

Taubes, Jacob

*To Carl Schmitt, Letters and Reflections*

Translated by Keith Tribe, with an Introduction by Mike Grimshaw

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As a young boy in the 1930s, Jacob Taubes (1923-1987) and his family left Austria for Switzerland to escape Nazism. In Switzerland, Taubes received both ordination as a rabbi and a classical education in philosophy (culminating in a doctorate), before going on to further study with Leo Strauss in New York and Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem. Taubes held teaching positions at Harvard and Princeton before attaining permanent academic positions at Columbia and the Free University of Berlin, the last of which he held until his death in 1987. Ranging widely from Biblical hermeneutics to the philosophy of Heidegger to the interpretation of Hobbes<sup>i</sup> to the political thought of Carl Schmitt, Taubes's works take up an impressive range of issues in political theory, the sociology of religion, and the politics of his own time.

Aside from his doctoral dissertation from the late 1940s, *Occidental Eschatology* (*Abendländische Eschatologie*), most of the writings which appeared during his lifetime took the form of essays, reviews, editions, opinion pieces, and contributions to edited volumes. All of his other books, from *To Carl Schmitt* (*Ad Carl Schmitt*, 1987) to his widely read *Political Theology of Paul* (*Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, 1993), *From Cult to Culture* (*Vom Kult zur Kultur*, 1996), and *Apocalypse and Politics* (*Apokalypse und Politik*, 2017), were published posthumously. Curiously, the first of these posthumous works to be published in German, *To Carl Schmitt*, is the most recent to appear in English translation. This book assembles a number of Taubes's occasional writings on Schmitt's works, as well as part of their correspondence,. A fuller scholarly edition<sup>ii</sup> of their correspondence appeared in German shortly before the appearance of Tribe's 2013 English translation.

There are many poignant, subtle, and sharp phrases of the rabbi, intellectual historian, and political theorist which are rendered aptly, even beautifully, in the translation, which is published by Columbia University Press under the title *To Carl Schmitt, Letters and Reflections*.

However, there are also many places in this translation where Taubes's quotation marks have disappeared, his ellipses have been omitted, and even whole phrases and sentences have been silently cut from the text. In some instances, Taubes's quotation marks signalling direct quotations from Heidegger have been omitted, in other instances Taubes's sentences have been truncated and

his claims have been altered. Here I will focus on some of the alterations and truncations relevant to political philosophers and historians of political thought wishing to think with (or against) Jacob Taubes, as well as those wishing to reconstruct Taubes's political thought.

Taubes's *Ad Carl Schmitt, Gegenstrebiges Fügung* presents a detailed portrait and radical critique of the prevalence of anti-Jewish sentiment in the thought of Carl Schmitt and his circle, as well as the prevalence of such sentiments in the early years of the German Federal Republic more broadly. However, in Tribe's English translation this portrait and critique are at times dampened or even suppressed and omitted altogether. Two instances of this facet of the translation are particularly noteworthy. First, in the third section of the collection, *Gegenstrebiges Fügung* presents four excerpts or citations from letters written by Carl Schmitt to the extreme right publicist Armin Mohler in which Schmitt discusses his relation to Jacob Taubes. In the first of these citations, Schmitt in 1952 relates the story of sharing a letter written by Taubes to a fellow traveller in the politics of the German Right:

A wholly astounding, great document is the letter from Jacob Taubes, which I have allowed myself to copy. I have shown it to some acquaintances capable of judgment; all of them were gripped by it. An old, thoroughly educated and experienced journalist of the old monarchy (Rudolf Fischer) said after reading it: "Bring me back the Jews!"

