Emancipatory History
Müntzer, Taubes, and the Anabaptists[1]

Original 2018. Updated and Expanded 2021.

Maxwell Kennel

In his writings on Carl Schmitt, Jacob Taubes explains that he is "skeptical of any philosophy that fails to deal concretely with history," arguing that "without history there can be no verification of even the most abstract metaphysical principles."[2] Taubes claims that no abstraction is free of historical determination, and situates his work as a normative intervention that rejects the position of the *katechon* and seeks apocalypse from below in such a way that works against both the domestication of apocalyptic and its abuse by the powers of empire.[3] Although much attention has been paid to Taubes' late work on Paul, and to how he resists Schmitt's katechonic power with his own apocalypse from below, below I turn to the less-examined philosophy of history presented in Taubes' dissertation.

However idiosyncratic it may prove to be, Taubes' *Occidental Eschatology* provides a theopolitical account of time and history that treats history as an eschatological movement defined by freedom – both the freedom to negate established ecclesial, governmental, and natural orders, and also the freedom of history from being subject to immediate use for political purposes. I understand Taubes as a certain kind of postsecular thinker because of his unique apocalyptic messianism and his interesting claim to have "no spiritual investment in the world as it is."[4] As Agata Bielik-Robson points out, much hinges on how the final three words in this formulation are interpreted, and the indeterminacies of Taubes' messianic apocalypticism walk "a thin line between the messianic hope in the radical transformation of the world and the apocalyptic expectation of the ultimate annihilation of the world – which is yet another version of walking the thin line between religion and nihilism."[5] Taubes mediates between messianism and apocalypticism, and religion and nihilism, in very postsecular ways, and with a very peculiar understanding of history as freedom. However, to understand how Taubes can contribute to a postsecular history we must also look to the sources that he draws upon to conceive of history as a process of emancipation, one of whom is Thomas Müntzer.

---

[1] Originally published as "Müntzer, Taubes, and the Anabaptists: Emancipatory History and Political Theology," *Political Theology* 20.3 (2019) [online-Sept. 2018]: 191-206. This corrected and updated version reflects my related work in *Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[2] Jacob Taubes, "Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution," in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections.* Trans. Keith Tribe. Introduction by Mike Grimshaw (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 4.
[3] Ibid, 12-13.
[4] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul.* Trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 103.
[5] Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014), 169. This statement by Taubes is also analysed in detail in Willem Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World: Gnosticism and Postwar German Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 1-7.

The radical apocalypticism of the sixteenth century mystic and revolutionary Thomas Müntzer has served as an enduring resource for the political left, from Friedrich Engels' *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), through Ernst Bloch's *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1921), to contemporary works like Alberto Toscano's *Fanaticism* and Wu Ming's introduction to the Verso edition of Müntzer's writings (2010).[6] In *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes places Müntzer at a key juncture in the history of eschatology, first by situating him within the dissenting traditions of the Reformation period, and then by connecting his revolutionary apocalypticism to the critiques of Hegel set forth by Marx and Kierkegaard.[7] This chapter aims to give a new perspective on Taubes as a philosopher of history, first by showing surprising connections between *Occidental Eschatology* and the historiography of Anabaptism, and then by arguing that Taubes' emancipatory history can contribute to a postsecular history.

I will begin by situating the genre of *Occidental Eschatology* and discussing the entangled relationship between prescription and description in Taubes' accounts of historical groups and figures like Müntzer and the Anabaptists, before moving to discuss Müntzer's importance for Taubes' overall project in *Occidental Eschatology*. I first give an account of Müntzer's importance within *Occidental Eschatology* by locating Müntzer as a key example in the framework of Taubes' distinctly emancipatory concept of history. After drawing out the tension between description and prescription and establishing Müntzer's importance for the argument of *Occidental Eschatology*, I then examine how Taubes' descriptive conceit conditions his work on Müntzer in Book III of *Occidental Eschatology*. Taubes is a philosopher of history and not an historian in the modern sense, and yet his account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists comes surprisingly close to the more nuanced perspectives of modern historical scholarship. Accounting for this surprising convergence will be the task of the later part of this chapter.

Occidental Eschatology is a book about time and history, and the apocalyptic and eschatological influences entangled with supposedly secular concepts of time and history. More than presenting an historical genealogy of eschatological thinking in European philosophies of history, *Occidental Eschatology* makes strong prescriptive assertions about time and history as philosophical concepts and asserts many normative and politically charged theses. Throughout the book Taubes presents a genealogy of eschatology that is ostensibly framed as a descriptive enterprise. The book begins with a series of declarations, such as "the subject of inquiry is the essence of history" rather than particular historical periods or events, and the claim that "it is in the Eschaton that history surpasses its limitations and is seen for what it is." (*OE*, 3/11). Rather than using a personal authorial voice or a series of I-statements to make arguments about how apocalypse or history ought to be understood or contested, Taubes makes boldly descriptive statements about both the topics that he is concerned with and the thinkers whom he summarizes, critiques, and periodizes.

---

[6] Friedrich Engels. *The Peasant War in Germany* in *The German Revolutions.* Ed. Leonard Krieger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), esp. 44-52. Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*. (München: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1921. New Edition: Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963). Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010), esp. 68-92. Wu Ming, "Introduction: Specters of Müntzer at Sunrise / Greeting the 21st Century," in *Thomas Müntzer: Sermon to the Princes* (London: Verso, 2010).

[7] Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology.* Trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) and Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2007). References appear in-text, abbreviated as *OE* followed by the page number of the English edition first and the German edition second.

