

## Off the beaten track

Ron Roberts argues for a critical take on modernity, a psychology of heart and mind

...truth is relational, not relative  
(Boym, 2010, p.67)

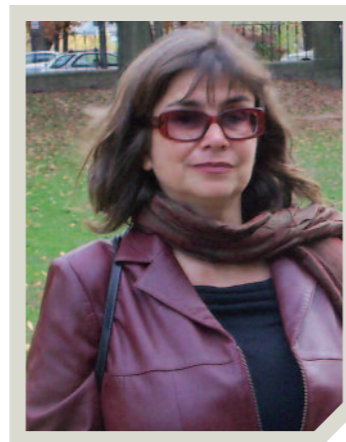
A body is given me – what shall I do  
with it, so singular and so much  
mine? – *Osip Mandelstam*

Artist, cultural critic, writer and philosopher, Svetlana Boym, whose untimely passing was noted in this publication last year, left a rich legacy of ideas for psychologists to ponder. One of the neglected aspects of psychology (Itten & Roberts, 2014) concerns the nature of human experience in the world: how each of us engage with and are engaged by the overarching political system/society of which we are a part. This relationship between the personal and the socio-cultural-political realm – in effect, the human condition – can be considered the core problem of the social sciences.

Boym addressed this in a series of bold and imaginative works reflecting on our personal and collective relationships to the past, our culturally enshrined ideas of freedom and the ensuing longings and belongings that define our time here. Her work dealt with areas of life that are of immense psychological relevance. Her treatise on nostalgia (Boym, 2001) is widely considered as a defining text on the modern condition (Bonnett, 2008; Burton, 2014; Magagnoli, 2015; Mihăilescu, 2011; Olick et al., 2011). I hope to show that Boym has much to offer psychologists interested in our subjective and objective affiliations to the world around us. In critically engaging

with the 'modernist' project, she fashions an innovative challenge to how we 'do' psychology and what we consider viable research findings.

The term 'modernity', as introduced by French critic, poet and essayist Charles Baudelaire (1863/2010), was intended as a critique of the new, fleeting rhythms of time and life in the burgeoning urban metropolis of the 19th century. However, the term has come to describe the 'progress' brought about by reductionist science, mechanisation and the drive to industrial modernisation. Modernity's hijacking by the allure of mechanisation and reductionist science – arguably the twin pillars of capitalist modernisation – has given us the form of psychological practice that is dominant today. It's a form embedded within cultural myths of technological and digital progress. It is also a form that some consider is divorced from people's everyday concerns (Itten & Roberts, 2014). Boym argues that these cultural myths of late capitalism may no longer work for us. 'We are', she says, 'right at the cusp of a paradigm shift, and to anticipate it we have to expand our field



Svetlana Boym

of vision.' Her concept of the 'off-modern' is an attempt to reinvigorate modernity as a critical project, beginning from the very fact of dislocation and articulating the creative and human possibilities that reside in it. In her words, it does not 'follow the logic of crisis and progress but rather involves an exploration of the side alleys and lateral potentialities of the project of critical modernity' (Boym, 2008, p.4).

An off-modern take on our own intellectual history allows for 'unforeseen pasts and ventures' to be recovered, opening into a "modernity of what if" rather than simply modernization as it is' (Boym, 2008). This opens up a space within which a different vision, a different way of 'doing' psychology may be articulated.

Boym's expansive elaborations of the off-modern throughout her work – dealing with nostalgia, our relationships to the domestic as well as external physical and artistic environments – reposition and reinvent the psychological within political and everyday history. It's an approach suffused with a fragile temporality that encompasses people, places, language, memory, imagination, emotion, art, artefact and home. In her interviews with Soviet emigrants and

their reflections on their current and past circumstances we can see a seamless merging of the search for meaning, dignity, love and freedom in individual life with a broader political canvas in which the ghosts of past actions – and inactions – inhabit the urban and domestic spaces of the real and the might-have-been. By exploring what could have been, but was not, we get a deeper sense of the meanings that circumscribe contemporary

human life, one with considerable relevance in the post-communist globalised landscape of accelerating change.

Gergen (1973, p.319) noted that 'a concentration on psychology alone, provides a distorted understanding of our present condition'. The beauty of Boym's exposition is that, while the full richness of a psychological framework is maintained, it is not privileged. Her work is elaborated within a critical tradition of comparative literature as well as architecture, philosophy and aesthetics, embracing many disciplinary interests and inviting us to rethink the purpose of psychological inquiry. This accords with others' concerns about the insecurities underlying our present disciplinary pursuits:

We haven't really discovered how to go on talking and practicing what's called psychology, even defining it... Our epistemological insecurity is fundamental. That is we don't really know what we're doing. If that's the case then we have to articulate another. (Hillman & Shamdasani, 2013, p.14).

