Antisemitism: Medieval, Modern, Postmodern
Part I

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“Is it possible that the whole world is wrong
and the Jews are right?” (re: blood libel)
Ahad Ha’Am/Asher Ginsberg, Russian Zionist, 1893

“The whole world is demanding that Israel withdraw.
I don’t think the whole world can be wrong.”1
—Kofi Anan, UN Secretary-General, 2002

In 1996 I wrote an essay on Jewish-Christian relations entitled “What Has 2000 to Do with 5760?,” in which I expressed concern over the possible effect that the passage of 2000 might have on the exceptional period of philo-Judaism that has marked Western society from the end of the Holocaust until the present. Indeed, the last 60 years may well mark the most exceptional and sustained period of philo-Judaism in the history of Jewish-Gentile relations, and the results—a flourishing and creative civil society precisely where those relations are best—seem to support the larger argument of this essay about the relationship between Judaism and civil society. On the other hand, as a historian familiar with the pattern of Christian and post-Christian history, in which periods of philo-Judaism end up flipping into their opposite and generating a sometimes furious episode of anti-Judaism, I wondered about a downswing in the aftermath of 2000.

I chose this date as the point of the downturn for two reasons. First, it was the date of choice for many of the evangelical and fundamentalist Christians whose support of Israel and whose love of Jews is intimately

1. Joel Brinkley, “Israel Starts Leaving 2 Areas, but Will Continue Drive,”
connected to their desire to convert them, and to see the final apocalyptic events play out through the fate of the Jews. Given the powerful historical role of apocalyptic hopes and disappointments in triggering the philo/anti-Judaic dynamic, I was concerned that the (inevitable) passage of 2000 might provoke a classic case of (post-) apocalyptic scapegoating: Jesus did not return because of the refusal of the Jews to convert according to the Christian messianic scenario. Second, Muslims had become acutely aware of the Jewish-Christian messianic alliance at the approach of 2000, especially the desire to build the “Third Temple” on the site of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque. Illustrating the first rule of apocalyptic rivalry—one person’s messiah is another’s Antichrist—the Muslims depicted Jews as agents of the Dajjal (Antichrist), who would himself be Jewish.

I therefore speculated that we might even see an alliance between bitterly disappointed fundamentalist Christians and their apocalyptic enemy of 2000—Islamism. At any rate, I argued, Jews should prepare themselves for a rough ride, and, while the philo-Judaic sun shone before 2000, they should strengthen their alliances among their current friends, liberal and conservative, secular and religious. In particular, I meant that we should clarify the nature of our relationships, so that the tacit expectations might not lead to bitter disappointments. When I spoke to prominent Jews about this issue, however, I received a condescending, sometimes aggressive, rebuke: Don’t be silly or alarmist. We’ve never been in such great shape. Alan Dershowitz quoted me as a lone voice cautioning against his unre-


strained optimism that the era of state-sponsored antisemitism and its open displays was over.\(^5\)

I was right and I was wrong. I was, alas, correct that there would be a wave of Judeophobia in the West; I was wrong in that it did not come from disappointed apocalyptic Christian Zionists who blamed Israel; instead, it came from the "progressive left." I was right that it was disappointed apocalyptic expectations; I was wrong in that the really bitter disillusionment of 2000 was the failure of Oslo, not the failure of the Rapture. If the push at Camp David in the summer of 2000 had succeeded and a secular, leftist government in Israel had given up sovereignty over sacred Jewish space—including the Temple Mount—to a Palestinian state, then the Christian camp, which so longed for the building of a new Temple, might have turned against "the Jews."

But Oslo failed, and the progressive left turned against Israel with a vengeance. Which brings me to my last and greatest (and unproclaimed) error and to the reason I wrote this essay: I had no idea that the resistance to the new round of Jew-hatred would be so weak, nor how prominent a place those hatreds would achieve in a post-Holocaust public sphere that was, in principle, constructed on their exclusion.\(^6\) In other words, I had no idea how powerful the new mutation in Judeophobia that I correctly predicted would actually become.

I—PRIME-DIVIDER VS. CIVIL SOCIETIES

In order to understand the dynamics I am concerned with, and that, I think, offer the best approach to understanding the distressing situation in which Israel finds itself, let me lay down some definitions and relate them to the most important single phenomenon of our time: globalization.

Prime-divider society: Those cultures in which a small elite monopolizes the technology of power (weapons, communications, public voice) by creating a fundamental gap between them and the vast majority (commoners). The three key components of the prime-divider society are: 1) legal privilege for the elite, 2) stigmatization of commoner manual labor, and 3) radically different forms of education/socialization for the two

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groups.\textsuperscript{7} The monopoly on weapons and communications that the elites maintain in such cultures permits them to appropriate—with violence if necessary, and always with the implied threat of violence—the vast majority of the surplus that the largely peasant society produces. The basic interpersonal and international principle behind such structures is the dominating imperative of “rule or be ruled,” a zero-sum game in which the elite wins and the commoners lose, producing the wealth distribution typical of such societies—an immensely wealthy and cultured elite and an uneducated subject population living largely at subsistence levels.

The logic of the elite here is quite simple: if we do not dominate others, whoever does take power will use it to dominate us—or, as the Athenians said to the Melians, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”\textsuperscript{8} The corollary political ideology, to paraphrase Plato, is equally simple: to grant freedom and autonomy to commoners, who have no discipline, no self-control, is a recipe for anarchy.\textsuperscript{9} The very stability of society depends on a small elite to run public affairs, and the immense disparities of wealth and power that mark the prime-divider society are necessary to maintain the social order. Power, in such a society, is opaque, mysterious, beyond the ken of the population. (These issues will become crucial in understanding modern antisemitism.)

