

Review

*Professor of Apocalypse:
The Many Lives of Jacob
Taubes*

by Jerry Z. Muller

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Henning Ritter, the literary journalist and son of the founding editor of the *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy*, opens the “Jacob Taubes” section of his 2012 memoir, *Honoured Thinkers: Portraits from Encounters*, with an anecdote pertaining to an American who has come to interview him:

The American Professor, who not so long ago travelled around and interviewed all the attainable people, who had anything to do with Jacob Taubes, is a proven expert on German intellectual history. He has written a book on Hans Freyer, in order to win clarity for himself on the susceptibility of younger German academics for National Socialism. His interest in German University relations appears to be authentic. The round-headed glass-wearer conducts the interview like a protocolist, who wants to have everything in little baskets. He seems to register my answers in pre-prepared lists, in order to compare them with the answers already assembled. Manifestly he has already heard the one thing or the other from another party and thus makes with many communications only a tick. For Jacob Taubes, the Professor himself is interested above all because others have been and are interested in him (Ritter 2012, pp. 27-65, at p. 27).¹

The American Professor in question is Jerry Z. Muller and the result of the interviews with Ritter and others coupled with extensive archival research in myriad lands is assembled and vividly presented in Muller’s *Professor of Apocalypse: The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes*, which appeared with Princeton and then with Suhrkamp within the last year. The book is both finely and compellingly written and offers an impressive synthesis of historical research. The life of Taubes is occasionally compared to the product of the lively pens of writers like Bellow, Roth, and Babel, and yet no fictionalist could make it up. One of the many virtues of Muller’s biography is his stage-setting at each of the waystations of Jacob Taubes’s life: Muller charts Taubes’s early youth in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s through histories of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and of rabbinic education in interwar central Europe, Taubes’s later youth in Zurich in the 1930s and 1940s (where Taubes’s father was called as rabbi from Vienna in advance of the *Anschluss*) through the history of international aide campaigns in Switzerland to save broadly European and specifically Hungarian Jewry. Muller sets the story of Taubes’s life in New York City in the late 1940s amidst institutional his-

Jerry Z. Muller, *Professor of Apocalypse: The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

tories of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Columbia University, and *Commentary* magazine, whilst placing Taubes in Jerusalem in 1949 amidst the backdrop of the history of a newly independent Israel. Muller combines copious oral history, archival research, historical synthesis, literary history, the history of sociology as a discipline, and the history of Universities and journals into a finely wrought tapestry that itself offers a kind of prosopography of middle and late twentieth century German and Jewish intellectual history. There are few in Muller's generation in North America who could match the scholarship of this book and still fewer in the generations which succeed Muller. All of this makes Muller's biography of Taubes, in a certain sense, a thing to read with pleasure, to cherish and to read again.

Another historian might have overlooked the papers of Arthur A. Cohen as a source for Jacob Taubes, and Muller has found there a treasure trove. Another historian might not have unearthed the letters and radio addresses (some still unpublished) in which Taubes makes rare and positive defenses of the Jewish state, and Muller has here upturned received wisdom on Taubes. Another historian would not have situated Taubes above all against Phillip Rieff and the traditions of sociology in Europe and America. In these regards and others, Jerry Z. Muller is not just another historian.

Muller's text exhibits a certain playfulness with some of the names of the figures in his narrative. The sociologist (and socialist) Frigga Haug, is sometimes referred to by Muller as "Frieda Haug" (p. 578, n21) and sometimes by her real name (p. 578, n15), with Haug's forename changed to "Frieda" perhaps to highlight her pacifist opposition to atomic weaponry.

By contrast, in Muller's text, the moniker of the Satmar rabbi shifts from being "Reb Yoilish" (p. 43) to "Reb Yoilisch" (p. 44) to "Reb Joilisch" (p. 105), with Muller calling the anti-Zionist rabbi, in effect, "Reb Joyless".

Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum and author and editor of more than fifteen books, including the *Nachlass* of Margherita von Brentano, is referred to by Muller sometimes by her real name (p. 588, n99) and sometimes as Susan "Neuman" (p. 589, n127).

