To adapt and horribly mangle Marx’s great lines, cultural workers are entrepreneurial, but not as they please and not under self-selected circumstances (Marx 1852/2005). One of several paradoxes of a group of workers, alternately celebrated (Handy 1995, Florida 2002) and the subject of concern (McRobbie 2002, Ross 2003) is that, like Marx’s revolutionaries, they are sometimes creating something that did not exist before, but in an environment of increasing precariousness and constraint. The entrepreneurialism they display is often of the forced, or at least adaptive, kind. They set up businesses because that is the easiest way to carry out their practice. They get premises because they need to work away from the kitchen table. They take on projects to pay the rent, and other projects on the back of that, because they now have new expertise. They socialise relentlessly to the point where it resembles work more than play. They often articulate social and political concerns about the kind of work they do; but they carry it out while exploiting themselves and others, often with the barest of acknowledgement.

This chapter looks at the phenomenon of the self-employed cultural worker, sometimes described as a ‘cultural entrepreneur’ or even ‘culturepreneurs’ (Lange 2006). In common with other writers (Naudin 2013), I am regarding entrepreneurship as encompassing aspects of self-employment, freelancing and portfolio working, as well as the more ‘conscious’ entrepreneurship of those who set up small businesses within the cultural sectors and seek to either work alone, or employ others as they grow. The chapter draws on many years of researching cultural entrepreneurs and considers the discourse of entrepreneurship and what it has meant to policymakers, advocates, critics and cultural workers themselves. It looks at various drivers of cultural entrepreneurship, including the growth and availability of digital technology, policy support for small businesses, and structural changes in the cultural sectors that have made the employment model a less stable one. It also looks at the growth of a more individualised attitude to work and the seeming willingness of cultural workers to take on the ‘brave new world of work’ (Beck 2000).

Alongside this, the chapter argues that the wider structural questions,
often ignored by advocates of small business-led growth, such as alternate consolidation and disintegration in the media and Internet industries, together with the growth of ‘free work,’ makes the conditions of the small-scale entrepreneur – all rhetoric aside – increasingly difficult. As Terranova puts it, the autonomous worker or the small-scale entrepreneur is always in danger of turning into ‘the precarious worker’ (2006: 33).

Yet the discourse of entrepreneurship and, behind this, some of the positive notions which we attach to cultural work, refuse to die. Even writers who have been critical of the over-promotion of entrepreneurship see some hope in new models of work, arguing that the growth of a critical form of social entrepreneurship could help to breathe new life into an idea that has become tarnished (McRobbie 2011). Others point to the growth of new worker organisations within the cultural industries as evidence of a new, more political, orientation among cultural workers (de Peuter 2011, Sawyer 2013), while theorists such as David Harvey (2012) see the ‘extensification’ of work as proving an opportunity to link the politics of the workplace with that of the city, in new forms of radical organisation, such as the Occupy movement.

Thus, this chapter asks, in an environment characterised not just by economic slump, but by an over-supply of labour and increasing inequality and poor working conditions, is entrepreneurship a useful notion with which to discuss cultural work? What is its relationship to discussion of new business models, to social entrepreneurs or to new workers’ movements, such as those that have formed around notions of precarity? And finally, is it a convenient way of disguising bad work or does it help us to recognise a continuing desire for a greater degree of self-determination in creative work?

DRIVING THE DISCOURSE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

As Barbrook has argued, while there is nothing new in the notion of entrepreneurship (Barbrook 2007), recent ‘takes’ on it tend to combine two forces: the growth of the Internet with its digerati (Brockman 1996), digital citizens, swarm capitalists (Kelly 1998), bobos (Brooks 2000) and netocracy; and the older notion of the bohemian, now reimagined as the ‘creative’. Certainly the idea of the cultural entrepreneur, as it is often portrayed, is difficult to separate either from the changes wrought by the growth of digital technology or from the idea of individualism (McGuigan 2010).

Some of the more celebratory writing on entrepreneurship has often
Rethinking cultural entrepreneurship

been infused with an uncritical excitement, especially with all things digital.

‘Today, anyone who holds a job, and isn’t looking for a side gig – or creating a business plan, writing a screenplay, or setting up shop on eBay – is out of touch,’ proclaimed Dan Pink in his turn-of-the-century work, Free Agent Nation (Pink 2001: 6). Although just over a decade ago, it’s difficult to imagine anyone writing a similar sentence today and not just because of the quaintness of the phrase, ‘setting up shop on eBay’. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a surge in interest, both in the newly minted creative industries (Hartley 2005) and in notions of entrepreneurship (Flores and Gray 2000) and, in many ways, we are still living with these expectations.

