The Psychology of People, Power and Politics

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Through the Looking Glass

By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0727-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0727-2

For Irina

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PREFACE

Most of the essays collected here represent a selection of my published output over the last 35 years, all of which might be considered 'off the beaten track' of my main academic work and which reflect on the nature of psychology and its relationship to systems of power in the wider world. Whilst 'off the beaten track', they do however reflect my major intellectual interests and as such, lean toward the critical and political end of the spectrum. I believe they remain relevant to contemporary developments in the world, not least for understanding the authoritarian drift in western democracies and the challenges which this poses for intellectual enquiry. Many of the articles explore different perspectives on how psychology functions as a discipline and pose questions as to where its potential boundaries may lie. I hope readers will find all of them of interest. They have been subject to only minor revision in order to correct errors in the original. They first appeared as set out below.

1. *Looking Back: Madness, Myth and Medicine. The Psychologist, 2010, 23(8), 694-695.*

2. *Francis Huxley and the Human Condition (co-authored with Theodor Itten), The Psychologist, 2021, 34, 68-71.*

3. *Off the beaten track. The Psychologist, 2016, 29, 620-623.*

4. *Psychiatry, Science and Mental Health. Critical Public Health, 1990, 4, 15-21.*

5. *Power and illusion: Perspectives from Laing and Chomsky. Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2005, 5(3), 124-131.*

6. *The Response of British Psychology to the Iraq War 2003-2004. Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2005, 5(1), 1-9.*

7. *Sleepwalking into Totalitarianism: Democracy, Centre Politics and Terror. In R. Roberts, ed. 2007, Just War. Psychology and Terrorism. Ross-On-Wye. PCCS Books.*

8. *The Politics of Truth. Previously unpublished, 2020.*

9. *Psychology in the Covid-19 dream world. Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 2021, 35(3), 1-3. DOI: 10.1080/10720537.2021.1932644*

Ron Roberts
London March, 2023

PEOPLE

CHAPTER ONE

THOMAS SZASZ: MADNESS, MYTH AND MEDICINE

> "Only after we abandon the pretence that mind is brain and that mental disease is brain disease can we begin the honest study of human behaviour and the means people use to help themselves and others cope with the demands of living" (Szasz, 2007, 149).

The recent debate in the pages of *The Psychologist* over the language used to describe recipients of psychiatric interventions illustrates the enduring unease which is stirred by the medicalisation of human problems. With the seemingly unending invention of psychiatric conditions to describe unwanted and troubling behaviours (from oppositional defiant disorder to ADHD) it seems a fruitful moment to review and assess the continuing relevance of the critiques offered against this practice by the Hungarian born psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, now in his 90th year.

Next year will see the fiftieth anniversary of the publication in *American Psychologist* of his seminal article 'The myth of mental illness' (Szasz, 1960), a thesis elaborated at length in a book of the same name a year later (Szasz, 1961). As the decade got into full swing, Szasz's critique of psychiatric theory and practise was herded into the same conceptual basket as the musings of Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing, and his erstwhile friend and collaborator David Cooper – the quite different ideas of these men came to be bracketed inappropriately under the rubric of 'anti-psychiatry' – an expression coined by Cooper though disclaimed by Laing and rejected outright by Szasz. Since then, biological psychiatry has developed a stranglehold on research, teaching and practice in the field of 'mental health' and Szasz's opposition to psychiatry and the basis for it has been mislocated in the art and culture of the day, its relevance for today denied - a supposed child of its time – a component in the social manufacture of the so–called anti-establishment swinging sixties.

To let such a misapprehension, pass unchallenged into the history of the behavioural sciences would be a serious error, and Szasz for his part has constantly endeavoured to set the record straight. First it must be said that Szasz's insights into the shortcomings of conventional psychiatry predate the 1960s by some considerable margin. In a brief autobiographical sketch (Szasz, 2004) he makes clear that the absurdity of psychiatric fictions had dawned on him long before Fellini's masterpiece was highlighting the shallowness of La Dolce Vita.

> "Everything I had learned and thought about mental illness, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis – from my teenage years, through medical school, and my psychiatric and psychoanalytic training – confirmed my view that mental illness is a fiction; that psychiatry, resting on force and fraud is social control, and that psychoanalysis – properly conceived – has nothing to do with illness or medicine or treatment" (2004, 22).

