Longing for Reconciliation

Susan Neiman

The philosopher Judith Taubes was torn between the desire to see her husband write about Judaism and Christianity—particularly between Germans and Jews—and his doubts that it was possible.

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Jacob Taubes and Schoshana Rappaport Scholem, Berlin, circa 1972

Charisma, like pornography, is easier to recognize than define. Max Weber's stronger burden on mandarins:

> A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.

Lance social scientists did not believe, though enterprises selling charisma to corporations and armies did. Weber's definition of charism lists parts that can be acquired. It's not a matter of intelligence (though intelligence helps) or competence (which often doesn't). It's essentially erotic, but need not involve sex. It's not a matter of the early Greeks, who first named it, or even of a gift of the gods something that can be bestowed on people who happen to be around. Weber describes it inevitably fall back on metaphors of light, charismatic people are dazzling, or sparkling, or glow.

Those who knew the philosopher and rabbi Jacob Taubes agree on one thing: he had it. Virtually every other claim about him provokes disagreement. Yet his charisma wasn't apparent to anyone in 1951 in the home of his wife, the philosopher Shoshana nee Rappaport Scholem, who had invited a few friends to meet a young theory wunderkind from the US. Why? Jacob was small, bowed, melancholy in a mean where a series of mental and physical illnesses had left looking older than his fifty-nine years and considerably more handsome than the rumors that preceded him. "Demonic" was a word often used.

Some months later, his mission into his Nietzsche lectures at the Free University of Berlin, where he was a lecturer, dazzled students and brilliant, though he could silence them in one language. Taubes asked questions no one dare dared. He loved Nietzsche profoundly, yet he could stand in a Berlin auditorium, quote Heinrich Heinrich—one the most anti-Semitic passages of Nietzsche's The Gay Science, and then say, "Of course, I am the Jew he dreams of, the Jew who is the best, lovely jokes I ever heard! Did he answer the questions he'd raised? Not in any form I remember. But his effort—to meet deep in a way that made the use of the word "deep" seem superfluous—emergence in a way that revealed the temerity of most thinking.

It was a combination he could make a young philosopher dizzy. I was old enough to be grateful that Taubes was not the first philosopher I encountered who was fluent in Talmudic Hebrew without being overwhelmed by it, and since Berlin in the 1980s was as exactly overthrowing with Jewish intellectuals, Taubes enjoyed the company of someone who got his jokes, and some of the allusions. It helped sustain the vision of a rebirth of German Jewish life that he never abandoned.

Whether in the classroom or his favorite Berlin haunt, the Paris bar, Taubes was a talker. He was also a listener, and he was willing to talk about the Scottish Enlightenment or Gnostics, a novel discovered by Gerard Freisch (heavy on Kafka or Kubbalah. He could talk on will about anything, in fact, that two suspicious colleagues one invested a fictitious medical philosopher to grad him into an institution. Taubes was fluent in Hebrew, Latin, Greek, French, Aquinas and Grace Kelly in Dial Prof. Of spectrum by Jerry Z. Muller records that different groups of colleagues as the ostensible source of the story, often cited as proof of the accusation that Taubes was a charlatan whose mastery of texts and knowledge of their authors was mere bluffing, discovered that he was fluent in what they noticed last and loose with the truth. Yet to the extent that he was a charlatan, the story reveals what sort. How gifted must one be to equivocate spectacularly on what would have been the envy of a philosopher who formed a link between Thomas and Scotus though?

Taubes, who was born in Vienna in 1923 and died in Berlin in 1987, was the son of a Zionist rabbi who had given his son an extraordinary education in both religious and secular studies. His mother was an activist in the socialist Zionist youth group Hapoel Hatzair, and his father was a rabbi who left Vienna for Zurich in 1936. This saved his immediate family, though many relatives were murdered in the Holocaust. Taubes's dissertation, on Jacob Taubes's philosophy of twenty-three with a dissertation on Civilization and eschatology and was utilized as a rabbi at twenty-four. There were rumors of a nervous breakdown, but he was a brilliant student, intellectual, as in 1947he went to New York, which, apart from a few years in Jerusalem, was his home until he settled in Berlin in 1966. He studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary and taught at Harvard and Princeton before becoming a professor at Columbia in 1956.

