

Original text (see below): “Szasz was also very close to the so-called Church of Scientology.”

Published by *Asylum* by their mistake: “Szasz was also close to the Church of Scientology.”

Asylum's correction see at the bottom of this file.

[Peter Lehmann](#)

Me and Thomas Szasz

Contrarian Approaches to Anti-psychiatry

Since becoming a humanistic antipsychiatry activist, I met Thomas Szasz on a number of occasions – in the form of his writings and eventually in person.

My First Contacts with Antipsychiatry

In Germany in 1977, I was diagnosed as schizophrenic, placed in a madhouse, treated in the typical way and, after some months, thrown out again with tardive dyskinesia. I withdrew from the neuroleptics, recovered, 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* (1971). As I began to think and read more about the nature of normality and so-called schizophrenia, whilst at the same time beginning a legal and political fight for the fundamental right to have unlimited access to the own psychiatric records, I came across Szasz's books, mainly *The Manufacture of Madness* (1970) and *Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry* (1976). Like many others, for example Franco Basaglia and David Cooper, Szasz publicly declared his solidarity with my fight.



Thomas S. Szasz



Peter Lehmann

In 1980, when we established the first antipsychiatric self-help organisation in Germany, we were quickly connected to the few groups which were active internationally. Judi Chamberlin,

who organized telephone conferences in the USA, sent materials and resources to a range of participants and other interested people. One of the articles was “The Lady in the Box,” an article by Szasz about Rebecca Smith, who was committed and put in a madhouse for ten years with a diagnosis of “schizophrenia.” There she was administered neuroleptics and electroshock before she was finally thrown on the street, where she lived in a cardboard box and finally froze to death. We translated the article, published it in our magazine and realized afterwards that we had forgotten to ask Szasz for permission. When we approached him to explain he sent new articles for translation. One of them was “The psychiatric will: A new mechanism for protecting persons against ‘psychosis’ and psychiatry” (1982). We translated and published it as a booklet in 1987 (with financial support by an alternative Berlin charity) through my publishing house. We began a long campaign for the right of people with psychiatric diagnoses to write legally binding advance declarations. In 2009, Germany became the first country to provide legal protection for advance directives made by people with psychiatric diagnoses. Because of this we do not forget the name of the man who was there at the beginning of this development.

Moneymaking and Scientology

But ... Szasz was also very close to the so-called Church of Scientology. The Runaway-house group (established in Berlin in 1982) received a letter he had written on January 27, 1978 stating that Scientology protects the best 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 nonconformism.”

As a result the Organisation for Protection from Psychiatric Assault (of which I was a member and which opened the Runaway-house Berlin in 1996) decided in 1990 to delete Szasz’s name from the Advisory Board because of his Pro-Scientology approach. We were convinced that this sect was mainly interested in the money of people who had had bad experiences with the psychiatric system charging them money for extremely expensive and never-ending dubious personality courses.

In 1998, Kerstin Kempker, working in the Berlin Runaway-house, was asked by the German critical medical journal *Dr. med. Mabuse* to review Szasz’s book *Cruel Compassion: Psychiatric Control of Society’s Unwanted* (1994). There she 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’” (Kempker, 1998).

That same year Szasz was invited by a dogmatic antipsychiatric group in Berlin to participate in the so-called Foucault-Tribunal to convict psychiatry for its systematic violation of human rights. In an open letter, the staff and clients of the Runaway-house demanded that the organizers 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 needs of many users and survivors of psychiatry for social support. P.S. Until recently, our Verein zum Schutz vor psychiatrischer Gewalt (*Organisation for Protection from Psychiatric Assault*) listed Thomas Szasz as a member of its advisory board. However, as a way of signalling our dissociation from his politically obscure position, the members have decided to remove his name from the list” (Verein, 1998).

Szasz’ Disinterest in Damages by Psychiatric Drugs

In 2010, the International Network of Philosophy and Psychiatry invited both me and Szasz to give keynote lectures at its conference “Real People: The Self in Mental Health and Social Care” in Manchester (UK). There I spoke about the intrinsic suicidal effects of neuroleptics (Lehmann, 2010), citing a number of medical publications proving the connection between drug effects and suicidality. Afterwards, as we chatted for a few minutes, Szasz commented that my lecture, using tables of psychiatric drug names, seemed similar a lecture by a psychiatrist. He made no comment about my key message that the most frequent cause of death in people with a diagnosis of “schizophrenia” was related to their psychiatric drugs. I guess he was simply not that interested in either publicising their hazardous nature or in discussing alternatives beyond psychiatry – key elements of a humanistic antipsychiatry and of a more humane approach to treatment (Stastny & Lehmann, 2007).

Translations of German citations by Peter Lehmann.

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About the Author

Peter Lehmann edited [Coming off Psychiatric Drugs](#) and [Alternatives beyond Psychiatry](#) and is a freelance humanistic antipsychiatry activist. More at www.peter-lehmann.de/english

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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.

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