The ‘dot-com’ boom (or bust as it is now often known) lasted from around 1997 to 2000. As so often with stock market bubbles, the end of the boom can be dated fairly accurately to 10 March 2000, when the NASDAQ, a US stock market index largely composed of high technology stocks, peaked at 5132.52, before starting what became a fairly dramatic collapse. The period of the boom had seen the formation of thousands of what were called ‘dot-com’ firms, often with little more than an idea, a URL (or web address) and an unrealistic grasp of potential markets.

Many of these firms were in retailing – boo.com, one of the more notorious UK-based companies, was a pioneer of online fashion, for example; while pets.com in the US sold pet supplies to retailers (both went out of business). But the cultural possibilities of the net, the growth of videogames and websites, and the seemingly low to non-existent entry barriers to setting up a new company, meant that hundreds of musicians, comedians, magazine journalists and graphic designers also saw the possibilities of becoming self-employed (McRobbie 2002). McRobbie argued that the Internet drove a ‘second wave’ of cultural entrepreneurship, and distinguished this from the subjects of her earlier work on fashion designers (McRobbie 1998), not least in terms of what she saw as the ‘despatialised’ characteristics of those not used to working physically close to other workers. My own interest in cultural entrepreneurs started at around the same time (Leadbeater and Oakley 1999) and while I felt them to be considerably less seduced by the ‘placelessness’ that often surrounds digital discourse (Cairncross 1999) and indeed, rather rooted in place, it was nonetheless clear that the Internet boom was providing a huge fillip to what were longer-term trends in the cultural workforce.

The significance of this period is not in what it says about the longer-run ‘creative destruction’ of digital technology; in that story the year 2000 may be merely a blip. But the global discourse of ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ (Cunningham 2002, Lange 2006) owes much to the optimistic possibilities suggested by the turn-of-the-century dot-com boom. If the current global
economic slowdown has put the dot-com collapse into the shade, it should perhaps be remembered more clearly. Not simply because many jobs were lost and businesses went under; it took until 2005 for employment in London’s creative industries to recover from the effects of the bust, for example (GLA 2010), but because the positive association between small business entrepreneurs and digital technology – an association so central to the idea of cultural entrepreneurship – is one that still animates much talk of cultural entrepreneurship a decade later (UNCTAD 2010).

FORCED ENTREPRENEURSHIP

At the same time, debates about media ownership and concentration, which so animate writers on the media, particularly those within a political economy tradition (Hesmondhalgh 2002), often get less airing in this tradition of writing about cultural entrepreneurship, where the emphasis on small businesses, craft skills and self-employment remains strong. This is reflected in much of the policy literature in Canada, the UK and across the EU, where the stress is on helping entrepreneurs to start businesses; but there is very little recognition of the wider trends within the cultural industries which may affect these businesses (Murray and Gollmitzer 2012).

Thus, for all the cultural entrepreneurs in McRobbie’s second wave who used the Internet to start new businesses, many others were created by wider structural changes within the cultural sectors themselves. Vertical disintegration, technological and, in some cases, regulatory changes mean that the core media industries, notably film and TV, have seen a huge growth in self-employed workers, who could be re-classed as entrepreneurs. As Blair has noted (2001), while the film industry has always had a great degree of freelance employment, at least outside of the Hollywood ‘studio system’, full-time, permanent jobs were a greater part of the television industry, particularly in European countries with a tradition of public service broadcasting. The contracting-out of more elements of TV production, and the growth of the independent TV sector, can be depicted on one hand as ‘entrepreneurship’, and on the other as the casualisation of formally secure employment.

McGuigan had rightly termed this ‘the paradox of independence’ (McGuigan 2010: 329) and it could be extended beyond TV into other cultural sectors. The core issue is that in this process of vertical disintegration, risk is passed from employers to workers, many of whom move from one short-term contract to another in situations of increasing insecurity. This has consequences in the exit of labour from these industries, particularly among older women, and at the entry level, a lack of diversity in terms
of race, class and gender across all the cultural industries (Skillset 2010, Oakley 2013a, 2013b).