Szasz graduated in medicine in 1944, having migrated to the US from his native Hungary in 1938, a fugitive from the looming menace of Nazism. He undertook a psychiatric residency and trained in psychoanalysis. The appeal of psychoanalysis, besides its intellectual and interpersonal attractions, lay in its ostensibly consensual and contractual nature. Less well known than his other works, his dissection of the nature of power in psychoanalytic relationships - published in 1965 as *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Szasz, 1965) - is central to his thinking and stands complimentary to the assertions that mental illness is a myth. In this, Szasz effectively provides a practical guide on how to ensure a level playing field in psychotherapeutic relationships –to the benefit of both parties and is honest and open enough to explicitly explore the role that money may play in distorting therapeutic means and ends. As such it not only stands the test of time but stands squarely against the numerous vested interests – both pharmaceutical-financial and professional which dominate the mental health industry – past and present and for which it is axiomatic that people with problems are to be seen as victims – either of biology or circumstance and not as moral agents and accountable for their actions. The idea that there are experts in mental health, able through arduous training, to guide the unwary through the trials and tribulations of life and thereby help one avoid the loneliness

of self responsibility is still prevalent – and psychologists it must be said have done little to dampen any enthusiasm for it.

Szasz has throughout his career – and at times at considerable professional cost - steadfastly eschewed psychiatric practise in an environment where people have been deprived of their liberty. Szasz is not then 'anti' psychiatry – he advocates the right to agree consensual contractual relations of any kind– including consensual psychiatry if that is what people, suitably informed, freely want. He has proposed for example the use of advanced psychiatric directives whereby people could agree to accept or refuse specific interventions to be made 'on their behalf' in the event of their becoming extremely distressed and 'irrational' in future. Such ideas have unfortunately been rejected outright by leading figures in both psychiatry and medical ethics and accordingly Szasz sees little possibility of any kind of consensual psychiatry until the use of coercion, whether explicit or tacit is relinquished. As psychiatrists for the most part appear unwilling to do so and continue to support the practise of psychiatry in its function as an extension of the criminal justice system, Szasz asserts that in its current form psychiatry must be abolished. This would require a concerted challenge to its support structures premised as they are on the notions of behaviour as disease, the fear of dangerousness and the necessity for medical treatment under the guise of protecting the individual from his or herself. The championing of the latter notion in particular owes much to an ignorance of its origins. A careful reading of Szasz's historical analysis of the origins of the insanity defence in 17th century England goes some way to clarifying where behavioural scientists got the idea from that people of 'unsound mind' were not responsible for their actions and could not be held accountable for them. In *Coercion as Cure,* he writes

> "With suicide defined as self murder, the person sitting in judgement of self killers had the duty to punish them. Since punishing suicide required doing injustice to innocent parties …the wives and children of the deceased – eventually the task proved to be an intolerable burden. In the 17th century men sitting on coroners' juries began to recoil against desecrating the corpse and dispossessing the suicide's dependents of their means of support. However, their religious beliefs precluded repeal of the laws punishing the crime. Their only recourse was to evade the laws; The doctrine that the self-

> slayer is non-compos mentis and hence not responsible for his act accomplished this task" (Szasz, 2007, 99).

And so, a social practise became reified into an imaginary biological disease process ravaging through the brains of its unfortunate victims and which necessitated psychiatric intervention!

The label of 'anti-psychiatry' which continues to be attached to his name is one which he has been at pains to condemn (Szasz, 2009), used as it is to stultify and nullify any criticism of contemporary psychiatry. While Laing saw himself as "essentially on the same side" as Szasz (Mullan, 1995, 202), Szasz sees considerable distance between them – for a number of reasons. Perhaps at the forefront of these, Laing was known to have forcibly drugged one of his patients (Szasz, 2008) and for all his eloquence and insight into human misery and contrary to received wisdom, his writings do not in principle condemn the forced treatment or incarceration of people against their will on psychiatric grounds. Finally, whilst *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1960) and *Sanity Madness and the Family* (Laing & Esterson, 1964) amongst other outpourings proclaimed the intelligibility of going mad within a human rather than biological framework, it must be said, that Laing did not reject outright the notion of mental illness, which in Szasz's view remains at best a metaphor. As biology, it is fiction, just as the social 'ills' of society cannot be addressed or remedied by the use of drugs, surgery or ECT, neither can personal or interpersonal 'ills'. To imagine otherwise is to commit at least a category error – but far more injurious than category errors is the ensuing violence done to people in the name of medicine and protecting people from themselves or others.