Boym's pronounced interest in the human relations that permeate the world makes it possible to imagine psychology (or psychologies) as less concerned with explaining the material workings of the human organism and our statistical commonalities, and more with addressing how we actually deal with the complexities of 'being' and 'having been'. This fragility, this appearance and disappearance from the world, how to actually live one's life, is arguably the issue that generations of psychology students thought they would be addressing. Instead, they have been instructed to forget it by the barrage of scientism and experimental psychology they receive. In the context of politics and history, Hannah Arendt (1998, p.42) took the view that 'application of the law of large numbers' signified the 'wilful obliteration of their very subject matter'.

The same may well be said of a good deal of psychology as currently practised.

The 'off-modern', then, questions established narratives of 'progress' and assumptions of linear social time. Boym's (2010) articulation of freedom poses serious challenges to a psychology predicated on an assumed unproblematic answer to the age-old question – 'What must the world be in order that we may know it?' (Arendt, 1978, Book 2, p.199). The historical world is demonstrably neither orderly nor rule-governed, and, as noted by Gergen (1973), it resists the claims of those who would ignore its relevance for psychology. Yet much of psychology still ignores this wildness and insists on a reductionist programme that would see the social and historical world reduced to biology.

Boym's work – seeking to grapple with the problems, puzzles and paradoxes of her own existence as a Jewish political refugee, an emigrant from the former Soviet Union to the United States – moves through scholarly writing, novels, short stories and plays to experimentation with photographic and digital art. Hers is an acceptance that our knowledge and understanding of the world, and what it means to be human, cannot be reduced to a single codified set of rules and procedures that give rise to a single form of knowledge.

### Estrangement

Explorers in the landscape of the off-modern may be assisted by acquaintance with the art of 'estrangement' pioneered by Soviet artist Viktor Shklovsky (1923/2005). The Slavic roots of the word suggest both distancing and making strange. Shklovsky sought a radical

## Meet the author

'I took the unusual step of writing to Svetlana Boym after enjoying one of her books. We became friends, and from one of our chats – in Greenwich Park over tea and cake – emerged the idea that I could pursue my take on the human mystery by exploring her concept of the "off-modern" in relation to the possibilities it offers for another way to do psychology.

'In Eduardo Galeano's *Book of Embraces* we are told the world "is a heap of people, a sea of tiny flames". Svetlana's flame blazed fiercely, with an elegance and assuredness firmly rooted to the earth. Anything I say cannot do justice to what a pleasure it was to have known her.'



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dislocation from one's usual point of view, one that affords an entirely different set of possibilities – for perception, understanding and action – that enhance one's (and others') life. This is what Boym has in mind when she speaks of estrangement for the world, breathing new life into the possibilities of being. It's there in 'profane illumination', moments of 'time out of time' providing 're-enchancement in a minor existential key' (Boym, 2008). Boym connects with other authors who stressed the importance of renewal and new beginnings in life's affairs – of the 'ordinary marvellous' (Boym, 2005). For Arendt (cited in Boym, 2010) it was the everyday 'miraculous' deed of freedom; for Baudelaire (1863/2010), 'the fantastic reality of life'; and for Benjamin (1999), 'the renewal of existence in a hundred unflinching ways'.

Marx's conception of alienation took in only the negative possibilities of dislocation. That Marx missed what Shklovsky divined is strange, given that

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it was Marx's own estrangement from bourgeois society that made it possible for him to pursue his lifelong work devoted to building a better society. Within the psychological community, few beyond Wilhelm Reich have given due importance to a sense of wonder in living as a matter inextricably bound up with individual and political freedoms.

There are many more examples than Marx of how estrangement may work in a positive direction. Estrangement lies at the heart of comedy, in which a portion of the world is first made strange (defamiliarised) and later returned (familiarised) with a punchline. It's also at the heart of all creative opposition and resistance, working to undermine a taken-for-granted 'truth'. Irony and satire have long been recognised as means of speaking to power. Yet in official psychological discourse, these are entirely absent... a form of emotionless parlance has been taken as a byword for truth and objectivity.

