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Jacob Taubes

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Introduction

Jacob Taubes (Vienna, 25 February 1923–Berlin, 21 March 1987), a philosopher and an ordained rabbi, was a singular contributor to the twentieth-century debates around political theology and philosophy of history. Taubes was not a prolific author. His first monograph, *Abendländische Eschatologie* [*Occidental Eschatology*] (1947), remained his only one. In subsequent decades, his output was limited to essays and lectures on subjects ranging from Judaism and Gnosticism to Protestant theology, modern philosophy, and the contemporary (Western) human condition. The second major work to appear under his name, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* [*The Political Theology of Paul*] (1993), posthumously collected the lectures he gave in Heidelberg shortly before his death. The three-volume collection he edited in the 1980s, *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie* [*Theory of Religion and Political Theology*] (Taubes 1983, 1984, 1987b), with its individual volumes on Carl Schmitt, political Gnosticism, and the idea of theocracy, further facilitated scholarly interest in "political theology" as a multifaceted concept and trajectory (on this trajectory, see Chepurin and Dubilet 2021).

A nomadic scholar based at various times in the US, Israel, and Germany, Taubes moved with ease between different theoretical and institutional contexts. Starting with his years at the University of Zurich, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Harvard, and Princeton during the mid-1940s to mid-1950s, and later at Columbia and the Free University of Berlin, Taubes was ever-attuned to ongoing intellectual conversations. He also came to shape conversations of his own—in particular through his polemical dialogue with figures such as Hans Blumenberg, Carl Schmitt, and Gershom Scholem, as well as through his powerful reclaiming o Paul as a Jewish thinker and his re-visioning of the Christian-modern trajectory as being underwritten in no small part by a Jewish apocalyptic impulse. While not a systematic philosopher, Taubes developed an apocalyptic view of

history from below throughout his thought—a view which was opposed not least to Schmitt's approach to political theology as pivoting around the figure of the quasi-divine sovereign acting from above (Taubes 1987a). This entry offers a synthetic reconstruction of Taubes's account of history through a focus on the interrelation between scepticism, crisis, and the Jewish tradition in his thought.

Scepticism, history, and crisis in Taubes

A Jewish apocalyptic philosopher of history

"To this day," Taubes proclaims in 1985, "I remain sceptical of any philosophy that fails to deal concretely with history" (Taubes 1987a, 10). However, for Taubes, this scepticism regarding any ahistorical standpoint does not result in either a historical relativism or a theodicy of history in the Hegelian vein: he resolutely opposes both. In Hegel, one finds a vision of history as the divine tribunal or court of justice and as the progressive revelation of reason and freedom. This kind of "apotheosis of history" leads, Taubes argues, to the adoption of the victor's view of history and the justification of "the silent suffering of the conquered" (Taubes 2010c, 10–11). According to him, radical historicisms of various political and philosophical leanings, in figures as disparate as Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, and Georg Lukács, likewise fall into an apotheosis of history insofar as they cannot conceive of a standpoint *outside* history (Taubes 1953, 9). The Zionist project in Buber, the German conservative revolution in Heidegger, and the Russian Revolution in Lukács (to use Taubes's examples) are glorified, despite whatever suffering they may bring, because these thinkers stake everything on historical success: on being, in the end, the victors of history. Across modern historicism, the salvific political goal, imagined as intrahistorical or as the end goal of history, runs the risk of justifying the negativity of history as the path to this goal: this is the central focus of Taubes's criticism.