Christoph Schulte, whom Muller is capable of identifying properly (pp. 600, n199; 600, n206), at times becomes "Christian Schulte" (p. 444) in Muller's narrative, perhaps with the implicature that, in Muller's view, this scholar of Jewish Studies is "Christian schooled" (Ibid).

Taubes's psychiatrist, Silvano Arieti (pp. 245, 302, 394) becomes "Salvador Arieti" (p. 302) in the central mention in Muller's biography, with the implication that the savior Taubes was in need of was really a psychiatrist.

Writing in the *Jewish Review of Books* in 2017, describing a letter from Taubes to the novelist and publisher Arthur A. Cohen, Muller would claim of Taubes's text that "There is much naming of names, but there is also a subtle hermeneutic intelligence at work." The reader of *Professor of Apocalypse* comes away from the biography with a clearer sense of Taubes as a namer of names than Taubes the subtle hermeneutic intelligence at work. Indeed, the phrase "hermeneutic intelligence" present in Muller's 2017 article is absent from the later biography.

Indeed, Muller is inclined to perform a kind of *diminuendo* on the ambit, extent, and originality of Taubes's work, not least on Taubes's output as a writer and scholar.

Muller claims that upon Taubes's death in 1987, Taubes had "not published a book since his doctoral dissertation in 1947, a work long out of print and barely read" (p. 2). On Muller's telling, Taubes's "propensities to open-ended speculation, to interest himself in everything but the scholarly subject at hand, and the lack of scholarly productivity that flowed from it, would remain the bane of his life" (p. 109). *Abendländische Eschatologie*, Taubes's "doctoral dissertation on occidental eschatology, his first—and only—published book," (p. 70), which, Muller is keen to repeat, "was the first and last of his books published during his lifetime" (p. 73). Given that Taubes edited both editions of Overbeck and a multi-volume work on political theology, as well as several volumes of the *Poetics and Hermeneutics* series, perhaps it might have been more accurate to claim *Occidental Eschatology* as Taubes's only published *monograph* to appear within his lifetime.

As the author is so keen to repeat that *Occidental Eschatology* was Taubes's only published book, the reader feels inclined to the question of what, for Muller, counts as a book?

The author of *Professor of Apocalypse* assures his reader that prior to writing on Taubes “I wrote some books, including an anthology of conservative thought in Europe and the United States” (p. 525, emphasis added). Muller’s own book *Conservatism*, like Taubes’s edition of Overbeck (p. 54: “Taubes would later edit a volume of Overbeck’s writings”), is very much an edited book, and Muller counts it under the general heading of “Books”, just “Books”, on his curriculum vitae.²

On this matter, the *Nachlass* of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt housed in Duisburg, in Westphalia North of the Rhein, is a more accurate source on Taubes’s productivity than Muller’s biography: Schmitt’s *Nachlass* lists two Taubes books in Schmitt’s possession upon the Nazi’s death: Taubes’s aforementioned dissertation and the first volume of the *Political Theology* trilogy, *The Prince of this World, Carl Schmitt and the Consequences*. On the matter of Taubes’s productivity, the record of Carl Schmitt’s library is more accurate than Muller’s biography.

When Muller himself edits a book, like an anthology on conservatism, this, the author of *Professor of Apocalypse* assures the reader, is most definitely a book (p. 525).

When Jacob Taubes edits the work of Overbeck or assembles a thousand-page compendium on political theology, a book, according to Muller, it somehow is not.

Muller is usually very sharp on matters of historical record: he’s sharp on the archives, he’s sharp on the correspondences, he knows the chronologies and the cartographies: Muller is an historian who works with both eyes of Clio, the muse of history, wide open. So, when Muller claims, falsely, (by a standard of what a book is that contradicts Muller’s own vita), that Taubes only published one book, one has to ask: why is Muller making the mistake? Where is Muller getting this information, if not from the historical record of published facts? If Muller is not deriving Taubes’s productivity from the publication of Taubes’s books (of which there are at least four, not one, published in Taubes’s lifetime), where is Muller deriving the information? Is Muller simply making this up? Or is Muller taking his bearings from elsewhere?