Boym's and Shklovsky's readings of estrangement are reminders that there are political options other than surrender or defeat. Unlike the favoured motif of dystopian science fiction, resistance is not 'futile' (a position echoed in recent work by Haslam and Reicher, 2012). Boym (2012, p.8) reflects that 'we have to do what it takes to exercise the modicum of freedom – defined by Hannah Arendt as a "miracle of infinite improbability" that occurs regularly in the public world'. If one of the principal functions of art is to disrupt the existing order (see Smoliarova, 2006), then art is central to politics, dissent, participation and change. In an off-modern slant it could become central to a form of psychology where the emphasis has moved away from the measurement of what is or what purports to be, towards a study and practice in which people, their humanity, expression, needs and desires are paramount – a psychology that estranges the status quo and challenges the dehumanising

automation of life. Arendt (1998, p.7) reminds us that 'all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics'. This, of necessity, must include the psychological. It points to the possibility of a psychology of cheerful resistance imbued with an 'intellectual imagination... freed from its current imprisonment' (Haslam & Reicher, 2012, p.174).

In the early years of the 21st century, corporate hegemony has given birth to a new variant of authoritarianism – policed neither from the political left nor right, but premised on the daily rewriting of memory through public relations, advertising, news control and surveillance. In a recent discussion, Roberts and Hewer (2015) outlined the continuing utility of a Laingian framework for comprehending the social production of adverse states of mind at differing levels of the social hierarchy (family, institution, international relations). This interdisciplinary framework is built on estrangement – an explicit rejection of the notion of value-free reductionist knowledge that permeates the scientific core of the discipline. Shklovsky saw in estrangement the miraculous possibility of maintaining wonder and joy in living. Art is central to this playful, dissenting reworking of the world.

"...psychology cannot run away from its political nature"

If a radical reworking of psychology rooted in everyday life and the wonder of our earthly existence is to be possible, then we must radically estrange it, uproot it from its corporate nest bed. This will require us to step 'off' the beaten tracks of psychology, to explore the wild undergrowth of ideas in the neglected gardens of knowledge. Instead of absorbing the regular force-fed diet of imminent scientific breakthroughs and the prescribed certainties of future success, we have to entertain the idea that the reality we experience is beyond lived



Boym's Taitlin with Butterfly 2007 from the series Hybrid Utopia, see [www.svetlanaboym.com/main.htm](http://www.svetlanaboym.com/main.htm)

comprehension as a singular totality. Yet there are ways to deal with it, interrogate it, bring it into being and know it – they just don't necessarily involve spoken or written language or the legitimising cloak of science.

Psychology, in short, could be made a work of art – celebrating what Eduardo Galeano (1992, p.121) refers to as the 'marriage of heart and mind', approaching discovery, knowing and learning with *sentipensante* (feeling-thinking). In an off-modern psychology, knowledge is generated and discoverable in the idiopathic and idiosyncratic strategies and programmes of the individual. An education in psychology becomes a tailored project in making sense of one's life. For Epictetus, the Greek slave, the proper subject matter of philosophy was each person's life, leading to refinements in 'the art of living' (Arendt, 1978, p.154).

### An avowedly political psychology

This challenge is not a new one. Writing in the 1920s, Shklovsky remarked that the Soviet artist of the day had but two choices: 'to write for the desk drawer or to write on state demand' (Boym, 2008, p.20). Despite the absence of a third alternative, Shklovsky argued that that was 'precisely the one that must be chosen' (pp.20–21). Similarly, we must

abandon two notions – that psychology can sit apart from political statements about its own relation to the production of knowledge (Roberts, 2015), and from people's experience of the world we move through and create. An avowedly political psychology can then develop. One of the lost messages from the Milgram experiments is that psychology cannot run away from its political nature – it is embedded within a network of institutional power relations where the very knowledge it generates affects not only the actions of those institutions but also people's understanding of their predicament within them.

Shklovsky characterised this 'third way' as a 'knight's move' when faced with a repressive binary choice. One must contend with the pathologising of this: in psychiatric parlance 'knight's move thinking' is evidence of a supposed 'schizophrenic thought disorder', said to be a dangerous loosening of thought away from established and accepted patterns of Aristotelian logic (Winokur & Clayton, 1994). The most common diagnosis dispensed by Soviet psychiatrists upon the unfortunate 'deviants' and dissidents sent to the Gulag was 'sluggish schizophrenia'. However, there is perhaps something to learn here. Shklovsky's stratagem was invented in the face of a pervasive, repressive, censoring, intrusive state apparatus that functioned in such a manner that what was officially true and what was not became difficult if not impossible to differentiate – a description increasingly suited to contemporary life in the authoritarian global city. Perhaps the distress shown by individuals now diagnosed with 'thought disorder' is a manifestation of life within a social system where open honest communication is in retreat, and the kind of individual cognitive strategies noted by Bentall (2003) and Harper (2011) amongst others come to the fore.