Civil polities\textsuperscript{10} try systematically (constitutionally) to substitute a discourse of fairness for violence in dispute settlement. Such cultures attempt to dismantle the prime divider by legislating equality before the law, by removing the stigma from, even dignifying, labor by eliminating the elite’s monopoly on communication (and education), and moving the control of weaponry from the “private” realm of the warrior elite to publicly funded and accountable organizations (army and police force). Civil polities demand of their citizens that they renounce the dominating imperative in favor of a mutually agreed upon “contract” of “live and let live.”\textsuperscript{11}

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\item For a more detailed analysis of these issues, see Landes, \textit{Heaven on Earth}, chap. 8.
\item Thucydides, \textit{The Peloponnesian War} 5: 105.
\item There is a huge literature on civil society, much of which has focused on the institutions that buffer between authoritarian states and their subjects. I use “civil polities” to designate those kinds of political organizations that in principle guarantee the rights of its citizens. Thus, scholars of the Middle East sometimes even refer to authoritarian Arab polities as “thriving civil societies” (Richard Norton, ed., \textit{Civil Society in the Middle East} [Leiden: Brill, 1995]), whereas only a radical relativist could call them civil polities.
\item For an excellent depiction of the demands and dangers of what I’m calling civil polities, see Eli Sagan, \textit{The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Para-}
\end{enumerate}
Such cultures systematically encourage the positive-sum relations of voluntary associations, and argue that if commoners receive a good education, enfranchisement will not lead to anarchy, and that if elites receive a civic education, their exercise of power will not lead to tyranny. Power in such societies is in principle transparent and accountable to the people on whose behalf it is exercised. Civil polities tend to be far more dynamic than prime-divider ones: because of their positive-sum relations, they tend to prosper and innovate more; because intelligent people engage in labor, labor-saving devices proliferate; because their egalitarian rules favor meritocracy, the intellectual discourse shows greater creativity and flexibility; and because public self-criticism is esteemed, there’s a sharp upward learning curve from mistakes.

Despite the legislative determination to establish civil polity—equality before the law—no culture has yet accomplished a society in which privilege and prejudice do not play significant roles: the old aristocracy, with its attitudes and its violence, persists behind the façade of egalitarian principles; great wealth replaces older forms of privilege and coercion; the dominating imperative continues to drive people in their relations with those weaker than they, whether it be fellow citizens or foreign countries.

Indeed, the temptations of power often destroy experiments in fairness, since so often the call to fairness, as Nietzsche noted, is based in ressentiment. As the Athenians, about to enslave the Melians, explained to their designated victims: “The only reason you speak of fairness is because you are weak. If you were in our position, you’d do what we are doing.”\(^{12}\) The ability to get power and not abuse it to your own advantage is the hardest demand of a civil polity; failure means the kind of backsliding that led democratic Athens to slide into empire and self-destructive warfare with Sparta. Nor does this involve political issues alone. Honor-shame cultures, which consider it legitimate to shed another’s blood for the sake of one’s own honor, promote these values above and below the prime-divider culture, and make the shift from prime-divider to civil society a cultural as well as political challenge.

Thus, the differences between prime-divider polities and even attempted civil ones are enormous. Indeed, the very effort to dismantle a prime-divider culture—to get a critical mass of people, especially of elites, to set aside the dominating imperative and adopt the constraining (read:


humiliating) rules of civil society—poses such enormous difficulty for dominating elites that it has almost never occurred in history. Thus, these experiments have repeatedly failed when attempted.

On the other hand, even a simple, minimal shift makes a difference. For example, once a polity accepts egalitarian law codes as the formal rules of the culture (no matter how much “cheating” goes on behind the scenes), new economic and cultural dynamics begin to transform the society. On one level, the difference between the modern, wealthy nations of the West and the cycle of poverty that has so far condemned most of the societies of the Third World lies precisely in the zero-sum dynamics of the prime-divider society and its replacement with the positive-sum dynamics of civil society.  

Toward the end of the 18th century, for a variety of reasons we cannot go into here, certain Western nations (United States, France, England) decided to formally adopt the rules of civil society: equality before the law for both elites and laboring commoners; open educational systems; and constitutional governments that, via electoral controls and free press, stood responsible to their citizens and (relatively) transparent to their scrutiny. This constitutional revolution accompanied an explosion of economic and technological transformations that created the wealthiest, most powerful nations in the history of mankind. The continuous success of these experiments in civil society over the last two centuries has created our current situation, in which the Western model of technologically endowed democracies offers the principal model of social reform for nations wishing to join in the material abundance of the modern world.

Globalization, which in the past has only occurred through military conquest (Hellenistic [third century BCE], Roman [first century BCE], Islamic [seventh-ninth centuries CE], European [16th-19th centuries CE], British [19th-20th centuries CE]), now occurs through economic penetration and acculturation. The new, “voluntary” modes, however, are not as radically different from earlier imperialistic ones as this construct may make it seem. Plenty of elements of the older, coercive modes lie embedded in the commercial and political relations that present themselves under the guise of civil society and its contractual public face. But deep and significant changes have taken place, and at their heart lie many of the issues surrounding Jewish-Gentile relations.

By the definitions provided above, few societies have even attempted the experiment of civil polity—some Greek city-states, notably Athens, possibly Rome during the early stages of the Republic, the urban communes of medieval Europe, and finally modern constitutional governments. The most exceptionally fruitful of the ancient experiments was the also first recorded one, that of the period of the Judges in ancient Israel (ca. 1300-1000 BCE). Here we find a society that is, in principle, governed by an egalitarian law (all civil and criminal legislation in the Torah applies to equally to all citizens and to strangers)—a society in which everyone labors and everyone rests, in which access to the laws and egalitarian principles is publicized to everyone, and in which the highest authority is a judge who administers impartial justice to self-regulating communities.

Indeed, the biblical texts suggest, as an alternative to the dominating imperative, the empathic imperative: love the stranger in your midst and do not oppress him, for you know the heart of the stranger since you were strangers in Egypt. Hillel famously expressed this empathic imperative as the essence of the Torah: “What is hateful to you, do not do onto others,” a direct response to the dominating Golden Rule: “Do onto others before they do onto you.” In its opposition to the unbridled power of kings, its egalitarian law code, its denunciation of the arrogance and exploitation of elites, its defense of the powerless and the poor, and its definition of justice and the importance of judicial impartiality, the Bible represents the most subversive political document of the ancient world—subversive to the prime divider and to the discourse of the political philosophers from Plato onward.

This essay is not the venue for a lengthy discussion of the wealth and depth of the values of civil society to be found in the biblical corpus and subsequent Jewish writings, but one particular one deserves special attention in the context of antisemitism: self-criticism. In order for civil society to work, all its members—elites as well as commoners—must remain open


to criticism. If judges should not take bribes, and kings should not take
covet the wives and property of their citizens, if the powerful should not
oppress the poor, and every seven or fifty years should set free the slaves
and forgive the debts, then the culture that hopes to work by these prin-
ciples must have mechanisms for holding the powerful accountable. One of
the most unusual themes in Jewish narratives about power involves the free
and public criticism of those in power (by prophets) and the willingness of
the powerful to admit fault (Judah and Tamar, David and Natan, Raban
Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua). Indeed, no other religious tradition has col-
lected such highly critical texts excoriating the powerful, both lay and cler-
cical, for “grinding the face of the poor.”