What might be called ‘forced entrepreneurship’, or the need for people in rapidly changing industries to adopt worsening working arrangements, lies behind much of the growth in entrepreneurship in the cultural sectors. While it could be argued that the term ‘entrepreneur’ ill-fits those who have never expressed any desire to be self-employed but have simply had to adapt, the cultural entrepreneurship literature is full of such conflicts and indeed often starts from the premise that entrepreneurship in these sectors is driven by a different set of personal motivations – autonomy, creativity – than in other allegedly more commercial sectors (Oakley and Leadbeater 1999, Banks 2007).

A blind spot in much of the rhetoric, and a failure of policy support for cultural entrepreneurs in the last decades, is that the focus on small businesses ignores wider national and international trends in media ownership, intellectual property and trade, in favour of a supply-side policy. Thus we have witnessed many starts-up in the cultural industries, for example, but, particularly in Europe, very few big or even medium-sized firms (KEA 2006). An iconic example of this would be the UK videogames sector, where I carried out a series of interviews in 1998/99, in what was at the time one of the top three countries in the world for videogames development (Leadbeater and Oakley 2001). Much of this was driven by a wave of first generation entrepreneurs, early gamers, who had grown up with programmable home computers such as the Sinclair Spectrum, which they could reverse engineer and teach themselves about in the classic, but nonetheless highly accurate, ‘bedroom entrepreneurial’ trope.

In many ways, videogames designers are classic cultural entrepreneurs; avid consumers of the products they want to develop, driven in the early days by a do-it-yourself culture which had built up a strong, but informal, shared knowledge base. But unlike those who work in the arts or as musicians, where the struggle to ‘make it’ had always been a perilous one, this wave of entrepreneurs stood at the beginning of their industry’s development, just before a huge growth period which was to see videogames become one of the world’s largest cultural industries. Rather than going on to develop global brands, however, over the next ten years, UK-based entrepreneurs lost competitiveness, becoming reliant on global publishers to finance games development, and unable therefore to hang on to their own intellectual property (IP). As the games industry became more successful and more commodified, more reliant on sequels and genre games, publishers were commissioning less original IP development and therefore making it more difficult for small entrepreneurs whose ‘creativity’ was the source, not only of competitiveness, but of their interest in getting into the
business in the first place (NESTA 2010). One way to read this is simply as an example of failed UK industry policy, which indeed it is; but my point is more that it is emblematic of the general disconnect between the discourse of cultural entrepreneurship and the reality of it.

While consolidation, concentration and disintegration have always been elements of the wider cultural industries, the growth of Internet mega-brands, what van Dijck (2013) has called GAFA (which stands for Google/Amazon/Facebook/Apple), sets a different set of challenges for creative work. Indeed, the current significance of ‘free work’ in the digital labour economy means that even to speak of things called employment or self-employment can be questioned (Scholz 2013). As freelance workers on the Huffington Post, unpaid interns on failing newspapers, games modders and spec workers have learned to their costs, ‘whether all this activity can or should be classified as labour according to any traditional criteria of political economy’ is now an open question (Ross 2013).

The problems of work in the cultural sectors have become more apparent, with even public industry bodies starting to pay attention to the lack of diversity in the industry and the explosive growth of unpaid work as an entry criterion (Cabinet Office 2009, Skillset 2010, 2011, Murray and Gollmitzer 2012). As Blair comments, the huge oversupply of labour in the cultural sectors gives particular importance to first jobs as a route in, as many of those who want to work in these sectors may never even get that far (Blair 2001). Given this, social contacts, including family links, play an important role in ‘getting in’, which obviously has undesirable consequences for the social and ethnic mix of the labour market. Similarly, the ability to sustain unpaid work, sometimes for lengthy periods, is clearly greater if one can draw on family resources.

One might expect that both the end of the initial Internet hype and the realisation of the hardship and inequality which characterises much cultural work would lead to a toning down of the promotion of cultural entrepreneurship and indeed some authors argue that this is the case (Lange 2006). But the idea remains a resilient one, not simply in the relentless promotion of government agencies, but in the minds of many young cultural workers themselves.

THE PLEASURES AND PAINS OF CULTURAL WORK

A distinctive, if not unique, feature of cultural labour markets is the degree of enthusiasm, even love that workers show for their job, which helps ensure that even casualised, insecure and often exploitative as these labour markets are, they are continually oversupplied with labour. McRobbie
describes the ‘passionate’ attachment that such people have to their work as ‘a space of romantic idealisation perhaps more rewarding than personal relationships’ (McRobbie 2007: 1).

