

Regulating criticism: some comments on an argumentative complex

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ABSTRACT

This commentary identifies a range of flaws and contradictions in Parker's critical realist position and his critique of relativism. In particular we highlight: (1) a range of basic errors in formulating the nature of relativism; (2) contradictions in the understanding and use of rhetoric; (3) problematic recruitment of the oppressed to support his argument; (4) tensions arising from the distinction between working in and against psychology. We conclude that critical realism is used to avoid doing empirical work, on the one hand, and to avoid scholarly interdisciplinary engagement, on the other.

Key words critical realism, interdisciplinary engagement, psychology, relativism, rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

For some time now Ian Parker and colleagues have been developing a distinctive and complex position in psychology. It has become something of a discrete perspective in critical psychology, with its own publications, workshops, courses and now a house journal. In his critique of relativism

Parker (1999) has done us a useful service by providing what is, intentionally or not, a synoptic position on the epistemological features of his programme. This attack on relativism has highlighted a range of contradictions and tensions that are worthy of comment. Indeed, the sheer *trouble* Parker has with relativism provides a pointer to trouble with his whole programme. This trouble is displayed in the argument style, which consists of a collage of assertions; it is displayed in a systematic and persistent misreading of the nature of relativism; and it is displayed in the tensions and fissures that criss-cross the text.

We have space for no more than a sketch of that trouble here, but it seems to arise from an intellectual trajectory that encompasses Foucault, Derrida, discourse analysis, social construction, psychoanalysis, critical realism and traditional Marxism. It incorporates power, ideology, discourse and constructionism as theoretical *and* analytic concepts. These concepts are themselves formulated in a range of contrasting ways. Parker is deeply critical of empiricism and, apparently, empirical work of all kinds, yet has produced straight methodological texts. Some of these tensions are apparent in the current article and others are features of the larger oeuvre.

Where Parker draws on Rose and Freud in his critique of the 'psy-complex', we wish to draw a reflexive parallel to his project by drawing attention to some elements of what we will call the 'Parker-complex'. Following from his definition of the 'psy-complex', by 'the Parker-complex' we mean his dense network of theories and arguments to do with politics, philosophy and psychology that divides the 'radical' from the 'reactionary' in order to regulate the conduct of critical psychologists. Our article is a sketch of the problems with the Parker-complex using his extended condemnation of relativism as the main diagnostic tool.

We will highlight the way Parker's philosophical posture of critical realism acts as a three-layer safety curtain. The first layer helps prevent the highly combustible mix of assertions, theories and empirical claims coming into contact with substantive work in sociology, history, political science, sociology and history of science from outside of psychology. The second layer helps insulate his work from evidence, which can be dismissed as low-level empiricism. The third layer helps insulate it from participants – people, *the* people – and their constructions and orientations. Without critical realism the whole Parker-complex could burn. That is why relativism is so dangerous. We do not have space to substantiate the existence of all these layers in the safety curtain here – but we hope that our identification of themes in his critique of relativism can support this general argument and highlight tensions in the Parker-complex.

RELATIVISM MISDESCRIBED

Most of the descriptions of relativism in Parker's article are wrong. Let us take them in three clusters. First, he repeats the claim that relativism takes the view that 'anything goes', that it is a refusal to take a position, which calls for a permanent suspension of judgements about things that lie outside the text and, indeed, an abandonment of all assumptions about the world. Given the explicit repudiation of this mistaken view in Edwards et al. (1995), which is a main target of his paper, and also in Potter (1998), which is in a book Parker edited, and, at length, in Smith (1988, 1997) which we have cited and will cite again, we are not sure what to make of its unqualified repetition here.

The response to this claim is the same as before: 'anything goes' is a variant of realism, suggesting merely a different arrangement of cogs in the underlying generative mechanism; relativists make judgements (such as the judgements that relativism makes sense, that this article's account of relativism is wrong, and that the article is confused); relativists make assumptions about the world, but they also hold those assumptions to be permanently open to examination and critique.

