Jacob's ladder

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Professor of Apocalypse:
The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes
Jerry Z. Muller
Princeton University Press

"God is not bourgeois," said Jacob Taubes. Neither was Taubes, a brilliant interpreter of the ways in which politics is a continuation of religion by other means. A new biography, *Professor of Apocalypse*, by Jerry Muller, portrays an erratic enfant terrible who thrived on scandal, intrigue and disorder – a flouter of social proprieties and disciplinary boundaries alike. Muller renders a compelling portrait of "a wanderer between worlds", a man of inner disjunctions, poised "on the border between Judaism and Christianity, between scepticism and belief, between scholarly distance and religious fervor". But in tracing Taubes' fissured life – from Vienna to wartime Switzerland, from post-war New York to Jerusalem to Cold War Berlin – Muller gives us something larger: a final snapshot of the German–Jewish encounter, pulled into focus by a failed Jewish preacher to the gentiles.

Born in Vienna in 1923 into an illustrious rabbinic family, Taubes was educated in Switzerland, where he studied Talmud

with Moshe Soloveitchik at the Montreux yeshiva and Protestant theology with Karl Barth in Basel. In his doctoral dissertation at the University of Zurich (the first and last book he would publish in his lifetime), Taubes surveyed messianic movements from the Hebrew Bible to nineteenth-century Marxism. "The pathos and the tremendous power of Marxist ideas," Taubes argued, "rest upon a theory of human salvation and the messianic vocation of the proletariat." In short, Marxists – not unlike the ideologists of the French and American revolutions – drew on religion as a source of utopian longing, in the attempt, Taubes said, to establish a "Kingdom of God – without God".

A couple of years after World War II ended, the 24-year-old Taubes escaped from the clutches of his traditionalist family to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York. One of his friends there, Richard L. Rubenstein (later to author the groundbreaking book *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*), noticed "something indefinably disturbing, one might almost say demonic, about the man". Taubes seemed to care more about avoiding banality than cultivating rigour. He dismissed empirical social research as "*schmonzes*" (trifles), derided the "*schmalz*-theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" and disdained "*Wissenschaft des Judentums* á la 3080 Broadway [the JTS address]" as a "fraud". He took a dim view of erudition for its own sake, especially if it slipped into "a kind of Ersatz of living". As his friend the Romanian-born philosopher Emil Cioran put it, "Taubes embodies a revulsion against every sort of dreary scholarship."

Taubes asked Leo Strauss, one of the German-born, Nazi-persecuted scholars at the "university in exile", New York's recently established New School for Social Research, to tutor him

in Maimonides' teachings – or, more precisely, in Strauss's radical reading of esoteric meanings concealed in those teachings. Drawing on what he had absorbed from Strauss, Taubes led a decidedly undreary private seminar on Maimonides for the circle gathered around *Commentary* magazine, which included Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Milton Himmelfarb and Arthur A. Cohen. (Taubes made his first appearance in English in the pages of *Commentary*.) Kristol called Taubes "the only really charismatic intellectual" he had ever met.

Around this time, Susan Feldmann, the daughter of a renowned Hungarian psychoanalyst and granddaughter of a chief rabbi of Budapest, succumbed to Taubes' charisma. Her autobiographical novel *Divorcing* (reissued two years ago by New York Review Books Classics) describes a courtship that involved none of the usual dinner dates, movies or terms of endearment:

> [A] marriage that happened on the basis of a sermon he delivered to her alone on the evening they met and the next evening when she answered his marriage proposal by asking him to deflower her, the sermon and the proposal repeated for the next six weeks, always the same sermon delivered by the young rabbi from Vienna to the psychoanalyst's daughter who argued against God and marriage, till the night she could not answer him …

In her letters, Susan addressed Jacob as her "my holy animal, my most trusted one, with whom I, a whorish pagan woman, made my eternal covenant". The couple transplanted their covenant to Jerusalem in autumn 1949. Before their departure, Taubes wrote to the philosopher Ernst Simon about the religious doubts that his close encounter with Strauss had evoked in him: "It is good to

go to Eretz Yisrael and to test whether the ice of atheism and the cold aura that emanates from it will melt under the sun and fire of God's word."

