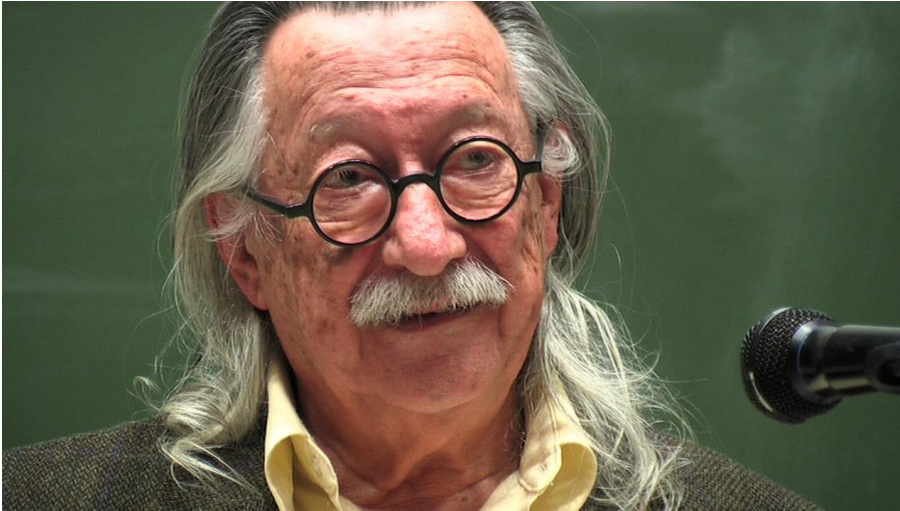


From „computer freak“ to social critic: Joseph Weizenbaum (1923–2008)



Joseph Weizenbaum in Jena, 2006
[Photo: Peter Haas/Flickr]

Joseph Weizenbaum was a German-American computer scientist and social critic.

The son of Jewish parents was born in Berlin in 1923 and emigrated to the US with his family in 1936. He studied mathematics at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he graduated in 1950 and began his career as a computer scientist. In World War II, he served with the U.S. Air Force.

In 1963, Weizenbaum was appointed professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he worked until his retirement in 1988. There, Weizenbaum developed ELIZA, the first software you could „talk“ to, in 1966. It simulated a conversation with a psychologist and was celebrated as a milestone in Artificial Intelligence. Weizenbaum was horrified, however, at how seriously many people took this relatively simple program, revealing their most intimate details in dialogue.

ELIZA was a key event for the computer scientist, which made him a critic of a thoughtless belief in computers. His criticism led him to write *Computer Power and Human Reason*, published in 1976. For him, artificial intelligence systems were a tool. He stressed that the actual decision-making power must always remain in human hands.

Joseph Weizenbaum always retained a connection to Berlin's universities. He taught as visiting professor at the Technical University of Berlin. From 1999 to 2008, he used his experience to guide the "Institute of Electronic Business", an institute affiliated with the Berlin University of the Arts, in his capacity as chairman of the Scientific Council.

From 1996, Joseph Weizenbaum came to live in his city of birth. In 2001, he was awarded the German Grand Federal Cross of Merit. The computer pioneer and social critic died near Berlin in 2008 at the age of 85.