The second cluster of points in the article revolves around the idea that relativism embodies a collection of polarities. For example, academic knowledge is separate from the world; the individual is separate from the social; facts are separate from values. The emphasis in Edwards et al. (1995) on relativism as an academic position highlights the need for scholars and philosophers to take these ideas seriously; it is certainly not claiming that they do not have relevance in 'the world'. The individual/social polarity is a mystery, given the relativist emphasis on 'truth', 'certainty' and 'evidence' as situated practices, more Durkheim than Descartes, but certainly not endorsing that polarity. Again, the suggestion that we employ a facts/values polarity is particularly odd given that it should be obvious, and it is repeated often enough, that a relativist, anti-objectivist position treats facts as inseparable from judgements.

We will not spend long on the third cluster of claims, which include the following: relativism is a celebration of Western culture; it is *no more than* a turn in a conversation; it tolerates anything; and it is a programme of balance like the BBC. Given space constraints, we will just note them as wrong and encourage readers to read the original Edwards et al. (1995) and compare it with Parker's glosses.

One final point is worthy of note, however. Parker treats relativism as a full-scale perspective, involving procedures for analysis and theories of society. This generates substantial confusion in a number of ways; most crucially, it confuses theorizing and analysis with philosophical argument. Relativism is not a position, equal and opposite to critical realism, let alone a large-scale perspective. For example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith helpfully glosses relativism as a 'more or less extensively theorized questioning –

analysis, problematizing, critique – of the key elements of traditional objectivist thought and its attendant axiological machinery' (1988: 151); that is, not a theory at all, let alone a theory of society.

Rather than emphasize this confused view of relativism, however, the point that is of interest is in how it paves the way for presenting critical realism as, equivalently but oppositely, a full-scale perspective. That is, critical realism becomes more than a conceptual account of what kind of thing justifiable knowledge can be, and is turned into an entire perspective on society, social change, analysis and morality, which purports, for example, to be capable of allowing us to 'comprehend the historical, institutional context within which the human sciences operate, the ideological apparatus which provides the conditions of possibility for psychology and the moral-political interests that are served by those who pursue only relativism' (p. 75). Parker needs to distort relativism in this way so he can make critical realism seem to be able to do the important work it is needed for.

RHETORICAL TROUBLES

One of the most interesting features of Parker's article is the trouble it has with rhetoric. Parker develops a traditional contrast between 'rhetoric' as a set of persuasive tricks, which can be tediously analysed, and a proper appreciation and evaluation of 'argument'. Three observations are worth making about this. First, as will be readily apparent to anyone who reads it, quite a lot of his own article is an attempt to document persuasive tricks, deft sleights of hand, and so on in relativist work. So his complaint about rhetorical analysis applies to his own article as much as to anyone else's work.

The second observation is also about consistency, but of a more general kind. Take Derrida's work, for example. Parker has used Derrida's writing for a decade – 'deconstructing' *The Archers*, psychopathology, social psychology and various other things in the course of it. However, one of the central features of Derrida's critique of philosophy has been his resistance to a rationalist distinction between 'the argument' and the 'style of its presentation'. The radical nature of the work for philosophy comes from resisting the abstraction of argument and considering truth as the outcome of the figurative organization of philosophical texts. Parker may try to argue/rhetorically persuade that his emphasis on the importance and unimportance of rhetoric is a kind of 'balance' – but it looks like confusion to us (cf. Hepburn, 1999).

Third, and more generally, Parker's intellectual career has involved regularly promoting (as well as criticizing) discourse analysis and more recently discursive psychology (Parker, 1997). If discourse and its rhetorical organization turn out now to be so tedious and unimportant, how does this fit with this continuing concern with it (e.g. Parker and the Bolton Discourse

Network, 1999)? Put another way, what can this programme of work now be offering? We will return to that.

