

# **Research Ethics in an Unethical World: The Politics and Morality of Engaged Research**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores ethical dilemmas in researching the world of work. Recent contributions to WES have highlighted challenges for engaged research. Based on the emancipatory epistemologies of Bourdieu, Gramsci and Burawoy, the authors examine moral challenges in workplace fieldwork, question the assumptions of mainstream ethics discourses and seek to identify an alternative approach. Instead of an ethics premised on a priori, universal precepts that treasures academic neutrality, this article recognises a morality that responds to the social context of research with participation and commitment. The reflection in this study is based on fieldwork conducted in the former Soviet Union. Transformation societies present challenges to participatory ethnography but simultaneously provide considerable opportunities for developing an ethics of truth. An approach that can guide engaged researchers through social conflict's 'messy' reality should hinge on loyalty to the emancipation struggles of those engaged in it.

**Keywords:** ethics, qualitative fieldwork, post-socialism, materialism, business and management research, workplace morality

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**Introduction**

The widespread international adoption of ethics codes and frameworks has sparked debates about their constraining effects on qualitative social science research (Bell and Bryman, 2007; Guillemin and Gillian, 2004; Huzzard and Björkman, 2012: 169). Increasing scrutiny of research activities on ‘ethical’ grounds particularly threatens intellectual projects of critical public engagement (public sociology) because the researcher-respondent relationship that these codes intend to regulate lies at the heart of engaged research, defining its moral integrity no less than its scientific validity (Brook and Darlington, 2013; Ram et al., 2014).

Engaged research is widely assumed to be a participatory, democratic pursuit that employs emancipatory dialogues and action research to access subjective and objective truths about social domination. This paper argues that such commitments are at odds with the theoretical assumption on which the morality of ethical frameworks is predicated. To establish what engaged research means, the authors first reconsider its most popular models: Bourdieu and Gramsci. It appears that emancipatory dialogues potentially entail political commitment and involvement with participants’ struggles, which defy academic notions of neutrality (Sheper-Hughes, 1995; Stewart and Martinez, 2011).

Burawoy’s (2012: 187) reflections on workplace research in Hungary and the US are examined to understand the role of socio-historical circumstances in determining conditions for dialogues. In ‘advanced capitalism’, he finds that dialogue is precluded by what Bourdieu

calls ‘mystification’: the obscuring of exploitation as a contingent product of capitalist relations of production. Under ‘state socialism’, in contrast, he can elaborate Gramscian good sense: the kernel of working-class autonomous intellectual activity that generates an immanent critique of the system of domination. This article re-examines mystification in post-socialism and suggests that engaged research may be premised less on permanent features of these regimes than on historical breaks with their *status quo*. Gramscian political hermeneutics (Burgio, 2014) and Bourdieu’s research ‘craft’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002) provide tools for this endeavour.

These methodological propositions are contrasted with official ethical precepts. Critiques of mainstream discourses equate the globalisation of ethics with a cultural turn that promotes passivity and distance from those it claims to protect (Badiou, 2006; Brennan, 2006). The authors therefore argue for an ‘ethics of truth’ that bases its legitimacy on loyalty to processes of social emancipation.

The following relates theory to practice by problematising ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin and Gillian, 2004) in the authors’ research experience. Fieldwork in post-socialism proves no less challenging than in the advanced capitalism Burawoy studied. Confronted with mystification, the authors resort to research strategies that deepen fieldwork engagements to elaborate good sense or to understand the common sense of respondents. These exercises always entail destabilising the epistemological standing of all participants in a process of mutual education, or ‘con-participation’ (Gramsci, 2007: 1430). Dialogue reaches closer towards the truth as it proves emancipative by challenging participants’ misconceptions.

This article first engages with debates about participatory research epistemologies and then analyses the authors’ research practice in post-socialist societies (Gambino and Sacchetto, 2007; Morrison, 2007).

## **Engaged research and ethics**

The authors' research relies on case study approaches that were pioneered in the post-socialist context by Burawoy (2012) and Clarke (2007). The aim of these approaches was to establish dialogues with workers and managers to make comprehensive sense of their views (Burawoy 1998: 26). The research embraced a materialist ontology that emphasised totality, structure, contradiction and crisis (Armstrong, 1991: 9-11) and that resonated with labour process epistemology by focusing on workplace relations and insisting on antagonistic relations (Thompson and Smith, 2001). Methodologically, the research employed ethical-political judgement and reflexivity to achieve 'rigour' and validity (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 239; Hammersley and Traianou, 2012).