Taubes' descriptive genealogy of concepts and thinkers contains and conceals many significant underlying prescriptions. In *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes obviously has a normative vision for how his readers ought to think about eschatology and history, and he valorizes certain concepts while critiquing others, rather than attempting to achieve an abstract position of distance. For example, Taubes privileges Israel over Rome in Book I, favors the Jewish people over the Romans in Book II, and elevates Müntzer over Luther in Book III, before attempting a brief synthesis of Kierkegaard, Marx, and Hegel at the conclusion of the work. Taubes' emphasis on Müntzer in Book III constitutes an exceptional prescription, for Müntzer does not number among the usual suspects in the philosophy of history, nor is his work easy to appropriate positively because of his revolutionary violence. Yet Taubes does so for very interesting and value-laden reasons, not least of which is that Müntzer represents the confluence of revolutionary freedom and eschatological consciousness that defines *Occidental Eschatology* as a whole.

In Book I of *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes' defines history in apocalyptic terms while arguing that the "fundamental theme in apocalypticism" is a revolutionary and emancipatory freedom defined by radical "negation" (*OE*, 9/19). For Taubes, the power of negation embodied in free revolutionary actions is itself constitutive of history, and here he shows his indebtedness to Hegel's dialectical account of negation (although later he will call on Marx and Kierkegaard to oppose Hegel's systematic impulse). Taubes declares that "the essence of history is freedom," and suggests that this freedom "lifts humankind out of the cycle of nature into the realm of history" (*OE*, 5/14 – translation altered). For Taubes, freedom and apocalyptic are inextricably linked, for apocalyptic points toward a time "when the structure of this world prison will burst apart" (*OE*, 9/19). Seeing apocalypticism as essentially revolutionary because of its hope for the transformation of the present, Taubes contends that "apocalypticism negates this world in its fullness," standing against both law and fate (*OE*, 9/19). Furthermore, Taubes defines the negating freedom of history as that which "can only reveal itself in apostasy [*Ab-fall*]," for anything less would remain "subject to the necessity of God and nature" (*OE*, 5/14). But the negation of God and the negation of Nature are not the same for Taubes. Influenced by Hans Jonas, Taubes sets forth a gnostic vision in which God and world are in stark opposition – but an opposition that is disturbed by the promise of an apocalyptic turning point at which God will appear in power (*OE*, 10/20).

Taubes' concept of history is distinctly emancipatory and contingent upon the existence and willful use of human freedom. He writes that "only humankind's answer [*Ant-wort*] to the word of God, which is essentially a negative one [*ein Nein* {a 'no'}], is evidence of human freedom." (*OE*, 5/14 – translation altered). For there to be history at all, humankind must answer God negatively. This no-saying is not only directed toward God, but also, in different ways, toward 'nature' and 'world.' While the negation of the world is already present within the apocalyptic promise of change here and now, for Taubes the negation of nature also takes place within the gnostic paradigm. Taubes wants to negate the naturalistic framework that "keeps [*bannt*] all events within a cycle in which everything flourishes and fades" with his own teleological, eschatological, and apocalyptic counter-vision (*OE*, 11/21). The revolutionary acts of the free human will that constitute history negate God with a 'no,' and negate the cyclical eternal return of nature with a teleology. But this negation also founds history in a third way: through the negation of established political and social powers, such as the church or state. Taubes finds exemplary historical instances of this kind of no-saying in Israel, Thomas Müntzer, and the Anabaptists.

For Taubes, "Israel is the restless element in world history, the leavening that first actually produces history" (*OE*, 16/27). Countering repetitive pagan cycles, "Israel breaks through the cycle of this endless repetition, opening up the world as history for the first time" (*OE*, 16/27). For Taubes, the cycle-breaking negation of Israel opposes the world as it stands, and this alienation and opposition to the world stands in continuity with the God who is alien to the world (*OE*, 17/29). Opposing the world and its political powers with the 'no' of human freedom is exemplified by God's initial alienation from the world, and Israel's subsequent opposition to the world. This opposition to the world by cycle-breaking means is also something that Taubes finds in Müntzer's revolutionary activity. Whereas Israel "breaks through the cycle of this endless repetition [of the eternal recurrence of the same], opening up the world as history for the first time" (*OE*, 16/27), the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Müntzer "bursts the established horizons of a cycle of life" (*OE*, 85/115). It is no coincidence that the same terms are used by Taubes to refer to Israel and Müntzer, for both exemplify the different ways that humankind says 'no' to God, to the cycles of nature, and to established political powers.[8]

Before moving on to examine how this concept of emancipatory history is developed in the rest of the book, however, it bears considering some of the sources and influences that underpin Taubes' understanding of time and history. Taubes' initial claim that history is freedom follows a paragraph that quotes from Nicolai Berdyaev's 1923 book *The Meaning of History*. In the book, Berdyaev argues (among other things) that "there would be no history without freedom" and furthermore that "the freedom of evil, indeed, forms the real foundation of history."[9] Berdyaev also argues that the Jewish people are central to history, concluding his chapter "The Destiny of the Jews" with the statement: "the problem of universal history cannot be solved without the religious self-determination of Judaism."[10] Although Taubes cites Berdyaev's book three times in Book I, these citations do not make explicit his debt to Berdyaev on the role of human freedom and Israel as constitutors of history.