A critical philosopher of history, accordingly, "must also be critical of history and cannot accept history itself as the last judgment." One must begin, instead, with a mental operation which resembles the suspension of judgement in Pyrrhonian scepticism: one must "reestablish the original situation where both sides"—the defeated and the victor—"are standing with equal right against each other" (Taubes 1953, 9). One must, in other words, *delegitimate* historical success as the criterion of salvation, justice, or truth. The standpoint outside history is crucial for a Jewish philosopher of history in particular, since it can help one to avoid being dazzled by the evident success of Christianity, and of modernity as Christianity's inheritor. Thereby, Taubes seeks to eschew both the subsumption of Judaism under the "historical victory" of the Christian-modern world and any accommodation of the Jewish vision of redemption that would include Christianity as a necessary counterpart of this vision (an accommodation he finds in Franz Rosenzweig). Judaism, Taubes asserts, must insist on its "unresolvable difference" *vis-à-vis* Christianity, as well as *vis-à-vis* the modern "bourgeois" world, with whose capitalist apotheosis of progress liberal Judaism has become too complicit (Taubes 1970, 2010a).

Even as it incorporates a sceptical dimension, the standpoint outside history is for Taubes not merely sceptical, but apocalyptic. "I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let the world go down," he announces. "I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is" (Taubes 1987a, 73). To understand this kind of apocalyptic imagination in which the way the world is, and thus the course of history, are delegitimated, one needs to go back to the apocalyptic spirit that permeates Jewish thought, starting with the prophetic books such as Isaiah and Ezekiel (Taubes 2010a, 54–56; 2010c, 19–20; cf. 1947, 17, 20–21). This is, so to speak, an apocalypticism from below, one that identifies with those who suffer and yearn for justice and dwells with the darkness and negativity of history, with all that the apotheosis of history obscures and represses. For Taubes, the restoration of the "equal right" of the defeated and oppressed serves more than the suspension of judgement. It is a way of saying, with the sceptic, that the search for truth and justice in history is bound to fail—but also of grasping this search, in an apocalyptic fashion, as a constant of human history that points "beyond" or "outside" the stalemate of history, precisely because justice can be affirmed only *against* this world and its history.

In Taubes, the apocalyptic standpoint from below is irreducibly *political*-theological, oriented around community and justice as what the world forecloses through its oppressions and hierarchies. From this standpoint, one can criticise all forms of domination and injustice, whether "religious" or "secular," and Christian or Jewish. Rabbinic

Judaism, too, becomes the target of Taubes's critique, not least for its denigration of the *am ha-aretz*, the "unlearned, common people," and for its perpetuation of a class or caste-like division that is incompatible with the apocalyptic demand (as he insists in a letter to his former student Arthur A. Cohen; Taubes [1977] 2017). This demand has, however, always been a constitutive part of the Jewish tradition, which Taubes envisions as developing through the tension between two poles: that of the law and that of "antinomian messianism" (Taubes 2010a, 54–56). While he emphasises the necessity of the former pole for preserving the "principle" of Judaism and stabilising the Jewish tradition amidst the hostile world, throughout his oeuvre, he explores the latter pole as opening onto an apocalyptic-revolutionary vision of being in common against the world.

The vision of an apocalyptic community of those who stand together as brethren (or, in a Marxist inflection, as comrades) against the way the world is, united by the demand of a counter-worldly justice—a vision originating in Jewish apocalypticism and inherited, in a transformed manner, by Christianity and modernity—remains a persistent focal point of Taubes's thought. In *Occidental Eschatology*, he traces this vision from early apocalyptic literature via Christian heresies and peasant uprisings to the eschatological dimension in thinkers such as Hegel and Marx. By insisting that the Jewish antinomian element permeates the Christian-modern trajectory as its apocalyptic-revolutionary underside, Taubes polemically reconfigures German philosophy of history from Hegel and Schelling onwards, opposing the overwriting of Judaism implied in the traditional periodising schema of paganism–Christianity–modernity and rethinking the birth of Christianity itself as an "inner Jewish event" (Taubes 2010e, 5), even if Judaism as such necessarily remains antagonistic to this event.