[*Holt's mir die Juden wieder her!*]<sup>iii</sup>

This repulsive image of ex-Nazi officials telling jokes about Jews after the Shoah in 1950s Germany is dampened in the 2013 English translation by rendering the plural as singular and omitting part of the text. In this version, Schmitt presents Fischer as saying "Bring that Jew here!"<sup>iv</sup> Schmitt's slur at the expense of Jews and alluding to the Shoah has been muted into a remark concerning Taubes alone. Second, Taubes is quite explicit in characterizing parts of Schmitt's work as written "against the Jews."<sup>v</sup> The Taubes of this translation is neither so explicit nor so sharply critical. In the original German text of *Gegenstrebiges Fügung*, Taubes refers to Schmitt's text of 1936, *Die Deutsche Rechtswissenschaft im Kampf gegen den jüdischen Geist*, as "that article against the Jews from 1936" (*jenen Artikel gegen den Juden von 1936*).<sup>vi</sup> This whole phrase is omitted without mention from the 2013 English translation and is replaced with the title of the article in question.<sup>vii</sup>

In addition to omitting passages related to Taubes's portrayal and critique of Schmittian anti-Jewish sentiment, this translation has also omitted or downplayed Taubes's statements about Bolshevism and Leninism. In the penultimate section of the book, "Extract from a Dispute About Carl Schmitt"<sup>viii</sup> (*Aus einem Streitgespräch um Carl Schmitt*),<sup>ix</sup> Taubes quotes at length from Schmitt's essay on "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," inserting a parenthetical remark of his own into the middle of his quotation. In it he discusses the relation of Bolshevism to the thought of Rousseau and certain Central European writers of the nineteenth century.<sup>x</sup> In the 2013

translation, these remarks of Taubes are dropped completely, without mention or annotation. The loss of the parenthetical remark means that the reader cannot see Taubes critically reflecting on the passages from Schmitt which he is quoting.

Near the end of *Ad Carl Schmitt*, Taubes offers the judgment and observation of Schmitt that “he could have become a Leninist, but he had it in himself to become the only relevant Anti-Leninist” (*Er hätte Leninist werden können, aber er hat das Zeug gehabt zu dem einzig relevanten Anti-Leninisten.*)<sup>xi</sup> The Taubes of the 2013 translation omits the assertion that Schmitt is to be numbered definitely as the only relevant anti-Leninist, and instead offers the more modest claim that “he was made for the anti-Leninists.”<sup>xii</sup> If, according to Taubes’s assertion, Schmitt is “the only relevant anti-Leninist,”<sup>xiii</sup> then it would seem to follow from this claim that all other anti-Leninists are not relevant. Neither Taubes’s judgment and observation nor its corollary are accessible to readers of this translation.

The translator, himself an historian, downplays Taubes’s criticism of professional historians. In the original, Jacob Taubes claims that he is of the opinion that history in the hands of History Department historians has simply been abolished or flatly done away with (*Ich bin...in der Tat der Meinung, daß die Geschichte bei den Historikern von Fach schlecht aufgehoben ist.*)<sup>xiv</sup> The Taubes of this translation claims with more politeness and less radicalism that “history has hardly flourished in the hands of professional historians.”<sup>xv</sup> Perhaps the reader might here be reminded of the oft-made observation that in the Gospel of Luke, the physician, parallel synoptic passages critiquing physicians are omitted.

The translator, while omitting certain features of Taubes’s text, has inserted others. Where Taubes writes of “Paul” (*Paulus*),<sup>xvi</sup> the Taubes of this translation writes of “St. Paul.”<sup>xvii</sup> Where Taubes writes of “Peter” (*Petrus*),<sup>xviii</sup> the Taubes of this translation writes of “St. Peter.”<sup>xix</sup> Where Taubes writes of “Augustine” (*Augustinus*),<sup>xx</sup> the Taubes of this translation writes of “St. Augustine.”<sup>xxi</sup> Taubes entitled his late lectures *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus—The Political Theology of Paul*<sup>xxii</sup> not *The Political Theology of “Saint” Paul*. Taubes’s Paul and Taubes’s Augustine are not saints in part because Taubes has a less than favorable view of the organs and institutions which confer sainthood.<sup>xxiii</sup> In this English edition of *Gegenstrebige Fügung*, the translator confers a certain sainthood on the Christian apostles and Church Fathers which Jacob Taubes did not confer.