Similarly, the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar on *Occidental Eschatology* is not foregrounded by Taubes. In his preface to the English translation of *Occidental Eschatology*, David Ratmoko notes that Taubes attended the lectures that would later become Balthasar's *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*, and he points to Ursula Baatz's essay on the relationship between *Occidental Eschatology* and Balthasar's *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele* (*OE*, xii). Baatz argues that *Occidental Eschatology* was written, in part, as an answer to Balthasar's *Apokalypse*,[11] and one interesting connection between the two works can be found in Taubes' distinction between inner and outer realms of time. When Taubes begins Book I by claiming that time is "split into an inner and an outer realm," and that time begins in the inner realm and moves to the outer with an "irreversible unidirectionality [*Einsinnigkeit*]" that proceeds teleologically toward the eschaton (*OE*, 3/11) he echoes – perhaps intentionally – the beginning lines of the *Apokalypse* in which Balthasar makes the very same distinction while arguing that

---

[8] It is possible however, that Taubes' negation of established political powers exceeds Müntzer's in intensity, for Taubes remains suspicious of church and state authorities, while Müntzer appeals to the dukes of Saxony, asking them to recognize him as the new Daniel. See Thomas Müntzer, "Sermon to the Princes," in *Revelation and Revolution: Basic Writings of Thomas Müntzer*. Trans. and Ed. Michael G. Baylor (London: Associated University Press, 1993), 110.

[9] Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*. Trans. George Reavey (London: Centenary Press, 1936), 58, 77.

[10] Ibid, 107.

[11] Ursula Baatz, "Ein Anstoss zur Abendländischen Eschatologie: Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele*," in *Abendländische Eschatologie: Ad Jacob Taubes*. Hsg. Richard Faber, Eveline Goodman-Thau, Thomas Macho (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 326.

the inner realm is revealed in the outer realm, but doing so with a concern for the soul rather than for time itself.[12] Taubes cites Balthasar's *Apokalypse* sporadically throughout *Occidental Eschatology*, but (as with Berdyaev and freedom) he does not make the relationship between his and Balthasar's use of the 'inner' and the 'outer' clear (*OE*, ff. 7, 10, and 40).

I note these connections not to hold Taubes to account for his influences, but rather to show that the influences upon Taubes' work in *Occidental Eschatology* are not always made clear in the text. In his forthcoming biography of Taubes, Jerry Z. Muller writes of how Taubes was unsure of how to write his dissertation, seeking counsel from friends about how to structure such a work.[13] Muller also notes that Taubes' unacknowledged debts and extensive borrowing from the works of others prove his' "genius" to some, while confirming his "charlatanism" to others. Whatever one may think of it, Taubes' complex indebtedness to his sources is essential to keep in view, not only in order to understand *Occidental Eschatology* as a whole, but especially when considering the role of Müntzer, for reasons that will soon become clear.

In Book II Taubes examines the history of apocalypticism and its conflict with the empire of classical antiquity (*OE*, 43/61) and considers the conflict between the Zealots and the Romans as a clash of "the global empire of masters against a world revolution of the oppressed" (*OE*, 45/64). Using the image of fire that he later draws out of Müntzer's work (*OE*, 106/143), Taubes praises the Jewish revolt against the *pax Romana* (*OE*, 46/64), and notes Jesus' complex continuity with John the Baptist (*OE*, 49/69). Just as the Jewish revolt favored the poor through "the relaxation of taxes, the abolition of duty, and the release of prisoners" (*OE*, 46/64), the message of Jesus' Kingdom of God "is particularly *good* news to the poor" (*OE*, 51/71). These themes of fiery rebellion and concern for common people reappear throughout Taubes' examination of Müntzer.

To understand how Müntzer fits into the conceptual narrative of *Occidental Eschatology* it is important to bear in mind the precise ways in which Taubes thinks human freedom constitutes history. The end of Book II of *Occidental Eschatology* prepares the way for Book III by contrasting Augustine's *civitas dei* with Joachim of Fiore's effort to "gain independence from the medieval *corpus christianum*" by means of an *ecclesia spiritualis* (*OE*, 82/111). For Taubes, Augustine is to blame for the movement from "*universal* eschatology" to "*individual* eschatology," in which the former becomes heresy, and the latter becomes Christian orthodoxy (*OE*, 80/109). Again, the tension between the inner and the outer arises, and Book III begins with a description of the Kingdom of God as an impending future that breaks the cycle of a "self-contained, mature system, which has found its own point of equilibrium, established itself absolute and contained all disruptive forces" (*OE*, 85/115). This cycle-breaking demonstration of history-constituting human freedom is definitive of the *ecclesia spiritualis*, which is radically distinct from the institutional *civitas dei*. Taubes writes that "the inner light of an *ecclesia spiritualis* burns down the walls of external institutions" and through both its proclamation and realization it becomes the "rhythm" of modern eschatology (*OE*, 85/115). Interestingly, Taubes contends that the modern age (*Neuzeit*) is also defined by this rhythm of cycle-breaking that

---

[12] Balthasar writes: "*Apokalypse heißt Enthüllung, heißt also soviel wie Offenbarung:* revelatio. *Offen liegt aber das Aussen, verschleiert das Innen. Seele is dieses Innen*." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele: Vol 1. Der Deutsche Idealismus. Vol 2. Im Zeichen Nietzsches*. *Vol 3. Die Vergöttlichung des Todes* (Salzburg and Leipzig: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1937-1939), I, 3. Although I am referring to the original version, a new edition edited by Alois M. Haas was published by Johannes Verlag in 1998.

[13] Jerry Z. Muller, *Jacob Taubes*. *Jacob Taubes: Merchant of Ideas and Apostle of Transgression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

"shatters an established horizon" and creates a "new syntax" that renders the old vocabulary obsolete (*OE*, 85/115).