This remark does not mean to suggest that other cultures do not have
these elements—the cry for justice and accountability from their elites. On
the contrary, I suspect that such a discourse is nearly universal. What sets
the Jews apart from other religions and cultures is that very late in their
development—approximately half a millennium after the creation of the
religious community—Jewish elites chose to canonize this voice of dissent.
Indeed, as we shall see, antisemites often use Jewish self-criticism against
them, while in the modern predicament of Zionism, sometimes Jewish self-
criticism becomes a pathology.

Of course, such a set of values and such a system of self-regulating
communities without any “top-down” coercive capacities had enormous
difficulties surviving: both external threats and centrifugal tendencies event-
tually led to judges’ replacement with monarchy (I Samuel 8:11). The first
recorded experiment in a civil polity failed (just as when democracy gave
way to oligarchy and imperial/royal rulers in Hellenistic and Roman socie-
ties). But in Israel, even the advent of kings did not marginalize the voices
of civil society, voices critical of abusive kings (Natan and Elijah), voices
critical of elites abusing their privileges (Isaiah and Amos), and voices
envisioning a future in which the nations of the world dismantle their prime
dividers and transform themselves into societies of peace for honest labor:
“They will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning
hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, nor study war any more.
But each shall sit under his own fig and vine with none to harass them”
(Isaiah 2; Micah 4).

Thus, when kings fell before the power of imperial powers (Assyria,
Babylon, Persia), the descendants of the judges, led by prophets and
reformers, could reformulate civil society in the form of Jewish communi-
ties, first in exile, then during the “Second Commonwealth,” and finally in a
second exile. When they conquered a local culture, ancient empires peeled
off the elite along the lines of an already existent prime-divider society and
absorbing them into the lower levels of their own administration, and
totally they dined out on the commoners. Jews alone of these conquered cultures did not have a clean prime-divider line along which to sever the elites, and, despite the partial collaboration/assimilation of some (the Hellenizers, the Sadducees), other elites, especially rabbinic, refused to switch their allegiance from their (chosen) people to the conquering elite. The ability of Jews to survive under circumstances that destroyed all the other cultures of the ancient world derives significantly from their ability to cohere as a culture without the use of coercion. A discourse of fairness and a mutual solidarity between rabbinic elites and commoners managed to bond these communities under the enormous pressures of dominating prime-divider societies.

I do not mean to suggest that Jewish life was a utopian community where no coercion, no authoritarianism, no hostility between elites and commoners existed. Anyone familiar with Rabbi Akiva’s comments about donkey bites knows better. My point here, as later with the state of Israel, is relative: in comparison with prime-divider societies, the relations between elites and commoners in Judaism are significantly more harmonious and mutual. Accounts of monarchical legitimacy, aristocratic behavior, assimilation, coercion, disdain for manual labor, and other elite manifestations in Jewish sources hardly disprove the thesis; they merely illustrate that Jews, like members of all other advanced cultures, are themselves subject to the gravitational pull of the prime-divider society. The evidence for exceptions to that tendency, so numerous in the official texts of Judaism and so limited in those of other cultures, constitutes the real anomaly.

This social aspect of Jewish life as an experiment in civil polity—the lived experience of ethical monotheism—represents a critical dimension of Jewish-Gentile relations. Indeed, one might argue that it is embedded in the very promises God made to Abraham. Rather than offer his Chosen People the prized goods of prime-divider society, namely dominion, God offers the classic positive-sum relationship: “Through you, all the nations of the world will be blessed.”

He then explicates with a classic formula contrasting positive and zero-/negative-sum interactions: “Those who bless you I will bless, those

16. This interpretation reverses the common formulation that Jews developed these attitudes because they had no choice: all other cultures faced with this choice could not make it, and therefore disappeared. The Jews did not disappear not because they had no choice, but because they had the cultural resources to adopt successful survival strategies.

17. Rabbi Akiva told his students that before he went to study, when he was an ‘am ha-aretz, if he would have encountered a Torah scholar he would have bit him “like a donkey.” His students asked, why say like a donkey, and not like a dog? He answered that a dog doesn’t break bones. Talmud, Pesachim 48b.
who curse you I will curse [dry up].” Those who have the strength to appreciate Jewish society and what it means for human dignity and freedom will enjoy the blessings of civil polities, and those who find the Jewish example threatening to their forceful grip on power, and seek to diminish the Jews, will live in the destructive and impoverishing zero-sum world of the prime divider. As we shall see, this promise offers interesting insights into the course of globalization today. But before we get there, we need to consider what this approach offers us in understanding the nature and dynamics of antisemitism.

**Philo-Judaism and Anti-Judaism Dynamics**

Optimists think that civil polities, especially after the Holocaust, should be the end of antisemitism, whereas the pessimists think that antisemitism is a permanent element of human nature (even Jews are susceptible). The perspective offered here suggests that both beliefs are misconceived. Antisemitic sentiment, in this view, derives from those authoritarians who benefit most from the prime divider, both the elites and their agents of domination among the commoners. Jews, with their iconoclastic intellects, their developed moral discourse, their educated and assertive (chutzpadik) commoners and responsive and responsible elites, offer a counter-example to the aristocratic insistence that prime dividers are necessary for social order.

As long as the Jewish communities in a larger Diaspora culture remain relatively separate and interact to only a limited degree, they do not present a serious threat. But, especially in cultures that at least nominally prize biblical values of social justice (Islam and Christianity), permitted and positive-sum intercourse between Jews and lay commoners tends to create conditions favorable to the flourishing of civil society: contracts and credit (which necessitate mutual trust), economic initiatives, religious and moral discussions, rule of law and equity. Here, the presence of the Jews as a kind of social leaven creates a threat to many with a stake in the prime-divider society.

