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Jacob Taubes: Looking into the Beauty of the Night

The academic folklore around Jacob Taubes could fill a few volumes of *The Best Academic Gossip*, if such a thing existed. (Itâs a great wonder that no one has ever thought to publish something like that; why limit academic gossip to its literal meaning? As we can see from the stories about Taubes, gossip can be tightly interwoven with an academicâs intellect and worldview). Among the many stories–some well-known professors would swear them true–Taubes is famous for having forged items in his academic vitae while teaching at Harvard and inventing a whole bibliography on the spot when ambushed by a group of professors; for embarrassing and sometimes humiliating distinguished scholars and politicians; for seducing women around the world, including in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem; and for possibly causing the suicide of his ex-wife Susan Taubes (b. Feldman, 1928-69), an exceptional thinker in her own right. Taubesâs conflicted spirit found a haven in the stormy intellectual atmosphere of post-Holocaust German and German-Jewish academia. His rivals were often those he most loved and admired, and his relationship with Gershom Scholem is a case study of this. Between the early 1950s and late 1970s Taubes admired Scholem and simultaneously attacked him. The best example of this schizophrenic relationship can be seen in Taubesâs plan in the late 1970s to organize an âanti-festschriftâ for Scholem, an effort that was blocked when Scholem learnt about it, and warned the president of the Freie Universitaet in Berlin that any such publication would make him turn against the university as a whole. In spite of his exceptional sense of rivalry, or perhaps because of it, Taubes is known as one of the most brilliant thinkers of the postwar generation–a generation that included some of Taubesâs own teachers–Scholem and Leo Strauss, Martin Buber and Ernst Cassirer, Hugo Bergman and, less directly but no less importantly, Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig. Among his disciples or intellectual descendants are many of the contemporary worldâs academic aristocracy, among them–to name just a few–Jan and Aleida Assmann, Susan Sontag , Avital Ronell, Peter Sloterdeijk, and Giorgio Agamben, who did not study or work with Taubes, but has admitted the importance of his lessons to contemporary critical thinking. From Taubesâs students and friends one finds as many stories about his cruelty towards those he disliked or failed to appreciate as stories about his extraordinary intellectual performances, exhibited in nightlong monologues in which he would interpret and recite–from

memory–whole midrashic tales with their Halachic context, complete philological tractates originating from the fathers of the church or Marcionite Gnosticism, reaching the contemporary artistic, political, or literary unconscious. Taubes, according to both rumor and the scarce written word–his dissertation, *Occidental Eschatology,* is the only complete book he ever wrote–was equally well versed in Talmud and left Hegelianism, and in Jewish, Gnostic, and Christian traditions. He freely alluded to ancient Jewish sources, the fathers of the church, scholastic theologians, and Enlightenment philosophers , ancient esoteric writings, and modern revolutionary ones. His lectures, collected by his loyal students, zigzag between ancient philosophical and theological principles, medieval scholasticism, and modern aesthetic and political implications. His ideas are as brilliant as they are inconsistent and ungrounded–many of his lectures ended with a soliloquy about the gaps and absences behind all kinds of identities and traditions, emphasizing the lack of continuity or instable identity rather than its coherence. Taubes was a sad and a sick man (he was diagnosed and hospitalized with a clinical depression that he discusses openly in his letters), but also a man of exceptional erudition who looked at the world from a post-Holocaust and post-apocalyptic perspective, with a black sense of humor and a cynical view of the habits and norms of the world. Taubesâs final, agonized conclusion was a tortured reflection on the demise of democracy and the failed hope for the independence of the free spirit. He chose to focus on those neglected thresholds in Western culture–for example the forgotten community of Christian Jews in Jerusalem, shortly before the destruction of the temple–that occupy the liminal space between conflicting worldviews. Such thresholds were as provocative as they were fascinating and fruitful. For Taubes those liminal areas allowed a structural critique that crossed national boundaries and conventional historical divisions. The gap in time separating Paul from modern thinkers was less important to him than how accurately Paul or Freud traced the threshold between Judaism and Christianity, or other âpublic enemies.â As Taubes described it in his scandalous lifelong admiration and simultaneous critique of the âCrown Jurist of the Third Reich,â Carl Schmitt, implying the famous distinction in Schmittâs 1932 *The Concept of the Political*: âThis is where an almost ninety-year-old man sat with someone who was a little over fifty and spelled out [Paulâs Romans] 9:11 … âEnemy is not a private concept; enemy is *hostis*, not *inimicus*, thatâs not my enemy.ââ Taubes places this within a modern post-Holocaust context, this time a Jew and a German, stemming from the older Jewish-Christian conflict that Paul confronted in a direct, often anti- Jewish, manner: âAnd this is the point I challenged Schmitt on, that he doesnât see this dialectic that moves Paul and that the Christian church after 70 has forgotten, that he adopted not a text but a tradition, that is, the folk traditions of church anti-Semitism, onto which he, in 1933-36, in his uninhibited fashion, went on to graft the racist theozoology. That is something that he, the most important state law theorist, did indeed receive as a lesson.â[1] The interpretation of Romans 9 was mentioned as a thread that both connects and separates the Jew and the Christian, the German Jew and the German. Indeed, the gap has been opened by Paul–âremember that Paulâs appointed task is not that of an apostle to the Gentiles, but that of an apostle from the Jews to the Gentiles … he introduces the concept of the remnant and speaks of *pas* Israelâ–but the responsibility for a tendentious understanding of his intentions lies on Schmittâs shoulders.[2]