Some confusion about Szasz's work has arisen through the quite different political cultures within which it is interpreted – even by those who oppose institutional psychiatry in its current incarnation. His work has been claimed and repudiated by those on both the 'left' and 'right' – deemed a liberal in some quarters and a fascist in others - with the claims and counter claims rooted in the predilections of the critics for different configurations of state power. European intellectual tradition on the left for example clings to a belief and a desire that state power can be harnessed for the good – so that while Szasz's attacks on psychiatric authority are applauded, his admonitions

against the 'therapeutic state' (Szasz, 2001, 2002) with its merging of psychiatric and state power on the one hand and private and public health on the other are glossed over. In truth, if such a thing can be said, Szasz's ideas belong to neither the right nor the left – for his work challenges and question all operations of organised power from the state downwards – as long as they are used to crush and oppress human freedom. His work implies unanswered questions concerning the forms of community and social organisation which people can harness for the individual and common good which would enable them to deal elegantly with the insatiable demands of living.

As an addendum to this article - in the midst of its preparation I encountered Philippe Petit's (2002) wondrous account of his high wire walk across the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in 1974. Immediately after performing his "artistic crime of the century" Petit was arrested and interviewed by psychiatrists. Why was this? What has anyone's *behaviour* got to do with medicine – whether it is unconventional or not? It struck me that Petit – an imaginative, unusual and beguiling figure exemplifies much that modern psychiatry stands in antipathy to. Petit cares not for the rules and regulations which structure and govern the lives of citizens and lives, in his terms, only to dream "projects that ripen in the clouds" (Petit, 2002, 6). There can be little doubt that psychiatry is an enterprise that seeks to destroy these – that it cannot tolerate idiosyncrasies of thought, whether grandiose or mundane. Petit succeeded in his outlandish and highly improbable quest – but why should one have to achieve outlandish success to be embraced by society and enjoy the right to pop one's head in the clouds or spend the "afternoons in treetops"? Szasz's efforts over the years can be seen in many lights – but without doubt he has toiled on behalf of the dream of human accountability and responsibility, for the freedom to be different and to take charge of one's life, free from the machinations of state sponsored psychiatric interference.

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CHAPTER TWO

FRANCIS HUXLEY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION (WITH THEODOR ITTEN)

> "Francis Huxley was the most intellectually adventurous person that I've ever met" (David Napier).

Francis Huxley, born in 1923, was the son of Julian and the nephew of Aldous Huxley. He was also a pioneering social anthropologist, colleague of the maverick psychiatrist Ronald David Laing during the heady and turbulent days of the 1960s and co-founder of Survival International. When he died, in October 2016, his life and work left behind a string of unanswered questions, many of which have relevance for our discipline of psychology in these uncertain and dangerous times.

Huxley, described by his friend Rupert Sheldrake as a "feral intellectual" was enormously quizzical about the human condition. Like many before him, he was acutely aware of the inadequacies of any one discipline to confront it. Psychology is considered by many to be best placed to interrogate – academically at least – the nature of the human condition. Huxley, like many others, was aware of the limitations of this view. My (RR) late friend, the philosopher and artist, Svetlana Boym suggested that perhaps our discipline's primary shortcoming for this task was that it lacked the time and space to tell nuanced individual stories. Too many of us – for perhaps too long – have been subverted by the all-encompassing imperative to be not only quintessentially scientific but answerable to the dictates of the, by now deeply entangled, academic-corporate marketplace.

Of course, storytelling still survives amongst our ranks – located as often as not amongst the marginalised - those excluded from the administrative paradise of reason by virtue of class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, profession or assumed morality. I would not claim the

aforementioned list is exhaustive! Other than the many who struggle to have their voice heard and their existence recognised, an additional issue is the nature of the stories which their lives beget and the contexts which house them. As I discovered earlier in my own career (RR) when tasked with investigating a pioneering drug rehab in East London, the boundaries within which psychological enquiry proceeds may on occasion come to resemble social anthropology. In social contexts a strategy of reductionism becomes less and less successful. Indeed, the crisis in social psychology can be summed up as a conflict between those whose interests lie in discerning the relationships between quantifiable variables and those whose aim is to understand the meanings inherent in the world.

