

# Thomas Szasz: Philosopher of Liberty



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## Abstract

Thomas Szasz turned 90 on April 15, 2010. This year we saw the 50th anniversary edition of his book that marked his full-scale assault on coercive psychiatry—*The Myth of Mental Illness*. Szasz's productivity is astounding—even in the past 4 years, he has added dozens of articles and a handful of major books to his incredible body of work (see <http://www.szasz.com>). Thomas Szasz has relentlessly and tirelessly challenged psychiatric coercion, and its twin pillars of civil commitment and the insanity defense. In so doing, his ongoing work is one of the world's leading intellectual voices for liberty and justice. A systematic and regrettable effort to censor Szasz from the mainstream of mental health education today has resulted in many, if not most, young professionals scarcely even knowing of his vitally important work. Thomas Szasz is, to paraphrase the Emerson epigraph at the head of this essay, "a declaration of independence walking." I am one among many who are better able to stand in defense of people as relational individuals, capable of responsibility and good will, deserving of liberty and self-determination. I offer this short biographical essay in his honor.

## Keywords

Thomas Szasz, psychiatry, psychiatric oppression, mental illness, mental health

To make good the cause of Freedom against Slavery you must be . . . Declarations of Independence walking.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Notebook WO Liberty" (1855, p. 199)

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It is a rare and precious gift to be writing about Thomas Szasz, who turned 90 on April 15, 2010—a living sage whose mind is sharper than my own and whose mental energy and productivity is astounding. In this coming year, we saw the 50th anniversary edition of his book that marked his full-scale assault on coercive psychiatry—*The Myth of Mental Illness*. In the past 4 years, he has added dozens of articles and a handful of major books to his incredible body of work (see <http://www.szasz.com>).

One of the enduring sayings of a great Rabbi teacher, the man called Jesus, is that, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:20 NKJV). As a philosopher, however, Szasz’s mission is not primarily to convey words, but to purvey wisdom, and prime fruit of that tree are those who grow and deepen their understanding as a result of partaking in his ideas. My friend, Leonard Roy Frank, author and relentless activist in the movement for liberation from psychiatric oppression, is a prime example. More than anyone, Leonard helped me, to borrow the words of Bob Marley, “decolonize my mind” by systematically examining and challenging my use of language as a so-called mental health professional. I know with greater certainty, for example, that “civil commitment” really means incarceration and that forced “treatment” generally means assault with a deadly weapon—and I know how important it is to say it that way. Leonard cut some serious teeth in this domain by reading Szasz, so the master’s direct influence on my thinking has at least been matched by his indirect influence via Leonard and others.

Though Szasz’s critics may see people like Leonard and myself as poisoned fruit, the fact is we are most definitely clearer and stronger by virtue of our relationship with Thomas Szasz. So are countless other students of his work, including, for example, neurologist John Friedberg and psychologists Seth Farber and Jeff Rubin.

Students of Thomas Szasz know that, although prolific in dissemination of his ideas, until recently much less has been known about his personal history and psychology. It was striking, as I read more about Szasz as seen by his colleagues, how little had been revealed about the man, especially until the last decade. For example, the first really intensive examination of Szasz and his works was initiated by Keith Hoeller, and became a special issue of the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* (1997). As Hoeller (1997) wrote in his “Editor’s Introduction,” “When I called Thomas Szasz to offer to edit a Festschrift in his honor, I fully expected to hear from him that several either had already been done, which I had somehow overlooked, or that several were underway . . . I was frankly surprised such was not the case . . .” (p. 1). To this day there is still no book-length biography. There is, however,

one thing even better—Szasz’s own 28-page autobiographical sketch, published in the book edited by Jeffrey A. Schaler, *Szasz Under Fire* (2004).

Szasz Tamas Istvan was born in Budapest, Hungary on April 15, 1920. Family and friends called him Tomi, similar to the English “Tom,” by which he is still known to his current friends. Born into an upper class family, Tomi [Szasz] spent the majority of his first 10 years with his beloved governess, Kisu. After age 10, he had a lot more time with his parents, whom he deeply loved and respected. The deep lifelong relationship with older brother George, whom Szasz asserts is much smarter than himself, has been an essential fact and joy of his existence.