The importance of the new Stanford translations of Taubesâs small (but not modest) oeuvre cannot be understood without this short introduction. The translation of the two key texts Taubes published in his lifetime (in contrast to the posthumous *The Political Theology of Paul* [2004]), the first as a whole, the second only as individual essays, is an essential contribution to the contemporary understanding of such topics as political theology, religion and violence, and religious hatred. Taubesâs attempt to create the conditions of possibility in ancient esoteric texts has won much acclaim since the revival of interest in religion and theology in the early twenty-first century. The two texts before us, Taubesâs 1947 dissertation *Occidental Eschatology*–wonderfully translated and introduced by David Ratmoko–and a collection of Taubesâs essays from the next four decades–first published in German in the mid 1990s–demonstrate the relevance of intellectual history and continental philosophy to the contemporary understanding of our theopoliticized world. In addition, they show why only a Jew, or more–a German-speaking Jew–could stand at the most horrible crossroad of modern civilization shortly after the end of World War II, and teach ancient knowledge and erudition as a way to move forward beyond any simplistic solution or closure, be it nationalism, religious identity, or any social role.

Occidental Eschatology–an indirect attack on Taubesâs professors in ZÃ¼rich[3]–progressed from a revolutionary and apocalyptic Jewish tradition to the hidden âeschatological momentâ within German Idealism. âThe historical place of revolutionary apocalypti-

cism is Israel. Israel aspires and attempts to âturn backâ [*Umkehr]*.... The pathos of revolution defines Israelâs attitude to lifeâ (p. 15). Through the centuries and the legacy of a Paulinian-monotheistic world, Taubes reaches from Israel to Kant, no less: âIn a nearly forgotten essay about *Das Ende aller Dinge* [The End of All Things] ... the thought of âthe End of all Timeâ has âsomething horrifying about it because it leads, as it were, to the edge of an abyss,â the abyss of reason, âyet there is also something compelling about it, because one cannot help but keep looking back at it in horrorââ (p. 140).

âKeep looking back in horrorâ is indeed Taubesâs lesson, found in the least expected spot of all, at the heart of Kantian philosophy. Yet, it is a classic Taubesian trick he plays on his readers or listeners, trying to prove to them that they, his audience, are speaking the prophecy unintentionally but no less profoundly.