Social anthropology itself, Huxley intuited, required a narrative psychological dimension more than it required a formalised mathematical one. "God" he wrote "as William Blake remarked, is not a mathematical diagram." Francis, was in some respects, trapped within the intellectual fashions of the day and looked to psychoanalysis to provide the requisite 'healing' qualitative psychological dimension. This, he and others surmised, might be capable of supplying the unconscious gel that would bind together healing rituals, religion, the symbolism of the sacred, family structure, the sexual politics of human groups with the human body as the ultimate mediator for the journey undertaken by thought from the murky depths of the unconscious into the full blossom of social life.

Unusual for an anthropologist of his time, Huxley had no interest in utilising Western colonialist categories of thought in order to mould the customs, habits and practices of other cultures into a form which could be comfortingly digested within our own cerebral habits. In this regard he was light years ahead of many of the debates in contemporary academia. He considered it was our duty to adapt to the mental templates of others, to see the world through their eyes rather than the other way round – a direct challenge to the presumed universality of Western reason. Laing described the terror which people may have of what their own and others' minds may produce as 'psycho-phobia'. For Huxley, this psycho-phobia was endemic in social science, and the remedy for it was not only to embrace others' ways of seeing but to travel in altered states of consciousness, one form of which, he considered madness to be. To embrace others' ways of seeing however

involves more than just a shift in perspective. It is a political act which involves work in two directions. Firstly, it questions the validity of the opposition between self/us and other, as by embracing the position of the 'othered' it ceases to be 'other'; simultaneously this boundary dissolution heralds the dissolution of the familiar comforts of 'home' thought.

But if Huxley's twinning of the 'anthropologised' and othered with madness was bold, there is a very real sense, in which it did not go far enough. It is true that Huxley challenged the colonial imprint abroad, though its domestic variant, racism at home, went unrecognised, untheorized and unchallenged throughout the entire radical movement to oppose institutional psychiatry. Any awareness of the pernicious and harmful effects of racism was, during the 1960s, largely confined to its victims and yet there is also a real sense in which an opportunity was missed. Huxley, Laing and David Cooper were visibly present at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1968. At this event the Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael (1968) referred to the "mental violence" and "psychological murder" inflicted by the White West - not only on African people but on Black Americans in the US. In response to this institutionalised violence Carmichael argued there was a need to develop a "revolutionary" and "resistance" consciousness to oppose both the external oppression and people's internalisation of it. Opposition to the violence, Carmichael was clear, did not mean adjustment to it. Despite Carmichael's presence Laing and colleagues continued to theorise the sources of 'psychiatric' disturbance in terms of existential-phenomenological and familial influences, stretching in Laing's case to an awareness that the wider systems in which family life was embedded, including the global capitalist system were an integral part of the context. Carmichael went much further, describing it as "a system of international white supremacy coupled with international capitalism" (above cit., 150).

Racism thus remained 'beyond words' and far from 'obvious' to those crusading against psychological despair and psychiatric tyranny. Laing's key intuition that he was involved in the study of situations, not individuals and Huxley's insight that there were meanings of madness which could usefully be imported from abroad somehow were unable to effectively come together. Perhaps this was because both were already fully occupied fighting against their own effective marginalisation from their respective

host disciplines, psychiatry and anthropology. Francis was otherwise well equipped to make the leap, and was acutely aware of the misgivings of colonialism which had emerged in the 1960s. Toni Morrison, some years later summed up what had been overlooked. “The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim” she wrote, “the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis.” (Morrison, 2019, 177). These were, she added “strangely of no interest to psychiatry.” Until recent years this criticism could equally have been applied to psychology, to the extent to which it remained in awe of biological psychiatry’s reductionist declarations.

So, even as psychoanalysis was brought in to supply some of the missing ingredients to the anthropological enterprise, something profoundly important was missing from it. The failure to explicitly map racism was not the only problem. Huxley’s (1985) talk on ‘Anthropology and Psychoanalysis’ highlighted a number of excesses in the psychoanalytic universe which led to problems in the relationship between the two fields – prominent among them was Freud’s insistence on the universality of the Oedipus complex. Although sympathetic, Francis had no hesitation in labelling psychoanalysis a “caricature of…a philosophical system” which had logical inconsistencies with anthropology. A critical dimension, for both Huxley and Laing, was the necessity to add a practical political element to what they were examining.