These two elements of Jewish-Gentile interaction operated in a kind of dialectic, especially notable in Latin Christian society, that runs roughly as follows. Every time a positive-sum Jewish-Gentile interaction, based on a Christian philo-Judaism, was sustained, the forces of civil society flourished, and economic, legal, and cultural transformations favored initiatives from below. Elites might initially have preferred, even encouraged, such interactions because they proved so fruitful and hence enriching for them as well as for the commoners involved. But over time, the kinds of transformations such interactions wrought began to threaten the grip of elites, subtly
but recognizably altering the socioeconomic landscape and creating new and potentially aggressive forces to reckon with.\(^{18}\)

Thus, the continued influence of Jews on an increasing assertive and articulate Christian commoner population triggered the emergence of hostility, specifically among those—elites and commoners alike—who stood most to lose from the new rule-set and the way it undermined the interests of the prime divider. For these people, the constantly shifting social and economic landscape created deep anxiety, fear of change, and fear of being left behind. Denunciations of greed and economic exploitation attacked those who profited most from new market relations, and the Jews served as a scapegoat that epitomized the new modern forces at work in the culture. And at some moment along this productive but unstable dynamic, the gathering forces of this hostility manage to seize upon a widespread social malaise that exploded into violence against the designated scapegoat. Soon thereafter, coercion and violence attack the other forces of civil society within the culture—religious dissent and autonomous commoners. As always, the Jews are only the first target of such war propaganda.

In the history of Jewish-Christian relations, the full cycle of this dialectic remains largely hidden from view—especially the initial period of cooperation, as it takes place largely at the level of commoners, where little gets recorded in the surviving documentation. Violence, however, along with pogroms, expulsions, and inquisitorial attacks, blood libels and their consequences, leaves a more visible documentary, traced both in the documents of those who developed the ideology (blood libels, theocide, conspiracies of evil), and of those rioters who took the bait. Looking back at this documentation, historians tend to see an almost unbroken string of anti-Jewish outbreaks, a lachrymose narrative of hatred and violence. A closer look at the 11th and 12th centuries and later periods like the Renaissance and the Reformation suggests that when we see a violent outbreak of anti-Jewish sentiments, we should look to the previous period for evidence of more philo-Judaic attitudes and the kinds of socio-economic and intellectual exchanges that such positive Jewish-Christian interactions encourage.

Thus, in the period just before the explosion of violence in 1096—the year of the first Crusade—we find a century of extensive Jewish-Christian interaction, the emergence of autonomous, self-regulating urban communities based on remarkably egalitarian law codes (communes), and the rapid

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18. Robert Ian Moore’s groundbreaking *Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) analyzes the first time this dynamic becomes pronounced (11th century), and notes the paradox that a period of great growth also generated an ideology and mechanics of persecution. One finds a similar dynamic at work in the witchcraft craze of the early modern period.
spread of agricultural, commercial, and productive capacities within the European economy. The bishop of Speyer, for example, invited the Jews to his newly established bishopric in 1084, giving them full legal autonomy within their community as a way to “increase the honor of the town.”19 At the dawn of European economic growth, the Jews were prized players. And when the violence came, it often came not from those who had interacted with the Jews, but those who had lost ground as a result of the economic growth such interactions had fostered.20

II—MEDIEVAL LATIN CHRISTENDOM

We are now in a position to understand the basic elements of medieval hostility to Jews in Western Europe. Medievalists like Gavin Langmuir have suggested the distinction between anti-Judaism, a dislike of Jews and Judaism, from antisemitism, a pathological distortion in which Jews and Judaism become demonized into super- or sub-human forces of evil.21 The former is built into much of what Christians taught their believers in the Middle Ages; the latter begins to emerge in the 12th century with the blood libels—the theological claim that the Jews knew that Jesus was God and killed him on purpose, the apocalyptic paranoia of those claiming to be fighting the Antichrist’s minions. The Nazis’ racism should not be the operative element for defining antisemitism, but rather the paranoid fantasies that rule the genocidal mind through fear and hatred.22

One of the more important elements of both forms of Judeophobia, however, concerns the manner in which such people use Jewish self-criticism against them. One could take a passage from Jeremiah and one from John Chrysostom and, by cutting out a few terms (devil, Satan), have virtually indistinguishable tirades against Israel. But Jeremiah chastises to improve, and Chrysostom accuses to destroy. The distorted use of Jewish self-criticism in the hands of people who project blame from their own cultures onto the Jews constitutes perhaps the single most corrosive element in Jewish-Gentile relations, something that pervades the discussion of the


Israeli-Arab conflict today and a moral failing that lies at the heart of antisemitism.

At the core of invidious Christian identity formation (We are good because you are bad; we’re right because you’re wrong) lies both a power play and a scapegoating discourse based on mimetic rivalry. In the period from the fourth century onward, when Christians served as the ideologues for prime-divider societies (Rome and its successor kingdoms), Jews had to be officially humiliated in order to keep the right socio-political order. Their disgrace raised the honor of Christianity and the Christian God, whom, according to Christian authorities, the Jews not only denied, but killed. Their disgrace served as a witness to the superiority of Christianity as one more proof of its triumph—we are right because we have supreme power; you are wrong because we humiliate you. Once the empire converted, the strong (Christians) increasingly “did what they willed”—claimed honor—and the weak (Jews, pagans, and heretics) “suffered what they must”—lived in humiliation.

And, not unexpectedly, having betrayed their very founding values, these Christians found it necessary to project their sins onto the Jews: As they repressed and even killed their own prophets (heretics, dissidents), Christians accused the Jews (who had canonized their prophets) of killing Christian prophets. By exculpating the Romans and inculpating the Jews in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death, the Christians of that generation, who translated Jesus’ words from Aramaic to Greek, were able to turn their messiah into the quintessential prophet killed by the Jews. Christians, indulging this hatred of Jews, created a Mobius strip of self-criticism and projection,


25. Note that the same phenomenon occurs against both Christians and Jews as a function of Dhimma status.
constructed around the power of accusation to enforce their projections and avoid self-awareness.

Thus far, invidious, zero-sum anti-Judaism: something characteristic not only of Christians but of pagans, Muslims, secular moderns, and post-moderns. The chimeraic and paranoid quality of antisemitism, however, from the time of the first blood libels in the mid 12th century to the Nazi Holocaust of the mid 20th, marks off European culture as exceptional in the history of Jewish-Gentile relations. The reason for such a distressing mutation in the history of hatred stems not from some innate viciousness of the European soul, but from the counter-intuitive phenomenon that Europe in this period was developing the most extensive commitments to the principles of civil polities in the history of sovereign nations. The hatred accompanied the move toward civil polity like the toxic wake of a transforming culture. It is the quintessence of the anti-modern and therefore a modern product.

Initially, most of this hostility expressed itself in religious terms. In the early 11th century, we have the earliest rumors of an international Jewish conspiracy to destroy Christendom, in the mid 12th, we have the first blood libel, and by the late 12th, we have the notion that the Jews knew that Jesus was God and killed him on purpose. Nothing serves to arouse anger more than the sense that the pain one feels was inflicted by someone else intentionally.