The book as a whole is speaking âTaubesianâ introspections without ever admitting the lines separating the personal from the impersonal. Taubes, who identified his academic role with the political and philosophical position of the stranger ever estranging social norms, reached the limit of alienation: Apocalypse is all about the stranger in exile–exile that is a mental-psychological state, a political and an intellectual state. Looking at the history of the world from the perspective of the apocalypse is choosing the ultimate perspective of estrangement. âThe theme of self-alienation is to be heard for the first time in the context of apocalypticism. Alienness or exile [*die Fremde*] and the topic of self-alienation permeate the whole of apocalyptic, Gnostic literature.... To be alien means: to come from elsewhere, not to be at home in this worldâ (p. 26). Rosenzweig and Martin Heideggerâs understanding of âhomelessnessâ echos in these words. Following them, Taubes concluded that every âturnâ must be understood with that absence at its midst: âThe dramatic homecoming that follows, as ordained by the motif of salvation, is the metaphysical history of the light deprived of light, of life in the world deprived of life, of the estranged life in the estrangement of the here and now. History is the path of light into the world, through the world and out of the worldâ (p. 27).

Looking at things from an apocalyptic point of view means–for Taubes–always considering the redemptive possibility of the Kingdom of God, or the possibility of evil and catastrophe and destruction. It is, above all, a temporal issue where âapocalypticism reveals the knowledge of what in time is like crisis [*das Krisenhafte der Zeit*]. Time appears as a stream, springing from the eternity of creation; after descending various gradients, it pours into the sea of eternity and redemptionâ (p. 34).

Occidental Eschatology develops such motifs as a structural paradigm that encompasses twenty-five hundred years and the whole of Judeo-Christian culture. It is obvious that what really interests Taubes is those ârevolutionary tidesâ that are ânot trivial and random but rhythmical and inevitable. Ideas and events which transform the nature of man and the features of humanity cannot be compressed into moments but must be seen through; they complete their course within a historical economy which comprises seemingly disparate centuriesâ (p. 87). Then again, the rhythmic shapes are seen as the ripples surrounding key revolutionary thinkers at a certain revolutionary moment, and the impact that ideas and events have on the intellectual descendents. In his later thinking, Taubes searched for a Paulinian master key to open all doors, one of the first in postmodern thought to use Paul as the pure hermeneutics of thresholds. In *Occidental Eschatology* it is the chiliastic theology and especially the medieval theology of Joachim of Fiore, which translates âthe chiliastic dream of a last empireâ and the âchiliastic papacyâ to âa new age and announced in a way which makes a new historical claim, one that positions itself alongside, and in the course of its development, counter to the claim made by the Roman Churchâ (p. 82).

Taubes ties it all to a language of symbols that unites modernity and antiquity: Behind the two of modern dialectic, there is the three of Christian theology, and behind both, there is the one of Jewish prophecy, coming to terms with the coming of new and destructive worlds. âA new principle is announced in the prophecy of Israel: the spirit of apocalypticism. This new canon expresses itself in apocalyptic visions and the formulations of Gnostic systemsâ (p. 22). This would turn out to be the leading principle of Taubesâs later reading–stunning in its interpretative power–of Paul. As Martin Treml, editor of the recent German edition of *Occidental Eschatology*, writes in his epilogue, âThe Paul of *Occidental Eschatology* appears to be the In-Between Figure [*Figur des Dazwischen*], shortly before Taubes would add here the messianic emphasis, of his later work.â[4]

The twenty-two essays collected in *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason* include essays written from 1953 to 1983 and published originally in 1996, nine years after Taubesâs death. They include elaborate contemplations about topics such as Jewish mysticism and Judeo-Christian messianism,

Christian theology in both ancient and modern times, ânotes on Surrealism,â and relevant work on the relationship between culture and ideology, âthe current state of Polytheism,â or religion and psychoanalysis. The editors of the collection, which is organized thematically, are a group of loyal disciples and peers, some of whom later organized the Paul lectures. The essays demonstrate a powerful far-reaching analysis that Charlotte Fonrobert–who edited the English edition together with Amir Engel–characterizes as âa battle against complacency and indifferenceâ (p. xiv). Since Taubes published his articles in both English and German, each edition translated about half of the articles.