There are some fascinating jewels for the biographically inclined in Szasz’s brief personal sketch. For example, Szasz had many childhood illnesses, including chicken pox, whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria! As a young boy he learned to malingering because he much preferred staying home to school: “My illnesses taught me some valuable lessons. One was a clear realization of the advantages of being ill . . . I learned to malingering . . . how to have a fever . . . by surreptitiously placing the thermometer close to alighted light bulb (Szasz, 2004a, p. 4). Despite Szasz’s aforementioned resolve to keep his personal and professional lives separate, it is intriguing to “analyze” this history in light of Szasz’s early works on strategic interaction and the role of malingering in psychiatric diagnosis; but that is speculation. An important fact is that he was largely self-taught: “I always preferred to learn, rather than be taught” (2004a, p. 21). With the aid of books he became his own teacher. His autobiography provides clear evidence of a family and school culture that emphasized scholarship and critical thinking; Thomas Szasz took it on and excelled.

Szasz also apparently imbibed from his family the virtues of respectfulness, cordiality, and consideration. While his opponents obviously don’t think of him as being polite, my experience is that he unfailingly expresses these qualities in his written and verbal dialogues; at age 84, he wrote, “Politeness: one of the most neglected and underrated virtues of our age” (Szasz, 2004b). Szasz also places great value on being direct and honest. He is often intensely confrontive in his writings; witness, for example, his scathing criticism of Ronald Laing (2008) **[AQ: 1]**. Some (e.g., Burston, 2003) think Szasz is overly harsh.

Szasz says he also “inherited” the traits of being well-groomed and well-dressed! And it is apparent, from his own words, and from the words of so many who knew him and loved him, that he kept a full range of friends at each stage of his life. He stoked his competitive athletic fires in intense ping-pong with George, and remained an active athlete through his adult life.

At the young age of 18, he emigrated to the United States and landed in Cincinnati where his uncle, a renowned professor of mathematics, taught at the University. Beginning without a word of English, he learned a few key words before he came to this country. Three years later, in 1941, he graduated with honors in physics. We get glimpses of other nonacademic lessons for this young man, for example, refusal of a restaurant to allow him to sit and eat with a friend who happened to be Black (Szasz, 2004a, p. 14). During his last year as an undergraduate, Szasz had applied to 26 medical schools and was accepted to “virtually all of them.” He was systematically rejected one after another as “undesirable” when, despite thinking of himself as an atheist, he affirmed his Jewish heritage. Probably because people knew him, and his esteemed uncle, at Cincinnati (2004a, p. 15), he was admitted to the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and graduated in 1944, first in his class.

These examples of Szasz’s awareness and sensitivity to faces of oppression—racism and anti-Semitism—foretell our ability to look back at this great man’s life as a freedom fighter. Obviously best known for his work in challenging psychiatric oppression, Thomas Szasz has never failed to place this challenge in a bigger context. He is a master of aphorism and analogy, and my own favorite summarizes his classic, *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement* (Szasz, 1970):

The Inquisition is to heresy as Psychiatry is to mental illness.

Szasz has sensitized generations of citizens to the fact that psychiatry is first and foremost an agent of social control. The title of another of his books, *Liberation by Oppression: A Comparative Study of Slavery and Psychiatry* (Szasz, 2002), is in a similar vein. Both books starkly reveal a fundamental teaching of oppression theory, that all oppression is justified by claims to virtue. Szasz has done heroic, masterful work in laying bare the moral bankruptcy of such claims. When he speaks of psychiatric slavery, he is in a long line of liberation workers who refuse to silence victims with the twisted language and claims to virtue of the oppressors. Szasz is expressing compassion and zeal for freedom when he shares the voices of those citizens who protest their involuntary “commitment and treatment” as imprisonment and torture.

