

Preface to the English Edition

I. Jacob Taubes's Work

The English edition of the edited collection of essays *Vom Kult zur Kultur: Bausteine zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft* (ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, and Wolf-Daniel Hartwich and Winfried Menninghaus [Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag], 1996) is first and foremost an opportunity to acquaint oneself with the work of Jacob Taubes. Taubes was an outstanding intellectual figure of the kind that is rare to meet in the Anglophone intellectual world. He did not publish much during his lifetime, other than in essay form, and much of his intellectual influence was due to his charismatic teaching and interdisciplinary initiatives. It is quite possible that these very characteristics made him what he was: a leading intellectual figure in Germany.

The essays collected in this volume might seem simultaneously familiar and foreign. They are familiar because in them Taubes discusses issues and thinkers at the core of many endeavors in the humanities that inform the way we now think and assign meaning. Paul, Marx, Heidegger, philosophy of history, Gnosticism, and politics are just a sampling of topics taken up in these essays. Yet as erudite and observant as Taubes was and as familiar as his topics are, these essays differ dramatically from the kind of essays we are accustomed to anticipate from scholars of his stature. Taubes makes bold and sweeping claims about topics that most would not even venture to comment on. He rarely refers to secondary material, and his referencing is sporadic and somewhat careless, but his engagement with the primary texts is personal and demanding. Thus, many of his observations are not precise in a scholarly way, at least not in the narrow sense of the word. Most importantly, Taubes does not ever blunt his cri-

tique or mask his attacks, which are always personal and poignant. To be sure, his is a very unusual form of scholarly discussion.

Thus, even if the questions Taubes raises are familiar and widely debated, his style of argumentation is foreign, especially in the American academic context. It is the uniqueness of Taubes's rhetorical style that we would like to comment on in this preface to the English edition of the collection of his essays, as the introduction to the German edition (translated for this volume) takes on the task of providing a commentary on his thoughts. Taubes's style is not only a matter of personal disposition but also essential for understanding his project.

Taubes does not think in isolation. Even if all the essays gathered in this volume are overtly penned by him, one could argue that all his literary production is a result of a collective effort of some sort. Practically all the essays present an attempt to answer, critique, or question an already existing position or idea. Many times, he writes a direct attack on another intellectual and his ideas. Of course, this is not an entirely unique approach. Most scholars respond to and argue with other thinkers. Writing is always an argument and an attempt to join an existing conversation of living and dead thinkers who already made their point. But in Taubes's work discussion has a particular prominence. For Taubes the discussion itself does not merely serve heuristic purposes; rather, it is the fundamental form of social interaction and intellectual production. This is true in the most rudimentary as well as in the most profound sense.

Practically all of Taubes's publications are the product of conferences, interdisciplinary research groups or workshops, and edited volumes of collected essays, which he organized, to which he was invited, and for which he produced his contributions. As rich and suggestive as it might be, Taubes's legacy is therefore mostly a series of responses, rebuttals, and deliberate provocations. Many of the essays collected here, as the editors of the original German language volume indicate,¹ are the product of two research groups that met more or less regularly during the 1970s and early 1980s.² One obvious example is the essay "Notes on Surrealism," which consists of some introductory remarks by Taubes and an edited protocol of the subsequent discussion. The editors of *Vom Kult zur Kultur* chose to publish that protocol along with Taubes's brief essay,³ so we integrated it here as well. Other examples are not as obvious and essentially resemble

most other scholarly essays. But these are the exceptions. It ought to be mentioned, therefore, that the context of the framing debate is a helpful tool in the attempt to grapple with Taubes's essays. Much of the introduction to the German edition is devoted to describing the discussions; therefore, we will not attempt to do the same in this preface. The reader is, in any case, advised to keep in mind that Taubes is, more often than not, addressing a specific audience with specific positions on the debated questions. Thus the discussion that informs Taubes's essays is indeed a discussion in the most literal and rudimentary sense.