But behind this cultivated anger lay a social concern. The Jews not only killed Christ, do not only kill little Christian boys and bake matzah with their carefully gathered blood (like Christian faithful gathering the blood of their saints for relics). They also undermined the prime divider that privileged the Christian clergy and the lay aristocracy; they also empowered commoners who play by the rules of the market, who think for themselves (heresy and markets were closely correlated), and who reject the Church for its idolatry and its claims to monopoly on the media of salvation.

The very existence of the Jews as an autonomous, unsubjected people undermined the creedal system that empowered ecclesiastical Christianity—the divinity of Christ, the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, clerical monopoly on text and interpretation of the Bible (especially the subversive passages of the Hebrew Bible). And beyond that, it undermines the seignorial system of the prime divider, where aristocrats (potentes) have privileges, including owning manual laborers (impotentes), who serve their masters in poverty and powerlessness. Every time that the Hebrew Bible was translated, and thus migrated from the control of the clergy to within

reach of commoners, we find a variant of the rebellious egalitarian ditty: “When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the Gentleman?” Medieval antisemitism arises within the framework of prime-divider societies, where the elites find the very existence of autonomous Jews a threat to their dominion.

A second, and closely related, issue informed this tragic dialectic, namely, that of Christian apocalyptic expectations. As we have seen above, one of the Jewish scenarios for the messianic age represents the spread of civil polities to all the nations of the world and—therefore—the end of war (as in democracies don’t go to war with each other). Christian apocalyptic expectation had given this moral vision of the dismantling of prime-divider societies a particular creedal twist—at the same time as the nations converted to peaceful societies, they also converted to Christianity (creedal eschatology), and among these conversions the last and most triumphant would be that of the Jews.

As a result, in times when Christians waxed apocalyptic—that is, when they anticipated the imminence of the messianic era—they often grew increasingly committed to philo-Judaism (those who bless you I will bless), and correspondingly enthusiastic about both a demotic religiosity that promoted the moral values of civil polity (“love thy neighbor [even thine enemy] as thyself”; act peacefully toward all men; renounce envy and Schadenfreude [pleasure in someone else’s failure or pain]). When they found their good will reciprocated, they fully expected that the Jews would convert to the true faith as a result of their open-hearted affection. Together, they would build a messianic world of peace and joy.

In the upswing of enthusiastic hope, this apocalyptic dimension intensified the contribution of these groups to both philo-Judaism and civil polity. But in the (inevitable) downswing after the failure of the Jews to convert and Jesus to reappear, the Christian disappointment sharpened the

27. See Paul Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant (Stanford University Press, 1999), chap. 3.


sense of rejection by the Jews, leading to a kind of apocalyptic scapegoating in which the failure of the Jews to convert had prevented Jesus from returning: Jewish rejection of Christian messianic hopes was a symbolic re-enacting of the deicide. And just as the first refusal had led to the Crucifixion, so subsequent ones led to the crucifixion of Christian hopes in Jesus-return Parousia. This pattern played out most clearly in the career of Martin Luther, who started by urging a friendly and conciliatory attitude toward Jews (after all, they had rejected the same flawed Christianity that he had), and ended with some of the most vicious and virulent denunciations of what he called their stiff-necked wickedness.30

Whenever we see Jews given the choice between conversion or death (e.g., the First Crusade, Black Death), an act that every formal piece of Christian theology since Augustine condemned, we should suspect that we are dealing with the latter phase of a process in which apocalyptic urgency had moved from voluntary conversion through Christian love to warfare with the hated forces of the Antichrist. The Jews at this point had the choice between turning to Jesus Christ or extermination as agents of the Antichrist. The dominating imperative (rule or be ruled) had mutated into the paranoid imperative: “exterminate or be exterminated.” This shift from the transformative apocalypticism of philo-Judaism, with its strong positive-sum impact on society, to catastrophic and violent apocalypticism, with its tendencies toward totalitarian state actions and mega-death (Crusades, Inquisition, witch hunts, reigns of terror), define the outer extremes of a fruitful if tragic interaction between Jews and Gentiles in Christian and post-Christian Europe.

Anti-Jewish polemic in Europe from about 1000 onward (the period when Europe starts its economic and social dynamics of growth) never ceases to mutate and to grow more virulent, a pattern we now observe on a global scale. The exceptional and exceptionally favorable conditions of the 11th century, in which both Jews and Christians of Western Europe developed thriving communities, especially in the nascent islands of civil society of that time—the urban communes that first appeared in the 1060s—led to the backlash of Crusade violence (1096), and that violence led to the blood libel (1140s).

Here, in a classic tale of guilty projection, Christians looked at the Jewish communities whose members they had slaughtered in an act of vengeance for having killed their Lord, and imagined that the Jewish survivors

30. Neelak S. Tjernagel, Martin Luther and the Jewish People (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), which emphasizes the psychological conditions of bitter disappointment that drove Luther to his tirades against the Jews (and so many other opponents).
must be planning the kinds of vengeance that these Christians had already exacted. If the Jews, because of their weakness, could not do it openly, they must be doing it secretly, in a bloodthirsty ritual that reverses everything the Bible teaches both Christians and Jews about not consuming blood.

Thus, the blood libel allows the scapegoater to strip the Jew of his moral and ethical commitments—to systematically transform all the evidence of the Jews’ civic commitments to discourse rather than violence, to respect for the rights of the stranger, of the animal, or all living creatures whose soul is in their blood that the Jews may not drink—and turn it into evidence of malevolence, hypocritical scheming, and demonic hatred. Christians began to spread the vicious myth that the Jews secretly consumed Christian blood as a religious rite. The popularity of this myth at times of anxiety can overwhelm a society’s judgment. As Ahad Ha-‘Am (Asher Ginsberg) wrote in 1893, describing the prevailing attitude of Gentiles when the Jews denied the blood libel: “Is it possible that everybody can be wrong and the Jews right?” Pogroms predictably ensued.

III—MODERN ANTISEMITISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY’S DISCONTENTS

With the advent of constitutional democracies from the American and French revolutions, we find a fundamental shift in the culture’s public attitude toward Jews. Rather than the built-in hostility of prime-divider societies, we find two new and very positive mutations in the Gentile attitude. On the one hand, secular post-Christian Westerners felt, reasonably, that if they predicated freedom of mutuality—if, in order to be free one had to grant the same freedoms to others—that should include the Jews, whom they accordingly emancipated from the legal and social inferiority to which Christian Europe had relegated them. In the new political dispensation of egalitarian law, Jews could (in principle) join in the open, meritocratic competition for professional and economic advancement.