"The world as it is," opposed by Taubes and by the apocalyptic community of the kind he imagines, is the unjust world of domination and oppression: the hegemonic world, that of empire, be it Babylonian, Roman, Christian, or capitalist. What Taubes grasps as the apocalyptic-revolutionary faith, cutting across the ostensible boundaries between "religious" and "secular" or pre-modern and modern, is also counter-worldly and collective, and an essential part of the Jewish messianic imaginary. A recent biography of Taubes calls his attitude to Judaism "skeptical," implying an intellectualism and distance that interfere with "faith" (see Muller 2022, 80, 449, 486). However, this dichotomy seems too narrow, as though the faith of an apocalyptic philosopher of history such as Taubes could be decoupled from his intellectual reflection on a tradition that, throughout his life, he affirms as his own. This dichotomy also assumes, in a secularist manner, that "scepticism" and "faith" are private attitudes, whereas for Taubes, the Jewish faith is necessarily communal and messianic, preceding and exceeding the personal. Thus, he speaks of belief or faith (*Glaube*) in the apocalyptic tradition, not as a personal belief, but as collective faith in the end of the world (Taubes 1947, 20–21, 32, 43). For him, scepticism, too, is a collective transhistorical tendency that, like apocalypticism, erupts most forcefully in a tradition's moments of crisis. If Taubes's attitude to Judaism remains complex, it is arguably not because his scepticism interferes with his faith, but rather because he sees himself as inhabiting precisely such a moment of crisis, ceaselessly grappling with the historical meaning of the Jewish tradition and its dual nature, and with the possibility of a way out of the twentieth-century crisis that would retain the emphasis on the counter-worldly vision of justice. It is from this standpoint, too, that Taubes not only incorporates sceptical elements into his thought, but offers a philosophical-historical critique of scepticism.

Scepticism and apocalypticism as transhistorical tendencies

Like many twentieth-century German-Jewish thinkers, Taubes views history through the lens of crisis—and his analysis of scepticism as a recurrent spiritual tendency also needs to be placed in the context of his view of the relation between crisis and history. There is, for him, a rhythm to history: the ostensible linearity of historical time is punctured by moments of crisis, all of which resonate across history. Every major historical crisis is a crisis of the world's legitimacy, and every crisis generates anew what Taubes sees as the basic spectrum of responses. This spectrum includes scepticism, but also a search for new meaning and certainty, and for a new theology or philosophy of history, which ultimately solidifies into new dogma. It also includes, alongside scepticism, various forms of world-refusal: from a turning inward as a way of rejecting the world to apocalyptic and messianic fervour. For Taubes, this rhythm of crisis applies to the Jewish tradition as well as to the Christian-modern trajectory and to the entanglement between the two. In his analysis, the necessity of a new philosophy of history, of the ever-renewed search for

meaning and justice, is crucial: in his view, it points to the limits of the purely sceptical attitude, and he sees this search as characterising the Jewish tradition in particular throughout history.

The picture of "general skepticism" (Taubes 1954, 123) that emerges from Taubes's writings is that of a spiritual impasse and breakdown, a loss of direction. After all, if for every thesis there is a counter-thesis, and if for every path forward there are good enough reasons not to take it, why would the sceptic proceed in any direction or towards any telos? The sceptical ideal is to stand still and observe at a distance from the world, distancing oneself, too, from those who adhere to a vision of justice or that of a messianic kingdom to come. Taubes takes this ideal to re-appear as a collective tendency at times of crisis as part of the broader sense of estrangement from the world and a loss of reality. As one who himself inhabits such a time, he refers to the postwar generation, represented in Germany by thinkers such as Blumenberg and Odo Marquard, as the "'skeptical generation' that is now in charge—intellectually and ideologically" (Taubes 2010d, 313).

Yet while scepticism is a necessary part of every world-historical crisis, and of the same spiritual disinvestment from the world out of which the apocalyptic tendency emerges, an apocalyptic philosopher of history must, in Taubes's view, critique pure scepticism—not only for its abandonment of the commitment to justice or community, but also because if one gets stuck in the sceptical attitude, one misses the new time that is struggling to be born out of a time of crisis. One may illustrate this using the example of Taubes's depiction of the Hellenistic period as that of the breakdown of, and alienation from, "the original mythical unity." As a period of crisis, it is also "the period of a break," whose one symptom is the rise of scepticism (Taubes 1954, 123). However, when this crisis converges with that of Jewish messianism, and with the Jewish apocalyptic spirit that plays a key role in "exploding" the pagan "mythical perspective" (Taubes 1971, 66), something new emerges: what Taubes calls the "Gnostic" tendency of world-delegitimation. This tendency arises from an estrangement from the world and from the conjoined political-theological crises of paganism and Judaism, and it encompasses, in Taubes's account, two central elements.