For Taubes, the spiritual inner light turns outward and becomes the fire of politically charged revolutionary activity. In this movement, the categories of the 'inner' and the 'outer' are again reconfigured at the beginning of Book III just as they were at the beginning of Book I where time was the measure of the distance between the inner and outer (*OE*, 3/11), and just as they will be at the end of Book IV where Taubes rejects the separation of inner and outer in the works of Marx and Kierkegaard (*OE*, 191/255). At the beginning of *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes sets the stage for the division between the inner and the outer by suggesting that time unfolds from the inner to the outer, and at the end of *Occidental Eschatology* he seeks their resolution by pushing together Marx's "worldly revolution" and Kierkegaard's "religious repentance" into his own – albeit unrealized – synthesis (*OE*, 191/254). The conclusion of *Occidental Eschatology*, as noted above, seeks to reconcile the idealism of Hegel with both the inward-focused piety of Kierkegaard and the outward-focused revolutionary consciousness of Marx. Because Taubes' synthesis of these three figures appears as a concluding flourish rather than an extended argument, I want to note that it is unclear how Taubes thinks that this synthesis should be pursued. More to the point, in the middle of the configuration of the inner and the outer in Book I, Taubes narrates the movement from the inner to the outer by looking to Müntzer's theology of revolution. It is here in the middle that Müntzer is situated.

Joachim's *ecclesia spiritualis* "shatters the foundations of medieval theocracy" when it denies (or negates) that the Church and the Kingdom of God are one (*OE*, 86/116). Taubes then argues that "Joachim's theology of history is taken to its conclusion by Thomas Müntzer's theology of revolution" which relies upon the same negation of the established church and desire to bring the Kingdom of God on earth (*OE*, 86/116). Taubes' turn to Müntzer not only aligns with his understanding of history as being constituted by human freedom, but also serves as a hinge between the inner light of the Spiritualists and the outer fire of the revolutionaries. Taubes states that "Müntzer and the Anabaptists want to bring about the *ecclesia spiritualis* on earth," but notes the problem of violence in his life and work (*OE*, 86/116). Taubes proceeds to contrast the Ptolemaic and Copernican visions of heaven and earth (*OE*, 88-89/118-120), and then strongly connects Joachim's three-stage vision of world-history with Hegel's dialectic (*OE*, 90-98/122-132), before returning to Spiritualism – specifically the Spirituals of the Franciscan order (*OE*, 99/132). For Taubes, the Franciscan Spirituals are a mystical influence on the Anabaptist movement, and this is the first of many anticipations of later research by social historians that Taubes provides when he critiques Troeltsch's distinction between Anabaptists and mystics (*OE*, 105/142).[14] Critiquing both Troeltsch and the church historian Karl Holl by using the work of Albrecht Ritschl, Taubes asserts continuity between the monastic traditions and the Anabaptists before beginning his section on Müntzer (*OE*, 106/143).

For Taubes, Müntzer represents the turning outward of the inner light of medieval Spiritualism (*OE*, 106/143). Referencing Marx, Taubes asserts that this movement of turning outward both *spiritualizes* the world by seeking to actualize the Kingdom of God here and now and *secularizes* the spirit by "losing it to the world" (*OE*, 106/143). Praising Bloch's

---

[14] Second generation 'polygenesis' historians of the Anabaptist movements accepted Ritschl's general thesis with some reservations and revisions. For two examples of scholars who trace the mystical and monastic influences on Anabaptism see Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Ascetism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979) and Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984).

interpretation of Müntzer, and referring to Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*,[15] Taubes makes a case for Müntzer's importance, despite his violence and "monomaniacal pathos" (*OE*, 106/143). Citing Bloch's *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* as the "best account" of Müntzer, Taubes paints a picture of Müntzer as an exemplary character in the drama of human freedom and its cycle-breaking fire (*OE*, 107/143),[16] arguing that in Müntzer "the courage to push beyond world becomes explosive in the world; the impossible gives birth to the possible, the unconditional to what is actually happening" (*OE*, 107/143-144).

The disputations between Müntzer and Luther are important to Taubes because – in a distinction borrowed from Holl – they present a choice between *reformation* (Luther) and *revolution* (Müntzer) (*OE*, 107/144). In this decision, Luther represents a kind of retention of the Ptolemaic separation of heaven and earth, which he projects onto the separation between nature and grace, law and gospel, and the Old and New Testaments (*OE*, 109/146-147). Where Ptolemaic Christianity maintains separation between transcendent heaven and immanent earth, Copernican Christianity arises in the Reformation's "enormous reduction in the dogma concerning the hierarchical relations between heaven and earth" (*OE*, 109/147). For Taubes, while Luther is a representative of this Copernican turn, Müntzer negates the separations between inner spirit and outer revolution, Old and New Testaments, nature and grace, law and gospel (*OE*, 112/151). Against the sacraments that supposedly bridge the gap between heaven and earth in the Ptolemaic Christianity of Roman Catholicism, "Lutheranism founds a new church on the Copernican earth devoid of heaven" (*OE*, 110/147-148). Despite this movement in Luther, Taubes argues that Luther is still beholden to the "political and policing forces" of the church, thereby preventing him from truly embodying the history-constituting courage of human freedom (*OE*, 110/148).

At this juncture it is both Müntzer and the Anabaptists who "take this freedom seriously by founding the community of Christians on the principle of freedom, without state or hierarchical control" (*OE*, 110/148). At the birth of the modern self – which Taubes calls the 'ego,' in a straightforward sense – "the freedom of the individual Christian bears the sign [*zeichen*] that enables him [sic] to break the power and coercion of the Church which bestows the objective sacrament" (*OE*, 110/148 − translation altered). Taubes associates the birth of this kind of modern freedom and selfhood with the Anabaptist groups, and this freedom continues in their influence upon the Collegiant groups described above. Of the Anabaptists, Taubes writes that "a visible external manifestation of this community is adult baptism..." but quickly notes that "adult baptism is only the sign of this these groups; their real longing is for the apostolic community" (*OE*, 110/148).[17] Placing Müntzer within the Anabaptist fold, Taubes asserts that the "seething mass of desires associated with the Anabaptists culminates in Thomas Müntzer" and his confrontation with Luther (*OE*, 110/148).

