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Book Review

Professor of Apocalypse: The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes

Jerry Z. Muller

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Jacob Taubes is a name that will likely be unfamiliar to many readers of this journal, but he wrote about many topics and persons of interest to libertarians, and in this superb book, the distinguished historian Jerry Muller does a magnificent job of discussing these. Muller has an almost unparalleled ability to explain complex ideas in simple terms, and he has a keen ear for nonsense as well.

Taubes, who was born in 1923, came from an Orthodox Jewish background and grew up in Zurich, where his father was Chief Rabbi. Muller stresses the difficult situation for Swiss Jews in the 1930s created by the increasing power of Nazi Germany, intensified by the onset of war in September 1939, and I would add to what he says the problems created by David Frankfurter's assassination of the Swiss Nazi politician Wilhelm Gustloff in February 1936. In 1938, Taubes met the "idiosyncratic persona" (p. 45) Oskar Goldberg, whose views on Jewish mysticism fascinated him. There is an interesting connection here with Carl Schmitt, one of Taubes's

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key intellectual interlocutors, in that Schmitt knew Goldberg, and the latter's depiction of Judaism influenced what Schmitt said about the Jews in his book on Hobbes. There is also a connection with Gershom Scholem, who was repulsed by Goldberg and viewed him as evil and a charlatan.

Taubes attracted notice from very early on for intellectual talent. He taught at Columbia University and the Free University of Berlin as a permanent faculty member and in other famous universities, including Harvard and Princeton, on a temporary basis. Many great scholars were impressed with his brilliance and wide range of reference, though some suspected he was a *poseur* skilled at faking what he did not know. He published very little, and the importance of what he did succeed in writing has again led to conflicting evaluations. But one point does not admit of doubt; he knew an astonishingly large number of intellectuals and influenced many of them.

There is another aspect of Taubes's life that Muller brings out, though I will not go into it in detail in this review. Taubes had a magnetic personality and people often found him charming, but many of those who knew him viewed him as evil. He suffered from hypomania and had almost no control over his strong erotic passions, and the tangled emotional webs he spun led to the suicide of his first wife, Susan. (Muller tells us, by the way, that she "renamed herself, by taking on the middle name 'Anima'—the Latin word for soul, a term with vaguely mythic or Gnostic connotations." (pp. 182–83) This provides another interesting connection with Carl Schmitt, as Schmitt's daughter was also named "Anima.") For decades he feuded with the great scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem. Taubes went to Jerusalem to study with Scholem, who regarded him as someone with great talent, but Taubes revealed to one of Scholem's doctoral students a private comment Scholem had made about his dissertation, and his doing so may have contributed to the student's suicide. The damage this did to Taubes's relations with his former mentor never was repaired, and Scholem became a major propagator of the view that Taubes was evil. One gets the impression from the book that, though Scholem lacked Taubes's "Mephistophelian" propensities, he wasn't a very "nice" person either.

Among the many people that Jacob Taubes knew was Friedrich Hayek, and it is an essay by Hayek that poses the key question that

must be answered to evaluate Taubes's significance as a thinker. When Taubes visited Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago, he "also took the occasion to meet another scholar from central Europe, the liberal economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek, and tucked away in his mind information about Hayek's current interests in the philosophy of science that he would make use of two decades later." (p. 182). At that later time, Taubes was seeking to bring Paul Feyerabend to the Free University of Berlin, and he wrote to Hayek, who "pronounced Feyerabend 'the most talented, rich in ideas, and multi-faceted among the younger German-speaking theoreticians of science' and sent to Taubes a collection of Feyerabend's articles. . . ." (p. 334)

The essay by Hayek that I mentioned is "The Intellectuals and Socialism,"[1] in which he calls intellectuals "secondhand dealers in ideas" whose function is "not that of the original thinker or the scholar or expert in a particular field of thought." Was Taubes an intellectual in this sense or was he more than this? That is the key question I referred to earlier.

The most important of Taubes's intellectual contributions was his short dissertation, *Occidental Eschatology*, finished when he was twenty-three. In it, he argues that "

> the notion that history has a linear direction rather than a recurrent, nature-like pattern, is a product of the eschatological habit of mind with its origins in the Hebrew Bible. For, so Taubes argues, it is the notion that history is headed to some end that makes it possible to view history as a meaningful process. . . . The book traces the origins of this eschatological vision in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, then follows its medieval transformations and its ultimate secularization in modern German philosophy and in Marxism. (p. 74)

In making this argument, he borrowed heavily from the seminal work of Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*; and in another key theme of the book, the history of Gnosticism and apocalypticism, the influence of the philosopher Hans Jonas's Heideggerian interpretation of the Gnostics is evident. (In his stress on the importance of the Gnostics, Jonas drew from Oswald Spengler, and when he wrote to Spengler, he replied that Jonas was the only person who had understood his remarks in *The Decline of the West* about the Gnostics.) "Apocalyptics search for signs that the existing order is coming to an

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[1] Available at https://cdn.mises.org/Intellectuals%20and%20Socialism_4.pdf

end and they engage in action to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Gnostics convey knowledge (gnosis) about the fallenness of the world, and they claim to know of an alternative, more perfect order." (p. 75) Taubes found in both movements

> a revolutionary pathos. . . . Apocalyptic movements inevitably fail. . . . But, Taubes asserts, they serve as the motor force of history, transforming old orders into new ones. Their failure leads to a new round of Gnosticism, which serves as a subterranean stream of discontent until the next round of apocalyptic enthusiasm and redemptive action. (p. 75)