A self-described primary drive for Thomas Szasz is curiosity, to “know what’s under the hood.” He did an unpaid apprenticeship in an auto repair garage before he left Europe and learned how to drive, so that when he came to the United States, even though he could not speak English, he was the only member of his family who could drive! In a much more astounding example

of investment of energy, once he finished all his medical training experiences, he walked away from medicine as he had gotten what he wanted—a better understanding of what was under the hood of the human body. Szasz did later practice medicine for 2 years in the Navy, from 1954 to 1956.

Thomas Szasz does indeed have a deep and abiding curiosity:

Although I have an abiding interest in and love for medicine and the hard sciences, my true passion was literature, history, philosophy, politics—or, put more plainly, how and why people live, suffer and die. (2004a, p. 17)

Strange as it may sound, just as I wanted to go to medical school to learn medicine, not to practice it, I served a psychiatric residency to qualify as a psychiatrist and be eligible for training in psychoanalysis, not to practice psychiatry. I felt that I would rather earn a living as a psychoanalyst than as an internist; that I would then have more leisure and opportunity to pursue my intellectual—literary, social, political—interests, and that the role of psychoanalyst would provide a platform from which *I could perhaps launch an attack on what I had long felt were the immoral practices of civil commitment and the insanity defense* [italics added]. (2004a, p. 18)

I want to emphasize the two reasons Szasz did a psychiatric residency—he wanted to train as a psychoanalyst and he needed a platform for a specific agenda. First, the training.

Thomas Szasz has written so much, and there are so many misconceptions—deliberate or otherwise—about his work that it has felt overwhelming to choose what to write about. As a professional psychologist, it has been gratifying to learn by more closely studying his life that he is a brother not only in the work of challenging psychiatric oppression but also in the work of professional counseling. It is easy to miss this, partly because of Szasz's felt imperative to focus on the very main challenge of his work, which is to defend liberty and destroy tyranny in his chosen profession. Even more of a blinder is that this part of Szasz's life gets so twisted and distorted by his critics who decry him as a cold, uncaring "right-wing nut" who would prefer to deny people's "mental illness" and let them suffer than help them. Reading both the historical and the current criticisms of Szasz, this type of *ad hominem* attack is relentless. Also relentless is the straw man argument that those of us who reject psychiatric coercion and fraudulent declaration of theory as fact simply want to let people suffer and die, and offer nothing. In his response to

the belittlement of Ralph Slovenko (2004), professor of psychiatry and law at Wayne State University, in *Szasz Under Fire*, Szasz writes, “The point is that Slovenko disapproves of the way I practiced ‘listening and talking’ for some fifty years . . .” (2004e, p. 162). Thomas Szasz not only trained as a psychoanalyst, he worked *for some fifty years* as a counselor.

Some critics argue that Szasz’s constant reference to the Virchowian gold standard of physical or chemical abnormality as the only valid criteria of disease leaves him defending an untenable belief in the face of decades of research that renders obsolete the old, absolute distinction between mind and body. Daniel Burston (2003), for example, changes Szasz’s famous aphorism to “mental illness is not a myth, but an oxymoron,” since psychological suffering very often also entails bodily suffering. These are important points for the field of counseling, but in my mind at least they are secondary to the main work of Szasz, which is about coercion and responsibility. They also beg the tragic fact that alleged biological (chemical imbalance theory) and genetic (bad gene theory) defects are used to justify a whole range of brain-disabling “treatment” with drugs and electroshock.

I think that part of Szasz’s intense effort to disabuse people of the notion that he is an antipsychiatrist (Szasz, 2008) is to remind us that he is a psychiatrist and not against himself. He is against coercion as civil commitment and excuse making as the insanity defense. He will engage folks on the validity of the “mental illness” metaphor, but he would defend forever their right to believe what they wish. He would and does also defend the right of all citizens, including those called “mentally ill,” to be free from coercion; and he has and does insist on accountability for those who commit crimes.