First, the Gnostic tendency is marked by an inward turn radicalised into an antagonism between "self" and "world," and by the attendant reconfiguration of the Greek *gnosis* to mean a non- and counter-worldly salvific, fugitive, even revolutionary knowledge (Taubes 1947, 36–37; 1955, 90; 1971, 69). In Taubes's view, it is the "turning [of] the messianic experience inward" (Taubes 2010e, 5) that characterises the figure of Paul as a Jewish thinker. Out of a crisis of messianism, and out of the Jewish tradition of "total resistance" against empire (Taubes 2017, 295), Paul radicalises the antinomian impulse by insisting on the abrogation of the law as the perfect fulfillment thereof, and on the apocalyptic God of justice who inverts the world's injustice and "bring[s] to nothing the things that are" (1 Cor 1:28). It is to this God, in Paul as in Gnosticism, that the estranged self turns for salvation.

Second, on the basis of a self that is alienated from the world, Paul in particular constructs a universal apocalyptic *collective*. He does so by turning Christ into the transcendent principle that mediates between all who are not of the world, binding them into a "supernatural community." As part of the Gnostic tendency, "a new pneumatic *We*" is born (Taubes 1947, 64; 1955, 94). Although Taubes is himself routinely called a Gnostic thinker, his position is also critical of Gnosticism. Thus, he rejects the elitist aspect of *gnosis* as a superior knowledge that puts one above others, and criticises every inward flight from the world that neglects a collective vision of justice. He further distinguishes the early apocalyptic Gnostic impulse from the later transformation of Gnosticism into a "dogmatic myth" in a stabilisation of the original impulse, a stabilisation that aims to overcome the Hellenistic crisis by re-establishing mythic consciousness *vis-à-vis* the threat presented by Judaism and Christianity (Taubes 1971).

For Taubes, this kind of stabilisation is part of the rhythm of crisis that leads to new dogma. As such, it occurs across traditions. In Christianity, the apocalyptic expectation of the imminent end stabilises into the church as a dogmatic worldly power that upholds the deferral of *parousia*. Neoplatonism, too, contains attempts at church-building as a form of pagan reaction (Taubes 1947, 76–78), and the Jewish tradition consolidates into Rabbinic Judaism, foregrounding the halakic and repressing the antinomian pole, and thereby surviving the messianic crisis and maintaining its distinctness from Christianity (Taubes 1971). Judaism's antinomian pole, however, also survives, manifesting itself in heretical and messianic "constellations": *inter alia*, in the wake of "the Marranic crisis" and the

attendant crisis of rabbinic authority, in "some parts of Kabbalah," and in "the revolt of Sabbatean and of [...] Frankian heresy" (Taubes [1977] 2017; 2010e, 7).

Both the apocalyptic and the dogmatic dimensions of the response to crisis are thus premised on an overcoming of pure scepticism—so that crisis, as Taubes says of the Hellenistic period, "works catalytically for the breakthrough of religion" (Taubes 1954, 123). The Taubesian analytic of crisis is not limited to the contexts we habitually call pre-modern or religious. Modernity, too, is for him an epoch of recurrent crisis. Having destroyed the harmonious cosmic order, the Copernican Revolution in science makes the modern subject assert itself against the universal void, leading to the rise of scepticism and nihilism, but also to the apotheosis of history as a "dogmatic" defence mechanism in the face of cosmic nothingness (Taubes 1953, 7–8). "The ethos of Copernican humanity is an ethos of the future" (Taubes 1947, 88), which may be envisioned as an Enlightenment theodicy of progress, but also as an apocalyptic-revolutionary demand. In Taubes's view, this demand is what opposes "the critical purge of [modern] skepticism," lest reason itself become purely "technological" and "instrumental," and lest our vision of the future be void "of the element of justice." Technological reason itself has become the post-Christian "imperial" instrument of "converting" the globe to the Western industrial faith. Accordingly, going *beyond* the historical condition—inhabiting the standpoint outside history—is now a matter of global justice. This standpoint, Taubes insists, entails an apocalyptic delegitimation of the very "equation between reason and power" at the origin of the Christian-modern world. Only in this way can the counter-worldly "promise" be disclosed "that relations between man and man are possible that are not tainted by violence, that man's relation to nature is not exhausted in the antagonistic structure of subject and object"—the structure that is also inherent in modern scepticism (Taubes 2010b, 275–79).

