

## ME & THOMAS SZASZ Contrary Approaches to Anti-psychiatry

### Peter Lehmann

Since becoming a humanistic anti-psychiatry activist I met Thomas Szasz on a number of occasions, first in his writings and eventually in person.

### My first contacts with Anti-psychiatry

In Germany in 1977, I was diagnosed as schizophrenic, put in a madhouse, treated in the typical way and, after some months, thrown out again with tardive dyskinesia. I withdrew from the neuroleptics and recovered. I finished my social-pedagogy examinations in 1979 and was offered the opportunity to write a PhD about my own madness.

I was encouraged to read the books of David Cooper, for example, *The Death of the Family*. I began to think and read more about the nature of normality and of so-called schizophrenia. At the same time I began a legal and political fight for the fundamental right to have unlimited access to my own psychiatric records. This led me to Szasz's books, mainly *The Manufacture of Madness* and *Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry*. Like many others, for example Franco Basaglia and David Cooper, Szasz publicly declared his solidarity with my fight.

When we established the first anti-psychiatric self-help organisation in Germany, in 1980, we were quickly connected to the few groups which were active internationally. Judi Chamberlin organised telephone conferences in the USA, and she sent materials and resources to a range of participants and other interested people.

One article was by Szasz: 'The Lady in the Box'. This is about Rebecca Smith. She had a diagnosis of schizophrenia and was committed to a madhouse for ten years. There she was administered neuroleptics and electroshock before finally being thrown onto the streets, where she lived in a cardboard box. In the end she froze to death. We translated this article and published it in our magazine.

Then we realised we had forgotten to ask Szasz's permission. When we approached him to explain he sent us new articles for translation. One was 'The psychiatric will: A new mechanism for protecting persons against "psychosis" and psychiatry.' With financial support from an alternative Berlin charity, and through my publishing house, in 1987 we translated and published this article as a booklet.

Our organisation began a long campaign for the right of people with a psychiatric diagnosis to be able to write a legally binding 'advance declaration'. In 2009 Germany became the first country to provide legal protection for Advance Directives made by people with a psychiatric diagnosis. Because of this we will not forget the name of the man who was there at the beginning of this development.

### Moneymaking and Scientology

However, Szasz was also close to the Church of Scientology. The Runaway House group (established in Berlin in 1982)

Peter Lehmann  
courtesy of Peter Lehmann

received a letter he had written in January 1978, stating that Scientology protects the interests of the public:

*The Church of Scientology is, in my opinion, acting in the best Anglo-American tradition of peaceful and responsible moral and political non-conformism.*



Because he seemed to endorse Scientology, in 1990 the Organisation for Protection from Psychiatric Assault (of which I was a member and which opened Berlin's Runaway House in 1996) decided to delete Szasz's name from the Advisory Board. We were convinced that this sect was mainly interested in getting at the money of people who had had bad experiences with the psychiatric system: it charged them for extremely expensive, dubious and never-ending personality courses.

Kerstin Kempker worked in the Berlin Runaway House. In 1998 she was asked by the German critical medical journal *Dr. med. Mabuse* to review Szasz's book *Cruel Compassion: Psychiatric Control of Society's Unwanted*.

She noted that our organisation had decided to remove Szasz from its Advisory Board, and wrote:

*Page after page, I became more repelled by his cruel disregard of the 'unproductive ones,' the profound disdain which equates 'badness' with 'madness,' and the brutal consequence of a purely capitalist world-view that eliminates all social concerns. In his version of capitalism, the state's only role is to protect property and freedom. People are divided into those who are productive and those who are unproductive. The unproductive are the enemies of freedom. 'An individual who cannot or does not want to become productive, must turn into a dependent person or a robber, lest he perish.'*



Thomas S. Szasz  
courtesy of Peter Lehmann

In the same year, Szasz was invited by a dogmatic Berlin anti-psychiatry group to participate in the so-called Foucault Tribunal to put psychiatry on trial for its systematic violation of human rights. In an open letter, the staff and clients of the Runaway-House demanded that the organisers of that tribunal withdraw the invitation to Szasz. They wrote:

*Although the historical merits of Thomas Szasz regarding his criticism of psychiatry are well-known, he has more recently moved towards a primitive form of capitalism (or rights only for those who make money), particularly in *Cruel Compassion*. In this book he criticises those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, i.e., users and survivors of psychiatry and, in particular, those who are homeless (who, he argues, include many criminal social parasites). He also calls for the abolition of the welfare state. Runaway-House employees and clients find it absurd that Thomas Szasz has been invited as an anti-psychiatric front man, when this will give him an opportunity to support those who wish to abolish the welfare system. Statements like these by Szasz are*

*diametrically opposed to the need for social support of many users and survivors of psychiatry* (Runaway House, 1998)

### **Szasz's apparent disinterest in the damage done by psychiatric drugs**

In 2010, the International Network of Philosophy and Psychiatry invited both Szasz and me to give keynote lectures at its conference in Manchester, 'Real People: The Self in Mental Health and Social Care'. I spoke about the intrinsic suicidal effects of neuroleptics, citing a number of medical publications that prove the connection between drug-effects and suicidal tendencies.

Afterwards, Szasz and I chatted for a few minutes and he commented that my lecture, which used tables of psychiatric drug names, seemed similar to a lecture by a psychiatrist. He made no comment on my main message that the most frequent cause of death in people with a schizophrenia diagnosis related to their psychiatric drugs. I guess he was just not very interested either in publicising the hazardous nature of drugs or in discussing alternatives beyond psychiatry – such as the key elements of a humanistic antipsychiatry and of a more humane approach to treatment.

*Translations of German citations by Peter Lehmann.*

### **Sources**

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## **CORRECTION**

Peter Lehmann's article in the last *Asylum* issue on Thomas Szasz (20:1, page 24) meant to say that "Szasz was also very close to the so-called Church of Scientology". Peter would like to point out that in Germany, the organisation does not have the status of a religious organisation. This is important because he does not want to inadvertently support their demand for non-profit status.