31. “Let the world say what it will about our moral inferiority: we know that its ideas rest on popular logic, and have no real scientific basis. . . . ‘But’—you ask—‘is it possible that everybody can be wrong, and the Jews right?’ Yes, it is possible: the blood accusation proves it possible. Here, you see, the Jews are right and perfectly innocent,” Ahad Ha-‘Am, Selected Essays (1962), 204.

32. The Encyclopédie defined the natural law as the product of “in each man an act of pure understanding that reasons in the silence of passions about what man may demand of his neighbor (semblable) and what his neighbor has a right to demand of him.” Diderot, “Droit naturelle,” Encyclopédie 11, no. 116:9, http://artfl.uchicago.edu/images/encyclopedie/V5/ENC_5-116.jpeg.

33. See the discussion around the status of the Jews in the French Revolution, both by the secular Robespierre and the religious Abbé Grégoire. Landes, Heaven on Earth, 265-68.
On the other hand, specifically in those Christian millennial circles most closely allied with democratic thinking, we find a peculiar innovation in the apocalyptic scenario. Whereas medieval Christianity had viewed any Jewish messianic activity as the “work of the Antichrist,” a strain of Protestantism viewed the return of the Jews to Israel as a necessary and positive step in the preparation for Jesus’ return. Although this scenario still involved the ultimate conversion of the Jews to Christianity, it delayed it significantly, and interjected a (an increasingly) lengthy period of mutual cooperation and respect between Jews and Christians before that day of reckoning.\(^3^4\) By the calculations of the secular democrats, the emancipation of the Jews should have led to their rapid assimilation and ultimate disappearance.

In a sense, this constituted a secular version of Luther’s attitude—the Jews had understandably rejected the superstitious nonsense of the (earlier) Christians, but now, with the triumph of an ecumenical rationale, they would become citizens and leave their own superstitions behind. When it didn’t work out according to their Protestant-reasoned millennialism, they reacted similarly, if less viciously, than their Christian ancestors. Ironically, those so-called “enlightened thinkers” most disturbed by Jews who had succeeded in modern conditions and stayed identified as Jews ended up rejecting everything from benighted Christianity except their hostility toward the Jews (and, one might add, their millennial dreams and attendant apocalyptic expectations).\(^3^5\)

Indeed, when the Gentiles emancipated the Jews, they thought they were doing a favor to a shriveled population fossilized in their ancient superstitions. At best, they expected them to gratefully vanish into the powerful currents of the modern age. What they did not realize (and I suspect many Jews of the time did not realize either) was that these recently matured Christians (Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment is the autonomy of maturity) had just adopted rules of a game (equality before the law, including intellectual meritocracy) that Jews had been playing by for over three millennia. Despite the democrats’ initial sense that these rules are self-
evident, the evidence suggests that they are culture specific, and extremely
difficult to live with and to sustain. The Enlightenment thus set in motion a
constantly evolving society and culture with an ever-changing scene over
the course of centuries. The Jews, long practitioners of these arts under the
worst of conditions (formal degradation), now had an enormous advantage
over the surrounding culture, which was only now adopting these rules.

As a result, one of the greatest unanticipated consequences of modern-
ity was the immense, astonishing success of Jews. Far from being swal-
lowed up in the process, Jews rose to great prominence in all walks of
life—the professions (especially law and medicine), academia, finance,
commerce, journalism, history. Indeed, any profession that called for open-
ing oneself to stiff criticism (academia, science, law, journalism) was a site
of predilection for Jews, trained in a culture of *machloket* (dispute),
*tochachah* (rebuke), and public self-criticism. 36

Nor was this “mere” stiff competition, as in the case of Moses
Dobruška, the Moravian disciple of the failed messianic pretender Jacob
Frank, who came to Paris as Junius Frey and became the chief ideologue of
the French Revolution, guillotined with Danton.37 Jews not only played
the game well, they changed the rules. Marx, Freud, and Einstein literally
upended the way that we think about the world and ourselves.38 Nor did this
only happen at the level of the elites. Poor Jews, Eastern Europeans fleeing
the pogroms to Western Europe and the United States, became a particu-
larly active laboring group with a distinct talent for capitalism and an ideo-
logical predilection for socialist and communist thought.39 Finally, perhaps
at the conjunction of the elites and the commoners, modern Jews showed a
particular interest and talent in the rapidly emerging world of the public
sphere—the world of newspapers, pamphlets, journals; later, radio, film,
television.

This exceptional success alarmed many. Jewish prominence in all
aspects of this central new dimension of modern life—the public sphere—
created a sense among some Gentiles that the defining elements of their

36. On the astounding success of the Jews in modern conditions, see Yuri
38. John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss,
and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Frederic
Grunfeld, *Prophets without Honor: A Background to Freud, Kafka, Einstein and
39. David Shuldiner, *Of Marx and Moses: Folk Ideology and Folk History in
the Jewish Labor Movement* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1999). On the
propensity of Jews, especially Jewish intellectuals, to lean left, see Norman
culture had been taken over by the Jews. Above all, it deeply disturbed those members of an older aristocratic elite who found themselves deeply handicapped by the modern egalitarian rule-set that disqualified privileged violence; in particular, they were hemmed in by the increasing transparency they had to endure under the public gaze of journalists. If, at the time of the first democratic revolutions in the late 18th century, the conspiracy theorists of the aristocratic world viewed the Masons as the epicenter of the conspiracy to undermine the “true” (Christian) order of the world, by the end of the 19th century, they came to believe that the Masons (and other atheists like Darwin and Nietzsche) were but the pawns of the real menace, the Jews.40

Jewish successes in a democratic, meritocratic, productive society also alarmed some below the prime-divider line, people for whom their medieval identities had, in significant part, been formed around their invidious sense of superiority to the even more lowly Jews. Crabs in the basket of want and misery, they found the sight of Jews getting out from underneath them deeply upsetting. To the extent that Christian and Muslim commoners found comfort in the superiority of their houses of worship, they also needed a population inferior to them, a bone to gnaw on in their own wretchedness. For them, the Jews were the helpless scapegoats, ritually humiliated, occasionally turned over to a howling mob for murderous thrashings, and they did not appreciate hearing from those who were reassuring these commoners that they were not the bottom of the barrel.

