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The roles of artists in the emergence of creative sustainable cities: Theoretical clues and empirical illustrations

Volker Kirchberg *, Sacha Kagan [1]

Institute of Sociology and Cultural Organization (ISCO), Leuphana University Lueneburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This article consolidates critical urban sociology with the understanding of cultural sustainability towards urban development. Whereas the latter demands a 'culture of complexity' based on self-organized creativity as stipulation for a sustainable creative city, the former provides theories for analyzing unsustainable creative cities. By combining paradigms from critical urban sociology and cultural sustainability this article lays ground for understanding urban social movements by artists. On the one hand these movements resist unsustainable urban development; on the other hand they strive for opportunities that allow urban communities becoming creative sustainable neighborhoods. Lefebvre's 'Right to the City' concept, Molotch's 'growth machine' thesis, and Smith's elaboration of 'gentrification' are particularly suited to explain the unsustainable urban development of 'creative cities'. The contrasting term of 'cultural sustainability' combines ideas of 'sustainable creativity' with concepts of resilience and serendipity; here, urban development is not limited to mono-causal economic objectives. The theoretical considerations are illustrated by three case studies in Hamburg, Germany, a city with a neo-liberal, i.e., unsustainable, urban development strategy. The cases demonstrate ranges of crossovers of artistic, social and political objectives. They represent degrees of resilience against an unsustainable urban political economy with an unsustainable grasp on creativity. They also represent degrees of adaptation towards urban cultures of creative sustainability with needs of limiting growth, fostering social solidarity and shaping realms of creative possibilities.

Introduction

At least since the dispersion of Richard Florida's *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life* ten years ago, urban politicians, economists, geographers and many other social scientists stress the need to support projects, professions and policies that are connected with the panacea of 'creativity' as the major human resource that will jumpstart those postindustrial cities towards a higher level of 'creative city'. In the context of global economic competition, the political and economic elites of particularly the cities in the Global North have created 'creative city' strategies that are favoring a 'creative class' at the cost of other population groups or classes (Florida, 2002, 2005a, 5b, 2008; Landry, 2000, 2006). Not only many municipal administrators and politicians but also artists located in and looking for public subsidies regard Florida's theses as 'miracle remedy' for creating a sound post-Fordist economy, the latter possibly because it provides them with a strong logic to ask for support. This one-sided urban strategy has provoked much opposition by different scholars and groups across the world. A flurry of critiques (Malanga, 2004; Peck, 2005 but also, less direct, Pratt, 2010) has risen mostly against the perspective of describing a 'creative class' as a necessary social remedy to be pampered for ensuring a bright economic future for 'creative cities' worldwide. The backing of the creative class will occur at the expense of other population groups of the same city, and at the expense of cities less fortunate in the Darwinian competition of a 'spiky world' (Florida, 2008: 17) with only a few winners and many losers.

Florida's thesis has evoked some major antitheses that can be also labeled as criticism from a sustainability perspective. Florida's emphasis on the creative class (and the 'super-creative core') is tainted by implicit demands for an unsustainable urban development. *First*, his insistence

* Corresponding author. Address: Scharnhorststr. 1, 21335 Lueneburg, Germany. Tel.: +49 (0) 41316772726; fax: +49 (0) 41316772689.
E-mail addresses: kirchberg@uni.leuphana.de (V. Kirchberg), kagan@uni.leuphana.de (S. Kagan).
[1] Tel.: +49 (0) 41316772724.