At this point in Book III Taubes' reading of Müntzer becomes a way of connecting Marx and Kierkegaard – a reading which takes up the bulk of Book IV, and one that he owes in part to Karl Löwith's 1941 book *From Hegel to Nietzsche*.[18] Taubes argues that Müntzer critiques and

---

[15] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge.* Trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, 1936), esp. pp. 211-219. Cf. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 92-94.

[16] Taubes cites Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, original edition, 135-6; new edition, 99.

[17] Taubes cites Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, original 79-80; new edition, 60.

[18] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*. Trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 137-162. Taubes describes the importance of his discovery of this work in "Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution," 2.

sublates both the inner religious life exemplified by Kierkegaard and the outer social life that concerns Marx, thereby effecting the kind of "fusion of inside and outside [that] can only be attained if one is prepared to abandon the territory which holds Marx and Kierkegaard, even in their opposition, captive" as he posits at the end of the book, in the last sentence before the epilogue (*OE*, 191/254). While Taubes employs Müntzer in the service of his overarching genealogy of eschatology, the focus of this chapter is on how Taubes' work resonates with later social histories of the Anabaptists, and how his work holds emancipatory potential that helps us understand the category of the postsecular.

Taubes and the Anabaptists

Until this point, I have attempted to summarize Taubes' use of Müntzer on his own terms, but in order to more fully understand Müntzer's importance within the argument of *Occidental Eschatology*, and to make a case for Taubes as a philosopher of history who anticipates later historical research on the Anabaptists, I will now compare his descriptions of the Anabaptists and Müntzer with more recent historiography. As noted above, Taubes' descriptions of Müntzer are difficult to tell apart from his prescriptions. In the declarative voice, Taubes makes claims about the relationship between Müntzer and the Anabaptists – specifically stating that Müntzer was influential for the Anabaptists via the apocalyptic and violent influence of Melchior Hoffman in the Dutch Republic, and suggesting that pacifist Anabaptism continued and concluded with David Joris and Menno Simons. Implicit in these claims is a distinction between violent and nonviolent Anabaptists, in which the category of Anabaptism is fluid and complex, not categorically including Müntzer, but not excluding him either. This fluidity of categories is in keeping with the idea articulated by Joshua Robert Gold that for Taubes boundaries ought to be complicated and blended rather than entrenched and essentialized.[19]

Given that Taubes is a philosopher and not an historian it is surprising to see that these historical descriptions are far more aligned with contemporary social histories of the Anabaptists and Müntzer, than with the North American Mennonite confessional historiography of Taubes' day.[20] Unlike the confessional history of the Anabaptists being written in the 1940s and 1950s which ascribed a singular origin and essence to the Anabaptist movement (H.S. Bender),[21] and defined Anabaptism as essentially nonviolent while rejecting Müntzer as an aberration (J.C. Wenger),[22] Taubes anticipates many of the advances made by later social historians of the Anabaptists by acknowledging the plurality of the Anabaptist movement (*OE*, 110/148), rejecting nonviolence as their defining characteristic (*OE*, 86/116), and defining their voluntarism as a consequence of their restitutionist desire to return to the values of the early church (*OE*, 110/148). Furthermore, Taubes places Müntzer in continuity with the broader Anabaptist movement (*OE*, 106/142) – something that confessional historians in the 1940s and

---

[19] Joshua Robert Gold, "Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse From Below" *Telos* 134 (2006), 141.

[20] For one overview of this history and historiography, especially pertaining to Müntzer, see the introduction to the anthology James Stayer, Werner Packull Eds. *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer* (Toronto: Kendall/Hunt, 1980).

[21] H.S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel: The Founder of the Swiss Brethren Sometimes Called Anabaptists* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), xiv. He writes, "The Swiss Brethren movement, commonly called Anabaptism and later known as Mennonitism, was formally initiated on January 21, 1525, in the city of Zurich, Switzerland."

[22] J.C. Wenger, *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1949), 7-9. He writes, under the heading "False Theories of Anabaptism," that although Conrad Grebel and Müntzer wrote to each other, "Münzer's program of violence was entirely unacceptable to the nonresistant Swiss Brethren" adding that "Swiss Anabaptism had no connections with Münzer's peasant revolt of 1524-1525."

1950s would not have done, but something that is done now with some regularity, especially in the case of Müntzer's influence on Hans Hut and South German Anabaptism. But in order to understand the significance of Taubes' anticipations and resonances, it is important to understand the trajectory of Anabaptist historiography.

The historiography of the Anabaptists has moved through several discrete stages, beginning with the "Bender school" of the 1940s and 1950s that sought to restore the dignity of the Anabaptists, who had until then been equated with fanatics (*Schwärmer*) and strongly identified with both Thomas Müntzer and the bloody siege of the city of Münster. Led by Harold S. Bender, this school of thought has come to be called the 'monogenesis' school because of its confessionally motivated desire to preserve a normative historical essence and singular beginning point of the Anabaptist movement. The next stage in Anabaptist historiography was even more revisionist, advancing a polygenetic thesis that divided Anabaptist origins into many distinct geographical and temporal categories to correct for the oversimplifications and essentialisms of the monogenesis school.[23]