In her study of new media workers in the UK and the Netherlands, Gill (2007) speaks of the ‘extraordinary passion and enthusiasm’ that people have for their work and the many different elements of this passion: the sense of autonomy and opportunity, the playful and pleasurable nature of the work, and the opportunity for community and political activism. Indeed, as she argues, ‘sociologists of work would be hard-pressed to find another group of workers who expressed similar levels of passion both for the work itself and for the field more generally’ (2007: 14).

McRobbie connects what she calls the ‘refusal of mundane work,’ among these cultural workers with the autonomist notion of refusal of work and the feminist dynamic, by which this independent work becomes a potential source of self-realisation (McRobbie 2007).

Such enthusiasm continues to drive potential cultural entrepreneurs today, as anyone involved in small business support or teaching within higher education can testify. Yet in line with the stress of this volume on the contradictions and tensions within creative work, the enthusiasm and passion of entrepreneurs is rarely simple and can be mixed and even paradoxical. McRobbie points out that that professed pleasure in work often masks self-exploitation, and that this attachment to ‘my own work’ provides both a justification, and a disciplinary mechanism, for staying, often unprofitably, with cultural work and not abandoning it altogether (McRobbie 1998, 2007). In my own interviews with arts graduates (Oakley et al. 2008), most of whom were working freelance and in other entrepreneurial ways, alongside professions of pleasure in work, there are also appeals to an older, Romantic tradition of the ‘importance’ of the artist. And Naudin, in her work on higher education, notes the distaste that her interviewees often express for what are seen as the negative aspects of entrepreneurship, such as a focus on commercial gains at the expense of being socially useful, or selfish and anti-social behaviour (Naudin 2013). Her research with masters’ students who are undertaking ‘enterprise’ education as part of their degree courses confirms the ‘forced’ aspects of entrepreneurship to which I have alluded. She quotes one student as saying of the idea of being a freelance worker, ‘I’m trying to be comfortable with it, because I know it’s going to happen to me’ (post-grad student, quoted in Naudin 2013).

Research on art and design graduates suggests that while many of the aspects associated with entrepreneurship – self-expression, being able to use one’s knowledge and skills fully and attachment to one’s own creative practice – continue to motivate career aspirations for those in the cultural
sectors, ‘being my own boss’ is in fact less of a driver than for workers in other sectors (Ball 2010). This research suggests that ‘being able to work for myself’ was ‘very important’ for just over 20 per cent of arts and design graduates, as opposed to 65 per cent who felt that ‘making full use of knowledge and skills’ was important, and even 60 per cent whose major motivation was to have a regular or stable source of income. This may reflect the optimism of newly minted graduates that they will be able to find scope for self-expression within employment, but again suggests that self-employment in the cultural sectors is about being able to find space for independent practices, not about the attractions of self-employment per se.

**DOING GOOD WORK**

My own research with cultural entrepreneurs suggests that there is a subset who, rather than resenting a form of work that requires so much self-sacrifice, justify their decisions, not through pleasure, nor the possibility of future success, but through the importance that they attach to cultural expression. An ethical stance is often taken to justify ‘being an artist’ – the notion of artists as truth tellers, for example, is still in evidence – with the consequence that falling short is a personal, almost ethical failing (Oakley et al. 2008).

Banks has similarly argued for an ethical orientation to cultural work and workers (Banks 2006), again based on empirical work among small-scale cultural entrepreneurs. In doing so, he queries many of the accounts of cultural work, which he sees as portraying a ‘moral vacuum at the heart of the cultural industries’ (Banks 2006: 459). Such accounts, he contends, neglect the agency of cultural workers themselves, presenting a picture of self-exploitation that often steers close to a sort of false consciousness notion, while accounts of a ‘new labour paradigm’ (Miller 2004: 59) neglect the different social and spatial conditions in which cultural entrepreneurship takes place.

Banks’ interviewees, by contrast, have a strong association with place, in this case Manchester, and are often involved in community activities, reflecting concerns about over-development and conservation and indeed keen to preserve some kind of diverse social mix in areas of gentrification. Others express a desire to give something back to the city in which they live and work: involving themselves in voluntary teaching or mentoring schemes, donating their services free to local arts events and, in one case, offering their recording studio free for local young people to use (Banks 2006).
Banks, also found entrepreneurs ‘reflect in depth on ethical aspects of management/employment, particularly regarding the treatment and development of staff’ (Banks 2006: 465).