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on seeing the success of cities purely through economic lenses lets him ignore the hazards of the assumed infinite growth of a few successful cities. *Second*, the competition for the 'creative class' will result in a 'spiky world' with a handful of tallest spikes (cities or regions that fully attract the top of the creative class), a few more, less high but emerging spikes (also in the developed world), many mega-cities in the developing world (''ravaged by large-scale »global slums«'') and finally ''huge valleys of the spiky world – rural areas and far-flung places that have little …economic activity'' (Florida, 2008: 31f). *Third*, the world of 'weak ties', i.e., social networks that are based on (close to) noncommittal relationships (Florida, 2002: 220, 276ff) might be good for searching jobs but not for creating strong communities – neighborhoods – on several (socially, culturally sustainable) levels. And *fourth*, the extremely mobile 'creative class' prefers (re-urbanized inner city) communities that all seem to be attractive according to the same factors, e.g.: 'lifestyle', 'social interaction', 'diversity' 'authenticity', 'identity', or 'quality of place' (Florida, 2002: 224ff). The ideal 'creative class' urbanism will be shaped similarly everywhere, the accommodation of this class will create a homogenized look of 'bourgeois-bohemian' chic, with the same features (today, these are Starbucks, bicycle paths and juice bars, cf. Clark, 2004) that pretend an 'indigenous authenticity' (Florida, 2002: 182ff) but indeed provides the same urban 'plug-and-play' environment everywhere.

These polarities between, *first*, 'economic growth vs. social evolution', *second*, 'the winner-takes-it-all vs. solidarity with the weakest', *third*, 'weak ties vs. strong ties', and *fourth*, 'homogenized plug-and-play neighborhoods vs. urban diversity' are strong arguments for the statement that the concept of creativity as promoted by Florida can be regarded as unsustainable. Uncoupled from the creativity discourse, examples for unsustainable urban development in modernity are plentiful, e.g.: suburbanization and its consequences for energy and natural space consumption, social and ethnic segregation and its consequences for the homogenization of ideas, attitudes, and activities and its resulting increase of prejudices and discrimination against other social groups, or the emergence of public mass housing and its lack of educational, cultural or other infrastructural provisions. It is often difficult to define sustainability in the positive because, as the above examples illustrate, unsustainability in urban settings and procedures is often more visible. However, to twist the critique of unsustainability (or unsustainable urban development) into concrete objectives for sustainability (or sustainable urban development) the attention should turn towards the societal areas that are known for real life shaping and work style innovations because of their search for unconventional forms of creativity. Some unconventional and also artistic approaches (whereupon artistic and unconventional are not necessarily identical) are often linked to protest and resistance against unsustainable kinds of urban developments, especially where contemporary artists are involved.

Before we focus on them and their potential for sustainable urbanism, we will sketch three theoretical pillars of contemporary unsustainable urban development, and later relate these theoretical considerations to the urban work of artists in neoliberal urban environments.

Theoretical perspectives on unsustainable creative cities – 'Right to the City', growth machine, gentrification

Three theoretical concepts, the combat for spatial representation of the repressed (Lefebvre, 1991), the growth machine as sociological explanation for urban development (Molotch, 1987), and the theory of gentrification from the perspective of space value production (Smith, 1996) are applied to understand the roles of artists in creative (un)sustainable cities.

Lefebvre's representations of space and the subsequent call for the 'Right to the City'

Lefebvre (1968, 1991) describes the multifold shifts of usages and assignments of urban spaces as interplay of concrete (everyday), abstract (commodified) and imaginative (liberating) traits. The concrete space is the physically perceived and accordingly used space of everyday 'spatial practice'. The abstract space is hegemonically determined 'representations of space', that, in contemporary society, is mostly a commoditized space shaped by considerations of economic profitability. The imaginative space is the idealistic and socially liberated (and liberating) 'representational space'. It is worthwhile to quote Lefebvre here at length:

> ''A conceptual triad has now emerged from our discussion, a triad to which we shall be returning over and over again. *Spatial practice*, which embraces production and reproduction and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance. *Representations of space*, which are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations. *Representational spaces*, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces).'' (1991: 33, italics in original)

According to Lefebvre (1968), the dominant shift towards more and more commodified representations of space has to be resisted by demanding and creating liberated representational spaces. In his political claim for the 'Right to the City', formulated during the Paris revolts of 1968, urban citizens must make accordingly use of their city spaces to take back their spaces; and this appropriation includes an artistic 'inventing' and 'sculpting' of urban spaces (Not Bored: 2006).

The triad of dominance over space, and the shifts between these dominances shed light on unsustainable urban development processes that have occurred in Hamburg in the last 30 years and on the function Lefebvre assigns to artists in this fight for power over space. This latter function bears special relevance for an alternative, sustainability-seeking approach to the city. His analysis of the urban crisis