The previous chapter depicted the ‘culture industry’ as an asymmetrical field of power, where workers appear to meekly accept their fate, powerless to resist, while the dictates and drives of corporations appear fully formed, coherent and uniformly applied. While useful, this binary theory of power has its limits for helping us to develop a full critique of cultural work, not least for its propensity to treat power only as a given property of the powerful and ignore the power that may reside ‘below’, so to speak, in varied or diffuse forms. Such an approach also fails to analyse the mechanisms by which power is applied in terms of the specific practices, circumstances and effects that are required in order to ensure that workers behave in the way that managers require. Furthermore, it provides only a schematic account of individual subjectivity and appears to disclaim the possibility of worker autonomy and free action. However, some consideration of these absent issues can be found within what we might refer to as a ‘governmental’ theory of cultural work, one that theorizes the immanence of power in all social contexts and seeks to evaluate the everyday discourses and procedures that help social structures (and, crucially, subjects themselves) to reproduce relations of power. In this chapter I examine how such an approach has helped extend the scope of the conventional critical theory of cultural work, by directing attention towards what Read (2003) has elsewhere referred to as the situated ‘micro politics of capital’.

Here, then, the aim is to more fully examine the ways in which cultural workers might be understood as ‘governed’ subjects, that is, as individuals whose fate and fortunes are, in substantial ways, prescribed by authorities that seek to ‘apply economy’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 92) to the management and administration of populations. Governmentality approaches suggest that societies are no longer dominated by a centralized, core authority
but tend to be administered by a diverse array of agencies and authorities that employ a variety of ‘technical’ means in an attempt to shape the conduct of social and economic life. Central to this ‘conduct of conduct’ is the manipulation of individuals’ ‘desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs’ (Dean, 1999, p. 11), not through overt domination, but, first, through discourses that provide the communicative ‘means through which regimes of power are enunciated’ (Rojek, 2001, p. 36), and, second, through ensuring that subjects are embedded in institutional contexts that enable the self-exercise of power. This marks a distinctive break with post-Adornian critique and the Marxism of the ‘missing subject’, since it posits that power is not the preserve of capitalists or the dominant class, a simple force to be impressed on docile labour, but a phenomenon that is immanent to all social formations, and one that works only through its specific exercise by individuals in embedded social and institutional contexts. Put simply, we might say that while critical theory approaches have suggested that cultural workers are forced to accept capitalist relations of production as a consequence of their powerlessness in the face of corporate power, ‘neo-Foucauldian’ or ‘governmental’ approaches suggest that workers are trained to accept and reproduce for themselves the precise conditions of their subordination.

After a brief discussion outlining the governmental approach, the first part of the chapter concentrates on analysing some of the specific discourses that have arisen in order to ‘govern’ the activities of cultural firms and the cultural worker. Primarily (following the work of Rose, du Gay and others) I examine how a discourse of ‘enterprise’ has arisen as a dominant rationality in Western societies – one that now appears to underpin all social and economic policy interventions, including the promotion of cultural industries. In order to demonstrate this, I then examine the particular construction of UK cultural (or now, rather, ‘creative’) industry policy as a strategy for the promulgation of enterprise discourse and the appropriate disciplinary management of a potentially recalcitrant and unpredictable cultural labour force. Here it is shown that government operates, not through simple domination, but through discourses that attempt to convince subjects of the necessity and benefits of upholding enterprise values in order to expedite successful cultural production. This, for governmentalists, is an example of how cultural policy acts as a ‘mechanism of rule’.

The second part of the chapter examines how ‘government operates through subjects’ (du Gay, 1996, p. 54) by identifying how cultural workers themselves are actively implicated in the reproduction of enterprise values. Here I evidence how workers are not reluctantly subjected