Burston also discusses the issue of confidentiality and represents those who see things in a much grayer way than Szasz who holds confidentiality as a sacrosanct part of the counselor–client contract. Burston argues that Szasz’s constant framing of things as adversarial as in state versus “patient” and family versus “patient” creates a sometimes false and sometimes even harmful divisiveness. Burston concludes that for counselors, “confidentiality has limits;” he sees this position as a greater valuing of life than confidentiality. One can easily imagine Szasz’s response to this. Burston is thoughtful enough to at least admit his resulting conundrum—even though he espouses agreement with Szasz’s fundamental rejection of coercion, he is willing to risk that those with whom he might choose to violate confidentiality might not share that rejection; “if so, that cannot be helped” (p. 5).

Burston, who wrote a book about Laing, takes issue with Szasz’s harsh assessment of Ronald Laing. He also argues that Laing’s personal failings, albeit severe, should not deter one from evaluating his ideas on their own

merits. I would say two things about this. One, my embrace of Thomas Szasz's fundamental teachings related to psychiatric oppression as a form of state and social control disguised as medicine certainly does not require agreement with all his ideas and attitudes. My second point is expressed in the following quote attributed to Lord Acton, that I got from Szasz (2004d);<sup>1</sup> it is the only remedy for confusion or uncertainty or premature judgments and accusations related to the contentious issues engaged by Thomas Szasz and those who care to consider his work:

To renounce the pains and penalties of exhaustive research is to remain a victim of ill-informed and designing writers, and to authorities that have worked for ages to build up the vast tradition of conventional mendacity.” (p. 223)

In a December 2000 interview, Szasz told Randall Wyatt that he found doing therapy quite satisfying, but that one of the reasons he left Chicago for Syracuse was to escape having to support himself financially by doing therapy because that can create financial temptations to make clients dependent on therapy. He also shared the following with Wyatt:

When practicing psychiatry—psychotherapy—I never prescribed a drug. I never gave insulin shock or electric shock. I never committed anyone. I never testified in court that a criminal was not responsible for his crimes. I never saw, as a patient, anyone who did not want to see me. I went into psychiatry with my eyes wide open. I never viewed psychiatry or psychotherapy as a part of medicine. Perhaps I should add, though it should be obvious, that I had no objections to the patient taking drugs or doing anything else he wanted. As far as I was concerned, things outside the consulting room were not my business—in the sense that if the patient wanted to take drugs, he had to go to a doctor and get them, just as if he wanted a divorce, he had to go to a lawyer.

Szasz practiced counseling, but as acknowledged earlier he was also indeed “treacherous.” Not only did he have a greater affinity with the humanistic psychologists, for example, than with his fellow psychiatrists, he overtly supported all the nonmedical counselors over the guild interests of psychiatry that wanted to assert its supreme value as purveyor of “mental health treatment.” During the years before “medical” psychiatry won out—clearly the case for now—Szasz continually asserted that counseling was not a medical issue, but a conversation between people. It is understandable that psychiatrists felt

betrayed; in a sense they were. Szasz's allegiance was not to his guild, but to the truth. The reactions of Slovenko and other critics is a mostly blind aggression in defense of their "right" to imprison and poison (or electrocute) citizens without due process of law, in the name of medicine. Of course, the essential point is that because "mental illness" is not a disease there can be no treatment for it.

Szasz had begun a medical residency in Cincinnati in July of 1945, and within a few months, decided "to bite the proverbial bullet." He would complete this residency in internal medicine, through March of 1946, then quit medicine. He told the chairman of the department that he was going to apply for a residency in psychiatry. The chair responded by telling Tom that "Medicine is losing a good man," thus affirming Szasz's major theme that psychiatry is not a part of medicine (2004a, p. 18).