Thomas Müntzer's reception by early historians of Anabaptism began with his rejection as the 'Satan from Allstedt' and his association with Luther in 1519, which contributed to his rejection by the monogenesis school.[24] From early on, despite receiving Luther's assistance in acquiring a post at a church in Zwickau, Müntzer differed from Luther. The relationship between the two remained a key issue of concern for historians of the Radical Reformation, including those of the polygenesis school.[25] Although Müntzer never baptized adults – a fact that allowed some confessional historians to distance him from the Anabaptist movement[26] – he did oppose the baptism of infants, and furthermore rejected Luther's salvation by faith alone.[27]

By 1521 Müntzer came to believe that the end of time was at hand, and in 1525 Müntzer saw the Peasant's Revolt and the battle at Frankenhausen as signs that the apocalypse and final judgment were at hand. Not to be confused with the person of Thomas Müntzer, the siege at the city of Münster in 1534 was spearheaded by Bernhard Rothmann, Jan van Leiden, Bernhard Knipperdolling, and Jan Matthijs – each of whom held apocalyptic beliefs like that of Müntzer. The siege began in February 1534 with the expulsion of all the unbaptized from the city, and what followed was the attempted establishment of the New Jerusalem, including the instalment of a theocratic government led by representatives claiming the titles of the twelve tribes of Israel.[28]

Where the pre-monogenesis historiography conflated the Anabaptists and Müntzer under the derogatory accusation of enthusiasm, the monogenesis school recovered the dignity of Anabaptism by separating the supposedly true and pure Swiss origin of Anabaptism from the apocalyptic violence of Müntzer. A movement of accord was then re-initiated by the polygenesis historians who considered Müntzer to be at least influential upon the Anabaptist movement. As described above, Taubes anticipates the advances of the polygenesis school and their heirs by

---

[23] See James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49.2 (April 1975): 83-121.
[24] Abraham Friesen, "Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986), 143.
[25] Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic, Mystic, and Revolutionary*. Trans. Jocelyn Jaquiery. Ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), xvii.
[26] Robert Friedmann and Werner Packull. "Müntzer, Thomas," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1987. Paragraph 13.
[27] See Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), Chapter 3.
[28] See Willem de Bakker, James Stayer, and Michael Driedger, *Bernard Rothmann and the Reformation in Münster 1530-35* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2009), 4.

referring to the Anabaptist movement in the plural (*OE*, 110/148), by not defining the group as strictly nonviolent (*OE*, 86/116), and by acknowledging Müntzer's influence on the broader Anabaptist movement (*OE*, 106/142). Taubes also seems to acknowledge the monastic influences within the Anabaptist groups and the complex inheritance of Anabaptist dissent in modernity, while the monogenesis historians underemphasized the former and oversimplified the latter. While permitting these complexities and avoiding the essentialisms of the monogenesis school, Taubes sees in Müntzer and the Anabaptists a usable history that can serve as a resource for present thinking about what it means to live in time and constitute history.

Emancipatory History

Can we distinguish between the surprisingly anticipatory descriptions of Müntzer and the Anabaptists in Taubes' work, and Taubes' prescriptive argument regarding the place of Müntzer and the Anabaptists in the drama of emancipatory history? The fact that Taubes is unclear about his influences, as well as the fact that he writes in strong declarative statements that admit no clear distinction between description and prescription, both seem to render this question unanswerable. For Taubes there is no separation between emancipatory values and history itself, for he does not sharply distinguish his normative thesis that the essence of history is emancipatory freedom from his descriptive account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists. It would be simplistic to say that Taubes advances a normatively oriented emancipatory history that just so happens to be more nuanced or more descriptively accurate than other normatively oriented confessional historians who were roughly his contemporaries. This construal of the relationship between descriptive and normative accounts of history risks disconnecting these two orientations in such a way that would suggest that despite the normative orientations that historians cannot help but have, they may still set forth a timeless and apolitical description of historical events and groups. But Taubes' account of Müntzer and the Anabaptists is surprising because it anticipates and resonates with later developments, and not because it achieves 'objectivity.'

While historians in the monogenesis school allowed their confessional values to overdetermine their understanding and evaluation of Müntzer and the Anabaptists, so too does the polygenesis school and its contemporary representatives, albeit in a less obvious way. For example, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, the author of an important social history of the Anabaptists, initially appears to write from a more value-free and balanced perspective than his predecessors – for he does not decide which of the many Anabaptist groups were faithful or 'true' Anabaptists. Goertz avoids the pitfalls of the monogenesis school by understanding Müntzer as a key influence upon Hans Hut and South German Anabaptism and by insisting on the plural origins and characteristics of the Anabaptists. In fact, Goertz himself contests Taubes' reading of Müntzer in *Occidental Eschatology*, arguing that although Taubes rightly understood Müntzer as a mystic, he did not adequately clarify the relationship between mysticism and apocalypticism in Müntzer's life and work.[29] However, like Taubes, Goertz's key category is human freedom and its dissenting negation of established powers. Goertz's landmark book *The Anabaptists* begins with an examination of the Anabaptist 'free church,' proceeds by defining Anabaptism via the key category of anticlericalism, and concludes with a statement that moves from a descriptive affirmation of the irreducibility of Anabaptist thought to a prescriptive admonition to take up the Anabaptist vision of freedom today:

---

[29] Goertz, "'Dran, dran, weyl ir tag habt': Apokalyptik bei Jacob Taubes und Thomas Müntzer," in *Abendländische Eschatologie: Ad Jacob Taubes*, 164.