In my own work, I’ve also heard both ethical and political concerns expressed freely among entrepreneurs; but unlike Banks, I have often found an exception to this in discussions of cultural work itself. Issues such as unpaid work, long hours and absence of standard work benefits are justified by cultural entrepreneurs on the grounds that, essentially, if they had to pay and provide benefits commensurate with other industries, they would not be in business at all (Oakley 2007, 2009, 2011). Instead, what many would argue are exploitative conditions are recast as the need for workers to ‘demonstrate commitment’. Self-management, ability to deal with stress, long hours and often high levels of insecurity – what Ross (2003) calls the ‘hidden costs’ of cultural work – are what interviewees appear to take pride in and to look for in others. There is often little or no sense that relying so heavily on unpaid labour is either unfair or exploitative.

In his ethnography of the Wicker Park area of Chicago, Lloyd (2006) hints at a class-based element behind these justifications. While he is careful to make clear that although genuine material scarcity is not uncommon among all sorts of cultural workers, the ‘voluntary’ adoption of this material scarcity differentiates it sharply from the life of the genuinely poor, both in terms of social status, which is often quite high, and in terms of control over one’s life.

The neo-bohemians thus make a claim on status privileges typically denied to the urban poor. While poverty as it is normally experienced inhibits self-determination, the voluntary adoption of relative poverty by bohemians claims to increase autonomy. (Lloyd 2006: 161)

Interviewees of my own have made similar points, often stressing the fact that they do not work primarily for money; seemingly unaware that the ‘voluntary poverty’ of the cultural entrepreneur’s lifestyle often serves to exclude working class people, who are less likely to see low incomes as a lifestyle choice, or to have the other assets that make such a life manageable.

Recent research on attitudes to unpaid work in the film and TV industries, however, reminds us that before generalising about ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ we need to pay more attention to the differences between types of cultural work – the self-employed community arts worker versus the freelance sound editor, for example. Different forms of cultural work have different histories of work organisation, and for those film and TV workers surveyed by Percival, a majority agreed that unpaid work in the
industry was a source of injustice and not primarily because it undercut wages. The research also suggested an important distinction between paid and unpaid work, as clear distinctions were made by respondents between so-called ‘no budget’ film production, where everyone works unpaid, and budgeted production. Respondents generally agreed that if one worker on a particular film production was paid, everyone should be paid. This suggests possible ways forward for those thinking about how the arts economy, which has always had high levels of volunteers who are not seeking paid work, can distinguish between opportunities for volunteering and exploitation of unpaid workers.

The current prolonged economic downturn, however, may lead to a sea change in attitudes to, and types of, cultural entrepreneurship. Cuts in public funding, a shrinking public sector and decline in urban retail and leisure industries that are often used as a supplementary source of income while entrepreneurs are working on their own idea (Lloyd 2006) have left a generation of young, often highly educated, cultural workers vulnerable and insecure. This could suggest a turn away from the risks associated with entrepreneurship; or it could suggest new forms for it.

WHAT NOW FOR CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURS?

The expansion of higher education in recent decades, particularly in creative subjects, combined with increasing awareness of the problems of cultural labour markets and a growing ‘politics of labor insecurity’ (de Peuter 2011: 421) has led to a new generation of worker organisations, often focused around issues such as unpaid internships. De Peuter has analysed a variety of these cultural workers’ movements, many of which either incorporate, or are driven by, the autonomous or self-employed cultural worker in a way that traditional trade unions, focused on a standard model of employment, often had difficulty in doing (de Peuter 2011, forthcoming).

At what one might consider the ‘higher end’ of the cultural labour market, organisations such as Model Alliance and Freelancers Union NYC are tackling issues ranging from sexual abuse in the modelling industry to the need to provide health insurance to self-employed workers, a particular concern for those in the USA. Other groups attempt to bring lower-paid workers in the cultural sectors – often in the retail, leisure or hospitality industries – together with other low-paid workers. Such organisations have had some success, particularly with Living Wage campaigns, though these tend to have been observed by larger employers such as financial services companies and local governments, affecting cultural workers only in their
second or third ‘job’, not in their primary mode of self-employment. In the UK, perhaps the most high-profile cultural labour market activism has been around the issues of unpaid work, which has seen a variety of students and younger workers developing campaigns around issues of unpaid internships. Groups such as the Carrot Workers Collective, Precarious Workers Brigade, Intern Aware and Graduate Fog have run a variety of campaigns; at the time of writing, London Fashion Week was the scene for a campaign against unpaid internships in the fashion industry (Thorpe 2013). Such campaigns have undoubtedly had some success and have helped to bring in established trade unions; the National Union of Journalists has fought a successful legal case for ‘back pay’ for interns, while the Musicians Union campaigned (unsuccessfully) against professional musicians being asked to perform at the Olympics for free.

