

Professor of Apocalypse: The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes

By Jerry Z. Muller. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.
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Jerry Z. Muller's engrossing portrait of the influential, mercurial figure of Jacob Taubes is both a biography and much more: it is also a study of the wide-ranging milieu through which Taubes cut the path of his "many lives," in the words of the book's subtitle. Muller wryly describes this aspect of his book as an "intellectual Baedeker" (5), but he is quite right that very few readers will be deeply acquainted with all of the major intellectual settings that Taubes traversed, and his accounts of them are rich and incisive. As for Taubes himself, how does one write an intellectual biography of someone who published only a single book during his lifetime, and whose most characteristic talents shone not in his scholarly productivity but in his role as an interlocutor? Part of Muller's solution was to conduct copious interviews – over 100 – with those who knew Taubes to supplement his archival research and contextualization.

To invoke Isaiah Berlin's image, Taubes was an intellectual hedgehog, a thinker guided by a single, compelling idea. It was already laid out in his doctoral dissertation, which soon after appeared as *Occidental Eschatology* (1947), the only book he published during his lifetime. In it, Taubes – not without precedents, as Muller demonstrates – traced the lineage of the Gnostic and apocalyptic tradition in Christianity and extolled its "revolutionary pathos," which he saw as creating a "subterranean stream of discontent" to be tapped into by future advocates of "apocalyptic enthusiasm and redemptive action" (75), up to and including the present. In this bifurcated, antinomian view of the world, the mundane order – including the bourgeois world of his own time – was a corrupted, false world fit for destruction. This worldview partly explains Taubes's dialogues and affinities with contemporary intellectuals of both the left (the authentic core of Marxism was eschatological, for Taubes) and the radical right, including Carl Schmitt among many others, which was another distinctive feature of his thought. *Occidental Eschatology* also already displayed three of Taubes's enduring features: the audacious scope of his vision; his interest in being a "seer" (5), which led some to regard him as a charlatan or worse; and a belief that the spiritually enlightened bearers of Gnostic wisdom were entitled to license for what the normal order regarded as transgressive behavior, whether political, sexual, or both.

The waystations of Taubes's journey began in the Viennese and Swiss rabbinic worlds of his family origins; it was during his Zurich years that he "acquired a set of interests and a stock of erudition that would carry him through much of the rest of his life" (52). Muller provides deeply researched accounts, full of discoveries and surprises, of his time at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he fascinated a wide variety of budding New York intellectuals; of his often-conflicted stay in Jerusalem in 1949-1952, where he thoroughly alienated Gershom Scholem; of stints at Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton; and, in four long chapters, of his move to the Free University of Berlin in the 1960 where, sensing an "apocalyptic moment" (336), he would come to publicly champion leftist student radicals but eventually become disillusioned, setting off a painful political and personal process of deradicalization, after which his psychic and bodily health began to collapse.

Taubes's personality was what enabled him to pull all this off: he could be a fierce polemicist but also a deeply, personally engaging teacher and interlocutor; he excelled as a "merchant" (241) or, better, an "impresario of ideas" (316). He was also sexually and even carnally voracious, topics to which Muller devotes sustained attention. Given that Taubes ultimately

suffered a psychic collapse and was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder, it is difficult to avoid psychological categories entirely when discussing his character. Without engaging in psychological reductionism, Muller sensibly argues that, before his breakdown, Taubes exhibited characteristics of a milder disorder, hypomania: “enhanced liveliness, interpersonal charm, and a high degree of perceptiveness, together with a sometimes uncanny ability to find vulnerable spots in others and to make use of them” (7); a strong libido and a taste for transgression of social norms; and, not least, “intellectual energy, creativity, and personal effervescence” (450-451).

Taubes’s relationships with women form a central theme, not a sideline, in Muller’s account. This aspect of his life, and perforce Muller’s account of it, is bound to remain a subject of fascination and controversy. Not the least reason is that the fiction and life of his first wife, Susan Feldman Taubes, are objects of interest in their own right; she committed suicide soon after the publication of *Divorcing* (1969), a roman à clef about their relationship. The old-fashioned phrase “compulsive womanizing” does not begin to do justice to Taubes’s infidelities and his sometimes plainly inappropriate relations with women, but neither does it cover them all. Here, too, Muller strives for nuanced and balanced verdicts that will nevertheless inevitably elicit disagreement.

Taubes’s struggles with his Jewish identity were one of the most revealing and complex aspects of his life, and Muller’s multifaceted, deeply researched account of his painful ambivalences is one of the great strengths of this book. By dint of his family background and intensive early studies, Taubes acquired an impressive command of Jewish learning that few of his interlocutors outside of Jerusalem could rival. He was also known by friends to be devout in some aspects of his religious practice, favoring Orthodox synagogues and praying fervently. Yet he was unable to reconcile his religious practice with his conflicted attitudes about the truth of Jewish beliefs. Revealingly, Taubes cultivated a lifelong fascination with the Apostle Paul, whom he saw as an antinomian revolutionary and the creator of a “new charismatic community” (252; also 89-90, 487-494); there was no small amount of identification and projection in Taubes’s version of Paul, the subject of his posthumously published lectures *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus* (*The Political Theology of Paul* [1993]). As Muller aptly describes the tension, Taubes was “an observant Jew with a strong Pauline streak” (108).

Jerry Muller’s lively, erudite, lucidly written study takes its place as the definitive biography of Jacob Taubes and as an important book about a chapter in the intellectual relationships between religion and politics in the twentieth century.

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Ein Mantel des Schweigens. Der Umgang mit der NS-Geschichte in Opfer- und Täterfamilien

**By Johannes Reitter. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2022.
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Johannes Reitter’s meticulous study focuses on silence and intergenerational Holocaust memory in perpetrator and victim families in Austria and Germany. The book follows in the footsteps of Dan Bar-On, who, working with German families, identified “a double wall of silence” (15) built by both the wartime generation and their children. Taking oral