> The doctrines of the Anabaptists were as much of their age as the theology of those who persecuted them as heretics. This does not mean that impulses from the alternative movements of the sixteenth century cannot be taken up today, wherever, in their religious or social experience, people perceive the oppression which obscures a still-awaited 'new heaven and new earth,' and wherever they are able to grasp small opportunities to gain freedom.[30]

If we are tempted to ask how it is possible that normatively-laden histories like Taubes' can still get history right – given his anticipations of later social history – then we ought to consider that modern social histories *also* reflect the values of their authors, betraying an historical determination, and even mobilizing their histories for select political causes in the present. This normativity is evident in the previous chapter in both Fix's commitment to the secularization thesis and Kołakowski's search for resources for anti-Stalinist Marxism. Unlike the confessional historians who desired to secure a stable origin and essence of Anabaptism, Goertz's historical work is conditioned by the value of human freedom. Goertz's emphasis on freedom may sound more value-neutral because individual freedom is so tightly knit into the fabric of modernity, but it is no less a normative *value* than the Mennonite principle of nonresistance that guided Bender and Wenger. Goertz's work may nonetheless be a better historical account because of how he broadens the category of who counts as an Anabaptist, thereby better apprehending his historical object of study by better understanding the caging limits of his categories, but it still does not achieve value-neutrality. By contrast, although Taubes' history of Müntzer and the Anabaptists is also deeply conditioned by his valuation of history as an emancipatory movement of human freedom, unlike the confessional and post-confessional historians of Anabaptism who both attempt to write descriptively, Taubes writes in a way that refuses to distinguish between prescription and description, but instead entangles what is and what ought to be, advancing a philosophy of history that is critical of modern political realities on the basis of the emancipatory history of eschatological thinking.

A remaining question concerns the source of Taubes' understanding of Müntzer and the Anabaptists. It is likely that Bloch's book on Müntzer exerted a substantial influence on Taubes' *Occidental Eschatology*, for Bloch too reads Müntzer and the Anabaptists as a part of a wider movement of religious and political emancipation that occurred during the Reformation. In one of his early essays, Mennonite political theologian A. James Reimer praises Bloch's interpretation of Müntzer for its combination of historical, theological, and literary styles, and for its portrayal of Müntzer as both a political and religious figure. Reimer further lauds Bloch's approach to writing historically while being "existentially involved," and concludes with an appraisal of the relationship between Bloch's historical work and his self-avowed commitment to revolutionary social change.[31] Reimer writes that "Bloch tends, like Engels, to throw Müntzer, the Münsterites, the Anabaptists, the peasants, and the poor working class all into one homogenous revolutionary group."[32] Indeed, Taubes could be accused of the same thing, and one could argue that his anticipations of later historical scholarship can in some way be traced back to Bloch's reading of these groups under one category. It is likely that Bloch's existential

---

[30] Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*. Trans. Trevor Johnson (London: Routledge, 1996), 135.
[31] A. James Reimer, "Chiliastic Imagination of Social Change: Bloch's Interpretation of Müntzer," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 451.
[32] Ibid, 451.

involvement with his subject matter and his refusal of neutrality influenced Taubes' approach to history, for Bloch's book begins with the claim that Müntzer calls to us from beyond the grave, constituting history itself through his challenge and inspiration.[33]

~

I began by situating Müntzer within Taubes' *Occidental Eschatology*, first by calling into question the role of the distinction between description and prescription in Taubes' account of Müntzer, and then by summarizing his emancipatory idea of history. I argued that Müntzer's role in *Occidental Eschatology* is essential, and then showed significant connections between Taubes' historical claims and those of modern historians of Müntzer and the Anabaptists. These connections alone give the reader a deeper understanding of *Occidental Eschatology*, but what remains is the question of how Taubes assists us in thinking about the possibility of a postsecular history between political theology and the politics of time.

Müntzer and Taubes are both significant figures who must be reckoned with in the discourse on time and history within political theology, not only because of their abiding partisanship and non-neutrality, but because of their desire for the emancipation of the oppressed (whether of the oppressed peasants in the case of Müntzer, or of forgotten histories in the case of Taubes). A deep contradiction within western modernity is the simultaneous emphasis on individual freedom and pluralism – two values that cannot be easily reconciled given that the assertion of the freedom of one individual inevitably conflicts with the assertion of another.[34] Both Müntzer and Taubes are decisive in ways that bear directly on this issue, resisting the discourse of neutrality and favoring the emancipation of the oppressed through revolutionary refusal and cycle-breaking freedom (respectively) over the cyclical and routinized patterns of established political and religious institutions.[35]

Taubes' *use* of Müntzer also refuses neutrality because Taubes does not merely present Müntzer under the guise of neutral description, but instead employs him as a positive voice in his normative history of eschatological thinking. Taubes' use of Müntzer is exceptional both because he acknowledges the complexity of Anabaptist history, and because he avoids the pretense of value-neutral description. Questions surely remain. If there is no value-neutral history, then what kind of values should historians hold? What is the proper use of history? These questions about the politics of time loom large for both historians and those who work in and around political theology, as well as those who take up a postsecular position. Taubes' use of Müntzer seems to demonstrate that an emancipatory reading of history can still account for the plurality and complexity of a group like the Anabaptists. This weakens the established sensibility that the proper telling of history must remain agnostic on the question of values, suggesting instead that there may be emancipatory potential left in the resourcing of history for contemporary political

---

[33] Bloch, *Thomas Münzer*, 10. Reimer, "Chiliastic Imagination," 448.

[34] See Ernesto Laclau, "Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject," in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 47-53; and Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1998), 1-8.