But the discussion in which Taubes takes part *kata sarka* only mirrors the more abstract discussion that informs the structure of Taubes's essays and his argumentation. Discussion is not only a physical reality but also an idea about the essence of the intellectual project. In the foremost sense it is this approach that propels Taubes's method. That is, for Taubes discussion is a form of thought, and it is foregrounded also in the content of the essays and not only in the circumstances of their production. The editors of the German edition write in their introduction:

The form of hermeneutics he cultivated drew from authors such as Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, and above all Carl Schmitt. The rule of thumb of this hermeneutic reads: "Against whom is this text written?" or "What key sentence was this text written to 'conceal?'"⁴

Taubes reads the sources, therefore, not as finite texts with finite ideas. They are for him palimpsests, which can barely conceal already existing conversations, debates, and discussions. The texts that Taubes discusses themselves also try to make a point on the background of an already given argument and in an already given historical moment. Taubes considers these texts primarily as an axis. For him—in true Talmudic fashion—each primary source is, first and foremost, a moment in time and a position in a debate. This might help explain the footnotes, or the lack thereof. It also explains why Taubes's claims move between and encompass far-flung historical circumstances, ideas, thinkers, and approaches. In this environment, where every text is an axis around which events, ideas, ideal, other texts, and foreign circumstances turn, it is difficult to do close reading and to insist on philological finitudes.

If this indeed describes Taubes's method, it must also bear some

significance on the outcome, on Taubes's written text. If indeed Taubes understands texts as axes, then it should be significant not only to the texts Taubes reads but also to the texts he writes. Taubes is not only debating with his contemporaries. With these essays, he inserts himself into the argument and becomes, himself, part of the ongoing discussions, which, at least to a certain degree and again in good Talmudic fashion, transcend time and space. It would seem, therefore, that understanding Taubes requires familiarity with the themes and problems he debates. While this is obviously helpful, more crucial still is a familiarity with this way of thinking. The debate is not simply the engine of the discussion, nor is it merely an opportunity to talk, nor just the motivation that structures the method. The debate is, more importantly, the essence of the intellectual work in the first place. For Taubes, the discussion is the reason to undertake a study and is its real end. Thereby the dead letter comes alive again.

It is perhaps for this reason that Taubes's polemic is so sharp and poignant. Surely, being polemical as he was is also a matter of personality. But there is more to it than idiosyncratic character. Taubes's tone and style leave no one untouched. They demand an answer and a strong one, if possible. This brings us back to the point: more than anything else, Taubes's approach is a battle against complacency and indifference. His attacks compel and force a reply. A discussion thus ensues, topics are debated, and questions that seem to be buried in the past become important, meaningful, and alive. Of course, scholarship in whichever disciplinary guise is the prerequisite. But it is called upon only insofar as it is important; that is, insofar as people are willing to argue about it.

Criticism and negation are the building blocks of Jacob Taubes's work. He aims to refute commonly asserted ideas, argue with them, and quite literally reverse their directionality. Taubes's work attempts to think critically and anew about even the most well-established truths and questions, including their institutional setting. It proves that such an undertaking is possible and that the great texts, those that connect to important conversations and dramatic moments in history, still require rereading and attention. It demonstrates, furthermore, that such a rereading can reveal the drama of the texts' conception and shows that the tension that brought them into being still desires resolution. Indeed, Taubes's essays demonstrate that the revolutionary power of ideas does not entirely dissipate and that it still abides in revolutionary texts.

The intellectual endeavor is, for Taubes, not merely a professional or even primarily a scholarly endeavor, but rather something very personal. It should be so. For, if ideas matter, if texts still contain the energy of their inception, and history really brings about change, then the debate about them is not merely a matter of erudition and publication is not only a matter of formality.

It should come as no surprise that Taubes's name is tied to a number of intellectual and political controversies. As Mark Lilla recently noted, "Frequent the intellectual circles of any of these cities [intellectual centers in Europe and the United States . . .] and you will discover that everyone of a certain age has a Taubes story."⁵ No one has yet collected these stories or written Jacob Taubes's biography.⁶ As intriguing as his biographical stories are, we leave them to the biographers. Here, it should suffice to say that the biographical stories can be read as bearing more than strictly personal significance. At the same time, the style of work, its method, reason, and motivation should not be understood merely as professional. So, it is not only Taubes's ideas and positions on different issues that matter, nor even his labor of putting art in a religious context, religion in a historical context, and ideas in a social context, as has now again become so fashionable in the era of interdisciplinarity in the humanities. It is also the brilliant effort to mesh the personal and the professional, the historical and textual, the heuristic and the scholarly.

