For many, the freedoms unleashed by processes of ‘reflexive modernization’ would appear to have imbued a vast array of creative workers, counter-capitalists, bohemians and community-minded cultural entrepreneurs with fresh impetus to fashion worlds in their own image. But before we retire to celebrate the revival of art and the newfound freedoms of the cultural worker, it is clear there remains much to be discussed. Rather than accept these ‘alternative’ interventions as inherently progressive, the first aim of this chapter is to more thoroughly question how far such initiatives present a serious deviation from, or significant challenge to, the capitalistic practices they purport to subvert. Indeed, for a body of renascent sceptics, while so-called ‘alternative’ cultural economies are seen to provide some palliative to the virulent excesses of neo-liberal ‘culture industry’, as long as the efforts of artists, firms and entrepreneurs remain contained within a capitalist framework – where, ultimately, profit and accumulation remain necessary for underwriting the continuation of alternative production – then attempts to moderate or check capitalism are unlikely to succeed. Thus, the chapter begins by providing a summary of more recent critical responses to the idea of alternative production – and the real freedoms of liberal–democratic individualization are finally assessed.

The second part of this chapter is concerned with the future of cultural work. The aim here is to reflect on how certain forms of radical cultural production may be emerging, ones that appear more fundamentally opposed to capitalist exchange than the moderated or restrained forms of capitalism currently championed in the liberal–democratic model. The emergence of various forms of barter and gift economy and some nascent attempts to create ‘digital democracy’ are chosen as illustrative
examples. I ask, how far do these utopian formulas offer the prospect of new kinds of post-capitalist cultural work emerging?

**Critique of ‘alternative’ economies**

While I have explored the argument that individualization opens up the potential for a renaissance of alternative (various art-based, practice-led and social/ethical forms) of cultural production, a number of critics have fought back to raise objections to the idea that capitalist values can be so easily evaded. Indeed, many observers continue to emphasize the totalizing hegemony of capitalist social relations, and their innate capacity to undo these ‘alternative’ economic configurations.

**The power of the market**

While the economic landscape is now more widely inhabited by creative cultural workers engaged in noble efforts to subvert or ‘hold out’ against ‘pure’ capitalist values – by creating alternative record companies, art studios and galleries, fashion houses, cafes, graphic design agencies, bookshops, new media firms and so on – at the same time, we should recognize that this kind of alternative production is highly vulnerable, not least to the formidable power of capital to appropriate for itself ‘without permission’ whichever elements of the ‘alternative’ it so desires. The inevitable diffusion of any form of avant-garde or alternative production will eventually bring it to the attention of mainstream capitalists who may attempt to exploit markets for goods and services that furnish desires for the autonomous and authentic. Indeed the compelling evidence of cultural history is that almost all radical innovations are destined to be appropriated and absorbed into the commercial world. Everyday, regardless of the wishes of its practitioners, oppositional art is decontextualized, commodified and thus (arguably) divested of its critical power (Bell, 1976). The transgressive sounds of jazz, punk, rock and rap are reworked into soundtracks for advertising cars, supermarkets, bank accounts and holidays (Scherzinger, 2005); left-wing, revolutionary and situationist ventures are turned into tourist experiences, trendy T-shirts or coffee-table volumes (Swyngedouw, 2002), independent fashion retailers find their alternative styles easily absorbed into the lines of mainstream corporations (Crewe et al., 2003; McRobbie, 2002a). Capitalists employ specialist ‘cool hunters’ to delve into the recesses of transgressive cultures in order to retrieve signs, symbols and texts that can be refashioned into new commodities or used to sell existing ones to the segmented panoply of youth, middle-youth