Many of the essays move unhesitatingly from ancient and medieval theology to contemporary political structures. The essays elaborate on a theme prevalent in contemporary historical consciousness, the search for a shared ground for religion and culture. This shared ground can be imagined in the form of a series of secondary earthquakes, for, as the editors of the German edition wrote, âin Taubesâs understanding theology is a product of crisis, arising out of crisis of cult and of myth.â[5] There is no qualitative difference for Taubes between the crisis that follows the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the crisis following the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Both create conditions for change and the transformation of theological themes into profane politics. *Profanus*, after all, literally means âoutside the temple.â

The editors of the English edition chose to follow the German edition. In both, the editors open the book with one of Taubesâs later essays–but one that could have been written in 1953, shortly after Scholem cut Taubesâs support in Jerusalem and forced him to return to the United States. In the essay Taubes again mixes admiration with a loud battle cry: âI intend to examine the inner dynamics of the messianic idea in Judaism. This entails reconsidering Gershom Scholemâs theses on messianismâ (p. 3).Shortly before Scholemâs death, at the 1981 World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, Taubes presented the essay under the title âScholemâs Theses on Messianism Reconsidered.â The essay was later published as âThe Price of Messianismâ (1982). According to Taubes, while thinking within a very German tradition of ideas, âScholem has made a substantial contribution toward our understanding of messianism, shaping all our further scientific pursuit of the subjectâ (p. 3). But Taubes strives for more: following in the path set by Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem, and Schmitt he tries to uncover the hidden political-theological essence of a sovereignâs decision-making. âI tend to believe that such a static opposition between Jewish and Christian notions of redemption obfuscates the dynamics inherent in the messianic idea itselfâ (p. 4). This dynamic has to do with the hermeneutic significance of a threshold, an active hermeneutic rebellion against any static identity, especially the one Scholem identified with Judaism and cultural Zionism. âInteriorization is not a dividing line between âJudaismâ and âChristianityâ: it signifies a crisis within Jewish eschatology itself–in Pauline Christianity as well as in the Sabbatian movement of the seventeenth century. How else,â Taubes asks, âcan redemption be defined after the Messiah has failed to redeem the external world except by turning inward?â (p. 4). In other words, Taubes overcomes Scholemâs âJewishâ categories by extending their context to the Christian world, and viewing them from an anachronistic perspective, or by refusing the temptation of a clear identity, in favor of an inherent duality or a threshold. More than Judaism or Christianity, it is the line dividing the worlds–Jewish and Christian, Gnostic and Trinitarian, ancient and modern, aesthetic and prophetic, theological and political–that exposes the method and limits of demarcation, both from within and from the outside. âThe crisis is an inner Jewish event. The crisis of eschatology becomes for Paul a crisis of conscienceâ (p. 5). After the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, a rift opened between the external messianic ideal and a notion of internal redemption. Rabbinic Judaism rejected both in favor of âlife in suspensionâ(p. 9). The widening gap also implied a political gap wherever a messianic force was drafted in the service of modern nationalism. âWhen in our generation Zionists set out on âthe utopian retreat to Zion,â rabbinic authorities looked askance at the enterprise on the whole and were frightened by the âovertones of messianism.ââ Here Taubesâs words become a prophetic warning. âThe messianic claim ... has allowed wild apocalyptic fantasy to take over political reality in the state of Israel. If the messianic idea in Judaism is not interiorized, it can turn the âlandscape of redemptionâ into a blazing apocalypseâ (p. 9). His solution to the problem, one should note, is the exact opposite of an enlightened and a progressive rejection of messianism and religious power. Rather, it is a plea to internalize it, swallow it, and turn it to a theopolitical organ in the service of a revolutionary body.