Szasz went to Chicago for a psychiatry residency because of its emphasis on psychoanalysis, and for its general structure: "The residency at the University of Chicago was ideal for me, not least because no one made any attempt to teach me anything. I always preferred to learn, rather than be taught. I read widely, had many intelligent friends, played bridge and tennis regularly, and read a lot" (Szasz, 2004a, p. 21). However, he says, "this idyll came to an abrupt end," in the form of a replacement of the department chair by "a freshly demobilized psychiatrist" (p. 21), Henry Brosin. According to Szasz the two got along very well, and often played tennis as they were evenly matched. But one day, "Brosin called me into his office for a chat." Basically, Brosin decided that the Chicago residency needed to provide "experience with treating seriously ill patients." This meant that Szasz would be required to do his third year of residency at Cook County Hospital. Szasz told Brosin that he preferred to stay where he was.

I was not about to tell him that the persons he called "seriously ill patients" I regarded as persons deprived of liberty by psychiatrist. I still felt much too vulnerable to let my superiors, or even friends, know what I thought about mental illnesses and psychiatric coercion. After a moment's hesitation, I thanked him, and said, "Hank, I tell you what, I quit" . . . I did not tell Brosin that ever since I was an adolescent, when I set my sights on going to medical school, I had believed that the physician's role is to help relieve the suffering of individuals who ask for and accept his help, and that the psychiatrist is committing a grave moral wrong if he imprisons individuals who neither seek nor want his help. (Szasz, 2004a, p. 21)



Fortunately, Szasz was well-liked and well-respected and found much more suitable ways to complete his training in Chicago.

Those were exciting years for the young man, Thomas Szasz:

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, but is a special kind of confidential dialogue that often helps people resolve some of their personal problems and may help them improve their ability to cope with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Still, I had to keep my beliefs—or, better, disbeliefs—to myself. I was poor, I was in debt, I had to earn a living. It was obvious that my view of psychoanalysis, as an enterprise separate from psychiatry—indeed, conceptually, economically, and morally antithetical to it—was not shared by my teachers or fellow trainees. (Szasz, 2004a, p. 22)

Szasz's autobiographical sketch deliberately leaves off just as he moved, with his wife and two young daughters, to Syracuse in 1956, at age 36, to assume a position as tenured professor of psychiatry. He could support his family, and he was tenured—fair protection against certain vulnerabilities. And he has vigorously wielded his intellectual sword ever since. Syracuse is where began in earnest the work that makes him famous—a work that is, by all accounts, favorable or not, an intellectual tour de force. Syracuse is the place Szasz launched an epic sustained campaign against his chosen profession; he himself acknowledges 1956 “as the year that my treachery began” (2004e, p. 175).

Beyond psychoanalysis per se, Szasz's other agenda in choosing a psychiatric residency, then, is directly relevant to his subsequent notoriety within the psychiatric profession, as well as his relative obscurity without. The fundamental, irreconcilable conflict between those who choose to value paternalistic coercion, in the flimsy guise of pseudoscientific medicine, on the one hand, and those who would defend liberty, autonomy and self-determination, on the other, is the heart of Thomas Szasz's life work. This work is how I and untold others connected with the man. I was an activist challenging the many faces of militarism before I became a “mental health professional” and more deeply confronted the exceedingly difficult, though very common dilemma

of how to be ethical in a largely unethical profession. As revealed above, Szasz did a psychiatric residency with a specific, *destructive* intention toward his chosen profession! I was a bit slower on the uptake, fortunate to have Tom Szasz to help me understand what I was facing every day with the clients I loved. He helped me reach a vital clarity that allows me to counsel people without being oppressive, and to actively challenge psychiatric oppression in the world. This clarity includes, of course, understanding that psychiatry's twin pillars—involuntary commitment and the insanity defense—are an assault on freedom and liberty. It also includes clarity about the rhetoric of suicide (Szasz, 1999) that so frequently turns a counselor into an agent of the state in incarcerating and forcibly “treating” innocent people. Beyond the specifics, reading or listening to Szasz is one of the best techniques for enhancing one's ability to think clearly—period.