Even those in the new elite who welcomed both the rules of meritocracy and the Jews found themselves in a disturbing and unexpected competition with these newcomers. Some chose to continue to play by the meritocratic rules, despite their confusion about Jews and their talents, intentions, and loyalties. These elites, including the Jews they tolerated/embraced, have come—very slowly—to dominate most Western academic circles, constituting one of the most vital and creative elements of modern culture, drawing in their wake even those in the academy who would rather not play by modern rules.41 Here again we find the biblical formula illustrated: those who bless you (Western academy) will be blessed; those who curse you (Nazi, Soviet, and Arab universities) will be cursed.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the reemergence of the dominant form of antisemitism in the medieval world—now mutated under the conditions of modernity—in these circles of “semi-modernized”

40. See the multiple discussions of the phenomenon in Landes and Katz, eds., Paranoid Apocalypse.
(ultimately anti-modern) intellectuals, who were committed to modern rule-sets not only because they were the established game but also were far more committed to the prime-divider values of incumbency and honor at others’ expense; who resented competition, especially from foreigners whom they did not understand; and who hated the humiliation of losing control. In medieval culture, the authoritarians who played by the rules of the dominating imperative controlled political and public voice and legislated against Jews to assure their humiliation, but in modern culture these people found themselves increasingly under pressure, either marginalized or under growing scrutiny, while they watched the Jews grow steadily in influence.

And, of course, the press proved one of the most sensitive areas where this new configuration of conflict played itself out. The older authoritarians found the greatest threat to them in the arena precisely that had attracted secularized Jews the most. With their commitment to the civic values of free speech, to the transparency and criticism of elites and the demystification of power, and to the education and exposure of the larger public to a wide range of opinions and information, liberal Jews found journalism a near-irresistible profession. For these authoritarians who watched their power wane precisely as that of the Jews waxed, only one answer made sense: conspiracy.

Modernity as Enslavement Conspiracy—The Protocols

Theories about a conspiracy of Illuminati who secretly sought to take over and rule the world go back to the 18th century, and initially focus on the secret society of the Masons. And, in fact, to judge from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (1791), written at the height of enthusiasm about the French Revolution, the Masons constituted a secret society dedicated to getting rid the authoritarian elites and their monarchical systems that ruled Europe at the time. “He is a prince!” gushes one character about Tamino. “He is more than a prince; he’s a man (*mensch*),” corrects the Mason. Just as Rip Van Winkle noticed, when he awakened after the American Revolution, that the caps (commoners) no longer bowed down before the hats (gentlemen), the Masons sought a world in which deference was gone, a world where the prime divider had ceded to world of equality in which no one is “another man’s man” and all men “can walk upright.”

The key issue, of course, concerned the purpose of this overthrow. For the elites who felt threatened, the secret work of the Masons could only signify the work of malevolent men who, like themselves, sought to dominate others. Thus, the purpose of a vision of world “liberation” on the part of the Masons could only mean the intention to replace the world “domination” of the current prime-divider elites (aristocracy). They therefore heard
such noble-sounding sentiments as merely the trap, the weapon whereby these people planned to disarm their opposition. Only a knave or an imbecile would possibly espouse such ideas as “Liberty, equality, fraternity.”

Employing these tactics, the old guard reasoned, the modern elites who were taking over used these notions to gull the foolish and greedy masses. The duped mobs who overthrew their aristocracies for promises of freedom and prosperity had a nasty surprise awaiting them. After losing their only real, if iron-fisted, protectors, they would soon be at the mercy of forces over which they had no control, especially those of the technologically enhanced marketplace. When these new manipulators had achieved their goal—constitutional democracies everywhere—they would then engineer a global crisis that would then permit them to enslave the entire world. At its simplest, these conspiracies represented a political argument first made explicit by Plato and Thucydides: the painful order of prime-divider society is better than the chaos of democracy and the inevitable slavery of tyranny.42

And, of course, the reaction of the French Revolutionaries to the threat that the united monarchies of Europe posed to this newest outbreak of an attempt to legislate civil society—the cannibalistic paranoia of the Terror and the imperialist megalomania of Napoleon—confirmed the fears of these older elites: this “democratic” conspiracy represented not a genuine drive for freedom, but a new face to an old foe—the “Others,” and their drive for dominion.43 Nietzsche was right: behind the slave morality that whines about fairness and equality lies a deep and corrupt ressentiment that cannot wait for the opportunity to do onto others as others now do onto them. It held just as true in the 19th century as it did in the fifth century BCE.

Over the course of the 19th century, as the forces of the prime divider struggled with the recurring outbreaks of the revolutionary forces of egalitarianism—1830, 1848, 1870—these conspiracy theories became more elaborate and widespread. The more the older aristocracy found itself replaced either by these punctuated revolutionary upheavals or the slow attrition of an increasingly meritocratic intellectual and technologically adept culture, the more they elaborated this conspiracy theory, in which their loss represented the last greatest hope for social stability.44

44. Landes, Heaven on Earth, chaps. 10-12.
At the turn of the century, one of the most powerful forgeries of history identified the Jews as the real power behind the conspiracy to use democracy in order to enslave mankind. The circumstances of its emergence bear a brief discussion. In 1894, in the France of the Third Republic, the military condemned an Alsatian Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, for treason. In 1898, Emile Zola published, in a well-known daily newspaper, his famous “J’Accuse,” a devastating attack on the army for framing Dreyfus and exonerating the true traitor, Ferdinand Esterhazy; and in 1899 the army conducted a new trial in which—although the army, with the enthusiastic support of the Catholic Church, prevailed and found Dreyfus guilty again—the battle for public opinion was lost. The president of the Republic granted him a pardon, and the anti-Dreyfusards were left to lick their wounds and suffer the constant attack of the proponents of modern democracy.45

The trial brought out all of the most virulent contradictions in the Third Republic—the deep conservatism of both the army and the Church: their immense hostility to the principles of egalitarianism and the transparency of power, a free press capable of criticizing the government to the public, and the meddling of intellectuals in affairs of state. The contrast between prime-divider politics could not appear with greater clarity: justice for the individual based on an honest and scientific examination of the evidence (handwriting analysis played a key role in Dreyfus’ exonerations) vs. the necessities of state, the honor of the army (Zola fled to avoid imprisonment for libeling the army) and the government, the importance of appearances, and the danger of admitting to error. Not surprisingly, the supporters of the army, especially the Catholic Church, argued that a great Jewish conspiracy had created the Dreyfus case precisely to attack the forces of order in society. In typical fashion for prime-divider elites, they prized image over reality (Esterhazy remained in office, free to continue his treason), and they blamed the malevolence of others for errors that they themselves had made in an extreme effort to avoid admitting error.