The emergence of ethical integrity as a validity requirement (Guillemin and Gillian, 2004: 275; Ziemer and Popov, 2014) interrogates this approach, prompting two questions: a) whether official procedures are compatible with emancipatory processes and b) whether co-operative engagement with agents could offer an alternative approach to ethics in social science research. The point of departure for answering these questions is emancipatory epistemologies.

## ***Engaged research and emancipatory epistemologies***

Debates initiated by Burawoy's call for a new public sociology identify engaged research with a 'moral and emancipatory enterprise', explicitly articulating 'the voices of the excluded' (Stewart and Martinez, 2011: 328). This 'ideological commitment' requires truly participative and democratic forms of engagement with labour (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 234). What should be the goal of emancipation? Emancipation claims become meaningful when related to social equality. In organisations, emancipation translates into struggles

around ‘frontiers of control’ and therefore is always emancipation *from* management. Furthermore, as some labour scholars argue, ‘the concept of emancipation only makes sense at the objective level’ (Armstrong, 2015: 12; Edwards, 2015). It needs factual bases to establish causal links between structures and the subjective experience of the oppressed. ‘Existential’ subjectivities, as Tinker explains (2002:267), offer little towards an emancipatory project.

When can participative engagements be deemed authentic? Fieldwork aims to build trustful relationships among the researcher, respondents and the researched community by deepening their intellectual and material connections. Stewart and Martinez argue against the ‘voyeuristic outsider’ who values neutrality above the risks of disconnection: ‘The labour process of research into others’ labour is arguably one of commitment (/.../) and is no less ethically compromised when we seek to stand outside the struggles of others’ (2011: 338). The integrity of engaged research requires that the researcher-respondent relationship has *continuity*. In other words, commitment cannot be withdrawn at the first sign of antagonistic or morally challenging situations.

Commitment to objectivity and embeddedness exposes the researcher to two significant risks. Pursuing objectivity can lead to misinterpretation based on the assumption that the sociologist ‘knows best’. Conversely, association with workers’ struggles or misbehaviour may be not only materially or legally dangerous but also perceived as politically and ethically compromised. The ways in which such risks materialise and can be overcome hinge on the adopted epistemological position.

Bourdieu’s committed scholar and Gramsci’s organic intellectual constitute positive models for public sociology (Stewart and Martinez, 2011). For Bourdieu, the main task of researchers is to apprehend the subjective experience of exploitation, which hides and therefore helps to reproduce its objective roots. In *Weight of the World*, Bourdieu outlines

respondent-researcher engagements that ‘*help respondents to deliver up the truth*’ by employing emphatic interactions (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 621). However, the Bourdieusian *habitus* concept is criticised as an extreme form of doxa-type false consciousness that denies ordinary respondents access to the truth (Brook and Darlington, 2013; Burawoy, 2012). Its methodological implications are detached and elitist approaches that are incompatible with democratic relations.

In contrast, Gramsci’s epistemology rejects the traditional academic’s illusory autonomy and posits direct involvement, constant dialogue and active affiliation with a social group as the only bases for emancipatory intellectual practice. Here, the condition for emancipatory dialogue between the researcher and respondent is Gramsci’s ‘good sense’ idea.

However, the choice of approach may owe more to socio-historical circumstances than to the researcher’s preferences, as seen in Burawoy’s reflections on workplace research. Unlike Gramsci’s involvement with Italian autoworkers in the revolutionary 1920s, Burawoy’s fieldwork (2012:202) in post-war American industry produced a ‘Bourdieusian moment’: the experience of an outsider who must ‘make a *break* with common sense’ [of the workers]. Burawoy (2012: 191) re-evaluates Bourdieu’s appreciation of the subjective aspect of domination, embracing his idea of *mystification*. Mystification, he argues, explains why ‘advanced capitalism’ exhibits a ‘stable hegemony’, whereas ‘state socialism’ generates contestation from below. Under the former, factory hegemony relies on workers’ subjective investment in the game of ‘making out’, the fulfilment of piece-rate production targets. Under the latter, this game delegitimises the system because, while battling its inefficiencies, workers gain autonomy and openly bargain over targets. In the US, Burawoy found no room for ‘Gramscian good sense in the common sense of the workers’, whereas in Hungary, he found ‘its kernel of good sense... through dialogue [with workers]’ (Burawoy, 2012: 202).