What, then, is the significance of these translation *faux-pas*? Why does any of this matter? Political philosophers wishing to dialogue with Taubes on topics such as revolution, (post)-Marxism, the critique of capitalism, and Leninism and Bolshevism, will be disserved by a translation that either mutes Taubes’s statements about Bolshevism, Leninism, and revolutionary communism or silently omits such remarks entirely. Intellectual historians and historians of

political thought wishing to engage with the historical evidence regarding Taubes's political thought and its relation to Marxism and Leninism will likewise be disappointed by the deletion and diminution of Taubes's claims about Bolshevism. Those wishing to engage seriously with these themes in Taubes's work will therefore have to refer to either the original German text or may wish to consult the translation of several chapters of *Ad Carl Schmitt* published in the two appendixes to Dana Hollander's 2004 translation of *The Political Theology of Paul*.

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<sup>i</sup> See Jacob Taubes, "Leviathan as Mortal God: On the Contemporaneity of Thomas Hobbes," in *Telos* 181 (Winter 2017), pp. 48-64 (doi:10.3817/1217181048).

<sup>ii</sup> Jacob Taubes—Carl Schmitt, *Briefwechsel mit Materialien* (Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, Thorsten Palzhoff, and Martin Tremml eds.) (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 36: „Ein ganz erstaunliches, großes Dokument ist der Brief von Jacob Taubes, den ich mir habe abschreiben lassen. Ich habe ihn eigenen urteilsfähigen Bekannten gezeigt; alle waren davon ergriffen. Ein alter, überaus gebildeter und erfahrener Journalist aus der alten Monarchie (Rudolf Fischer) sagte nach der Lektüre: *Holt's mir die Juden wieder her!*“ (Reviewer's translation in the text above, italics in the original). For a fuller account of Taubes's critique of Schmitt, see Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, "Interpretation and Critique: Jacob Taubes, Julien Freund and the Interpretation of Hobbes," in *Telos* 181 (Winter 2017), pp. 9-39. (doi:10.3817/1217181009).

<sup>iv</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 25.

<sup>v</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 45. For a fuller discussion of Schmitt's views on these themes, even in the post-World War II period, see Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, "Indirection and the Rhetoric of Tyranny: Carl Schmitt's *The Tyranny of Values* 1960-1967," in *Modern Intellectual History*, 18:2 (June 2021), pp. 427-450. (doi:10.1017/S1479244319000398)

<sup>vi</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 45.

<sup>vii</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 33.

<sup>viii</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, pp. 33-47.

<sup>ix</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, pp. 45-64.

<sup>x</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 53: „(Taubes: also nicht seit 1917, der bolschewistischen Revolution, sondern er sieht ineins die bolschewistische Revolution mit den ‚wilden Denkern‘, dem *Pensée sauvage* der Rousseau, der Slawophilen, Rozanow und allen anderen dieser Richtung)“ (Reviewer's translation: “(Taubes: thus, not since 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution, but rather he sees as one the Bolshevik Revolution, the ‘wild thinkers,’ the *pensée sauvage* of Rousseau, the Slavophiles, Rozanov and all others of this orientation).”)

<sup>xi</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 71, with a modified version of Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, "Appendix A," p. 102.

<sup>xii</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 53.

<sup>xiii</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, "Appendix A," p. 102.

<sup>xiv</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 11.

<sup>xv</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 4.

<sup>xvi</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 35.

<sup>xvii</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 23.

<sup>xviii</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 34.

<sup>xix</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 22.

<sup>xx</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 35.

<sup>xxi</sup> Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 22. When Taubes does refer to Church Fathers with their canonized prefix, it is usually in the context of reported speech or indirect discourse. This is the case when Taubes refers to Erik Peterson's 1935 treatise as "Dedicated to St. Augustine" [*Gewidmet Sancto Augustino*], where he is reporting the linguistic usage and terminology of another thinker. Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 28; Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt; Gegenstrebiges Fügen*, p. 40.

<sup>xxii</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Edited by Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, in conjunction with Horst Folkers, Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, and Christoph Schulte, Translated by Dana Hollander (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt*, p. 52: "Antwort Taubes: Die Kirche ist antijudaistisch, antisemitisch" (orthography in original). Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, p. 38: "Taubes responds: The Church is anti-Judaic, anti-Semitic."