It is interesting to read some of the critics in *Szasz Under Fire*, who suggest that Szasz failed in his effort to destroy psychiatry because he was too extreme, that he should have settled for challenging the excesses, the abuses in psychiatry. In his response to one of these men, Edinburgh psychiatrist Robert Kendall, Szasz once again asserts that he never intended to reform psychiatry. He long ago concluded that, given the unholy symbiotic twinship between the force of state law and psychiatry, reform was impossible—one of the twins had to die. Since the power of the state was not going away, that left psychiatry. In his reply to Kendall, Szasz (2004c) stated that “I consider being able to articulate that viewpoint—and attracting a hearing for it—as much success as I ever hoped for” (p. 53).

Henry Weihofen, a leading forensic psychiatrists at the time, denounced Szasz as a heartless fascist and “extreme right winger” in 1964. Szasz says, “Since then, virtually all defenders of psychiatric slavery have leveled this charge against me” (2004e, p. 178).

In the aforementioned 2000 interview, Wyatt asked Szasz how he dealt with the relentless criticism:

I was very fortunate. I had very good parents, a very good brother, a very good education as a child in Budapest. I have very fine children, good friends, good health, good habits, a fair amount of intelligence. Really, I have always felt blessed. It also helped a lot that I felt there were many people who agreed with me—that what I'm simply saying is simply  $2 + 2 = 4$ —but that many people are afraid to say this when it is personally and politically improvident to do so. I haven't made any scientific discoveries. I'm simply saying that if you are white and don't like blacks, or vice versa, that's not a disease, it's a prejudice. If you're

in a building that you can't get out of, that's not a hospital, it's a prison. I don't care how many people call racism an illness or involuntary mental hospitalization a treatment.

Szasz did acknowledge that it got to him at times,

especially when people actually wanted to injure me—personally, professionally, legally . . . I tried to protect myself and escaped, luckily enough. I found boundless support in literature, in the great writers. Ibsen said, among other things, that “the compact majority is always wrong.

Wyatt also asked Szasz about his heroes:

Where should I start, there are many? Shakespeare, Goethe, Adam Smith, Jefferson, Madison, John Stuart Mill, Mark Twain, Mencken. Tolstoy, Dostoyevski, Chekhov. Orwell, C.S. Lewis. Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, Camus, and Sartre, though personally and politically, he is rather despicable. He was a Communist sympathizer. He was willing to overlook the Gulag. But he was very insightful into the human condition. His autobiography is superb. His book on anti-Semitism is important.

As in the general case of seeking truth, the simplistic dichotomy of left and right is useless in understanding Tom Szasz. Over and again, Szasz and others have shown that he has an affinity with liberal humanists such as Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith and Lord Acton. I learned a Josh Billings quote awhile back from Szasz, that “The problem is not that people don't know anything, but that they know so many things that ain't so.” Tom has been perhaps my best help over the years in clearing or defending against the effects of the constant drumbeat of psychiatric propaganda. Regarding his political leanings: “For me the issue is, and has always been, individualism versus statism, not “right-wing” or “left-wing” (Szasz, 2004e, p. 176).

The recently deceased historian Howard Zinn—a man who might be categorized as on the far “left”—liked to say at his talks on how presidents, Democrat or Republican, always lie to get the country to go to war: “If you don't know history, it is as if you were born yesterday.” Time and again, Szasz emphasizes the importance of knowing history and does the work of forcing the history of psychiatry into the public eye. I did a video review of

one of my personal favorites, his history book, *Coercion as Cure: A Critical History of Psychiatry* (Breeding, 2009).

