

# Commentary

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## The Folly of Brilliance

Review of 'Professor of Apocalypse' by Jerry Z. Muller

by **Peter Berkowitz**

**T**HE GREAT THINKERS WHO EMERGED OUT OF THE MILIEU OF 20TH-CENTURY European Jewry wrestled with the tensions of modernity and delved into the many dimensions of Jewish tradition. In their seminal writings, such diverse figures as Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Leo Strauss, and Joseph Soloveitchik suggest that the tensions that typify the modern experience—between authority and autonomy, community and individuality, and the safeguarding of a particular tradition and the scientific study of that tradition—cannot be neatly harmonized in theory or easily ironed over in practice but can be illuminated through learning and tempered in day-to-day life. Appreciation of these tensions—the determination to give them their due but no more or less than their due—inspired and enriched their explorations of essential elements of the Jewish tradition.

Those explorations brought into sharp relief profound ideas and extraordinary achievements even as they amplified divisions about just what counts as the heart and soul of Jewish tradition. For example, Buber sought to anchor in Hasidic tales and in biblical texts the teaching that the fullest experiences of friendship and love always also involve the encounter with the divine. Scholem went beyond the classic study of Jewish law to recover the tradition's powerful mystical and messianic dimensions. In his interpretations of Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, and Spinoza, Strauss stressed the contest between the claims of reason to provide moral and political guidance and those of religion. In his writings on the West, Strauss

highlighted the conflict between modern philosophy's focus on individual freedom, on the one hand, and the shared commitment of classical political philosophy and biblical faith to the cultivation of moral virtue and the pursuit of transcendent wisdom on the other. Soloveitchik argued that halachic Judaism provided the most adequate framework within which to realize the aspiration to autonomy celebrated by modern philosophy.

Even as they differed in their assessments of what is most urgently in need of recovering and conserving in the Jewish tradition, Buber, Scholem, Strauss, and Soloveitchik showed that living well with the tensions of modernity as a Jew depended on regaining access to the tradition's multifarious treasures.

The case is very different for Jacob Taubes (1923–1987). So one learns from *Professor of Apocalypse: The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes*, Jerry Z. Muller's exhaustive, incisive, and judicious portrait of an unusually intriguing but erratic intellectual. Taubes seems to have thought of himself as belonging to the ranks of the greatest of 20th-century Jewish thinkers. But his ideas—never carefully developed and patiently set forth—foster the misguided hope of emancipation from the tensions of modernity and an ill-advised aspiration to overcome the particularities of Jewish tradition.

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A professor emeritus of history at the Catholic University of America and the author of several important books on the history of ideas, Muller has written more than a biography of a talented and tormented Jew and professor of philosophy and religion. Through painstaking reconstruction of the myriad communities of scholars in which Taubes operated and the various worlds of ideas in which he revolved, Muller illuminates hitherto unconnected but fascinating chapters in European, American, and Israeli intellectual life. Indeed, it is Muller's methodical accounts of 20th-century controversies in religion and modern philosophy rather than his subject's shambolic speculations that make his book a genuine scholarly accomplishment.

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Born in Vienna in 1923, Jacob Taubes “was descended from rabbinic nobility, in a culture in which distinguished lineage—*yichus*—meant a great deal,” writes Muller. Jacob’s father was a rabbi and a scholar, devoted to rabbinic Judaism as a matter of faith and to the historical and scientific study of Judaism as a matter of vocation. The son took apart the harmony between faith and the scholarly examination of faith that the father took for granted.

At the age of 13, Jacob moved with his family to Zurich. He received a gymnasium education, which included Latin and Greek, while acquiring mastery in Hebrew and studying sacred Jewish sources, eventually receiving rabbinic ordination. By his early twenties, Jacob regarded himself, according to Muller, “as a man of the left, committed to equality” while never ceasing to believe that he was also an exceptional member of the intellectual elite. He enjoyed engaging with people on the right as well as the left, especially those on the hard left and the hard right who agreed that modern, liberal, bourgeois society must be radically criticized and thoroughly transcended.

At the age of 23, Taubes completed his doctoral dissertation at the University of Zurich. *Occidental Eschatology* dealt with themes that would preoccupy him for the rest of his career: apocalypticism, Gnosticism, and the longing for redemption in a corrupt and lost world. The dissertation, which would become the only book he published in his lifetime, combined impressive erudition in philosophy and theology with baffling formulations, wild generalizations, and portentous pronouncements.

