

THE NEW YORKER

- « “Betrayed” on the West Coast
- Main

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A Map of the Future

This month’s Atlantic has a cover story called “How the Crash Will Reshape America,” by the urban theorist Richard Florida, whose last name stands in opposition to his argument. Florida sees the economic crisis as one of those historic turning points that reshape the social geography of a country, much as the panics and depressions of the late nineteenth century moved Americans off the land and into the industrializing cities. This time, the trend will bring Americans back from the suburbs and exurbs, where they migrated over the past half-century, into the “talent-rich, fast-metabolizing” cities, where “idea-driven creative industries” will produce the jobs of the future. The winners will be the corridors and regions around Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, North Carolina’s research triangle, Boston, Austin, and even—in spite of the recent death of Wall Street—New York. The losers will be the old manufacturing centers of the Midwest, which are already hemorrhaging population, as well as “newer, shallow-rooted Sun Belt communities whose recent booms have been fueled in part by real-estate speculation, overdevelopment, and fictitious housing wealth.” That’s where Florida comes in.

Florida the urban theorist is making the case that success will depend on America becoming less like Florida the state, and more like Europe: fewer homeowners, smaller homes, more renters, denser cities, fewer cars. The article is a big-picture extrapolation of some of the themes suggested in my piece

“The Ponzi State.” (Pam Iorio, the mayor of Tampa, and Ben Eason, the publisher of the alternative weekly *Creative Loafing*, made very similar predictions as they fretted about the future of Tampa in the wake of the housing collapse.)

One implication that Florida’s piece doesn’t mention and mine only glanced at is the political changes that will come with this new national geography. The landscape of the future seems more favorable to Democrats than Republicans. And the country seems at risk of dividing into wealthier, better educated, more liberal cities, where new populations will flow, and poorer, less educated, more conservative suburbs and rural areas, where the populations will grow sparser. This transformation might usher in a new era of liberal ascendancy, but it will bring new problems, new inequalities, new resentments.

Keywords

- Atlantic Monthly;
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