While it is true that today overt slavery and racism, for example, at least tend to be frowned upon, Szasz believes that psychiatry replaced the Inquisition and snuffed out whatever “enlightenment” there was following the latter’s quiet death. In any event, one technique that buttresses the claims to virtue is to rewrite or simply “forget” history. This is why Szasz has so painstakingly and repeatedly unearthed and exposed the history of psychiatry. In challenging electroshock, Leonard Frank’s *Electroshock Quotationary* (2008) is the best source for the truth about electroshock’s history, including the fact that the early shock doctors applauded brain damage, the procedure’s primary and most obvious effect. I mention this here because I found the following ironic quote from Hungarian-born psychiatrist Paul Hoch in Leonard’s book:

This brings us for a moment to a discussion of the brain damage produced by electroshock . . . Is a certain amount of brain damage not necessary in this type of treatment? Frontal lobotomy indicates that improvement takes place by a definite damage of certain parts of the brain. (Paul H. Hoch, “Discussion and Concluding Remarks,” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 17, 1948)

Paul Hoch is the man who, in his position as commissioner of the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, insisted on the firing of Thomas Szasz from his teaching position at Syracuse Psychiatric Hospital in 1962 (Hoch, 1962/2004).

A more general—and more seminal to the underground history of psychiatry—statement providing an accurate rationale for psychiatric coercion and assault belongs to Benjamin Rush, the so-called founding father of American psychiatry, a man whose face emblazons the seal of the American Psychiatric Association:

TERROR acts powerfully upon the body, through the medium of the mind, and should be employed in the cure of madness . . . FEAR, accompanied with PAIN, and a sense of SHAME, has sometimes cured this disease. Bartholin speaks in high terms of what he calls “flagellation” in certain diseases. (Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind*, chap. 7, 1812)

The work of unearthing history is important for any domain where truth and understanding is desired. To my mind, the work of John Taylor Gatto lends

perspective to the stupid notion that Szasz, and all his allies, failed to stop the sickening wave and horrific effects of what one lawyer calls the pharma-cause because of faulty ideas or strategy. Like Szasz a Libertarian, Gatto is a lifelong teacher, but he quit the public schools with a bang on January 31, 1990 when, on the occasion of accepting an award from the New York State Senate naming him New York City Teacher of the Year he gave his celebrated—at least in alternative education circles—speech, “The Psychopathic School.” Gatto (2000) also wrote a history book, *The Underground History of Modern Education*, in which he details his extensive research into the designs of those who planned and implemented our modern system of compulsory public education, the keyword in any essay about Thomas Szasz being, of course, compulsory! Here is a piece of Gatto’s research, a quote from William Torrey Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education from 1889 to 1906, who, according to Gatto, played the key role in standardizing our schools, according to the Prussian (German) model:

Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom. This is not an accident but the result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual. (The Philosophy of Education, 1906; cited in Gatto, p. 106)

Thomas Szasz knew the dangers of Harris’s assertion early on:

I realized, even before I left Hungary, that psychiatrists and psychoanalysis had nothing to do with real medicine or with one another: psychiatrists locked up troublesome persons in insane asylums for the benefit of their relatives; psychoanalysts, who were not supposed to touch their patients, engaged in a particular kind of conversation with them. Incarcerating people and talking to them were not medicine. Any intelligent child would have known that. Of course, such simple-minded clarity had to be “educated” out of people to make them normal members of society, especially American society. (Szasz, 2004a, pp. 17-18)

In his autobiography, Szasz says that he was deeply moved by the tragic story of Hungarian obstetrician Ignaz Semmelweis. Semmelweis has been called the “savior of mothers” for his discovery that childbed fever, a form of septicemia, could be prevented if doctors washed their hands in a chlorine solution before gynecological exams. During his life, however, he was ignored

by the medical profession, and angrily challenged and denounced them. Subsequently, according to Wikipedia (2010),

His contemporaries, including his wife, believed he was losing his mind, and in 1865 he was committed to an asylum. In an ironic twist of fate, he died there of septicaemia only 14 days later, possibly after being severely beaten by guards.

It was only after his death, with the discoveries of Louis Pasteur, that his suggestions earned widespread acceptance.