Taubes argued in *Occidental Eschatology* that the enduring teaching of Hebrew scripture is a “revolutionary apocalypticism” that anticipates a radical transformation of human existence. The Apostle Paul, Taube maintained, carried forward Jewish apocalypticism in the New Testament, espousing a form of Gnosticism, according to which, as Muller puts it, “the current world—fallen, dark, and evil—will give way to a new

world of goodness and light.” Taubes discerned this Gnostic dynamic at work in traditional Christianity and Judaism. And in modern philosophy, too. German Idealism culminating with Hegel as well as the thinking of Kierkegaard and Marx represented, for Taubes, the secularization of biblical apocalypticism. Embracing Heidegger’s judgment that 20th-century humanity had drained meaning from the world by adopting an instrumental orientation toward nature and by constructing a mechanized environment that degraded the human spirit, Taubes concluded that only rediscovering God could bring about the apocalypse that could save us now.

Through his life’s many twists and turns, Taubes does not seem to have incorporated any essential alteration into his dissertation’s grand history of the human spirit as an anticipation of the apocalypse. He was drawn to “ideas and historical movements,” in Muller’s words, “that were transgressive, deliberately violating accepted institutions and social norms in the name of some higher wisdom.” While never furnishing much hint as to what that higher wisdom was, Taubes did not seem to doubt his entitlement to flout the rules—not only as an intellectual and scholar but also as a teacher, friend, lover, husband, and father.

Touted as a prodigy, he arrived in New York as a young man in 1947 to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary. “His youth, his erudition, his traditional observance combined with his antinomian sensibility,” notes Muller, “created an air of mystery about him.” Taubes made a stunning first impression among young intellectuals—including Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Irving Kristol—the force of which tended to wane over time, especially among those who were actually experts in the many fields in which Taubes found occasion to declaim.

From 1949 to 1952, he pursued research in Jerusalem, where he courted Scholem and managed to estrange him permanently. Between 1952 and 1966, Taubes did stints at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia. In the mid-1960s, he secured a position at the Free University of Berlin, which served as his base until his death in 1987. In Germany, he became, according to Muller, an “impresario of theory,” offering classes, hosting seminars and colloquia, running centers, and advising publishers on a mix of philosophy, theology, social theory, and literary criticism.

Over the years, he developed a keen interest in the Frankfurt School on the left and pursued a decades-long fascination with Carl Schmitt on the right. Taubes was drawn to both for their radical critiques of liberalism, which converged with his life-long apocalypticism. His short posthumously edited and published work, *The Political Theology of Paul*, reaffirmed his youthful conviction that the essence of Judaism was captured by Paul's Gnosticism and entailed a radical depreciation of tradition and a comprehensive transformation of the world as we know it.

Muller stresses the contradictions of Taubes's character and suggests that he may have suffered from manic depression that worsened as he grew older. A charismatic and mesmerizing teacher who ranged widely and freely—many competent observers thought impressionistically, sloppily, and grandiosely—across the history of ideas, Taubes was also an unproductive scholar who tended to antagonize senior faculty through his pretentiousness and arrogance.

He cultivated interlocutors and admirers across disciplines and the political spectrum and influenced numerous prominent intellectuals, but his lectures, publications, and conversations, thought-provoking as they could be, showed Taubes to be more of an intellectual gossip of an unusually high order than a reliable transmitter and interpreter of ideas. Though often captivating and able to deftly navigate institutions and cultivate individuals in high places, he was capable of coldly backstabbing friends and colleagues. He was careless with personal hygiene and freely displayed gross table manners, but he attracted and seduced many women with little pause over the course of his two marriages. He possessed a gift for impressing scholars of other subjects with his knowledge of Jewish matters while alienating serious scholars of the Jewish tradition through his superficial and high-handed treatment of complex subjects. And while learned in Jewish law and, especially later in life, drawn to the ultra-Orthodox, he was a frequently absent father who failed to transmit Jewish learning to his children and in his teaching and writing over the course of almost five decades effectively disparaged religion by reducing it to a vehicle for proclaiming the overcoming of the tensions of modernity and the emancipation from all tradition.

As in politics so too in scholarship—and even if the topic is apocalypse—little of lasting value is likely to result without balance, measure, and proportion.

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Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.