After 1989, post-socialist workers' antagonism did not wither but appeared ineffectual by reproducing individualised resistance and appeals to the state (Crowley and Ost, 2001; Morrison and Croucher, 2010).

Is emancipatory dialogue always possible in (post)-socialism? Burawoy's recognition of ethnographic fallacies (2013) suggests otherwise. Capitalism's stability is exaggerated by eternalising and homogenising the field site. The methodological radicalism of *inchiesta operaia* (workers' enquiry), born of European workerism (Tronti, 2013), shows that crisis in capitalist hegemony can produce breaks with the common sense of capitalist domination. Simultaneously, the resilience of ideological legacies in the FSU, dubbed 'irrational conservatism' by some (Grancelli, 2012), shows that mystification is not unique to capitalism. Eastern workers' practices are consistent with the gradual adaptation to capitalism of past employment regimes in post-socialist Europe (Morris and Polese, 2013) and the lack of restructuring in the FSU (Clarke, 2007). Their acquiescence can be explained by assuming that post-socialist legacies are 'rooted in social relations' rather than in 'totalitarian' minds (Clarke, 2007; Morrison, Croucher and Cretu, 2012). Hence, research in post-socialism proves the wider relevance of Burawoy's concept of mystification.

Emancipatory dialogue is conceivable in both systems. This study suggests that its possibilities rest on an historical *caesura*. Bourdieu and Gramsci both offer resources in this pursuit. Bourdieu shows how emphatic interactions and objectification enable dialogues in circumstances where 'there is only minimal *collective*... resistance or no prospect of it' (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 240). Gramsci's political hermeneutics insists on reducing knowledge asymmetry by relying on embeddedness in researched communities (Burgio, 2014: 50-54). By embracing an emancipatory strategy, the researcher can experience engagements as 'combat situations' (Burawoy, 2014: 141) fraught with ethically problematic moments. The way this approach compares with official precepts is our next subject.

### ***Research regulations and ethics of truth***

Ethical regulations are criticised for constraining researchers' freedom while offering little practical guidance. Scholars find such rules wanting for their 'foreignness' to socio-economic studies and their 'philosophical' abstraction (Bell and Bryman, 2007; Dougherty and Atkinson, 2006: 293). However, critical enquiries (Badiou, 2006; Brennan, 2001) suggest that the problem lies more in the 'underlying theoretical assumptions concerning morality' (Bell and Bryman, 2007: 64).

Badiou elaborates a critique that contrasts the 'human rights ideology' based on post-modern philosophy with a politics of emancipation founded on an ethics of truth. How is this ideology problematic? Ethics is conceived as the ability to express judgement on real situations. Mainstream approaches pretend to do this on the basis of an a priori, universal and consensual understanding of Evil. Its universalism is premised on a neutral subject that is defined by its ability to suffer. Similarly, postmodernist discourse posits that after Auschwitz, 'bare life', not social or political life, is all that remains worth protecting (Brennan, 2006: 194-5). This approach is conservative because it is primarily concerned with protecting the *status quo*. It negates the human capacity to improve its condition, which is what defines emancipation. According to Badiou (2006), knowledge can only be produced when an 'event' destabilises a 'situation', breaking with the *status quo*. An 'Ethics of truth' embodies 'loyalty' to such events and is enacted by 'persevering' in the experience. Badiou's loyalty resonates strongly with the continuity invoked by Stewart and Martinez (2011).

The conditions for emancipatory research may be reformulated. Historical breaks with the status quo at the micro level (workplace resistance) or the macro level (crisis, revolution) can allow truth to emerge. Ethics demands support for such events throughout the research process by challenging the sociologist's neutrality and the dominant viewpoint embedded in

the common sense of respondents and researchers. Ethics can only be resolved from within a singular situation because conditions depend on socio-historical contexts (Burawoy, 2012). ‘The ideal of standardised procedures’ should be dismissed in favour of a ‘craft’ that serves ‘the desire to discover the truth’ (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 607, 621). The next sections test these propositions by reflecting on research practice in Russia.