Others are looking not just to workers’ organisation, but to the organisation of cultural work itself as a source of renewed creativity and political hope. McRobbie has called for a ‘renewal of radical social enterprise and co-operatives’ as a response to the high levels of unemployment and withdrawal of social support currently afflicting young people across Europe (McRobbie 2011: 33). She sees possibility in the growth of radical social enterprise and new forms of co-operative in the cultural sectors and beyond, particularly in the links between cultural work and social care and education. As such the ‘instrumental’ cultural policies of recent decades, which have stressed the links between cultural activity and responses to perceived social problems, may also be due for renewal, alongside the notion of entrepreneurship. Others see the salience of well-being in public policy as a possible avenue for renewed attention to working conditions, including those in the cultural sectors (Spencer 2007, Davies 2011).

Meanwhile theorists such as David Harvey (2012) see the ‘extensification’ of work as providing an opportunity to link the politics of the workplace with that of the city, in new forms of radical organisation. While Harvey argues that ‘pacification and professionalisation’ of the cultural workforce have blunted its once radical edges, he sees enough potential in its sub-cultures and growing discontent to believe it still makes fertile ground for leftist politics (Harvey 2012: 88). In doing so, he appeals to a timeless notion of culture as ‘something so special’ that it can both absorb and resist commodification. Eric Olin Wright in his study of what he calls ‘Real Existing Utopias’ similarly argues for the relevance of a basic income model for the arts, comparing it, in this case, with various kinds of caring activities and domestic labour as part of the social economy that should exist outside the market (Olin Wright 2010).

We are clearly a long way here from the notion of cultural entrepreneurship as simply starting a small business to produce websites. Many
of these arguments call upon a notion of ‘cultural work’ greatly different from the sort of entrepreneurial creativity said to drive innovation in the wider economy. Instead, they suggest an intrinsic quality to cultural practices themselves that is capable of opening up other spaces of thinking or alternative views – ethically, politically and aesthetically. Indeed, the very notion of a ‘culturepreneur’ had always played with these differences, while often being used pragmatically to connote the kind of forced entrepreneurship I have been describing.

CONCLUSIONS: RETHINKING CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

This chapter has argued that the notion of the ‘culturepreneur’ was born at a particular historical juncture and yoked together the growth of high-tech small businesses, the desire for self-expression and the importance of cultural practices, and longer-term changes in the cultural industries, in a form that was always unstable and has now collapsed. Work in the cultural industries, including self-employment, needs to be rethought.

The notion of the cultural entrepreneur was adapted to serve a rhetorical function and pressed into service in the global spread of the creative industries or creative economy idea, but it has always concealed a multitude of different practices and experiences. More importantly, it relies on a model of economic growth and spending, both public and private, that is broken. The chapter has argued that the forced or adaptive models of entrepreneurship – the desire to carry on doing a certain kind of work after you’ve lost your job or the inability to fit your cultural practice into a paying job – has always been more characteristic of the figure of the cultural entrepreneur than the notion of the driven small business woman or man.

It is therefore useful to ask if there really is entrepreneurship in much of the cultural work we currently see around us. Calling the multifarious forms of contingent work ‘entrepreneurship’, particularly as these forms spread beyond the cultural sectors into huge parts of the economy, is meaningless, even deceptive. Autonomous workers, contingent workers, precarious workers – all these terms may capture the reality of self-employed cultural work better, but they have their own baggage and limitations.

In particular, the genuinely creative aspect of cultural work, the desire to make the world anew, is important to hang onto if we think that work, as it is currently experienced, can be improved. We cannot, and many would not wish to, rehabilitate ‘standard’ employment relationships –
historically contingent and demographically limited as they were. It is
important not to sentimentalise cultural work; Banks (2007) reminds us
that all work has a moral dimension, and there is no reason that cultural
workers should be at the vanguard of more ethical forms of labour. But
imagination is required to rethink our notions of good work in culture and
elsewhere, and persistence will be necessary to bring this about – and both
these are qualities of entrepreneurs.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it correct to label all self-employed cultural workers as entrepre-
neurs, or do we need a different term?
2. What do you think of the notion of ‘forced entrepreneurship’? Does
it correspond with your experience of work or self-employment, or
those of people you know?
3. How can we make ‘entrepreneurship’ in the cultural industries
genuinely open to all and more sustainable?
4. What policies might help with that and whose responsibilit(ies) are
they?

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