Huxley and Laing were also able to intuit that while the facts of life appear straightforward enough from a distance – we are born, we age, love, mate, work, play, fight, create and eventually die - these facts do not so much define us as a species as highlight the biological, social, emotional and creative imperatives which orchestrate our existence. Some facts – love, sex, birth and death – in their intangible enormity, point to an inescapably spiritual aspect to the human condition. They also supply the ontological foundations upon which psychoanalysis was arguably erected. Faced with the ineffable mystery of existence, politics and the ontology of unending change however, psychoanalysis retreated. Psychology for a long time arguably took the same track. To secure intellectual acceptance it substituted the failed aesthetics of a predictable clockwork biology, predicated on Newtonian mechanics. It did so for reasons which continue to

haunt intellectual endeavour in psychology. The craving for acceptance in the halls of establishment thought. Perhaps more than most, Huxley was aware that anthropology offered clues – shamanism (a topic with which he was deeply fascinated) being one of them – that fundamentally different views of reality than those present in Western epistemologies had something useful to offer. To his credit he was prepared to work with the ambiguities which come from living and practising in two seemingly incompatible systems.

Our fledgling individual attempts to craft meaning from our presence in the world are paralleled by the intellectual, psychological and artistic challenges to make sense of the human condition in its entirety – where all these individual strivings merge into a collective whole, a puzzle bound by geographical, cultural and historical variations; nothing less than the full range of conditions in which we humans are present and which both shape and in turn are shaped by the world. What Huxley and Laing both realised is that essential as such disciplined attempts are, they necessarily come up short in the face of the inexplicable givens of our existence - both material and existential; what Rebecca Solnit (2006, 202) described as "the mystery in the middle of the room, the secret in the mirror…what has been there all along." Psychology, like psychoanalysis has largely failed to confront the fact of our existence in the world as ultimately mysterious and that an awareness of this sublime mystery is one of the conditions of being. Many writers have referenced the celebration of this as underpinning what Abraham Maslow called peak emotional experiences. For Baudelaire (2010, 20), it was "the fantastic reality of life," For Boym (2005, 503), "the ordinary marvellous," For Arendt, the "miracle" of freedom and for Benjamin (1999, 63) "the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways." The mysterious nature of being may also lie behind Freud's concept of the uncanny, a realisation of the fundamental strangeness of existing in the world. Adam Kotsko (2015) has considered this uncanniness, 'creepiness' as he designates it, as intrinsic to the enigma of desire – that our significant relationships are founded on a recognition of the 'strangeness', and inalienable differentness of another person. Yet despite all this, there is no place in the psychology curriculum for discussion of the unerringly strange fact of our existence.

Within the broader mystery of our existence are attendant others; our experiential entry and exit points from the world vis-à-vis the birth and presumed death of consciousness, the nature of experienced time, and the place of love in the fabric of the world. These are central to our experience and understanding of life and cannot be resolved by rational means alone – they rather invite an engagement with one's total being, one that in Huxley's (1974, 3) words "must be acted out in order to be experienced and experienced if one is to make it one's own." In several works he dived headlong into these waters, charting the symbolic roadmaps of world culture, documenting its riches without ever seeking to reduce the map to the semblance of anything more rudimentary. The mysterious, though it is soaked in the world of appearance, is not synonymous with it. In his book the *Way of the Sacred*, Huxley charted the divine iconography and mythic symbolism of the world which points us toward the invisible source of mystery. It stands as his answer to the question – what is the world? It is the world, ready-made, and replete with its own history and peoples that we encounter when we are thrust into it newly born; a phenomenology of human sacred symbolism.

The requisite attitude behind a good deal of Huxley's work is thus a reverence for the unknown, an attitude that is antithetical to the epistemologies currently ordained and worshipped in the church of academia. The instrumental bent of the knowledge industries which circle academia and the kind of information they demand also underscores an aspect of Francis Huxley's life which we have sought to delineate here. Huxley's respect for indigenous peoples, their right to define their own life in the way they choose, their right to be heard, for their voices to be carried into Western academic and political discourse speaks of a demand for knowledge to be allied to justice. The allegiance to any notion of a pure science places considerable obstacles in the way of such a desire. It is no coincidence that it is the qualitative realm where distant voices have been raised. Huxley also accorded people the right to experience the world in a manner consistent with their own customs. Though we now consider it a distinctly post-modern slant, he long ago saw a place for granting different cosmologies rights of co-existence. Raised as he was in the socially privileged bosom of the Huxley clan, educated at Gordonstoun School and

Oxford University, the distance he covered intellectually and emotionally, in rejecting the ideologically constructed norms which bolster the mirage of Western superiority cannot be underestimated. We may ask how far our own systems of education encourage us to challenge our own precepts.