Everyone who has learned the history of Zionism knows that Theodore Herzl’s astonishment at the virulence of the anti-Jewish opinion at the first Dreyfus trial (1894) shattered his faith in the promises of the Enlightenment (real equality in exchange for assimilation) and convinced him that the only way for Jews to become free and escape the virulent hatreds of European society was to become an independent people. In 1895, he wrote The Jewish State, and in 1897 he presided over the first Zionist conference, in Basel, Switzerland, setting in motion the first modern Jewish political movement; Zionism. All of the principles of progressive liberalism were on

display; the aim of the Jewish state was to guarantee those promises made so generously in the Declaration of the Rights of Man—liberty and equality—and kept so grudgingly from Jews who applied.

Constitutional government, a free press, freedom of religion, the dignity of manual labor, just courts committed to equality before the law—all the classic values of progressive modernity—were on display in the Zionist enterprise. Indeed, some of the enthusiastic participants in the movement, many of them from an educated proletariat, took these commitments to equality far beyond the classic liberal notions—equality before the law and equality of opportunity to the socialist and communist notions of equality of property and wealth—producing, among other exceptional institutions, the kibbutz, the most successful communal movement in history.

What the history of Zionism does not often mention is that in 1904 a pamphlet appeared claiming to publish the secret proceedings of the Zionist conference of 1897, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Here, for the first time in a form that quickly grew to be the dominant one, the centuries-old conspiracy of the Illuminati became the millennia-old conspiracy of the Jews against mankind. The forgers of this document, large parts of which were taken almost verbatim from an anti-Napoleonic tract from the 1860s, identify the enemy as this evil cabal of Jews who, in the privacy of their secret deliberations, openly embrace the principle of the dominating imperative, and present the Jewish support of democracy and other principles of modernity as a trap to gull the foolish Gentiles to their doom.

The Protocols claims that these power-hungry Jews are classic demopaths. They use democracy as a trap to seduce the commoners into overthrowing their natural protectors, the “Gentile aristocracy,” a class too powerful for the weak and small Jewish people to take on directly. Once they succeed (revolutions of the late 18th and 19th centuries), the natural chaos that democracy inevitably engenders will enable the Jews, masters of the market, to bring about massive crisis and collapse and enslave all of mankind.

This book, which first “leaked” this intercepted secret protocol of the Jewish cabal to the world, presented it in apocalyptic terms.46 This was the conspiracy of the Antichrist, aimed at destroying Christianity, and its progress was now so great that the Jews had almost closed the circle and enslaved everyone. In the hands of demagogues, the message easily became an urgent call to drastic action, a “warrant for genocide” against the malevolent Jews.

The victory of the communists in Russia in 1917, and the revolution’s rapid transformation into a merciless totalitarian cult, confirmed the belief that the atheist forces hostile to the Gentile aristocracy (so many of them Jews) was determined to subject all of mankind to a devastating slavery. For many observers, even those not inherently hostile to Jews, it confirmed all the greatest fears the Protocols had stirred. And when the Nazis took over these ideas within a more secular, modern framework of the technology of death and the science of racial dominion, the apocalyptic meltdown of genocidal warfare ensued. Under the pressures and anxieties of modernity, the dominating imperative had mutated into the paranoid imperative: “exterminate or be exterminated.” Co-existence was impossible.

Like the medieval blood libel, the modern conspiracy theory systematically misreads Judaism and the values that have permitted it to survive from the ancient world and to feel so at home in the modern one. It takes every honest commitment to values of fairness and equity in Judaism and reads them as their opposite—malevolent hatred and desire for dominion. It projects onto the Jews the ressentiment of Nietzsche’s “weak,” who only call for tolerance and equity because they are weak. The Protocols’ role in the Nazi genocide proved that the forgery was the cultural equivalent of germ warfare.

And yet, the success of the Protocols constitutes one of the most important phenomena of the 20th century, both before and after the Holocaust, and now, unfortunately, into the 21st century. No serious analysis of Western, and now global, history can be done without an understanding of why this patent forgery has enjoyed such enormous popularity in so many different cultural and political climates—right wing, left wing, secular, religious, European, Muslim, Japanese.

In fact, the Protocols’ immense and enduring appeal lies specifically with all those who feel threatened by the advance of modernity and of a meritocratic society based on the principle of equality before the law. This includes not only the older prime-divider elites, who rule by old-boy-incumbency networks and Mafioso intimidation, but also the numerous people who feel enormous anxiety at the prospects—common in modern conditions—of not knowing what the future holds, who feel diminished by the success of others, who prefer to pull down whatever crabs seek to escape the basket, lest, in escaping, they make those who remain behind look like lazy failures.

How can one view oneself and one’s fellow commoners as tragic figures who accept with grace their ineluctable misery when some—the lowest—show how one can choose success? The visceral appeal of antisemitism lies in its ability to trigger the worst elements of human self-destructiveness: Schadenfreude, malevolent envy, scapegoating . . . in brief, all those who believe in the dominating imperative, both those who dominate, and those who, in deep and abiding resentment, hate those who oppress them even as they identify with these aggressors. Those who curse you will be cursed.

Conspiracy brings us face to face with a core issue: the refusal to self-criticize. The prime divider is built on projection of blame. The opacity and mystery of the elites serve, among other things, to hide their abuse of power to their own advantage; their monopoly on violence, which permits them to eliminate anyone who criticizes them publicly; and their monopoly on communications technology and public space, which permits them to dominate the public voice with their own scapegoating narratives. It projects the most depraved desires of the believer in conspiracies onto the Other. As the Nazis screamed about the Jews’ desire to enslave mankind, they themselves set about to do just that. As Charles Strozier put it: “A conspiracy theory is a narrative that victimizers tell themselves in order to claim the status of [future] victims, and justify striking out as a preemptive move.”48 It is a warrant for genocide.

Thus, where one finds an instinctive recourse to conspiracy theories to explain the unfolding of events, one finds people who will not accept any responsibility for their situation, people who project their own worst intentions onto scapegoats and demonize them rather than self-criticize. And, of course, both the commoners and the Jews then bear the burden of the society’s sins. In every prime-divider society, theodicy must explain why the commoner suffers, and most often, whether a karmic punishment or the consequence of the original sin, it is the commoner’s fault. And when, as in modernizing conditions from the 11th to the 21st century, the Jews leaven prime-divider society with opportunities for commoners to rise, they must be held responsible for precisely the oppression to which they offer a compelling solution: if they are not responsible for killing Christ, they are at least responsible for every problem raised by modernity.

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