In applying his interpretation of these movements to the understanding of Marx, Taubes was influenced by Eric Voegelin, though Voegelin used his analysis to criticize Marxism while Taubes was favorable to it. Murray Rothbard also viewed Marxism as a secularized form of heretical theology: see his "Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist."[2]

Though Taubes derived many of his ideas from others, Muller finds merit in the book. "His bold attempt was to synthesize this diverse material into a coherent narrative and analytic framework."(p. 75) I would add that Amos Funkenstein, whose *Philosophy and the Scientific Imagination* is in my opinion one of the greatest twentieth-century books dealing with intellectual history, thought highly of *Occidental Eschatology* and recommended it to me. (Muller discusses Funkenstein, who was a student of Taubes, on pp. 319–20)

Löwith wrote about the religious origins of the progressive understanding of history, but he did not like the view himself, preferring instead the cyclical understanding of history found among the Greeks. In this he was at one with his friend Leo Strauss. When Taubes attended the Jewish Theological Seminary in the late 1940s, Louis Finkelstein, the President of the Seminary, paid Strauss to tutor Taubes in the thought of Maimonides.

> His studies focused on what he dubbed "the theological-political predicament". . . the members of a polity require rules that restrict and restrain their evil and base impulses. Most people are more likely to obey such rules if they believe that the rules are 'laws' of divine origin, such that transgressing the laws will result in ultimate punishment, and obeying them will result in ultimate reward. But it is the nature of

[2] Available at https://www.rothbard.it/essays/marx-religious-eschatologist.pdf

> philosophy to call into question the divine origin (and hence validity) of such rules. . . . So understood, the theological-political predicament entails the recognition of a tension between the philosopher's open-ended quest for knowledge and the normative demands of any polity for consensus, order, and restraint. The philosopher is an atheist, or at least a skeptic when it comes to received opinion. (p. 113)

Strauss saw Maimonides in the light of this model. In Strauss's view, Maimonides wrote esoterically, "leaving intact the belief among the multitude in the divine origin of the law (commandments) and hence its binding nature. That, Strauss maintained was a belief that the philosopher knows to be a likely tale' or even a noble lie'—noble because it promotes the well-being of society." (p. 114) I have thought it important to present this account of Strauss because Harry Jaffa and his followers have offered a "Straussian" understanding of the American Founding according to which every person has equal rights. Muller makes clear that this was not Strauss's view. Taubes, reviewing Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, "noted the esoteric element of the work; for the book began with a warning that the self-understandings of the Declaration of Independence were being eroded, but then proceeded to attack the philosophy of Locke, upon which the Declaration was based." (pp. 225–26) Taubes came to reject Strauss's account of the ancients, though this did not lead him closer to support for natural rights as Jaffa and his followers understand them.

Far from it. He preferred the intensity of Carl Schmitt's thought to a liberalism he deemed pallid and bourgeois, and though Schmitt had been for a time a Nazi and Taubes was a Jew seared by the Holocaust, he regarded Schmitt as the greatest mind in Germany and the two thinkers came to be friends.

Like Taubes, Schmitt was interested in the relation between theology and politics, though he rejected Taubes's appeals to the apocalyptic, viewing himself rather as the *Katechon*, who holds the forces of chaos in check. He famously said, in a way that influenced Taubes, that significant political concepts are secularized theological concepts, but I would be inclined to understand what this means in a way slightly different from Muller. He says,

> Just as deists believed that God created the world with its own laws that did not require further divine intervention in the form of miracles, so did liberals believe that government could be constituted by a set of rules and procedures alone. . . . The obverse of this was that there was some sort of analogy (Schmitt was vague on this) between the religious belief

> in God's ability to perform miracles and the political sovereign's ability to suspend the normal constitutional rules. (p. 63)

I would take the analogy in question not to be vague. Schmitt took from the medieval nominalists the distinction between God's absolute power (*potentia Dei absoluta*) and the ordinary course of nature (*potentia Dei ordinata*) and applied this to the sovereign's power to suspend law in times of emergencies. Schmitt's interpretation of this distinction was at the heart of his debate with Hans Blumenberg, a great intellectual historian and philosopher who influenced Taubes and was friendly with him, though he later viewed Taubes more negatively. As Muller explains in excellent fashion, Blumenberg saw this distinction as crucial for the modern world's break with the ancient and medieval world views, but Schmitt thought otherwise.

I would also be inclined to look at Schmitt's debate with Erik Peterson, another thinker who influenced Taubes, somewhat differently from Muller. He writes, "Taubes then launched into a discussion [in his visit to Schmitt] of political theology, specifically of Erik Peterson's 1935 critique of Schmitt's conception of political theology, in which Peterson had insisted that no preferred political form could be deduced from a proper understanding of the Trinity." (p. 461) I would rather say that Peterson criticized Schmitt for ignoring the significance of the equality of the persons of the Trinity, and he thought this led Schmitt wrongly to his analogy between God and the sovereign. Schmitt rejected the criticism, and his response to it is a principal theme of his *Political Theology II*.

I have been able to cover only a few of the topics in this vast book, but I hope I have said enough to indicate its high quality. Taubes's brand of conceptual history deserves our attention, although those who, like Quine, prefer "desert landscapes" will not find it entirely satisfactory.