



Jürgen Brokoff. *Die Apokalypse in der Weimarer Republik.* München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001. 188 S. EUR 30,00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-7705-3603-0.



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Considering the recent “apocalyptic tone” adopted by some political commentators and think-tanks in our post-September 11 world, Juergen Brokoff’s study *Die Apokalypse in der Weimarer Republik* is a timely piece indeed. Although its main focus is certainly the “apocalyptic tone” of the intellectual discourse in 1920s and 1930s Germany, much of Brokoff’s argument could easily refer to more recent trends and developments in the intellectual field.

Based on Brokoff’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Bonn in 1999, which was supervised by the eminent Germanist Juergen Fohrmann, this study is perhaps particularly worth recommending because it forces us to rethink the boundaries between religion and the political *imaginaire* during the Weimar Republic: the goal of the apocalyptic text, Brokoff suggests, consists in establishing a discursive regime within which only apocalyptic speaking is possible, that is, within which absolutes reign in an essentially self-destructive manner. Certainly, Brokoff is not the first scholar to consider this topic and its consequences, but much of what he has to say exceeds standard accounts by introducing a more “philosophical” perspective.[1] Ironically, apocalyptic discourse is always of an aporetic nature, unable to fulfill its premise of a final judgment/decision. Apocalyptic speech is thus always already connected to the po-

litical, and it is precisely the boundaries between the theological and the political that, over the last twenty years or so, have led to much discussion in German intellectual discourse, inspired in particular by the writings of Jacob Taubes and, more recently, Jan Assmann.[2] But while Taubes and Assmann approach this boundary from a largely theological and anthropological angle, Brokoff closely follows the arguments of Jacques Derrida’s *D’un ton apocalyptique adopte naguere en philosophie*. [3] As such, he is not so much interested in the content as in the form of apocalyptic discourse and seeks to examine its internal logic by focusing on the intersection between the structures of political thought and what might be termed “theological foundation myths” in the writings of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Juenger and Adolf Hitler.

Although Brokoff’s study presents itself occasionally as a form of sophisticated *Epochenkritik*, he clearly moves within the framework of recent literary criticism and theory: his main concern is not the content, or the political implications, of apocalyptic discourse within a particular historical context, but a detailed examination of its language and internal logic. Following well-known interpretations of the Revelation of John the Baptist as an apocalyptic discourse marked by the tension between immanence and transcendence, and taking into account

the recent theological and anthropological interest in the apocalypse as a figure of thought, Brokoff argues that intellectual discourse in the Weimar Republic (re-)politicizes the apocalypse, so that the original tension between immanence and transcendence becomes part of the political.[4] While seriously lacking in historical contextualization, this is undoubtedly an ambitious and worthwhile undertaking. At the end, however, there are also some fundamental problems, especially the question of whether the relationship between theology and the political can really be successfully addressed from the perspective of a philosophically inspired literary criticism.

While Brokoff's introduction and the first chapter seek to set the stage for things to come by outlining the recent debates and by presenting his own theoretical framework, his argument gains momentum from the second chapter onwards. At the center of this chapter on Carl Schmitt stands the latter's differentiation between "friend" and "foe," that is, the anthropologically oriented claim that the political meaning of human action is always based on this differentiation. Although Brokoff often refers back to those of Schmitt's early writings that have been somewhat neglected in recent Schmitt scholarship, especially the studies *Gesetz und Urteil* (1912) and *Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen* (1917), the main argument of this chapter rests on Schmitt's most prominent works, *Politische Theologie* (1922), *Politische Romantik* (1919) and *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1932). Within Schmitt's theory of the state, Brokoff rightly notes, "foes" are exactly those who do not accept the transcendental status of the sovereign, whose power does not derive from anyone other than himself. In the grey area between theology and political thought, this also means—at least according to Brokoff—that Schmitt's theory of the state, together with his decisionism, rests on an apocalyptic double-bind: the transcendental claim of the sovereign can only be defined in opposition to that which endangers the position of the sovereign. If there is no foe, in other words, there might not be a need for the transcendental status of the sovereign. The legal system of the state, safeguarded by the decisions of the sovereign, always needs to rely on its "other," while positing itself as an absolute. It is in this sense, Brokoff argues, that Schmitt's political theory mirrors the structure of the Revelation of John the Baptist, especially its image of the final judgment: worldly immanence is destroyed by transcendence, which can only exist, however, in relation to immanence. This, Brokoff argues along the lines of Derrida, results in an essentially impossible and self-destructive discourse that can also be

found in Walter Benjamin's theory of violence, itself the topic of the third chapter.