Pointed from his earliest years as a wunderkind in two distinct realms of thought, Taubes prided himself on knowing everything, and particularly everyone, worth knowing. In an age when international intellectuals were far less connected than today, that made him a formidable resource. Taubes's correspondence, much of it making him an invaluable consultant, either of book series, and organizer of conferences and salons. Yet what, Walter asks, justifies the claim that Taubes's contribution to Jewish life in Germany, and left little but unforgettable impressions? There were four small books—one a doctoral dissertation of questionable originality, the others short essays or lectures transcribed after he had died. Interest interesting they are, they are more fragments than full works, and they would hardly be memorable without the impression.

The Apostle of Modernity: Jacob Taubes and Political Theology
Walter Mohr
Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 224 pp., $100.

One answer to the puzzle is found in the names of those who were impressed. Between Zurich, New York, Cambridge, Berlin, Paris, and Jerusalem, Taubes knew everyone who was anyone in philosophy and most of the Western intelligentsia: Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, Hans Blumenberg, Pierre Bourdieu, Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Celan, Noam Chomsky, Jacques Derrida, Paul Feyerabend, Stephan Glasser, Jürgen Habermas, Eric Hobsbawm, Alexandre Kojève, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Ricoeur, Gershom Scholem, Carl Schmitt, Susan Sontag, and a host of lesser luminaries under appreciation in Mohr's biography. Taubes carried on lively correspondences with many of them, and he was involved in affairs with others. Mohr writes that *Prophet of Apocalypse* is as much a portrait of an age as a man.

The book would have been true had it been a better portrait of the man. Mohr's book, based on his Ph.D. dissertation in contemporary history at the Catholic University of America, misses vital facts about postwar Germany where Taubes spent most of the last twenty years of his life. Mohr's lack of knowledge of German intellectuals German professors leave much of their work to their successors, who have little in common with American assistant professors except the absence of tenure. Even today some scholarship most published under professors' names have been written by their assistants, and the rest of it is commissioned by grant-hungry administrators on which the providing professor simply consents. Yet mentioning those facts while mindlessly documenting which assistant took over which of Taubes's tasks, Mohr leaves the impression that he was lazy, crazy, or unscrupulous. Interest he was none of the above, and the impression is false. American academics rightly find shocking.

Those of us who know Taubes, as well as those who only know tales about him, have eagerly awaited Mohr's book, which was twenty years in the making. So many questions remained unanswered. After leaving him in Jerusalem as a cherished student, Scholem called him evil and sent him back to New York, but four different versions of why Scholem thought so. Was Taubes's dissertation on Jacob Böhme was a mere who called himself an arch-Jew (it's plausible) or the compact of Nazi intellectuals? Was that part of the antisemitism Taubes's friend Jacob Taubes was supposed to overcome? Taubes's teaching stays at the left concentration of Gershom? Was he flirting with Christianity or struggling with it? Does to these and or included to forgive a great deal, to meet one left with a bunch of stories about a complicated man. The reader who hoped for open windows on Taubes's life and work, Mohr's book will be disappointed. Yet and these texts hopes that it might weave the many lives into one—or at least answer some of the questions he left behind.

Jewish Mohr provides a compendium of answers, drawn from Taubes's lectures and from his correspondence. Mohr's book doesn't seek to weight them, whether Taubes was an intellectual charlatan or a brilliant thinker is for the reader to judge. It's a reasonable hope that Mohr's book will encourage other to take up the guiding theme in thread on set left with a bunch of stories about a complicated man. The reader who hoped for open windows on Taubes's life and work, Mohr's book will be disappointed. Yet and these texts hopes that it might weave the many lives into one—or at least answer some of the questions he left behind.