## **Truth and ‘moral politics’ in post-Soviet workplaces**

### ***Research background of case studies***

The relationship between the researcher and respondents has been central to the authors’ fieldwork experience. A change of positioning in this relationship led one author to abandon management-led consultancy in favour of participatory research (Morrison, 2003). In 1997, Claudio entered a Russian company to conduct a post-graduate internship for a Western consulting firm that managed restructuring projects in the Russian textile industry. After this experience, he successfully sought research funding in the UK and subsequently returned as a PhD student to conduct case studies of managerial practices.

The research aimed to question critiques of post-Soviet management proposed by the mainstream understanding of post-socialist restructuring as a ‘Transition’ from a planned to a market economy (Clarke, 2007; Morris and Polese, 2013). Extracting and evaluating knowledge from respondents was developed as a craft treading carefully between inclusive participation and critical intent. The outcome was a study of the labour process that explained the reproduction of Soviet practices through a dynamics of consent and resistance. ‘Ethically important moments’ emerged in gaining access, during interviews and in participant observation.

### *Transcending neutrality*

The turmoil into which Soviet society was thrown (Kagarlitsky, 1995) approximates an historical break in which immanent critique exists alongside celebrations of its ‘radiant past’ (Morris and Polese, 2013). Post-Soviet managers ideologically embraced capitalist restructuring much as they resisted its practical implementation. A Western consultant explained, ‘Russian managers understood and appreciated “Western” techniques but were prevented from realising them by the circumstances’. In the Soviet Union, workers had no decision-making powers over what should be produced but had to determine how to achieve planned targets, thereby preventing managerial control over labour, a position known as negative autonomy (Arnot, 1988). Soviet *rukovaditely* (leaders) and *kadry* (foremen) proved not to be managers in a capitalist sense (Filtzer, 1986). Transition removed state support but not its interference; new owners would cause managers and workers to achieve capitalist targets with Soviet tools. Unsurprisingly, they experienced transition as traumatic change (Clarke, 2007), which facilitated their reflection and engagement in dialogues.

In 1997, relations between ‘Western’ consultants and Soviet-era management at the Russian Company were at a breaking point, and Claudio faced a stark choice between loyalty to his employer or to his newly befriended Russian managers. The Western project chief, fearing negative publicity, delivered a scolding tirade against him for surveying Russians’ views about restructuring. The Russians, however, appreciated his constant presence in the shops. Empathy, political sympathy and the desire to understand the social impact of restructuring compelled Claudio to embrace ‘local commitment’ (Sheper-Hughes, 1995: 417). The development of Gramscian organic connections creates the immediate possibility of retaining access to the site and a commitment to unveiling the truth. However, resentments and suspicions were strong within the company, generating biased narratives and information hoarding. This situation resonates with the ‘Bourdieusian moments’ described by Burawoy.

Stratagems were deployed to ‘deliver’ as much knowledge from as many viewpoints as possible. The following explores such instances.

### *The interview process*

At the beginning of the PhD factory study in 2000, data collection proved a more arduous task than expected. Respondents were reluctant to disclose information, either out of loyalty to their superiors or to hide illicit practices. A classic case concerned productivity problems in the workshops. Top management insisted that workers were ‘a bunch of alcoholics’, whereas Western consultants dismissed workers’ behaviour as irrelevant. Middle management lamented top executives’ absenteeism as well as workers’ lack of discipline. Early attempts at interviewing workers proved most difficult. Workers refused an initial request for face-to-face interviews and only later conceded to answering written questions. Disappointingly, answers were fashioned as a collective riposte akin to *cahiers de doléances*.

The respondents’ initial resistance to research scrutiny equates to Bourdieusian moments in which ‘workers do not understand their position as a sociologist might do’ (Burawoy, 2012: 201). Workers’ silence and managerial dismissiveness hid their ‘making out’ game. A Stakhanovist ideology celebrating workers’ autonomy obscured a lack of horizontal co-operation, which generates inefficiencies and hampers solidarity by perpetuating atomisation and managerial authority. Restructuring, which changed the rules of this game to workers’ detriment, prompted workers to selectively reclaim old Soviet norms, thereby exposing them (Morrison, Croucher and Cretu, 2012). At this stage, mystification could only be overcome through objective analysis, which helped to locate workers’ subjectivities by understanding their common sense. Interrupted and antagonistic engagements with workers proved vital to reveal the limits of the researcher’s reach in the community and to identify the complexity of the interests that structured it.