In fact it was Taubes himself who melted under the scrutiny of his master, Gershom Scholem. At first enchanted by Taubes' luminous mind, the eminent scholar of Kabbalah soon wrote to Leo Strauss that his erstwhile protégé had produced little more than "rhapsodies on themes of others and hugely pretentious twaddle". In reply, Strauss remarked on Taubes' "shameless ambition". Hannah Arendt, who agreed with Scholem and Strauss on little else, likewise noted Taubes' talent for "bluffing people with Levantine cleverness".

In 1951, Scholem privately shared with Taubes devastating remarks about a psychologically ill student named Joseph Weiss, whose wife, Miriam, Taubes had seduced. When Taubes relayed those remarks to Weiss, Scholem accused Taubes of "an extreme breach of trust", severed contact and declared him persona non grata at the Hebrew University. (Such was Taubes' notoriety for indiscretion and treachery, Muller says, that colleagues who wished to spread a message would reveal it to Taubes in strictest confidence.) "Your disappointment is my greatest humiliation," Taubes replied to Scholem. For the rest of his life, his conversation with Scholem would be entirely one-sided, like a kind of marvellous soliloquy.

Banished from Jerusalem, Taubes landed on his feet at Harvard, where he taught courses on "the history of heresy" and Susan wrote her dissertation on the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. Four years later, Taubes got himself a professorship at Columbia University. One of his students there, Morris Dickstein, said: "Radiating charm, intelligence, and mystery, Taubes drew men and women irresistibly into his orbit."

One of Taubes' closest relationships at Columbia was with Susan Sontag, who was his teaching assistant for three years. After they slept together, Sontag reported in her diary that he was "unexpectedly good + sensitive sexually". In her first novel, *The Benefactor* (1963), Sontag portrays Taubes as Professor Bulgaraux, a scholar of religious sects who speaks of "being liberated through contracting one's settled life and unleashing one's deepest fantasies". Sontag's then husband, Philip Rieff, was less taken by the conceit-laced man he described as "deeply sinister and evil".

Depending on who is asked, Taubes was a charismatic genius, a reckless charlatan, or both. Theodor W. Adorno charitably concluded that "there is part of him that really wants to do the right thing and that is exceptionally responsive, but that then some hard-to-control impulses get in the way … This constellation leaves considerable characterological scars."

Muller makes no attempt to disguise his subject's scars: he neither excises nor excuses Taubes' philandering (including an affair with the Austrian author Ingeborg Bachmann, erstwhile lover of Paul Celan), his plagiarising (including from Scholem) or, most egregiously, what Muller calls his "almost animal-like instinct for human weakness and how to exploit it". A good biographer – especially of a character as polymorphously self-dramatising as Taubes – is not a stenographer. Rather than merely recount how others saw Taubes, Muller explores how Taubes saw himself.

Taubes increasingly identified with Paul of Tarsus, zealous apostle to the gentiles, whom Taubes regarded as "more Jewish than any Reform or liberal rabbi that I've encountered". Like Paul, Taubes felt torn (in Paul's phrase) between "Israel according to the flesh" and "Israel according to the spirit". And, following Paul, Taubes defined the Jewish people, bearers of a message both

particular and universal, as "a *Volk* that is also a non-*Volk* (what a blessing!)". In universalising the Torah, Taubes said, Paul "drew heretical conclusions" from Jewish premises. "Just as the apostle unchained the content of Judaism into Christianity," Taubes told his friend Margarete Susman, "so I want to unchain this Christian content into something universal."

To cut the chains, Taubes honed the notion of "secularization", the translation of eschatology – descriptions of the end of history – into a this-worldly vernacular of modern politics. He wished thereby to catch "the political potential of theological metaphors". Modern politics – and the story it tells of increasing freedom and self-realisation – interprets and preserves traces of messianic longing. For Taubes, translating messianic motifs into practical politics begins with affirming that history has a fundamental direction, from creation towards redemption (however deferred). In the religious chronology that has its origins in the Hebrew Bible, history is not passively experienced as a cyclical succession of events; it moves towards some meaningful end and is thus subject to human action and responsibility. If we measure how the tides of history ripple with apocalyptic undercurrents, Taubes asserts, we would see that "the problem of time is a moral problem".