A psychology of the everyday has been sought in Moscovici's theory of social representations: a 'social psychology of knowledge' (Moscovici & Duveen, 2000, p.280), of common sense. Yet despite its founder's intentions, it has not laid bare the cultural myths underpinning the shared social consensus that props up late capitalist societies. One reason for this, perhaps, is that it has remained tied to professional discursive regimes that dictate how psychology is 'performed', via officially sanctioned methods and publication outlets. The dislocation of social representations theory from the lives of the people whose

sense and reality it aims to grasp has more than a little to do with the values that pervade official academic disciplines, and the relations between those disciplines and broader systems of power and privilege (See Giroux, 2014). Social representations theory has failed, not because it does not represent common sense but because the professional psychological discourse it embodies does not represent the voice of common sense against the tyranny that assails it. This, along with the relative isolation of social psychology within the broader discipline, has meant that too few have seen in it a pathway to action.

### A profoundly human task

Honouring the paths taken by fellow deviant travellers in the past is an important part of recovering an alternative psychology. Fromm, Laing, Milgram and Kelly, for example, provide us with examples of a form of 'political' psychology that might have taken centre stage but that did not. They are in a sense phantasmagorias – existing in the shadowlands between the not quite remembered yet not wholly forgotten.

Laing, for his sins, estranged both the family and madness from bourgeois sensibility (Laing & Esterson, 1964) while Fromm (1957) did the same for love. Milgram estranged the procedures and institutions behind the very production of psychological knowledge. Kelly (1955), whose personal construct theory for a time threatened to shake up psychology, never got to grips with the material questions of power and influence that shape not only the world but the psychological discourse and knowledge produced in it and to which Foucault (e.g. 2002) devoted some attention. Though Kelly stressed action in the world and our emotional grasp of it as forms of construing, the performative and poetic elaboration/exploration of construct theory's possibilities never took off.

What is needed instead, if we are to avoid the contribution of psychological knowledge to alienation, is a form that is more than a little sympathetic to those it addresses – that is explicitly biased towards those with whom it makes common cause. It cannot settle for being what Moscovici described social representations theory might be 'at its best' (2000, p.280); namely, a 'metatheory' that purports to stand above and beyond the world. Psychological knowledge should instead commemorate the human striving to live well – or even to live at all – and to aid this and participate in an aesthetic devoted to improving and

renewing our lot, individually and collectively. Boym (1994, pp.158–159) opened up for consideration an aesthetic commemoration of the everyday art of survival in our lived personal and communal spaces. Her focus was on the inhabitants of Soviet living space – but the very 'human' value and functional worth of her vision (Boym, 2012, p.13) reminds us that at the heart of the real world we inhabit lies the virtual world of past and future possibilities. 'The fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present have a direct impact on the realities of the future.'

We must still wrestle with the problem of how to write about the human condition in a manner that accords dignity, agency and worth to our experience of being in the world. The mercurial city streets and parks, memory lanes or rural by-ways, in which the lives of the 'great', the 'terrible' and the 'humble' unfold and in which ideas of human nature have been fashioned, have been altogether neglected. The landscape of social relationships and identities that towns and cities in their amalgam of private and public spaces foster, disrupt, nurture and contain lies unconsidered. A psychology that is at once geographical, political and social stands in the shadows.

Scientific psychology remains utopian – enacting a 'charismatic concealment' (Boym, 2001, p.99) of the wider horizons of psychological reality and the birth of psychological ideas and social change. For a political psychology to go any way toward this it must address, amongst other things, the precise (relational) content of human life as it is experienced. Whether such a re-centring (or de-centring) of psychological knowledge is possible, unshackled from formal professional methodology and theory, is a question to ponder. It is most definitely a political question. Understanding politics is not merely to create narratives of victory and defeat, or of the unjust excesses of power. It is always a profoundly human task. In this we are required to evaluate the world through our own moral compass. This is at its most dignified where it involves 'giving imaginary space to the defeated, to their impossible human choices, leaving space and acknowledging the dreams of exit in a no-exit situation' (Boym, 2010, p.275). Given this most human requirement, an off-modern perspective warrants further consideration as the basis for a very different kind of psychology, one where dreams and reality exist side by side. Svetlana Boym left the stage prematurely – but she has left much behind to occupy our lives.

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