Friday–Saturday, October 20–21, 2017

Thirty Years after:
Jacob Taubes between Politics, Philosophy and Religion

A Collaboration between the Center for Literary and Cultural Research in Berlin and the Ludwik Fleck Center for Philosophy of Science in Zurich
Jacob Taubes – a controversial figure. 30 years after his death and 70 years after the publication of his famous dissertation thesis, we ask anew: what can we learn from Taubes, as a person as well as a vibrant intellectual voice for recent debates on religion, hermeneutics, and politics?

Jacob Taubes (1923–1987) was a controversial figure, embracing conflicting attitudes, stirring up tensions, and full of contradictions. He called himself a ‘Pauline Arch-Jew’ and nevertheless was inspired by Carl Schmitt to interpret the Letter to the Romans. He was arguably one of the most potent networkers in the humanities, yet his oeuvre remained relatively small. He polemically intervened in various intellectual debates, using a diversity of forms affiliated to the Jewish tradition of commentary. He was part of a budding academic jet set on both sides of the Atlantic, traveling restlessly from one continent to the other, establishing relations and seeking connections, but remained a “difficult person”; sometimes he was celebrated, sometimes met with reservation or even hostility. At the same time, he persistently kept to a narrow arsenal of subjects since the days of his dissertation on eschatology. Jacob Taubes – a marginal rabbi at the center of intellectual networks, a key intellectual exploring the margins of academic life, a philosopher bored by “pure philosophy.”

Taubes was connected with important cities such as New York, Jerusalem, Paris, Berlin, and Zurich. As he was educated and, finally, buried in Zurich, Switzerland’s largest city is the appropriate place to reconsider Taubes’ achievements, thirty years after his decease. We would like to do so by structuring the manifold aspects of Taubes as an intellectual figure as well as of his challenging writings in four separate, yet interrelated sections:

1. Taubes’s Theory: Between Friends and Foes:
Taubes was a polarizing and disturbing intellectual. Often enough friends became enemies, and teachers turned into adversaries, as in the case of Gershom Scholem; whereas others, such as Hans Blumenberg, remained aloof, or even tried to avoid contact, like Hans Jonas. On the other hand, Taubes was endowed with an elusive talent of reaching out over abysses and opening up locked doors, as was the case with Carl Schmitt or Armin Mohler. What impact did
contacts such as these have on his readings? Is there a hidden agenda recognizable behind his efforts, conflicts, and what he intellectually embraced?

2. Hermeneutics, Philosophy of Religion, and Interdisciplinarity: In his beginnings at Freie Universität Berlin, Taubes combined the disciplines of philosophy, sociology of religion, and Jewish studies (Judaistik) – as well as the respective three institutes – in one person. Later on, all three disciplines were amalgamated to form the Institute of Hermeneutics. Among related issues, his papers and short contributions focus on messianism, gnostic thinking, eschatology, and St Paul as a turning point in the Jewish tradition. Can we determine the character of Taubes’ hermeneutic and philosophical work? What are its genres? Is there a mutual interaction between topics and disciplines? And, last but not least, what are the features of his approach to religion and theology?

3. Taubes’s Legacy in Theory: His *Eschatology* is a tour de force of the history of western thought, while the God of this tradition is presented as not being supernatural, but ‘counter-worldly’, hence by all appearances decisively belonging to a dualistic framework. What sources, textual traditions, and strategies are to be discerned in his *Occidental Eschatology*? What can we learn from Taubes’ thought for recent debates on secularization, contemporary religion, and future prospects of the ‘political’?

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<td>“The apocalypse of our generation has come and gone”: Jacob Taubes, views of the man, trajectories into his work</td>
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Saturday, October 21, 2017

**SESSION 3 – Taubes’s Legacy in Theory**

10–11 am
Elettra Stimilli
Jacob Taubes: Messianism and political theology after the Shoah

11–11.30 am
Coffee break

11.30 am–12.30 pm
Sigrid Weigel
In Paul’s Mask: Jacob Taubes reads Walter Benjamin

12.30–1 pm
Concluding remarks

Prof. Dr. **Agata Bielik-Robson**, Professor of Jewish Studies, University of Nottingham

Dr. **Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink**, Lecturer at the Center for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin

Prof. Dr. **Gabriel Motzkin**, Director of The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and emeritus in Philosophy of the Hebrew University

Dr. **Christina Pareigis**, Lecturer at the Center for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin

PD Dr. **Hartmut von Sass**, Vice Director of the Collegium Helveticum, Zurich

Dr. **Elettra Stimilli**, Lecturer in Philosophy at Sapienza University of Rome

Dr. **Martin Treml**, Senior Lecturer at the Center for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. **Sigrid Weigel**, former Director of the Center for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin, and emerita at the Technical University of Berlin
Agata Bielik-Robson

Jacob Taubes, the Jewish Hegelian

The aim of my paper will be to present Taubes’ *Occidental Eschatology* as a masterpiece of a late-modern philosophical line of thought called ‘Jewish Hegelianism.’ This classification allows to reread Taubes’ early work in the theoretical context of the thinkers who also belong to this group: Theodor Adorno, Emil Fackenheim, and Jacques Derrida whose Glas bears particularly strong affinities to Taubes’ attempt to interpret Hegel against his overarching dogma of universal reconciliation. I will try to argue that Taubes remains within the frames of the Hegelian dialectic, but tries to ‘gnosticize’ Hegel by maintaining the element of the ‘Jewish antithesis’ – the divine ‘counterprinciple to the world’ – which Hegel himself rejected. The Taubesian Hegel never manages to ‘sublate religion into philosophy,’ which also makes him immune to the process of a full immanentisation: he retains the concept of the antinomian transcendence which finds its ‘cunning’ way to subvert the course of nature and natural history. Even if Taubes’ own solution in *The Occidental Eschatology* is not quite successful, its underlying intuition is nonetheless right: the true dialectics, which breaks with the pre-modern metaphysics of analogy, depends on the method of *operative antinomianism*, which only the Jewish mutation of Hegelianism can supply.

Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink

The Boredom of “Pure Philosophy.” Jacob Taubes, Academic Philosophy, and the Challenge of Theological Intervention

The paper addresses the intricate relation of (academic) philosophy and theology in Taubes’s thought. The focus is on his early, formative years as a young academic in the United States and Jerusalem. The period of his subsequent academic career in Germany, however, is taken in consideration as well. Taubes’s texts of the 1950s present philosophical questions and debates of the time, as for example that on time and being. A reading of these texts reveals Taubes’s resorting to the rich philosophical tradition from Plato onwards. At the same time, his approach is critical towards philosophy and always pointing out limits and deficiencies of philosophical discourse. The paradoxical strategies and Taubes’s epistemological interest connected therewith make up the core of my presentation. Examples will be his discussion of Heidegger and the intitial post-war Heidegger-debate, of the so-called ‘philosophical anthropology’ and other philosophical positions that were in the process of becoming established in German academic philosophical discourse of the 1950s and 1960s. In reference to Taubes, the paper will also explore the issue of interdisciplinarity and the currently much-debated question of anti-academicism.
Gabriel Motzkin

Taubes, Secularization, and the Philosophy of History

According to Karl Löwith, Taubes, despite his adherence to a political conception of history, did not believe that secularization had really occurred. However, he did conceive of Christianity as a political religion. That conception required him to conceive of Judaism in terms of political theology. It is questionable whether Paul understood Judaism in the way that Taubes understood it, and whether Paul thought of Judaism as a political religion. Understanding religion as being primarily political may itself be an indication of some kind of conceptual secularization. The same issue arises when the conception of the apocalypse is examined. There is a difference between maintaining that a specific conception of the apocalypse has political implications and that it has political motivations.

Christina Pareigis

“Too alienated from her Jewish sources to be truly demonic”: Susan Taubes und die intellektuellen Köpfe des 20. Jahrhunderts


Mit den Mitteln der Literatur schrieb Susan Taubes das Nachdenken über Fragestellungen, die sie als Philosophin zu Beginn der 1950er Jahre in publizierten Essays und privaten Aufzeichnungen beschäftigten, fort: Leben in einer Welt ohne Gott, Erfahrungen von Gewalt und Fremdheit in der Moderne, die Unmöglichkeit, für die Länge eines Lebens ein und dieselben Person zu bleiben.


Durch eine intertextuelle Lektüre werden diese Dokumente zusammen mit später entstandenen Romanszenen als Zeugnisse eines intellektuellen Netzes gelesen, im Spannungsfeld mehrerer Perspektiven: dort die unbeirrt vorwärtsstrebende junge Studentin, hier ein schillerndes Prisma literarisch verarbeiteter Fremdzuschreibungen.
After the plebiscitary acclamations of the Nazi regime and the ‘historical apocalypse’ of the Shoah, the focus of the Taubes’s reflection is the relationship between religion and politics. This intervention focuses on Taubes’ interpretation of Paul the Apostle, in which he highlights the Jewish roots of Pauline discourse and at once underlines the antinomic element present in the Biblical pact. Thus, in his work there emerges a new definition of political theology, which contrasts the “sovereign” unity between the theologian and the politician proposed by Carl Schmitt. Taubes does not identify theology with politics in order to legitimize it. The two instead diverge and messianism becomes, for him, the theology capable of proposing an act which is in itself political as a critique of power.

The paper wants to introduce into Taubes's life and work in a special way: it combines his different intellectual traits and interests with cities where he lived and worked: Vienna and Zurich go with eschatology (not only with the dissertation project, but with the experience of a whole world being destroyed), New York City phase I with Jewish theology and its discontent (the post doc phase at JTS and the encounter with Leo Strauss), Jerusalem with messianism and mysticism (being both student and critic of Gershom Scholem), New York City phase II with American academia and the Western intelligentsia after the Shoah, West-Berlin with theo-politics after the secularization, and finally Paris as temporary retreat and sometime utopia.
of the 1960s? The lecture pursues two lines of the way in which Taubes’ reads Benjamin. The first line runs along the Notes on Surrealism (1963), the article on Culture and Ideology (1969), his notes for the seminar on Benjamin’s On the Concept of History in 1984/85 up to the article on Benjamin – a Modern Marcionite (1986); here Benjamin enters the stage as warrantor of historico-philosophical questions, which are elsewhere considered of having an aesthetic character. He then undergoes several metamorphosis, appears in the mask of a „modern theological marxist“, as a theorist of messianism, as an author of political theology, and finally as a Marcionite of modernity.

The second line starts nearly a decade later and pursues a linking of Benjamin and Carl Schmitt; here, these both authors seem to represent opposite poles of an electrically charged trace of thoughts. This line culminates in Taubes’ lecture on Paul in 1987 where Benjamin appears as an exegete of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. The last mask Taubes puts on Benjamin is that of Paul.