RECRUITING THE TORTURED, OPPRESSED AND MURDERED

Parker recruits the tortured, oppressed and murdered people of the world to his philosophical position (critical realism), as if their suffering and death bore testimony to his vision, and sided with his (ambivalent and occasioned) dislike of non-Foucaultian discourse analysis, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, and epistemic relativism. Conversely he links our arguments to notorious Holocaust-deniers such as Faurisson who, he claims, would 'delight' in our arguments.

This is extraordinary and distasteful. Faurisson should have no more truck with our arguments than Parker. Indeed, a more telling comparison is between Faurisson and Parker – in their philosophy, we hasten to add, not in their politics which are poles apart. They are both realists; their disagreement is about precisely what is real. Both prioritize politics over epistemics, preserving a favoured version of how the world works while using relativistic critique against opposing positions. Both see the opposition as serving entrenched ideological and economic interests, whose 'real' nature underlies a veil of appearances, the removal of which is the analytic, polemical task each of them embraces. Faurisson is Parker's analytical mirror-image, preserved in form but inverted in content. He is surely no relativist.

The use of Geras (p. 68) to claim that relativism will be no help in the solution to war crimes is particularly odd given that earlier Parker had celebrated the use of relativism as an important feature of his own rhetorical (yet non-rhetorical) armoury against the (realist?) orthodoxies of psychology. The quote from Geras suggests that focusing our analysis on 'discourses or language games or social practices' deprives victims of oppression or injustice 'of their last and often best weapon, that of telling what really happened'. It does not deprive them of anything of the sort. We have often suggested that realist, experiential claims and narratives are among the most effective rhetorical weapons that anyone can use (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996).

Further, how is it to be claimed that 'telling what really happened' *is* such an effective 'weapon'? How do people get it accepted, that that is what they are doing? How *are* reality-claims made, contested, undermined, bolstered against refutation? Is that not the very thing we are studying? Of course, the Geras/Parker line depends on there being something else going on, that might serve as a 'weapon' – that 'telling what really happened' is precisely and merely that, telling what really happened. It is difficult to know where to begin with such a notion. It begs all the questions. How is it so effective, not

only for victims to do it, but for Geras to write about it, and for Parker to quote it, given its self-contradictory weakness: that such a 'telling' is somehow an effective weapon beyond the analysis of discourse and social practices? This is a view of telling apparently untouched by Wittgenstein, Derrida and Sacks.

The Geras example works, first, by ontological gerrymandering (authoring-in a reality beyond the text), which is how vignettes of this kind generally work, in circular fashion. Second, it uses a 'death trope' (who would deny victims of oppression their claims to truth?). We find it distasteful to recruit the oppressed and dying into arguments for philosophical positions on textual analysis and realism in this way.

A final point is worth underlining. The Holocaust was not brought into this debate by us to support relativism. It was introduced by realists in their criticisms of relativism, and continues here to be introduced by realists in a rhetorical case against relativism.

CRITICAL REALIST PSYCHOLOGY AND CRITICAL REALISM IN AND AGAINST PSYCHOLOGY

In one of the most telling sections of Parker's paper he frets (consider his writing on p. 72) over the relation of critical realism to psychology. His solution to a perceived dilemma, over psychologists starting to use critical realism to further psychology's reactionary ends, is to emphasize the importance of taking a position of 'critical realism in and against psychology'. This seems to be a useful distinction. However, it raises two questions.

First, should we now consider Parker's output (including the varied writings on method, the new *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, his contribution to an introductory book on critical psychology, and so on) as not part of psychology but *about* it?

Second, if this output is not part of psychology, where is it coming from? An obvious answer might be that it comes from taking a sociological stance, or a historical, or a political science perspective. After all Nik Rose, inventor of the concept 'psy-complex', has conducted his scholarly Foucaultian critiques of psychology from a base in sociology for some time. The problem for Parker is that if he took this route he would have to address the grounding and coherence of his disparate collection of theoretical and analytic concepts.