In our biography of Francis Huxley (Roberts & Itten, 2021) we examined the matrix of intellectual, emotional, and social possibilities passed from one generation to another which contained him. For Huxley, as for all of us, escaping that web is not possible but weakening and mitigating its effects is. Francis was at times aware that he was trapped, and in various gambits sought to escape. In many ways his life is a calling card to abandon the traditional premises on which intellectual merit is assessed and on which higher education is founded. Thus, we have agency even if we are not unambiguously free. We can cultivate how to live within the strictures of the given, choose to some extent, using one's inbuilt and acquired resources, what outside influences may be granted entry. He rejected aspects of eugenic thought which his favoured uncle and father endorsed; challenged, both in his narrative anthropology and with the creation of Survival International, some of the cultural accoutrements of colonialism and white supremacy; rejected the monotheistic centrepiece of respectable English society, stood apart from the scientism of his esteemed father Julian Huxley and the literary bolthole of his uncle and tried to forge his own way in the world.

Huxley also challenged the instrumental bent of knowledge in another crucial manner. His LSD experiences and research at Weyburn hospital in Saskatchewan accorded love a pivotal place in the human place in the cosmos. Like Chagall, he believed "the meaning of life and art" was "provided by the colour of love." One can too easily dismiss this as a hangover from the pop philosophy which coursed through the veins of the 1960s. One should look past such fashionable dismissal. Huxley was extremely well read in cultural anthropology and comparative religious thought as well as the wide literature on psychedelia and did not make his pronouncements lightly. He drew attention to an experiential truth which has pervaded world thought for millennia; one which may be as crucial for our own survival and the well-being of the biosphere as the material logistics of selfishness, promoted under conditions of capitalism as a central

plank of neo-Darwinian thought. What Darwin imputed into nature, for all its genius, Huxley intuited as arising from Darwin's own masculine tinged view of the world. Huxley was strongly influenced by the suffering his mother endured in her marriage and took a keen interest in the iniquities which women in the world faced. For him, this meant an artistic, even existential appreciation of nature was needed to compliment the excesses of an impersonal view of the natural world. With the intellectual heritage of his great-grandfather weighing heavily on his shoulders, Francis used his anthropological experience and awareness of the often, personal nature of non-Western cosmologies, to balance the formative Huxley picture. His essay on Darwin, published as the 1950s (Huxley 1959/60) drew to a close, remains bold, original and fully contemporary for our age.

The kind of psychology which Huxley championed and which we endorse is a call to broaden the scope of enquiry into the human condition - to forge a greater alliance between psychology, anthropology and the arts; one in which research is fully embedded in an investigator's own conditions of living. In hindsight one can see Huxley's life and work, as a fully lived enquiry into the conditions of his own existence – familial, cultural, symbolic and religious, a self-designed anthropological program pursued largely outside of academia. Its outcome is an answer to the twin questions of 'what is the nature of the world?' and 'how do I wish to be known in it?' One can posit this exploration as one's own declaration that without oneself, the world would be incomplete!

The unpredictable and flexible nature of this kind of enquiry, let alone many others, is unlikely to ever find a place in the sanctioned habitats of universities and colleges, already suffocating under the weight of undue regimentation and compartmentalisation of study methods and subjects of enquiry. It is for the convenience of institutions and a deference to tradition that the present arrangements are prioritised above any creative inclination to teach, research and understand the complexities of human life.

All this begs important questions regarding the pursuit of knowledge. Just what kind of knowledge, what kind of enquiry, what programs of learning, what kinds of academics and researchers subscribing to what kinds of values do we want? Must it all be safe, obedient, careful; must we only teach

students to follow laid down procedures, capable of guaranteeing pre-ordained results within a specified time period? If so, it will remain the case that the existential and metaphysical dimensions of our existence, not to mention truly liberating commentary or art, will remain off-limits. Then, there will be no place for the Francis Huxley's of this world and any vision for what the fruits of intellectual life can deliver will be correspondingly diminished. Fun and love, were for Huxley, essential to both life and enquiry. It is up to us to include them in what we do.