2. The Genealogy of the English Edition of *Vom Kult zur Kultur*

By now the German volume *Vom Kult zur Kultur* has attained somewhat of a canonical status in the oeuvre produced by Jacob Taubes. The credit goes to Aleida and Jan Assmann as well as Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, all of them Taubes's students, and to Winfried Menninghaus who assembled and selected the widely scattered essays that were to serve as a testament to Taubes's intellectual work. Without that volume, the impact Taubes has had on the intellectual life specifically in West Germany, but more broadly on the humanities, would hardly have become as visible as it has in recent years.

True, the broader reception of Taubes's work in recent years is due

primarily to his lectures on Paul and to his creative and critical engagement with Carl Schmitt. It was perhaps Taubes's insistence that Paul needed to be taken seriously as an intellectual figure that helped spark the interest in Paul in the current intellectual scene, such as that exhibited by Giorgio Agamben⁷ and Alain Badiou.⁸ However, in Germany there has been a much broader recognition of the influence of Taubes on shaping not only the academic scene and the minds of many of his students but also on public intellectual life as well.⁹ In addition, Agamben helped spread the gospel of Taubes to Italy,¹⁰ where some of his work has been translated and discussed.

It seems therefore that an English edition of Taubes's essays is long overdue, not only to complete the trilogy of Taubes's books in English, *The Political Theology of Paul*, *Occidental Eschatology*, and now *From Cult to Culture*, and not only for reasons of intellectual history. Rather, Taubes himself—after having completed his doctoral degree and dissertation, which was the *Abendländische Eschatologie*, in Switzerland—started his academic career in the United States, at some of the major universities on the East Coast: Harvard, Columbia, and Princeton. Indeed, many of the essays assembled here, especially the early ones, were published originally in English in American journals and anthologies. For instance, the entire third section of *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, that is, all five essays on theology assembled there (Chapters 11–15), were published in English during Taubes's sojourn at American universities in the 1950s, as were a few essays in the fourth section. In addition, the essays on Jewish thought in the first section (Chapters 1–4) were also published originally in English, not only the early ones, but—we may surmise—because much of contemporary intellectual Jewish discussion is carried out in English.¹¹ The fact that the majority of the essays were originally published in English therefore allows us to consider this volume an English edition rather than merely a translation of *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, even as we follow the German volume.

It goes without saying that where an English original existed we adapted that version for our purposes rather than translating back from the German translations in *Vom Kult zur Kultur*. At times, therefore, the English versions that appear here are not entirely identical to their German translation in *Vom Kult zur Kultur*. As to the essays that appeared originally in German we translated them for this volume, and we

are grateful to our translators Mara H. Benjamin and William Rauscher. We list their names at the end of the essays for which they prepared the initial translations. Translating Taubes is a difficult and at times impossible task, especially when trying to preserve the tone of the original. The difficulty is increased by the fact that the essays cover an incredibly broad range of subjects and intellectuals, many of whom have not been translated themselves, such as some of the work by Hans Blumenberg and Odo Marquard, to name only the most prominent. This means that often we faced the difficulty of translating the creative philosophical German of these writers into intelligible English, as Taubes quotes liberally from his interlocutors.

We discuss the provenance of each of the essays in our endnotes, in order to supplement the more general discussion in the introduction to the German volume. Further, we decided to leave Taubes's essays intact in their original form, that is, with the endnotes that he supplied (or not), in order to preserve his style. For the purposes of this volume, we sought to supply more detailed bibliographical information, and in some cases clarifications, recorded in the endnotes for each of the essays. This labor presented us with problems that at times seemed insurmountable. Often, Taubes supplies no reference to the source. Or, the endnotes lack some information that made tracing Taubes's reference very difficult, let alone those cases where Taubes quotes his sources inaccurately. Wherever possible we render Taubes's quotations directly from the existing English translations, with the corresponding reference. Where texts are not translated into English or where the source could not be traced, we translated the quotations ourselves and kept Taubes's reference in place.

All of this is to say that as much as we tried to achieve precision, this volume is not a critical edition of Taubes's essays. Alas, that aspect of the endeavor of scholarship was of only minor importance to Taubes himself. With that said, we hope that this volume will allow Taubes to continue to ignite discussion and debate on the very stage where he commenced his intellectual path.

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