We live in times marked by conflict. Categories that helped order our social world in preceding decades are now in discussion, and one of the most surprising transformations is the concept of “alternative”. Since the rise of the notion of subcultural theory at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, in the 1970s, the subcultural label has always implied some degree of resistance, claims for a more open social world and progressive political trends. Now, some of us are astonished when we see conservative movements reclaim the label “alternative” for themselves, thereby adopting the subcultural discourse of counter hegemony in order to define their social position.

This collection of essays was written before the Brexit referendum in the UK and Trump’s election in the USA, but provides very useful points of view in understanding how the concept of subculture has changed in the global context and how new social actors have appropriated it in different ways. Most of the essays raise criticism of the CCCS’s theories as a starting point. As Paul Hodkinson explains in the chapter that serves as the theoretical framework for the whole book, “one of the CCCS’s biggest problems was that it interpreted subcultures as a solution to working class problems but excluded typical working class youth from an analysis that took spectacular style as its starting point” (6). The historic context of the classic subcultures was one of an industrial society in decline; now, we are living in the information society: new practices, new tools, new values have been developed by subcultures in a context of a different form of capitalism. And that means the ways to make subcultural work is changing, and as a consequence the ways of studying it. As the editors remark in the surprisingly short introduction to the book, “subcultures have never gone away; they may have changed...
form, and we need to adapt our conceptual tools or consider other practices, countries, or social groups, but fundamentally, similar processes of cultural expression have continued to exist” (1).

Thus, we are invited to consider subcultural activity in post-communist countries such as Estonia, Hungary, the Czech Republic or Russia. In another chapter, we are guided to the periphery of London linking new processes of urbanization with the repeated claims by the British press “in quasi-sociological terms that young British Asians were moving from the margins to the mainstream” (Rupa Huq, 110). In addition to that wide geographical scope, subcultural work is integrated throughout the book in the contradictory context of the creative classes, using the hipster as a paradigm of the clash between subculture and new capitalism (especially in the chapters by Miranda Campbell and Stefan Wouters).

One of the main problems for these new paradigms of subculture lies in defining clear limits. What is the difference between a subculture and any other oppositional or alternative group? Are subcultures defined by their practices, their aesthetics or their discourses? If we consider that all communities “established in opposition to popular culture and the values of a consumerist society” (183) are subcultural, we confront a vast number of different groups around the globe to approach using our subcultural analytical tools. The “focus on localities, the reconstruction of ethnicities, ideas of egalitarianism, and anti-consumerism, the search for alternative cultural forms and lifestyles” (183) seems too open to define such a specific concept as subculture. Most of the authors of the volume use the ideas of “subcultural capital” from Sarah Thornton as a way to move the analysis from social groups to cultural practices and discourses, sophisticating the approach.

In this way, it is possible to understand, for instance, the way rock music has been used as a soundtrack by nationalist groups in Hungary. In order to understand this peculiar blend, it is necessary to reconstruct the ways in which oppositional culture was organized under the communist regime. Agnes Pataffalvi Czirjak suggests that rock music still maintains the alternative value that it acquired during the communist years; it is still a style that fits into a semiotic universe, “held together by a strong aversion towards anything considered as pertaining to the official order and the mainstream” (172). So, we can see the rise of a national rock, able to engage with xenophobic skinhead ideologies and folk styles connected with a claim for an old and pure identity. Its subcultural or alternative value is now used to maintain a nationalistic and conservative culture, very far from the original meanings of rock music in the countercultural 1960s.

The several chapters dedicated to examining subcultural practice in post-communist countries are quite fascinating since we were used to thinking
about subcultures in the context of advanced capitalist cultures. The concept of class identity that fuelled pioneering works by Hall or Hebdige is not useful in a context where those present pretend that class distinctions were abolished by the revolution. In contrast, we observe how the quick transition to capitalism in these European countries created a very different subcultural universe in these places. “Socialist countercultures seemed to share the powerful presupposition that the clause of freedom of expression would automatically permit their existence (and guarantee it) without any necessity to learn (and accept) the rules of operation under capitalism” (Zuzana Kepplová, 146). The tensions between culture and the market that characterized subcultural practice as understood by the CCCS researchers have been eroded. Club culture in Bratislava has adopted the entrepreneurial language in line with the discourse of the modern creative industry, and subcultural distinction is transformed into an “allure of seriousness” (158) that attract sponsors and reassure the media that these were “real” cultural events, not drug havens. The fight for distinction from both parental culture and other youth cultures has been transformed into a competition between projects involved in a discourse around expertise, dedication and innovation: the values of the emerging creative classes.

Although the concept of the creative class is problematic, it provides a framework for understanding the role of subcultural capital in the highly developed cultural industries of our time. The assumption from the classic study by Phil Cohen on working-class subcultures that there were no career prospects in subcultures (quoted in Kepplová, 143) cannot be maintained in our days. There is a vast field of labour in which the practices of bricolage that define subcultural style become the fabric of professional practice, from designers to journalists, from musicians to TV broadcasters. Miranda Campbell pointed to one of the problems of such blends: “the bleeding together of work and leisure in creative pursuits might give a surface appearance of glamour or a veneer of fun but this often belies a more difficult reality” (47). Subculture is always linked with leisure time, but now subcultural capital can be transformed into a way of living.

This new capitalist context is a challenge for subcultural analysis. Can we, for instance, define hipsters as a subculture? One of the main aims of every subculture was to provide its members with a peculiar identity, something to be proud of, a boundary that differentiated the members of a group from the outside and created a link between insiders. But most of the literature on hipsters, as in the Greif essay quoted by Campbell, defines them from the outside: nobody seems able to define him/herself as a hipster.

Paradoxically, the problem of defining hipsters in subcultural terms seems to solve the main problem that most authors of the volume attribute
to the CCCS’s subcultural theory: its difficulty in explaining the problems
that typical youths face in the contemporary world. Campbell discusses an
advertising campaign that stated that being a “hipster is not a real job”: “it
might not be a job but increasingly, small-scale careers are and this work is
characterized by low pay, uncompensated labor, long hours, short-term con-
tracts, and precarity” (49). The modern creative worker is having fun at work
time: he is not dreaming about the weekend like the characters in Quadro-
phenia. His work allows him to fulfil himself. But the price to pay for having
this kind of “funny” job is scarcity. As another contributor in the volume sug-
gests, we are in a world where the work of art has been replaced by the art of
work (Kepplová, 159).

This book will be of interest to all who are trying to understand the ways
in which the concepts of high and low, elite and the people, mainstream and
alternative are being repositioned in our times. It is a very useful tool to think
with. It does not provide an ordered framework or a distinctive theoretical
model, but rather offers a bunch of case studies that allow thinking about
subcultures in new racial, local, urban, professional or national contexts. The
book illuminates the dynamics of the public sphere in a time when the aes-
thetic dimension has heavily permeated daily life as a distinctive element of
the new capitalism.