For Taubes, the crisis of the Jewish tradition is also entangled with the modern Western condition of crisis. His 1970 lecture before the World Union for Progressive Judaism joins an analysis of this condition, and in particular an embrace of the 1960s student movements, with a critique of progressive Judaism as something "emptied of all religious substance" and reduced, in his view, to a liberal morality that is part and parcel of the bourgeois world. For Taubes in 1970, the demand of the time is that of global justice, and in this demand, "the question of meaning knocks at the door." In view of this, it is no wonder, he notes polemically, that "young Jewish people" are turning away from a Judaism that has become a part of the world they reject. "It is," he asserts, "an exodus of a critical minority [...] from loyalty to its own orbit"—"an extraordinary event" exhibiting "a yearning for the 'not yet,'" "an eschatological stance." To Taubes, it seems clear that what the 1960s movements show is that the postwar "sceptical generation" is being succeeded by one of apocalyptic-revolutionary faith—and that although "we speak of a crisis of belief [...] we are entering an 'age of belief.'" Progressive Judaism, however, as Taubes finds it, appears ill-equipped to respond to this call for meaning and justice. "We face," he continues, "an attenuation of Jewish identity among our youth because Jewish life is bound up with a bourgeois style that represents [...] the acme of liberal civilization." Thus, "the confrontation with the absolute in politics"—that is, with the apocalyptic promise—"must be faced," he preaches, "or we will go under." "The history of Judaism," he concludes, "is greater than any specific metamorphosis," and so it must undergo another metamorphosis in response to the movement of the time (Taubes 1970, 12–14). This entails both an overcoming of scepticism and a passage through the exilic and antinomian pole, an affirmation of a heretical collective standpoint from below: one below the world, in the shadow of the world, "the shadow [where] what is holy grows" (Taubes and Taubes 2014, 176).

To summarise: in Taubes, the sceptical standpoint converges with the apocalyptic in at once rejecting any ahistorical viewpoint and doubting, or refusing to accept, that history is the revelation or criterion of truth. There is no one dogmatic transcendent truth, only the constant search for meaning and justice—which, however, points beyond history and cannot find fulfilment in it.

Open questions

- To what extent can Taubes's overcoming of scepticism via apocalypticism be understood as part of the modern philosophical tradition, from Descartes onwards, of beginning with scepticism so as to go beyond it? Is the distinctness of scepticism thereby lost? What about the distinctness of the Jewish tradition or of the Jewish

antinomian impulse, which Taubes may be taken to "overextend" to thinkers such as Hegel (cf. Bielik-Robson 2022)?

- Apocalypticism is a non-sceptical position—yet Taubes holds that it is not dogmatic either, but opposes all dogma as well as any dogmatic affirmation of "the world as it is." How exactly is one to understand apocalypticism in Taubes as non-dogmatic, given its strong insistence on justice and its emphatic embrace of the side of the suffering and oppressed?

- A sceptic might claim that the apocalyptic standpoint outside history is impossible. Yet Taubes might respond that in fact, he goes further than the sceptic, opposing the logic of historical possibility itself as part of the "apotheosis of history." How is one to articulate this dwelling conceptually with what is historically impossible yet essential and real?

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