promote a different lifestyle and higher professional performance.

### **Instead of Conclusions. A Sociological Dilemma: Clusters of Creative Classes or Cultural Capitals?**

Beyond these considerations, the European creative class—however defined and sociologically assessed—exerts a decisive influence on the nature of cities that have been awarded the title of European Capital of Culture (ECC). This is, moreover, one of the fundamental hypotheses of my research. I contend that, when attempting to classify ECC cities through clustering methods (developing homogeneous categories based on distinctive criteria, such as city size, tourist flows, economic structure, or levels of cultural consumption), the creative class can serve as an excellent lens through which to understand such coalescence.

A close analysis reveals that the 2014 decision by the European Commission, which removed city size as a criterion in the selection of European Capitals of Culture, created a generous corridor for the recognition of smaller cities with pronounced creative classes. Under the same decision, the presence of cultural heritage is no longer a prerequisite—unlike UNESCO listings—and the title is now awarded more for prospective actions than for historical credentials. In this context, the creative cultural class has the opportunity to stimulate a competitive dynamism that operates not only internationally but also nationally. Simultaneously, these policy changes opened the door for industrial heritage in cities with a pronounced economic profile to be leveraged in the competition for the ECC title. Accordingly, I argue that the effects on the creative class and industrial heritage are more significant than other variables previously used to evaluate the impact of ECC status, such as increases in tourist numbers. As Urbančíková (2018) notes, cultural tourism is a “tricky” criterion (p. 4). Although the ECC designation is not a tourism project per se, it entails a cumulative effect on tourist numbers over time, unlike sporting events, where a city experiences a surge of spectators at once. Here, the relationship with residents and their engagement with cultural operators is key. While the financial benefits of cultural tourism and improvements in quality of life are quantifiable, in the long term, the effects of ECC status are also reflected in how the creative class succeeds in preserving the rebranding of a former European Capital of Culture.

Urbančíková (2018) further identifies three clusters of European cultural capitals: traditional cultural cities (Florence, Paris), smaller cities with a cultural and heritage-focused profile (Avignon, Patras, Salamanca), and post-industrial cities with a new culture-based identity (Essen, Glasgow, Košice). One could extrapolate the criteria that enable these clusters through Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances, demonstrating that their similarity is grounded not only in sociological instruments but also in philosophical reasoning. More importantly, however, Urbančíková’s analysis largely overlooks the role of the creative class. Her study concludes that most candidate cities rely on a pre-existing cultural profile, augmented by their current cultural attractiveness. This simultaneously implies the existence of a creative class already embedded in traditional cultural ecosystems, which strengthens their candidacy. Variables such as city size—which can form a cluster by itself (tourism and cultural performance, accommodation capacity, resident population, and integration of industrial heritage into promotional strategies)—are excluded.

The second cluster is more sensitive, encompassing economic and industrial structure, unemployment rates, and the number of students relative to the total city population. Here, it

is crucial to correlate these variables with the functionality of the creative class: what proportion of a city's population belongs to the creative class, and how many students are enrolled in creative sector fields? The fact that a city becomes more attractive to students merely because it has held ECC status seems more contingent than necessary. Far more relevant is the tradition of cultural and creative industries for students in SCC (cultural and creative sectors) fields. Independent of the variables considered, the prestige of ECC status, based on the rebranding of a city's public image, is easier to achieve for smaller cities.

I do not concur with the perspective that the association between the concept of the creative class and the social morphology of the communities to which it pertains should be restricted to the aforementioned clusters. What I am considering here is the overly restrictive and narrow application of the concept of the creative class, as well as the broader social dynamics of cities, which render clustering theory vulnerable.

It is particularly delicate to equate Florida's concept of the creative class with the notion of the cultural class advanced by Rosler (2016). For Rosler, the creative class comprises "cognitive workers" who hold a higher status than artists, the perennial subjects of an underfunded sector, and precisely because they produce capital, they sometimes undermine residents' welfare and exacerbate the social inequality experienced by artists. Rosler thus addresses the need for social justice for vulnerable groups that shape the morphology of creative cities—a concern to which European Capitals of Culture are not immune. On one hand, social justice is needed for insiders and outsiders alike; on the other, there is a constant horizon of expectation regarding social justice for diverse groups within the cultural creative class.

Most importantly, in light of the preceding analysis, it can be concluded that the concept of the creative class inherently accommodates social inequality. The competition for the European Capital of Culture title further intensifies rivalry among creative agents, exacerbating polarization. Meanwhile, residents endure various forms of sacrifice, which crystallize into genuine competitive social narratives. Yet, the fundamental question remains: who enforces social justice for the creative class in a world where culture perpetuates natural inequalities among individuals, based on their talents, within a perpetually unequal social order shaped by the logic of capitalism?

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