In a detailed interpretation of Benjamin's short essay "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" (1920-21), Brokoff highlights once again the intricate relationship between theology and law, focusing on Benjamin's notion of "Generalstreik," itself influenced by Georges Sorel. Like war, the general strike posits law, or at least a new legal situation suspending the previous one, through an act of "violence." Generally speaking, no law or legal system can come into existence without such an act: since there is no "original" law of a divine origin from which other laws can be derived, every law defines itself in opposition to a previous legal system. Needless to say, there are many parallels between Benjamin's theory of violence and Schmitt's decisionism, and the relationship between Benjamin and Schmitt has been the subject of much recent scholarly work. It is, however, interesting to note that Brokoff attributes to Benjamin an apocalyptic discourse, which rests on the very aporia that law can only begin with illegality (Brokoff himself speaks of the "ausweglose Immanenz des Rechts" [p. 61]). Needless to say, this aporetic dimension has generated much excitement in poststructuralist thought, so that Brokoff's interest in the connection between Schmitt and Benjamin needs to be seen against the background of the German reception of Derrida's *Force de loi* (1994).[5]

The fourth and fifth chapters focus on some of Ernst Juenger's politically most problematic writings of the 1920s and 1930s, in particular on *In Stahlgewittern* (1920), *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1922), *Die totale Mobilmachung* (1930) and *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (1932). Clearly influenced by his own experiences in the trenches of the First World War, and by the disastrous effects of the *Materialschlacht* on the Western front, Juenger begins to develop his own apocalyptic discourse within which industrialization, war and theological absolutes constitute a curious intellectual blend with wider anthropological consequences: both the *Arbeiter* and the *Soldat* constitute themselves as quasi-transcendental forces that symbolize what Brokoff perceives to be the "end of immanence" in apocalyptic discourse (p. 82). At the heart of modern society Juenger discovers a double structure of violence—the "worker" and the "soldier"—, which leads the history of civilization to a violent end precisely because the difference between the army of industrial workers and the army of soldiers is minimal. Although at first sight it seems that Juenger's emphasis on the worker within the modern industrial society promises a secularized social perspective in opposition to the political status

quo, he in fact establishes an essentially theological discourse of absolutes. The worker and the soldier are self-referential figures: although they can only define themselves in opposition to those who are neither workers nor soldiers (i.e. the bourgeoisie), they seek to negate and destroy their respective “other.”

Brokoff, then, is interested not in the actual content of what he terms “apocalyptic discourse,” but merely in its “structure.” On the one hand, he thus clearly accepts the limitations of his own approach, which occasionally resembles that variant of quasi-poststructuralist *Systemtheorie* which is currently very much in vogue in German literary criticism, but the results of which are not particularly spectacular: turning political theory into an exercise of literary criticism underestimates the interpretive sophistication of both. In contrast to some of the more curious blends of deconstruction and systems theory that have entered German literary criticism in recent years, Brokoff is very much aware of this problem. On the other hand, however, we need to ask whether this approach is really able to deal with highly charged texts such as Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. It is not surprising that Brokoff increasingly becomes suspicious of the general political implications of what he regards as the apocalyptic discourse of the Weimar Republic: if it really should be the case that German intellectual discourse during the 1920s and early 1930s is generally marked by such an apocalyptic regime within which absolutes are the norm, then one could argue that this prepares the ground—at least “structurally,” as Brokoff claims—for the Nazi politics of complete destruction (p. 74). The problem is, however, whether this is really a reasonable interpretation and whether it is possible to draw a seemingly straight line from Benjamin to Hitler. Certainly, somehow everything is “structurally” related to something else, but does this really tell us much about the Weimar Republic? It is of no surprise, then, that this study does not have much new to say about Hitler, the topic of the sixth and longest chapter, which proceeds very cautiously and carefully. It is certainly true that Hitler’s ideological convictions are based on the binary opposition between Aryan and Jewish culture, and that the apocalyptic tendency of *Mein Kampf* becomes evident in its emphasis on the complete destruction of the Jewish population, but it is questionable whether this really justifies reading Hitler through the lens of Derrida, as Brokoff suggests (pp. 148-149).

Despite the generally clear language, style and argument, and despite its otherwise recommendably logical approach, Brokoff’s attempt to follow the lines of Derrida occasionally falls into the trap of poststruc-

turalist dadaisms, which can only be appreciated, however, in the original German. Sentences like “Die Dekonstruktion Derridas ist der Generalstreik, ohne Generalstreik zu sein” (p. 71) might still be within the range of a mere figure of speech, but consider, for instance, the following, which merely states that apocalyptic discourse is always aporetic: “Durch die skizzierte Nicht-Identität von apokalyptischer Sprechsituation und apokalyptischer Entscheidungsstruktur, die sich aus der Differenz von Unentscheidbarkeit und Entscheidung ergibt, treten im apokalyptischen Text die mögliche Unendlichkeit des Sprechens und die tatsächliche Endlichkeit des apokalyptischen Sprechens auseinander” (p. 27). This conclusion is indeed a good example for the quasi-deconstructive aestheticization, and thus re-mythologization, of political thought in recent German literary criticism.[6] Perhaps this is the old problem of attempting to be more “deconstructive” than Derrida himself. But the problem of statements like this one, however, is not only a question of presentation: we need to ask whether the texts Brokoff discusses can really be interpreted according to such a seemingly sophisticated philosophical analysis, which tends to empty them of their historical relevance. With regard to Benjamin’s theory of violence this might still be in order, but Schmitt certainly has more to say, while we have to wonder whether it is really necessary to overinterpret Hitler’s political ideas in quite this way.