Ethically, the workers' reluctance was more than justified; they jealously protected their craft from intrusive eyes, fearful that disclosure might unleash reforms at their expense. This concern, incidentally, is not normally acknowledged by otherwise scrupulous ethical procedures. Ignoring the topic to respect their silence, however, risked misrepresentation and constituted a *de facto* collusion with managerial practices aimed at silencing workers. The practical solution was to rely on those with whom the author had trust relations while seeking to expand them beyond cadre workers who felt safer and were therefore more outspoken. Unravelling the labour process, however, required more than agreeable participants. A clear example emerges from a dialogue with 'manager' and key respondent Kolya.

After an explosion in his shop caused by a defective steam pipe, an argument ensued between Kolya and Claudio. The latter was outraged that these technical faults were tolerated and that health and safety authorities blamed Kolya for the incident. Kolya questioned Claudio's argument as culturally biased by 'Western' assumptions about technological infallibility. Soviet society, he argued, operated under the assumption that complete safety is a hopeless pursuit and consequently relied on the individual to prevent inevitable failure. The argument reverted to the 'real' circumstances at the basis of the incident: a lack of maintenance, design faults, and bad investments. It was Soviet reliance on decentralised management and workers' negative autonomy rather than Russian culture or communist ideology that ultimately explained the importance of the human factor.

These interviews represent an induced process of self-analysis (Bourdieu). Crucially, however, good sense emerges because self-analysis applies as much to the researcher, resulting in a process of mutual education (Gramsci). Its ultimate limits are defined by embeddedness and political-ethical judgement rather than universal rules.

***Participant observation: negotiating double moralities in the researched community***

The gender divide emerged as another important barrier to dialogue with workers. Social relations in the FSU are moulded by the post-socialist gender order (Ashwin, 2006). In the textile factories under investigation, it was young women who tended machines on the line (Clarke, 1996). Lifting such barriers depended on challenging gender stereotypes that portrayed 'Western' males as alluring bride-seekers or mischievous womanisers (Redini, 2008). The status of an insider in male factory networks also raised expectations about masculinity. In a world where 'a man is a man and a woman is a woman', as the workers put it, the author was required to engage in patriarchal behaviour.

How could Claudio retain the trust of gatekeepers without appearing to tolerate their chauvinism? The solution, achieved through 'reflex reflexivity' (Bourdieu et al., 2002: 621), was to never desert his companions but to not refrain from questioning their behaviour. Furthermore, he engaged female colleagues as friends and respondents and discussed these issues openly. The essential stratagem was to avoid being judgemental and to present his different attitude in practical and political terms that were familiar to them. The outcome of this strategy emerged when Boris Anatolevich, a chief mechanic and close acquaintance, confessed, 'For a while, we had doubts about you because given your resources, you never took advantage with the girls and it seemed strange, but now we have understood – you are a true *Stalinist* [i.e., taking a high moral ground]!' What is truly significant in Boris' argument is the recognition of a foreign researcher's behaviour in the local political culture.

Apparently, no break with common sense occurred, at least among male respondents. However, a number of things were revealed: for the respondents, the possibility of a different position *within* their culture, a third option between elitist detachment and imitation of common practice; for the researcher, the often overlooked 'ideologies... which included racist, sexist, religious and localist sentiments' (Burawoy, 2012: 202). The avoidance of

unethical behaviour does not necessarily entail surrender to slavish imitation or retreat into the comforts of a value-neutral gaze.

## **Discussion**

Organisations are communities structured around multiple antagonistic interests. They can be experienced by researchers as an unethical world rather than the pristine reality they are at risk of disturbing, as posited by conventional approaches. The post-Soviet context presents such conditions in a heightened form and therefore contains, as Badiou put it, ‘an opportunity for truth.’ Reflection on research practice has shown how ‘loyalty to the truth’ can set researchers on courses of action that raise moral dilemmas (Guillemin and Gillian, 2004). To gain access to fieldwork settings, researchers are drawn to take sides and switch loyalties. The risk of silencing workers makes it necessary to pursue ‘intrusive’ interview strategies. ‘Insider’ status leads the researcher and the respondents to engage in risky or morally questionable behaviour. The answers to such dilemmas made the authors wonder whether such research practices violated conventional ethics and whether different principles might emerge.

