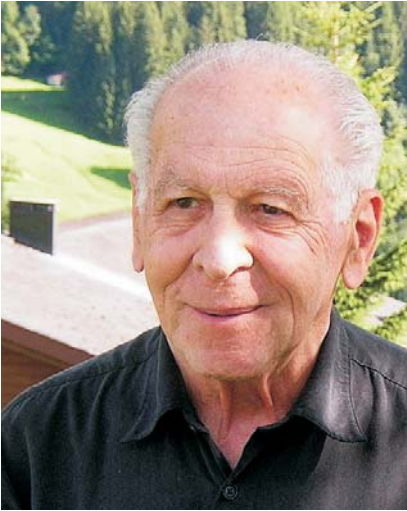


DEMOCRACY IS A PSEUDONYM FOR “PHARMACRACY”

Thomas Szasz

POSITION



THOMAS SZASZ is an American psychiatrist, a life member of the American Psychiatric Association, a prominent activist of the anti-psychiatric movement, and a well-known social critic of moral and scientific foundations of psychiatry and of the use of medicine for social control purposes within modern society

During the last half of the century, society has become extremely “psychiatric” so to speak. There are examples of this all around us – it is there in society’s attitude to smoking, to obesity, to taking drugs, some of which are even being legalised and others which are banned. There is a gradual “medicalisation” of life currently taking place – indeed, life has even begun to be perceived as a medical problem.

RJ Is the “medicalisation” of life a problem for society?

Society is living with this problem. For example, this was not considered to be a problem a hundred years ago or five hundred years ago. Such changes in our life can be assessed by people individually. Of course, most people think that life is good, that it is better than it used to be. However,

is it actually good to lock up people who wish to commit suicide? In America they get locked up. On the other hand, why shouldn’t somebody be able to commit suicide if that is what he/she wishes to do? This is a question about just how much liberty people should have. As to whether this is a good or bad thing, I think it is bad because people’s freedoms are diminished, but most people obviously think that it is a good thing.

RJ When we speak about modern society, we tend to call it liberal society, and we consider that the level of democracy within it is increasing. Is this really the case?

We don’t have liberty in its true sense – neither do we have liberty in America, nor does it exist in Russia. We also don’t have liberty anywhere now, compared to what people had a hundred years ago, when, for example, you could have bought any drug that you wanted. Nowadays the situation is different. That is why I say that our liberties have become fewer. **Democracy is a slogan. We don’t actually have democracy; we have what I call pharmacracy - the rule of doctors.**

RJ What exactly do you mean by the term “pharmacracy”?

By “pharmacracy”, I mean exercising power through the use of medical institutions. “Pharmacracy” is also referring to the political sphere, because politi-

there were complaints, especially in the West, about how if somebody misbehaved in Soviet Russia, the psychiatrists simply locked him up. This situation is true in the West even to this day. For instance, if you fail to take care of your children properly, the state will persecute you, you can end up either in an asylum or in jail. No freedom comes into play in such situations. But the source of this problem does not lie in the sphere of politics, but rather in the sphere of medicine. And this is not a problem in specific relation to the State; rather, it is a societal problem.

RJ Is society able to or should it do something about it?

Yes, society needs to do something about it. Society has levers for changing the existing situation. For instance, getting a divorce used to be prohibited due to religious convictions. Nowadays, however, it is possible to get a divorce. In this sense, we see that our freedoms and rights have expanded. Society has come to the conclusion that this problem should be resolved by the members of a family and that the State should not interfere with this situation.

RJ Can we say that the attitude to homosexuals has changed over the last fifteen or fifty years, may be? Has it not become more liberal?

Earlier, it used to be completely illegal, not a human right at all, to be a homosexual. Not only is it not illegal these days, but now a man can

Let’s reread “Ward number six”, written by Anton Chekhov. It’s in our own best interests to behave within the bounds of society. If the people in power think that there is something wrong with us and that something needs to be done about that, then we are finished

cians and law-makers make the laws about how medicine should be practiced. During the Soviet regime,

even be officially married to another man, or a woman to a woman. Society is constantly changing, but

that's what makes up the interesting dynamics within our history. **But society does not simply change in the direction of becoming more liberal. This is just a delusion to believe that, and believing so would be to deceive oneself.** Some things are becoming freer, as is the case with homosexuality, and some things are becoming more forbidden, as in the case with smoking.