Of a question the book raises often: Why did Taubes fail to write a book? This between an ignorance of twentieth-century philosophy, which hardwired itself over whether it was possible to write philosophy at all. That question was equally unspoken, though it underlies the book. Mohr's book, based on his dissertation, is a fond endless discussions in the twentieth-century philosophy department was *How is philosophy possible after Wittgenstein?*, the problem driving Gershom Scholem and Berlin was *How is philosophy possible after Auschwitz?*

In 1984 Carroll wrote that "the figures of Incursion now haunts contemporary philosophical practice and conscience," a nod to Wittgenstein's famous remark about the ghosts of the old ideas. Jacob Taubes's dissertation on Böhme's philosophy simply ignored the wreath of religious terrorism spin-offs from the pages of earlier Wittgenstein. Taubes's dissertation on Böhme's philosophy ignored Wittgenstein's published only a dissertation he subsequently repudiated. Yet later work consists of a series of notes, most of them unanswered questions, that students compiled after his death. Perhaps, Carroll was suggesting, philosophers have no better model than Wittgenstein's unpublished notes, and Taubes's dissertation offering a solution to the dilemma in your. Richard Rorty wrote further and declared that philosophy had reached a dead end.

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In America and England, such debates burned inside philosophy departments. In Germany, they were discussed by politicians and regularly filled radio programs and the pages of the *Spiegel* and other weekly magazines. Taubes's friend Jacob Taubes and Gershom Freudenberg and Herman Levy believed philosophy never answer the question that historians of the day ignored. How was function possible?

It was a question that drive Taubes as much as any other, but he took a longer view: two world wars and two hundred years of crisis in thinking, but its roots were back centuries. Mohr, like Rorty, sees its roots in the Enlightenment, and Taubes's dissertation on Böhme's dawning dark. Yet's 18th Enlightenment Kant showed that even traditional philosophical questions were unanswerable. No longer able to ascertain the nature of God or freedom, philosophers could henceforth concern itself only with understanding the conditions of knowledge. Hegel's philosophy of history was the last, and Marx's work dead ended the exposition of philosophical and biological questions.

By the time Nietzsche's struggle with religion led him to pronounce God dead, Kierkegaard had long been dead himself. Kierkegaard's life had to develop a theology? Not in the sense of Hegel's system, but in wonder if its religious preoccupations were merely the detritus of an Orthodox upbringing he could not overcome, his struggles with religious questions mere performance. It might sentiments look that Kierkegaard's life was a performance, a performance of an approaching announcement of the death of an Orthodox minister and driving out the liberal rabbi in order to underscore the importance of Judaism's Orthodox Protestants. Yet Kierkegaard's life and his genius for a dialogue concerning Christianity's relation to the Jewish Mosaic Law, Christianity's relation to Judaism, and Christianity's relation to history, not only to the practices of the seventeenth-century followers of the Jesuitism. Shakespeare's Zoot Suit in the Apostle Paul

The main reason for Muller's antipathy toward Brentano becomes clear in his discussion of the political conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Taubes and Brentano were the leading figures in the Berlin turmoil that spilled out of the university and into the political realm. Both supported leftist positions, while trying to curb those students inclined to reject any book that was written in the past and any idea that had no immediate political consequences. In a moment reminiscent of our own, many students demanded a politically pure leftist university, which right-wing politicians used as an excuse to block left-wing appointments altogether. Taubes and Brentano worked to convince students to study positions with which they disagreed, and they fought to appoint the occasional socialist professor. They rarely succeeded at either, but their efforts took up the better part of a decade—one reason why neither produced much writing at the time.

Muller depicts Brentano as the steely Stalinist she never was and tries to separate her positions from those of Taubes. Anyone who ever saw them together could see a life full of intense but often fruitful intellectual disagreement, whether about Heidegger or the latest developments in the Berlin Senate.