In âThe Issue between Judaism and Christianity,â an article published in *Commentary* in 1953, shortly after Taubes returned from Jerusalem and before he began teaching at Harvard in fall 1954 (Buber and Bergmann were instrumental in getting him the fellowship), Taubes

argued that Paul was a better diagnostician of the Jewish-Christian rift than Rosenzweig, Buber, or Scholem. Paul represented to him a perfect fusion of Jewish knowledge and an outsiderâs conclusions, an exceptional familiarity with tradition and a deep longing to transgress norms, both political and religious. âAll the premises of Paulâs theology were âJewishâ and even âPharisaicâ but from these he drew heretical conclusionsâ (p. 53). It is for him âthis same Paulâ who studied under Gamliel and excelled at his studies, â[w]ho was better prepared than modern Jewish apologists to define the basic issue dividing Judaism and Christianityâ (p. 53).

Stories about Taubes refer often to his fierce spirit of rivalry and its effect on his scholarly work and personal life. But the issue here is different: Taubesâs system is a highly coherent one, extending directly from his life, with its gaps and lacks. His hermeneutics relies heavily on a set of aesthetic oppositions and a philosophical sense of rivalry that exists in both the world of ideas and in his own life. This âpermanent state of enmity,â in which he lived, motivated Taubes and supported his general understanding of the world as an entity made of pure libidinal and intellectual powers. Taubes, in contrast to other academics, was not shy about acknowledging this boiling sense of conflict, which for him united the personal with the intellectual, the emotional, and the abstract. Moreover, exposing this link allowed him to transgress the basic norms of the academia. It is not a coincidence that Taubes took intellectual freedoms that no other academic of his time took.[6] In purely textual terms, Taubes did not feel the need to back up his findings with either a serious bibliographical background or his own writing. That rebelliousness was part of his philosophical worldview, starting with Paulâs interpretation of the Jewish-Christian rift, leaping to the Jewish-German rift, and ending with an apocalyptic battle he conducted with his mentors, wife, lovers, students, colleagues, and finally, himself.

To conclude, Taubesâs folklore and his legacy–his verbal âTorahâ–demonstrate his commitment to a direct confrontation that carries hope. Taubes argues this point well in the last paragraph of *Occidental Eschatology*: âIf, looking into the beauty of the night, man does not mistake it but sees the darkness for what it is; if he recognizes his protective shells as mirages; if he perceives his insistence as dogged resistance and unmasks his self-made measures for the lies and errors they are–then day will dawn in this human world, and the transition from insistence to existence will followâ (p. 194).

The English translation of two of Taubesâs central writings, joining his important *The Political Theology of Paul*, translated brilliantly by Dana Hollander, has finally brought Taubesâs thinking to the English-speaking world and to the American academy. It comes at a time of–and should be considered in the context of–a much wider interest in Taubes that includes an important project at the Zenturm fuer Kultur und Literaturforschung (ZfL) in Berlin, a promised biography by Jerry Z. Mueller, and the highly introspective albeit short work of Joshua Robert Gold, who passed away last year at the age of 38. As interest in Taubes grows with these two excellent new translations into English (a few, scarce mistakes in *From Cult to Culture* do not diminish the high quality of the work, greatly assisted by the learned commentary of the editors in the footnotes), and some excellent work by young scholars, more work is needed to analyze both Taubesâs own life and scholarship, and the intellectual context in which he worked.

Notes

[1]. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 51.

[2]. Ibid., 38.

[3]. Taubes describes the early denunciation of his teachers as a major factor in his interest. See Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebige FÃ¼gung* (Berlin, Merve Verlag, 1987), 10.

[4]. Martin Treml, afterword to *AbendlÃ¤ndische Eschatologie*, by Jacob Taubes (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 2007), 278.

[5]. Jacob Taubes, *Vom Kult zur Kultur: Bausteine zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft*, ed. Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann, Wolf- Daniel Hartwich, and Winfried Menninghaus (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), 11.

[6]. For example, in âThe Jerusalem School: The Theopolitical Hourâ I discussed Taubesâs attraction to one of the leaders of the radical right wing in Israel, Geula Cohen. As Taubesâs own letters to Hugo Bergman demonstrate, it is impossible to separate his libidinal interest in her from his theopolitical curiosity regarding the Zionist âpolitical messianism.â In *New German Critique* 35, no. 3 105 (2008): 97-120.