RJ *But doesn't the State decide what propaganda should be broadcast on the TV or radio?*

Not exactly, it is more likely society itself that decides this. A great deal of this consists of what is called advertising. You are essentially told what kind of soup or automobile you should buy. How is that determined? **It is advertising that is the propaganda of our days.** In turn, it is affected by businessmen, politicians, religious leaders, leaders of different groups and organisations.

RJ *What role should the social sciences play in this situation?*

In general, social sciences are basically a tool used by the State. They are basically "prostitutes" of the State, in a sense, because they are fundamentally dependent on the State for their financing. All teachers and professors have their salaries paid by the State. The term "social sciences" in and of itself is actually an unfortunate term. It is really only rhetoric and boils down to advertising.

RJ *What should a scholar do in this situation - enrol in the existing system of education, work at some universities and institutes, or to become independent and not sell his/her knowledge?*

Once upon a time in the West, there was a very good idea about establishing a free university. As you are aware, socialism and communism essentially took seed at universities. Marxism became a subject of study, like physics or mathematics, for instance. They are not wholly prostitutes, but are indeed prostitutes to a large extent, in the same way as are armament manufacturers, to draw a comparison. They essentially work for the State. I am not using the word "prostitute" in a particularly negative sense, but rather in

a business sense – in a rather commercial or economic sense.

RJ *How do you see the future in regards to this situation? Do you think it is possible that there could be something like a revolution in this sphere?*

Revolution – that is a tricky word. I mean, we are now living in a revolutionary time, all over the world. Of course, it seems like a revolutionary measure that somebody cannot smoke in practically any public place in the United States due to the near-total ban on smoking. I have never smoked by the way and I am not addicted to smoking - it seems to be that it is a very stupid thing to do. But yes, this question touches on the issue of personal liberties. Obesity is also a problem today. This morning, just before you called me, I was listening to the local US news, and they were talking about how 75% of Americans are going to be too obese in ten years' time. Do you have this problem in Russia too, that people are becoming too fat?

RJ *I guess this will be a problem at some point in the future, but not at the moment.*

But why is that a problem? Because the State has to pay for the treatment and other medical expenses. The State didn't used to pay for such medical expenses a hundred years ago. People used to pay for themselves. There have been medical problems for thousands of years, but the State never previously paid for medical treatment for its citizens. That is a very modern idea and has emerged rather recently.

RJ *But all of these tendencies or trends have resulted from the policies pursued by the government or else they are an outcome of advertising campaigns? How should society react? Is society capable of doing something about it, something extraordinary to improve the situation?*

Society can resist. A very good historical example is the prohibition of alcohol in the United States. And, as I remember, there were also attempts at alcohol prohibition during the Communist regime, and the price of vodka was raised and what not. And people resisted - they made their own vodka at home in a bathtub.

Thus, people are capable of resisting. In order to be successful, however, this has to be a very, very massive resistance. This is namely how the situation changed for homosexuals – it was through massive protests that homosexuality realised the recognition of their rights in the United States. They resisted. They organised and resisted. Feminism was also a resistance movement. As for the Black Power movement in America, this was a resistance movement from the people.

RJ *But why can't we say that this movement has resulted in a huge advancement, and why can't we say that liberty is growing, that democracy and human rights are improving. Why can't we say that our society is becoming more democratic?*

Well, look, in some areas, society has become more democratic. When the Berlin Wall was taken down, why was it taken down? Because too many people wanted to escape and there was too much resistance, which was world-wide. But we don't have that with respect to the sphere of medical assistance. Many people like the idea that, in the case that they get sick, the State will take care of them. **People don't just want to be free - they want to be secure and taken care of** – by the church, by the state, by their family.