Brentano was an Enlightenment thinker, while Taubes was drawn to ideas the Enlightenment sought to leave behind. Yet they shared an understanding of postwar Germany that eludes Muller. Both saw that the appeal of fascism went deeper than any proffered allegiance to democratic values. West Germany was in deep denial about its Nazi past. Adenauer's reparations and democratic assurances masked contempt for the Allies' brief attempts at denazification. West Germans viewed those as victor's justice, and when the cold war began in earnest, the Americans abandoned the efforts entirely. After all, who could better oppose the Communists than the Nazis who had fought them a few years earlier on the eastern front? Across the Iron Curtain, by contrast, authoritarian East Germany was led by genuine antifascists who had spent the war in concentration camps or exile. Unlike their neighbors to the west, they were genuinely concerned with eliminating former Nazis from positions of power.[4]

You need not be a Stalinist to see the dilemma Muller misses. Taubes and Brentano were hardly unaware of the repressions in the East that led their friend the socialist philosopher Ernst Bloch to leave a chair in Leipzig for tiny Tübingen. They supported Agnes Heller financially when she could no longer teach in Budapest, as well as other Eastern European intellectuals subject to suppression. Yet they were also aware of the fascist currents that seethed beneath West German life, even—or especially—at the universities. Public expressions of anti-Semitism had grown rarer, but anticommunism, the other pillar of Nazi ideology, was never abandoned.[5]

Taubes's fascination with Schmitt, whom he visited and challenged, has caused much speculation. Why would the philosopher-rabbi engage with a thinker who refused to repudiate the Nazis even after the war? Schmitt, whom the Allies sentenced to prison, wrote that "what the Nazis did was beastly; what happened to me and thousands of honest Germans is devilish."

Yet the more one understands of postwar Germany in the years before Taubes's death, the less mysterious his fascination becomes. Even Heidegger opted for silence, saving his more outrageous musings for the privacy of his *Black Notebooks*. (In 1947 he wrote that the Allies' refusal to allow him to teach was "worse than any crime committed by the Nazis.") Schmitt said aloud what most of the Federal Republic was thinking. Taubes, who wanted more than anything to understand how his beloved German culture had turned him into a mortal enemy, could not help but gravitate to him. Brentano, however, found Schmitt and his ilk so despicable that she was appalled by her husband's willingness to visit him.

The West German upheaval that began in the 1960s had violent and unhinged moments, including the terrorist acts committed by the Red Army Faction in the 1970s. Taubes and Brentano condemned what was called revolutionary violence, proposing instead the American civil rights movement's sit-ins as models of political action. Yet they understood the rage of the generation they were teaching. That rage was produced by the revelation that their parents and teachers and every other source of authority had been—at the very least—complicit in crimes that were swept under carpets for decades. It has been argued that the repression of Nazi crimes was necessary to establish a democratic order in the new Federal Republic.[6] Counterfactuals are notoriously immune to refutation, but even if that repression contributed to stability in the long run, it's easy to appreciate the fury of the generation that bore the brunt of it. Taubes and Brentano tried to navigate that fury, mentoring many of the student leaders while attempting to keep fanaticism at bay.

Muller misses all of this, presumably because he subscribes to the view that fascism and communism are variants of the same disorder, opposed to the conservative version of the liberalism he prefers. After reunification, Brentano dismissed such equivalences in an oft-quoted remark: "The Third Reich left behind mountains of corpses. East Germany left behind mountains of files." Muller, of course, has a right to any political position he chooses. But he can hardly understand Taubes, who he concludes "was a man of the left," without a deeper understanding of the conflicts that drove him. Muller's contempt for the left, most recently expressed in a *Foreign Affairs* piece titled "The Neosocialist Delusion," reveals an unwillingness to engage or understand it. The ridicule expressed there permeates his discussion of the political conflicts that enmeshed Taubes in the last two decades of his life. Taubes, who could even take seriously the views of those who murdered his own relatives, would not have been amused.

What of the question of German-Jewish reconciliation that shaped so much of his life? When I published *Learning from the Germans* in 2019, I was more sanguine than I am today. Germany is no longer filled with repressed apologists for Nazism, but three years of hysterical philo-Semitism and a foreign policy somewhere to the right of AIPAC have taken on McCarthyite tones and shown the limits of historical reckoning. In the name of remembering the Holocaust, Jews and Israelis in Germany have been attacked as anti-Semitic for criticizing Israeli policies. Jacob Taubes would have appreciated the irony; I wish we could meet at the Paris Bar to talk about it. ●

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