A reflexive reconsideration of fieldwork reveals principles of workplace morality. ‘Loyalty to the truth’ emerges in opposition to loyalty to organisations (i.e., owners, managers or official unions). Against any presumption of neutrality, research autonomy can only manifest in relation to a social order. A crucial aspect of achieving this task lies in the ability to build legitimacy in the researched space and to challenge commonly accepted views and the authorities presiding over them (Hughes, 1994). Workers are no longer seen as victims to be protected but as social actors to be questioned and supported in their striving for emancipation.

This is not to say that political commitment on moral grounds should take precedence over knowledge production. Political sympathies are unavoidable in research. However, social change is not an obstacle to knowledge. Objective research requires challenging the status quo to remain capable of unearthing fundamental contradictions. Validity therefore has less to do with the dutiful collection of perspectives under conditions of neutrality than with the extraction from antagonising agents of the mechanism that regulates their relations.

How do the demands of emancipative research meet the need for objective truth? Burawoy offers a stark choice between Gramscian dialectics in state socialism and retreat into the interpretation of workers' common sense in advanced capitalism saturated by mystification. The authors confronted a post-Socialist field site in which the hegemony of Soviet managerial practices founded on 'negative autonomy' persisted despite the collapse of Soviet institutions, offering access but resisting scrutiny. The apparent contradiction can be explained by the nature of the historical break itself, which defies a simple dualistic scenario. Transition in the FSU has been understood as Passive Revolution (Simon, 2010), a revolution/restoration that transforms the bases of social domination but marginalises the working masses, generating a hybrid system (Altman and Morrison, 2015). Its understanding requires methods and ethics that can plastically adhere to its contours.

Faced with mystification, the authors employed 'intrusive' tactics that, on reflection, aligned with Bourdieu's hermeneutics. Rather than breaking with common sense, these tactics enable researchers to locate subjectivities and can help *all participants* to better understand their own and each other's common sense. If emancipative dialogues occurred and good sense emerged, this was because dialogue narrowed the gap between the researcher and the respondent. Restructuring facilitated dialogues by destabilising routines, forcing workers and managers to reflect on their ideological underpinnings.

The truth emerges through a double movement: for respondents, to proceed from common sense to good sense; for the intellectual, to break from over-rationalised misconceptions, enacting a ‘movement from knowing and comprehending to feeling (/.../) the sentiments of the masses’ (Gramsci, 2007: 1505). Here, Gramsci’s ‘living philology’ can be fully appreciated as a method based on ‘con-participation’ and ‘con-passionality’ (Burgio, 2014: 51-52). If this represents a demanding task for engaged research, then so does any claim to emancipation.

## **Conclusions**

The authors advocate ethics that can guide engaged researchers through the ‘messy’ reality of social conflict and demand loyalty to the emancipation struggles of those engaged in it. What position should researchers assume in relation to mainstream approaches?

The widely held assumption that such rules are here to stay has generated answers ranging from amendment to integration (Guillemin and Gillian, 2004). Arguments built on the idea of ‘multiple ethical communities’ (Dougherty and Atkinson, 2006) evoke an amorphous pluralism where the internal fault lines of the academic community take centre stage over the fractures running through the social space. Integration risks reducing emancipation to meaninglessness when it is assumed as a generalised objective (Armstrong, 2015).

A consistent ethical approach should recognise the existence of multiple antagonistic interests and accept the reality of ‘risk’ and ‘harm’ immanent to fieldwork settings. The legitimacy of research can be founded on its relations to the social context and its ability to narrow the gap between researcher and respondent. Thus, studies that are ‘deliberately and legitimately opposed to the interests of the research participants/organisations’ and ‘critique fundamental economic, political or cultural disadvantage or exploitation’ (ESRC, 2010) can

be seen not as a risky exception but as a fully-fledged alternative to the pro-business mainstream, whose risks of harm and intrusion are often far greater than assumed.

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