3b
The Quintessentially Academic Position

Potter et al.’s response to my ‘Against Relativism in Psychology, on Balance’ neatly summarises what they take a ‘critical realist’ position to be and how ‘relativists’ should defend themselves. Their response also illustrates why the version of critical realism I elaborated is more thoroughly critically relativist than Potter et al. assume and how their version of relativism actually rests on a rather uncritical subscription to realism.

If the world, and academic debate within it, divided neatly into fixed, consistent and self-evident positions then this ‘relativism–realism’ debate would be clear-cut and quickly decided. This is exactly what Potter et al.’s response seem to assume, and, paradoxically, they betray motifs in studies of discourse which do attend to flexibility, contradiction and (particularly in Foucauldian work) meaning produced in relations of power. I took these motifs seriously in my ‘Against Relativism in Psychology, on Balance’ and have shown how dialectical critique can take them further in relation to relativism, linguistic idealism and ‘postmodern’ theory (Parker, this volume, Chapters 2 and 4). What Potter et al. are up to is not mere paradox, however, for it reveals how they shift under pressure, by virtue of their own subscription to a particular academic–political location, from their version of relativism into uncritical realism.

Uncritical realism of the type exemplified by Potter et al. thinks it is able to tell us what relativism really is as something fixed and what a ‘mistaken view’ of it would be. So if Gergen (1991: 7), for example, celebrates relativism in contemporary culture as a world in which ‘anything goes’ this, I suppose, would be ruled out of court. There is a curious assumption that there are real ‘correct’ representations and people like me who ‘distort relativism’. The paradox here is that it is
the ‘relativists’ who characterise what they are doing as if it were a thing and in the process they turn realist to defend it.

Uncritical realism must then set itself against those who are inconsistent or, rather, those these relativists assume must be inconsistent for their caricature to work. Since we are dealing here with writers who are concerned with attributions of intentions in argument as interested ‘stakes’, it is pertinent to ask what the stakes are for them when they assume that I will ‘worry more about inconsistencies’ and when they puzzle about whether the different things I do are really part of psychology or about it. With respect to my work on discourse and my critique of discourse analysis they pose the question ‘how does this fit?’, as if it should. Here the paradox is that my inconsistency becomes problematic for those who are by now in this turn of the conversation only ostensibly relativists.

Uncritical realism in discursive psychology – the kind of psychology that has spawned relativism as a credo rather than as a practical–tactical guide to action – all too often manifests itself in crass textual empiricism, and its English variants carry the marks of a philosophical position as an ideological ‘empiricist discourse’ (Easthope, 1999). This is a world divided between what is self-evident in a text or in an argument (and its correlative ‘basic errors’) on the one hand and ‘rhetorical weapons’ on the other, and the paradox here also exposes Potter et al.’s claim to transcend a fact/value polarity or a distinction between the social and the individual. They themselves tell us how things really are as but the background for a subjective evaluation of what is right and wrong. Why, for example, is the ‘recruitment of the oppressed’ problematic? It turns out, twice-stated in their response, to be because they find it ‘distasteful’.

To understand how relativists so easily fold into uncritical realism we do need the kind of sensitivity to language that the thorough-going epistemic relativism espoused by critical realism provides us, and we need to embed our understanding of the paradoxes displayed by Potter et al. in a dialectical critique of where their argument comes from and the functions it serves.

The relativism–realism debate is often rather tedious. Why? Potter et al. seem to imagine that the only way of escaping this ‘arcane epistemological cul-de-sac’ is to ‘recruit’ the oppressed et al. into an academic argument. This is ‘distasteful’ to them, but this is the only way it could be because, after all, ‘relativism is the quintessentially academic position’ (Edwards et al., 1995: 37). So they avoid questions of theory and ideology and press all the more firmly down the ‘safety curtain’ that