RJ *In other words, there exists some psychological source for this dependence? Is it possible that people will ever get rid of this feeling of dependence?*

We will never rid ourselves of this feeling. All of us depended on our parents when we were, say, fifteen years old. That's what I mean by dependence. We depend on other people, and we want them to behave, not to become alcoholics or criminals. Dependence is just as important as freedom. We should acknowledge this as a psychological and a social fact. We all depend on something. We don't live on an uninhabited island - we live in society and we depend on its rules. We depend on companies that produce electricity. If our computer gets broken, we are dependent on a specialist to come fix it.

RJ *Do you feel that, given today's situation, what is needed is a call for change?*

I think of myself as a social observer and a commentator, I am not a revolutionary, and I am not interested in changing society. Society changes itself all the time. I am more than ninety years old, and everything is different than it was. So, everything has changed, but is it any better? In some ways it is better, and in some ways it's worse. For people who like personal liberty, things are generally worse in America. I imagine that they are generally better in Russia. I have never been to Russia and I don't know, to tell the truth, except for the information we read, which tends to be unreliable. Among my favourite

Russian writers, in particular there is one writer and one story that I would like everyone to read – it is a story by Anton Chekhov, called “Ward number six”. That's the greatest psychiatric story ever written so far in the history of the world. That's as it really was, and that's exactly how it is today, except it is better, and it is different. The content is the same, but the packaging is different.

RJ *What lesson can we derive from this story of Chekhov?*

We must realise that it is in our own best interests to behave within the bounds of society, at least to the point that we do not fall into this abyss that he describes, when we become of interest to people in

power. And if the people in power think that there is something wrong with us and that something needs to be done about that, then we are finished. One is either labelled as a criminal or a revolutionary or a crazy person, or a deviant. So, what was written in Western sources, this was very much the case with the KGB in Russia. The thing to do was not to attract their attention. Once you have come to their attention, you had a problem. That is very much like the situation here with psychiatrists. Once you have grabbed their attention, you may forget about leading a normal life any more. ■

*Thomas Szasz was speaking with
Kseniya Kolkunova*

A MUSICIAN WHO DISLIKES HIS OWN MUSIC

During his lengthy scientific and public career, Thomas Szasz has managed to rise to prominence in quite many areas. Sometimes he is called “a musician who dislikes his own music”. As a professional psychotherapist, who has held his own practice for a long time, he has devoted many books to critiquing psychological therapy as a science. Raising the issues of human rights and ethics in relation to the intrusion into the human psyche, Szasz proclaims the impossibility and unethical conditions of psychiatric methods of treatment in terms of both the use of pharmaceuticals and techniques involving the isolation of patients from society.

“*Mental illness is a myth*” – that is the credo of and basically sums up Szasz's works. In his view, notions about the existence of a norm ascend towards Victorian science, in which approach the human organism was viewed as something like a machine. The brain, like any other human organ, can get sick, but this is a neurological problem. Our mental health, which is the realm of psychiatrists in modern society, has nothing to do with the brain as an organ. The problems caused by viruses and infections in the brain, or by traumas, for example, or by epilepsy, should be treated by neurologists, not by psychiatrists. However, the latter are reluctant to lose their positions and their influence on society.

Szasz's views are quite clearly reflected in the titles of his two most famous books: “The myth of mental illness: foundations of a theory of personal conduct” and “The manufacture of madness: a comparative study of the inquisition and the mental health movement”. The comparison of psychiatry to the inquisition is one of Szasz's favourite

metaphors. There were no witches, but there were women who were accused of being witches. There are no mentally sick people, but there are people who have indeed been labelled as such by the society.

Since 1958, Szasz began to fight against the use of the notion of a “mentally sick person” as a legal term. According to Szasz, a mental illness defines a person's culpability not more than his possession by demons. Szasz also vocally spoke out against the forced placement of purportedly ill people into mental hospitals. He believes that this represents a violation of the basic principles of the patient-doctor relationship, by which the latter is essentially transformed into a jailer.

Szasz, who views himself as a libertarian, is a supporter of the free market, including the free market with respect to the provision of medical services and mental care. For Szasz, libertarianism means that individual freedom is a much more important value than mental health, however we may understand it. A libertarian views people as grown-up, sui juris entities, who are responsible for their own deeds and who do not require the care of the state. Legislation should protect the rights and liberties of people, but it is not within their capacity to protect people from themselves.

Kseniya Kolkunova