Either way, one of the most interesting and stimulating aspects of Brokoff’s study is, curiously enough, not his interpretation of apocalyptic discourse but his criticism of modernity as a process of secularization (p. 77). Brokoff announces this theme already at the beginning of his study by pointing out that “secularization” merely replaces the “transcendence of God” with another form of “transcendence,” such as that of the “sovereign,” of “violence,” etc. It is precisely in this sense, he argues, that we need to understand the theological and religious overtones in the work of Schmitt and Benjamin. Especially with regard to Schmitt, Brokoff successfully argues that, in contrast to a presumed process of secularization which moves from the religious and the metaphysical to the realms of the political and economic, intellectual discourse in the Weimar Republic is marked by the latent presence of the theological structures continuing to inform and shape the way in which, for instance, Schmitt, Benjamin and Juenger conceive of the political (pp. 37-40). After all, Schmitt famously notes himself that all central notions pertaining to the theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.[7] But does this mean that

theology precedes politics? Following Jan Assmann's suggestion that early Egyptian theology is essentially derived from the structures of political and social order[8], and that therefore theology does not precede politics, Brokoff indeed hits on an interesting problem he is unable to solve within the framework of his approach, but which nevertheless is perhaps one of his strongest points: considering the theological and religious tendencies he finds in both the style and the arguments of Schmitt, Benjamin and Juenger, the thesis that modernity constitutes a secularizing discourse comes into increasing difficulties (pp. 161-173). The question is essentially whether, in the intellectual discourse of the Weimar Republic and its political *imaginaire*, theological figures of thought have become politicized, or whether political absolutes (e.g. the role of the sovereign in Schmitt's decisionism) have become theologized. Are we faced, in other words, with a secularization of the theological, or with a theologization of the secular? Although Brokoff opts for the latter, he is a little unsure about the consequences of his conclusion. Again, this shows that he is able to accept the limitations of his own approach while not shying away from issues that clearly exceed the scope of his study.

In the end, we have to note that this is a very timely and worthwhile undertaking, which poses serious and difficult questions for intellectual historians of the Weimar Republic. At the same time, it is difficult to overlook, however, that the perspective of Brokoff's study is occasionally limited and his arguments led astray by the theologically charged language he employs.

Notes:

[1]. See, for instance, Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (Munich: dtv, 1988), and the contributions in Klaus Koch and Johann M. Schmidt, eds., *Apokalypstik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982). With a somewhat different emphasis, see also the contributions in Karlheinz Stierle and Rainer Warning, eds., *Das Ende: Figuren einer Denkform* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996).

[2]. Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebige Fuegung* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1987); Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Altaegypten, Israel und Europa* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 2000), and *Politische Theologie zwischen Aegypten und Israel*

(Munich: Carl-Friedrich-von-Siemens-Stiftung, 1992).

[3]. Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1983).

[4]. See, for instance, Ferdinand Hahn, *Fruehjudische und urchristliche Apokalypstik: Eine Einfuehrung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998); Wolfgang Sommer, ed., *Zeitenwende-Zeitenende: Beitrage zur Apokalypstik und Eschatologie* (Stuttgart, Berlin, and Cologne: Kohlhammer, 1997); Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); M. Bull, ed., *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1995); and Mathias Rissi, *Die Hure Babylon und die Verfuehrung der Heiligen: Eine Studie zur Apokalypse des Johannes* (Stuttgart, Berlin, and Cologne: Kohlhammer, 1995).

[5]. Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi : Le 'Fondement mystique de l'autorité'* (Paris: Galilée, 1994). For the German reception, see especially the contributions in Anselm Haverkamp, ed., *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit: Derrida-Benjamin* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), and Petra Gehring, "Gesetzeskraft und mystischer Grund: Die Dekonstruktion naehert sich dem Recht," in *Einsatze des Denkens: Zur Philosophie von Jacques Derrida*, ed. Hans-Dieter Gondek and Bernhard Waldenfels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 226-255.

[6]. For another prominent example of this sort of "argument," consider Bettine Menke's article "Benjamin vor dem Gesetz: Die Kritik der Gewalt in der Lektuere Jacques Derridas," in *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit*, ed. Haverkamp, pp. 217-275.

[7]. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveraenitaet* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1990), p. 49.

[8]. Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel*, pp. 77, 105.

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