Here is what young Thomas Szasz learned from Semmelweis's story:

It taught me, at an early age, the lesson that it can be dangerous to be wrong, but, to be right, when society regards the majority's falsehood as truth, could be fatal. This principle is especially true with respect to false truths that form an important part of society's belief system. (Szasz, 2004a, p. 27)

Tom Szasz has not had to pay with his life, but he has paid dearly—attacked, criticized, dismissed, and censored. When “all hell broke loose” at Syracuse shortly after the publication of *The Myth of Mental Illness* and public testimony at a well-publicized commitment hearing, Szasz was fired from a position at the allied state hospital; they were not able to fire him from his tenured professorship, but tried to make him pay in other ways. One of the hardest things must have been to see his close friends and colleagues who supported him be systematically purged from the department and retaliated against beyond that.

One of the men who was purged from Syracuse, psychiatrist Ron Leifer, wrote a summary of that experience for the aforementioned *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* tribute to Szasz, titled, “The Psychiatric Repression of Dr. Thomas Szasz: Its Social and Political Significance.” The very close alliance of the Syracuse psychiatry department with the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene (DMH) presented a severe ethical conflict of interest, epitomized by the fact that the department head, Marc Hollender, was also director of Syracuse Psychiatric (State) Hospital. Many other faculty had joint appointments, a common arrangement then and now. This is why DMH director, Paul Hoch (quoted above regarding his views on the value of brain damage in psychiatric treatment) could in 1962 order Hollender to “terminate Dr. Szasz” to the residents of the state institutions and to any personnel which is employed by the Department of Mental Hygiene” (Hoch, 1962/2004).

When Hollender suggested Szasz move his seminars for the psychiatric residents to the University, Szasz refused this compromise—he and his allies, people like Ron Leifer and Pulitzer Prize winner Ernest Becker, fought hard for academic freedom. They strongly believed that this example of repression dramatically underscored the principle that academia must be autonomous from the state, or else freedom of thought and expression would be sacrificed. They paid a big professional price. For Leifer, Becker, and others, it cost them their jobs and made it very difficult, if not impossible, to work in academic psychiatry. For Szasz, here is how he summed it up decades later:

By 1970, I became a non-person in American psychiatry. The pages of American psychiatric journals were shut to my work. Soon, the very mention of my name became taboo and was omitted from new editions of texts that had previously featured my views. In short, I became the object to that most effective of all criticisms, the silent treatment—or, as the Germans so aptly call it, *Totschweigetaktilik* (Szasz, 1997, p. 71).

As history shows, Thomas Szasz was not to be denied. He has relentlessly and tirelessly challenged psychiatric coercion, and its twin pillars of civil commitment and the insanity defense. In so doing, his ongoing work is one of the world's leading intellectual voices for liberty and justice. Life is and always has been difficult and risky. Despite loud and voluminous assertions from the kingdom of psychiatry, there are no medical experts who can provide hope and absolution from the challenge of human existence. The false hopes and dangerous practices of psychiatric oppression do far greater harm than good. George Alexander, former law dean at Syracuse University, called Szasz “the greatest freedom fighter of the twentieth century” (Slovenko, 2004, p. 150).

We have all failed thus far to stem the advent of the therapeutic state, and we all have our work cut out for us. That Thomas Szasz so clearly and powerfully articulated truth, and influenced so many of us, is real and meaningful success. I am one among many who now stand shoulder to shoulder with this man in defense of people as relational individuals, capable of responsibility and good will, deserving of liberty and self-determination. Thomas Szasz is, to borrow from the Emerson epigraph above, “a declaration of independence walking.”

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## Note

1. Szasz's footnote is as follows: Lord Acton, quoted in Damien McElrath with James Holland, Ward White, and Sue Katzman, *Lord Acton: The Decisive Decade, 1864-1874. Essays and Documents* (Louvain, Belgium: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1970), p. 10.

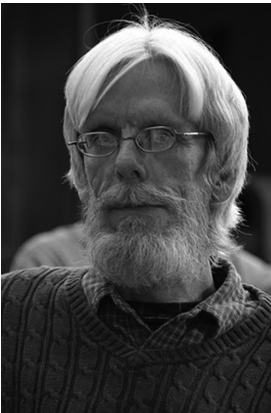
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## Bio



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