In the early 1960s, when he and Susan divorced, Taubes became an early academic jetsetter. After several years of commuting between New York and Germany, he moved to West Berlin in 1966 to serve as founding chair in Jewish studies at the Free University, to marry a member of the Catholic aristocracy, Margherita von Brentano, and not least to explore a pressing question: how to live as a Jew in post-Shoah Germany. Just as he had approached Christianity as a Jew, now, equally unapologetically, he moved to Germany as a Jew. "The elements of my existence are

discordant," Taubes confessed to a lover. "The circles of my language and my spirits, the Jewish and the German, confront one another today as two enemy brothers, as enemies to life and death, in a war without mercy, without reconciliation, and the slash goes right through me."

Taubes' German students from the "generation of 1968" welcomed his leftist cosmopolitanism and freewheeling style. "*Der Wunderrabbi*", as they nicknamed him, played to their desire to unburden themselves from the guilt of the Shoah their parents had perpetrated, and to their need for a "good Jew" – a descendant, figuratively speaking, of Paul and Marx. He became a hit in a way he had never been among Jews in New York or Jerusalem.

In turn, Taubes embraced German student radicals even as he rued their vilification of Israel. "Since the catastrophe of European Jewry," he declared in a radio talk, "the Jewish people grasps for a piece of land in Israel as a drowning man grabbing a plank. And whoever tries to knock this plank away continues – knowingly or unknowingly, wittingly or unwittingly – the Hitlerian fantasy and the methods of the Final Solution."

Life in Germany magnified Taubes' compulsions as a controversialist and contrarian. "I search for right-wing intellectuals of distinction to find a true opponent with the aid of whom one can ascend intellectually," he said. Just as he had once sought out Leo Strauss, Taubes now turned to Carl Schmitt, the "crown jurist" of the Third Reich. When he finally met Schmitt – whom he hailed as "still today the greatest mind in Germany" – Taubes said he felt awed by their "tremendous" (*ungeheuerlich*) conversations. Muller, who has previously written on German right-wing thinkers, observes dryly that "Taubes made Schmitt kosher for a leftist audience".

In his declining decades, Taubes led an ever more fractured life. In 1969, days after *Divorcing* got an unscrupulous and misogynistic review in the *New York Times*, Susan, aged forty-one, drowned herself off the Long Island shore. (Her body was identified by Susan Sontag.) Always mercurial, Taubes was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and beginning in the mid-1970s he flitted in and out of psychiatric hospitals and consented to electroshock treatments. He found intermittent refuge in Paris, where he held court "like a Jewish Socrates", as the philosopher Babette Babich put it, and in Jerusalem, where he befriended stars of a younger generation, including Avishai Margalit, David Hartman, Guy Stroumsa and Moshe Halbertal. Leon Wieseltier, who met Taubes in Jerusalem in 1978, said he had lost nothing of his "narcotic relationship to religion".

Taubes was struck down by cancer and died in 1987, aged sixty-four. The decades since have sent resurgent waves of new readers not just to his dissertation, *Occidental Eschatology*, but to his posthumously published books: his essays, collected in *From Cult to Culture*, and his last lectures, *The Political Theology of Paul*.

"Taken from a great height," the German-Jewish cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer said of Taubes' teachings, "they remind one of aerial photographs; like these, they allow one to catch a glimpse of normally invisible configurations of the broader landscape they survey." An early mentor, warier of Jacob Taubes' soaring ambitions, cautioned the wunderkind against climbing too high: "In Jacob's dream, it is angels, and not men, who descend and ascend the countless steps … anyone who seeks to imitate them commits the most irreparable error." To its great credit, Muller's scintillating but earthbound biography makes no such mistake. ≣