

The Therapeutic State | Thomas Szasz

[The Shame of Medicine: Alan Turing Redux](#)

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In [my May 2009 column](#) I recounted the tragic story of the medical-legal persecution of the famed British mathematician and World War II code breaker Alan Turing. In June, John Graham-Cumming, a British computer programmer, created a petition on the “No. 10 Downing Street” website asking for a government apology for Turing’s mistreatment. On September 10, Prime Minister Gordon Brown issued a formal apology on behalf of the U.K. government, stating, in part:

Earlier this year, I stood with Presidents Sarkozy and Obama to honour the service and the sacrifice of the heroes who stormed the beaches of Normandy 65 years ago. And just last week, we marked the 70 years which have passed since the British government declared its willingness to take up arms against fascism and declared the outbreak of the Second World War. So I am both pleased and proud that, thanks to a coalition of computer scientists, historians and LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] activists, we have this year a chance to mark and celebrate another contribution to Britain’s fight against the darkness of dictatorship: that of code-breaker Alan Turing.

Brown was clueless. Turing had nothing in common with LGBT activists. Comfortable in his identity as a homosexual man, he killed himself because the “treatment” “transgendered” him in ways he did not expect and was not told about. Calling Turing “a quite brilliant mathematician” was another of Brown’s gaucheries. Turing, Brown continued, “was one of those individuals we can point to whose unique contribution helped to turn the tide of war. The debt of gratitude he is owed makes it all the more horrifying, therefore, that he was treated so inhumanely.” Would Turing have been less deserving of belated compassion if he had been just another Englishman caught in the web of his country’s anti-homosexual laws?

“Laws,” warned Solon, the sixth-century B. C. Athenian philosopher, “are the spider’s webs which, if anything small falls into them they ensnare it, but large things break through and escape.” The special irony of the Turing case is that he was not treated as any ordinary violator of the prohibition against gay sex would have been: He was allowed to choose between imprisonment and “medical treatment.” He made the wrong choice. Despite his high intelligence and familiarity with medical crimes in the Third Reich, Turing failed to understand that medical criminals abound in all modern societies, most insidiously in so-called “free societies.”

Brown says that Turing was “treated inhumanely.” That’s not exactly true. He could have gone to prison, where he could have worked, had visitors, and would have been unmolested by psychiatrists, and from which he would have emerged physically and

mentally undamaged, as had Gandhi, Nehru, Castro, and many other prominent historical figures. Turing was treated inhumanely because he as well as his doctors failed to heed George Washington's famous warning: "Government is not reason; it is not eloquence; it is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master."

Physicians who work for the government's law-enforcement apparatus do not practice therapeutic medicine and are not healers. They practice anti-therapeutic prosecution, governed by the principle *Primum nocere* (first, do harm): They are professional injurers who define the harm they do as help. Such doctors are medical criminals, the gravity of their crimes depending on the particular laws they help to enforce and the methods they use.

Therapeutic Scapegoating

Turing was blind to the nature of the political system that victimized him. Brown is blind to the nature of the political system over which he presides and the fundamental similarities between it and the system he criticizes. Many more people are now persecuted in the United Kingdom (and in the United States) for "abusing" drugs than were persecuted for "abusing" sex. Neither of these modern (quasi-religious) scapegoat-persecutions could have occurred without the approval and assistance of medical professionals. Yet it does not seem to occur to Brown to mention the role of doctors in the Turing affair, much less blame them or suggest that they, too, owe apologies to Turing and others.

German politicians have apologized for the Holocaust. American politicians have apologized for slavery and post-Pearl Harbor concentration camps. Psychiatrists have not apologized for their institutionalized misdeeds. The American Psychiatric Association (or the Royal College of Psychiatrists) is not about to declare:

We apologize. We erred when we declared homosexuality a disease and the forcible injection of female sex hormones an effective treatment for it. We committed evil when, instead of joining the defenders of liberty and endorsing the abolition of anti-homosexual legislation, we eagerly supported the coercive apparatus of the State and prostituted ourselves in the service of the social control of society's unwanted.

As an aside, it should be noted that the past medical treatment of homosexuals had included procedures such as surgical sterilization, carbon dioxide inhalation (a kind of suffocation by "gas-boarding"), and electric shock therapy.

Psychiatrists will never apologize for their crimes because they never acknowledge responsibility for harming people. For example, when criticized for depriving people of liberty, they assert that they do not commit mentally ill persons to insane asylums—judges do. "Mental health professionals must understand," explains Robert Simon in *Psychiatry and Law for Clinicians*, "that it is not they who make commitment decisions about patients. Commitment is a judicial decision that is made by the court or by a

mental health commission.” Psychiatrists call ordinary criminals who deny responsibility for their misdeeds “psychopaths” and say they have no conscience. Doctors, lawyers, politicians, and the press call psychiatrists who deny responsibility for 300 years of psychiatric slavery “conscientious physicians” and honor them as medical healers. Reality, not just history, is written by the victors.

As long as psychiatrists are accepted as medical specialists possessing the privilege to forcibly classify persons as patients and impose tortures on them as treatments, they will not apologize. Acknowledging that the classification of homosexuality as a disease was a mistake would open a Pandora’s box of doubts about the disease status of currently fashionable mental illnesses.

Brown ended by exulting, “This recognition of Alan’s status as one of Britain’s most famous victims of homophobia is another step towards equality, and long overdue. . . . Alan and the many thousands of other gay men who were convicted, as he was convicted, under homophobic laws, were treated terribly.”

Turing was not a victim of homophobia. Many persons are still “homophobic”—and “phobic” as well of Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and atheists, among others—but they have no power to deprive the persons they fear and hate of liberty. Turing was the victim of medical doctors who declared male homosexuals ill and declared torturing them a form of humane “medical treatment.”

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