Ironically, and despite the conservative implications for interdisciplinary work, Parker favours having 'our allies in other disciplines' each keep to their own patch, and take their understanding of psychology from him and his colleagues. That would indeed prevent those 'allies' making embarrassing appeals to the very notions that Parker is seeking to undermine. Meanwhile,

however, his own importation of concepts from philosophy, politics, Marxist sociology, post-structuralism, etc., shows no sign of struggle, no sign of their being wrested from agonistic debates and crises of their own. When taken and applied to psychology's problems, they merely shine forth and clarify what is Real.

Although we have, for the most part, followed Parker's request (p. 74) that we abstain from tediously tracing rhetorical devices, there is something particularly striking about the paragraph in which he introduces the distinction between critical realist psychology and critical realism in and against psychology. What intrigues us is the *non sequitur* at the centre of the paragraph. We quote:

[critical realism in and against psychology] challenges each and every claim to truth that is deployed to make it more efficient. It is not surprising, *in this light* [!], that the depoliticizing effects of relativism have been an unwelcome ally for feminists. (p. 73; emphasis and exclamation added)

Parker started his article by saying that he is happy to use relativism as a locally useful strategy precisely for undermining psychology's truth-claims. So it is notable that it is *now*, and just *here*, described as depoliticizing. Moreover, the construction textually mobilizes feminists on his side and as a general category, as if feminists in general and as a whole found relativism unwelcome. Of course, there is a wide range of feminist positions, some critical realist (e.g. Gill, 1995), some relativist (e.g. Hepburn, in press), many rather uninterested in what could easily be seen as an arcane epistemological cul de sac removed from practical concerns about exploitation and visions of emancipation. Indeed, critical points supporting relativist positions from a feminist perspective have recently been made from an explicitly feminist perspective by Bronwyn Davies (1998) in a book edited by Parker himself.

Our general point, then, is that this *non sequitur* appears here, because it draws attention away from one of the most important tensions within Parker's work. Let us end with this tension.

TROUBLE IN THE PARKER-COMPLEX

We started with the suggestion that critical realism serves as a safety curtain, or firewall, to prevent the incendiary mix of theories, positions and claims that make up the Parker-complex from bursting into flame. We have noted how Parker turns and misdescribes relativism into a full-scale perspective to facilitate turning the much more important (for him) construction of critical realism as an equal and opposite perspective. Making critical realism this big means it can then do the theoretical work that would have to be done by

history, sociology and political science. In other words, these important questions that have engaged large numbers of researchers and theorists across the social sciences seem to be answered by *a priori* philosophizing.

Critical realism is built up in this way to provide the space for criticizing psychology without having to be troubled with interdisciplinary scholarship. Parker does not have to engage with Stuart Hall's attempts to reformulate notions of ideology in relation to new social formations, for example. Nor does he need to take seriously (nor, indeed, take in any way at all) Barry Barnes's work, say, on the role of social interests in scientific development. He can make assertions about ideology and the political role of science as if they were straightforward issues that have long been sorted out. The paradoxical consequence of this is that, for all his criticisms of psychology, Parker needs a strong psychology to work in and against. It is psychology and its obfuscating legacy of secure theoretical walls that allows these limitations in interdisciplinary scholarship to remain hidden. The danger is that the legacy of the Parker-complex will not be radical critique of the very existence of an independent discipline of psychology but merely a reassertion of its power and sovereignty.

Let us end by noting that there is, and always has been, a space for a lively and critical Marxist position in (and against) psychology. However, the critical realist enterprise developed in this article raises a number of questions. What is its stance on science, evidence and academic scholarship? How does the critique of empiricism square with the production of methods textbooks? How does the critique of rhetoric mesh with championing of deconstruction? How precisely should we understand ideology in the arguments developed? For example, does the support of Foucaultian over conversation analytic notions of discourse not extend to supporting the Foucaultian critique of Marxist notions of ideology? What kind of thing is the 'bourgeois polity', and how does it relate to class and nationhood in a world after Gordon Gekko and George Soros? Parker could valuably bring the Marxist passion about exploitation and inequality to bear on psychological issues, but we think there is some work to be done first.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Alexa Hepburn, David Middleton and Sue Speer for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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