Helpfully for the sceptical reader, Muller names his source on page 498 of his biography in discussing the obituaries for Taubes: “A more substantial portrait,” Muller writes, “came a few months later from Taubes’s old friend, Armin Mohler...the article began by noting that although he had published little since his doctoral dissertation of 1947, ‘Taubes was a presence in West German intellectual life’”.

Armin Mohler, it must be noted, served a prison sentence in Switzerland for trying to join the Waffen-SS and continued to praise Hitler’s leadership *in print*, well into the 1990s.

In drawing his portrait of Taubes’s productivity from Mohler’s obituary, Jerry Muller has taken his bearings from the fascists rather than from the facts.

The same issue recurs throughout Muller’s book where Muller reports claims of Taubes’s brilliance as indirect discourse or reported speech (pp. 25, 85, 118, 122, 129, 152), but registers claims that Taubes was dirty or messy (claims generated from Muller’s oral interviews) as if they were fact (pp. 126, 380, 397, 424).

These claims lead Muller to substantiate the obituary claims of Hans-Dieter Sander, a theorist of neo-Nazism, in Sander’s obituary for Taubes: “Sander characterized Taubes as the ‘Phenotype of Diasporic thought seeking to hasten the apocalypse’...Sander thus portrayed Taubes as the paradigm of the uprooted Jew,” Muller writes, “adding character traits that in the case of Taubes had more than a little truth” (pp. 500-501). Here, too, Muller, in effect endorses the claims of a neo-Nazi obituary about a leading Jewish intellectual.

In his Taubes biography, Muller goes out of his way to play down the Nazism of Ernst Jünger, writing that “Jünger found National Socialism too plebeian for his tastes and distanced himself from the movement even before it attained power”, which is not true of the historical Jünger—who sent autographed copies of his books to Hitler, was decorated for military service in the Nazi army, and served as cultural attaché to the Nazi embassy in occupied Paris and contributed his writing to party organs well into the 1940s.

In the Taubes biography, Muller refers to Arnold Gehlen and Carl Schmitt, both Nazis, as “conservative intellectuals” (p. 288), while Muller refers to Hans-Joachim Schoeps, who lent Jewish support to Hitler in 1933 before having to flee Germany on account of his heritage, simply as an “historian of religion” (p. 190).

The problem of Muller’s presentation of Taubes as a writer who didn’t publish much and Muller’s own problem of calling Nazis and fascists by their names are, fortunately or unfortunately, interrelated problems. While Muller finds difficulty in calling Gehlen, Jünger, Schmitt, Schoeps, Sander, Mohler, and Heidegger Nazis and fascists, he does not find difficulty in adopting their descriptions of Taubes as the backbone and scaffolding of his biography.

And in his biography, Muller has allowed the Nazi obituaries of the Jewish intellectual to set the tone, and when these obituaries deviated from the historical record, Muller has followed the fascists rather than the facts. This matters because the biography gives little space to Taubes’s expansive *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie* (1983-1987), and, writing in accord with Mohler’s dictum that Taubes was unproductive, Muller has almost to pretend that this work doesn’t exist.

All of this might lead us to reconsider not only Taubes’s life, but Taubes’s intellectual endeavors as richer, more complex, more prolific and less staid and settled than Muller’s biography presents them as being. This biography thus serves as invitation to read and re-read Jacob Taubes as the sharp and perceptive hermeneutic intelligence which his books so amply display.

NOTES

- 1 The author of *Professor of Apocalypse*, portrayed in Ritter’s vignette, calls this “An altogether valuable portrait.” (p. 578, n22).
- 2 See “Jerry Z. Muller, October 2022” accessed at <https://history.catholic.edu/faculty-and-research/faculty-profiles/muller-jerry/cv-muller-2022.pdf> (accessed on 16 February, 2023).

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