[35] Later, Taubes will articulate his own vision for apocalyptic community in similarly value-laden terms, distinguishing between communities that found themselves on soil, from those who found themselves on blood, from those who found themselves on spirit, culminating in the messianic community who redeem the earth and blood. See Jacob Taubes, "Community – After the Apocalypse" in *Community*. Ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), 106. This essay was recently translated into German in Jacob Taubes, *Apokalypse und Politik: Aufsätze, Kritiken und kleinere Schriften*. Hsg. Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink and Martin Treml (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017), 127-138.

purposes, and not in such a way that requires the sacrifice of that history's complexity and ambiguity for those political purposes. The major consequence for thinking about postsecular history that Taubes' work highlights is the double freedom of history: the freedom found within history as it negates that which would order it, and the fact that history continually frees itself from simplistic and instrumental use at the hands of those who would seek to take hold of it in a katechonic fist or through other violent expressions of political power.

Contemporary social historians of the Anabaptist movements have recently pointed out that the fear of violent fanaticism is connected to the ways that governments govern in the name of security,[36] with some scholars emphasizing that the negative connotations of Müntzer, Münster, and the Anabaptists endure, most recently being compared to the actions of ISIS in the popular media.[37] For example, Driedger argues that the reductive account that endures from the demonizing of Anabaptists through to contemporary charges of fanaticism risks contributing to "an unintended legitimation of state violence."[38] Against the simplistic scapegoating of Müntzer and the Anabaptists that props up the rational state against so-called 'fanatical extremists,' Driedger insists that we should try to get history right, but in such a way that "weaken[s] the larger assumptions about religion and violence that encourage the meme of Anabaptist violence."[39] Citing Toscano's critique of the use of fanaticism to reaffirm political hegemony and Cavanaugh's critique of the very concept of religious violence, Driedger proceeds negatively, with the aim of maintaining the complex and contested status of his historical object, but without avoiding contemporary political realities.

However, Taubes moves further still than this, acknowledging the complexities of Müntzer and the Anabaptists, but pushing past the negative task of criticism and the neutral task of description toward the positive construction of new values that may go some way toward addressing the oppressive and repressive tendencies of the past. In this way, Taubes is exceptional, not only because he gives a framework for understanding the work of history as a partisan exercise for the emancipation of the oppressed, but also because the freedom of negation that defines history in his work returns to challenge the use of that history. Both Taubes' resourcing of Müntzer and the Anabaptists and the ways in which Müntzer and the Anabaptists refuse to become usable histories demonstrate how history can be emancipatory – both by contributing to the cause of freedom and by remaining so unruly and undomesticable that they cannot be easily appropriated for political use.

Taubes' work helps to weaken the prefix of the postsecular by showing how history can be used for emancipation and freedom without compromising how that history refuses instrumental use. Despite the fact that it has a history that stands against the inclinations of its prefix, I suggest that the postsecular can still name an approach that makes a normative claim to the positive status of freedom, and does so in ways that far exceed the desire to be free from history. Although the prefix 'post' proclaims a sort of freedom from the determinations of its history, those who work under its name cannot unhinge their work from that history. As Luc

---

[36] Gary Waite, "Apocalyptical Terrorists or a Figment of Government Paranoia? Re-evaluating Anabaptist Violence in the Netherlands and Holy Roman Empire, 1535-1570," in *Grenzen des Täufertums / Boundaries of Anabaptism: Neue Forschungen*. Ed. Anselm Schubert, Astrid von Schlachta, Michael Driedger (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 122.

[37] Michael Driedger, "Münster, Monster, Modernity: Tracing the Challenging Meme of Anabaptist Madness." in Mark Jantzen, Mary S. Sprunger, and John D. Thiesen, Eds. *European Mennonites and the Challenge of Modernity Over Five Centuries: Contributors, Detractors and Adapters* (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 2016).

[38] Ibid, 29, 47.

[39] Ibid, 49.

Huyse suggests, "all things pass except the past."[40] It is not so simple as to say that the postsecular is a category for that which is free from secularity, nor is it sufficient to say that the postsecular is wholly determined by its history, but instead the question should become: how should the category of the postsecular name a mediation between the desire for freedom from its secular history and the fact that it is still determined by that history?

Occidental Eschatology, in which history is constituted by freedom while also being free, provides some resources for this dilemma. The postsecular is not neutral, for it challenges the neutral statuses of Christianity, religion, and the secular, and therefore must challenge its own normativity as well. Helpful for this task, Taubes' emancipatory history is explicitly non-neutral, but without allowing the taking of sides to usurp the cause of freedom. Taubes' thesis that history is constituted by a cycle-breaking freedom that negates God, the world, and its institutions, is helpful because it allows for hope and change, while also considering history to be something that refuses straightforward use. Holding up the Anabaptists as an example of the movement of freedom in history, Taubes sees the group as part of a usable history, while at the same time avoiding the narrowness of confessional historiography and its bounded obsession with origins and essences. Effecting at least a partial recovery of the implicit claim to freedom in the postsecular – given its desire to move beyond the constraints of Christianity, secularity, and religion – Taubes' work assists in understanding the ways in which the postsecular can remain a valuable periodizing concept without compromising its critical edge.

The category of the postsecular cannot emancipate itself from its own normativity. Whether it attempts to free itself from the cage of secular reason or the problems of Christian theology, the postsecular will remain within the realm of values and their contestation. What matters for the postsecular history developed herein is that the normativity of the postsecular avoids both the free and instrumental use of history (in which the past is not free from present use) and the total determination by history (in which one is not free from the determinations of the past). This tension between the use of history and its refusal of use is just as present in the grand scope of intellectual history that divides Ancient from Medieval from Modern, as it is in the periodization of a life story into stages and division of time into past, present, and future – for the narration of a life story also struggles with the conflicting desires to make either meaning or meaninglessness compulsory.

[40] See Luc Huyse, *All Things Pass Except the Past* (Belgium: AWEPA, 2009).