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CHAPTER THREE

SVETLANA BOYM: AN OFF-MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

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

"A body is given me - what shall I do with it, so singular and so much mine?" Mandelstam (1909)

Introduction

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, a unique living embodiment of our total life experience, 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 can be considered the core problem of the social sciences in so far as it attempts to reckon with the human condition. It was addressed by Boym in a series of bold and imaginative works reflecting on the nature of 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 which are of immense psychological relevance. Her treatise on nostalgia (Boym, 2001) is widely considered as a defining text on the modern condition (Bonnett, 2008; Mihăilescu, 2011; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, 2011; Burton, 2014; Magagnoli, 2015). In this brief article I hope to show that Boym has much to offer psychologists interested in our subjective and objective affiliations to the world around us.

Svetlana Boym, The Off-Modern and Psychology

Like Foucault, Boym's work critically engages with the modernist project, fashioning an innovative challenge to how we 'do' psychology and what we consider viable research findings. Psychology as well as psychotherapy may be said to embrace key aspirations of the project of modernity. The term 'modernity' introduced by French critic, poet and essayist Charles Baudelaire (2010) was originally intended as a critique of the new, fleeting rhythms of time and life in the burgeoning urban metropolis of the 19th century. Over time, however, the term has been transformed from a *critical* position on contemporary life into a *project* of modernity which 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 in the actualities of capitalist modernisation – have given us the form of psychological practice which is dominant today, a form which is embedded within a matrix of cultural myths of technological and digital progress. It is also a form which 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 of vision"[1]. 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 which 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, 4).

Thus, she presents us with an alternative intellectual history of modernity. 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" (above cit.). This opens up a space within which a different vision, a different way of 'doing' psychology may

[1] See http://www.svetlanaboym.com/offmodern.html

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 a cultural phenomenology of political and everyday history, suffused with a fragile temporality encompassing 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 which circumscribe contemporary human life, one with considerable relevance in the post-communist globalised landscape of accelerating change.

Gergen (1973, 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. Though her work is elaborated within a critical tradition of comparative literature as well as architecture, philosophy and aesthetics, it embraces many disciplinary interests and invites us to rethink the purpose of psychological enquiry. This accords with others' concerns about the insecurities underlying our present disciplinary pursuits. James Hillman for example remarked;

> "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" (in Hillman and Shamdasani, 2013, 14).

Boym's pronounced interest in the human relations which 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 in the world, imbued with an elusive and fragile sense of time passing, and of our appearance and

disappearance from the world. This question, of how to actually live one's life, is arguably the issue which generations of psychology students thought they would be addressing and have been instructed to forget by the barrage of scientism and experimental psychology they receive. In the context of politics and history, Hannah Arendt (1998, 42) took the view that "application of the law of large numbers" signified the "wilful obliteration of their very subject matter." A noted criticism in some quarters is that the same may well be said of a good deal of psychology as currently practised.

The 'off-modern' then brings to the social, political and psychological realm the seemingly paradoxical presence of multiple co-existing realities – opening doors to "a superposition and co-existence of heterogeneous times" (Boym, 2001, 30) questioning established narratives of 'progress' and assumptions of linear social time. Boym's (2010) articulation of freedom in a co-created human world 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, 199). The historical world is demonstrably neither orderly nor rule-governed. It has defied the efforts of Hegel and Marx to impose any laws upon it, and as noted by Gergen (1973) resists the claims of those who would ignore its relevance for psychology. Yet much of psychology still ignores this wildness in the nature of the world and insists on a reductionist program that would see the social and historical world reduced to biology.

An off-modern psychology challenges this and suggests the possibility of a more artistic, interpretative and performative stance, at ease with changing and modifying the world whilst attempting to know it. Boym's own 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 different performative strategies – from scholarly writing, through novels, short stories and plays to experimentation with photographic and digital art. Hers is an implicit acceptance that our knowledge and understanding of the world - how we address the question of what it means to be human - cannot be reduced to a single codified set of rules and procedures which give rise to a single form of knowledge.