Introduction

The Protocols at the Dawn of the 21st Century

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This volume of essays results from a conference held at the Elie Weisel Center for Jewish Studies at Boston University with the collaboration of the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University a century after the publication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

The Protocols stands out as both one of the most malicious forgeries in history—“an atrocity-producing narrative”—and the most widely distributed forgery in the world. Soon after publication, believers translated its “revelations” about an international Jewish conspiracy to enslave mankind into dozens of languages and spread the text from its Russian foyer to the rest of Europe, the Americas, and as far as Japan. At the height of its first wave of influence (1905–1945), it played a key role in inspiring and justifying the Nazi attempt at genocide of the Jews.

After the catastrophe wrought by a great and powerful nation seized by a genocidal paranoia in response to the conspiracy it perceived via the Protocols, those who vanquished it renounced and denounced the mad text. Modernity had won, and the broad public consensus held that “Nie Wieder” [Never Again] would we see either the “bloody tide” or the forged fantasies that fueled it. The Protocols quickly became a taboo subject in the West. Anyone who referred to it incurred the stigma of both ignorance and hate-mongering. Civil society, with its egalitarian rules, its scientific skepticism, and its high levels of tolerance for the “other,” had won the battle against xenophobic paranoia. New, unthinkable institutions of international cooperation—the United Nations, the European Union—arose and survived in this new dispensation.

One might call this postwar attitude, embodied in Norman Cohn’s pathbreaking and disturbing study, Warrant for Genocide, the “modern” solution to the Protocols. “Positivist historiography,” dedicated to find out “what really happened” (however the scientific chips about objective reality fall),
condemned the *Protocols*, just as it condemned the forged evidence in the Dreyfus Affair. After the Nazis, the same “positivist” trials that, in 1923, had failed to quell belief in the *Protocols*, became normative. Sadder but wiser, the post-Holocaust world adopted the “modernist” position—the *Protocols* are a malevolent forgery, an “atrociously written piece of reactionary balderdash.” And, hand in hand with that conclusion, modernists held that anti-Semitism is a historically proven social and political toxin banished from legitimate discussion by political correctness.

This itself is part of a much broader consensus on the nature of the public sphere and what constitutes sane discourse in the period after the Holocaust. Human rights, respect for other people and cultures, self-criticism, historical accuracy all participate in a mild international experiment in transformative millennialism: the universal inauguration of civil society. People—Jews and Gentiles—who express astonishment at the return to prominence of the *Protocols* in our day represent the intellectual products of just such a paradigmatic approach to the public discussion in which the *Protocols* was understandably and justifiably banned.

When Richard Landes first read the *Protocols*, while teaching at Columbia in 1985, he was part of this modern consensus. He was surprised by what he read. It turned out he had been hearing echoes of this text—what Stephen Bronner calls “analogs”—all the time, in particular from radicals at Berkeley, where he had spent the previous years arguing with them on Sproul Plaza about the Israelis in Lebanon. “The Jews control the media . . . the Jews control the markets [including the oil markets] . . . the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians what the Nazis did to them . . . Israel is part of a conspiracy with America to rule the world.” An Iranian group even handed out a flier with excerpts from the *Protocols*. When he realized that the teachings of the *Protocols* were filtering back into political discourse, he suggested a scholarly edition, one that allowed informed citizens to become aware of the sources of such paranoid and demonizing rhetoric.

Then came his second surprise: Virtually everyone disagreed with him. As Fritz Stern, the senior professor in German history in the department, put it pithily, “You think you’re inoculating people, but you’re spreading the disease.” That was 1985, when the *Protocols* seemed a dead letter to most, and keeping it quiet seemed like a good idea. They were halcyon days when Sartrian analysts figured that, with anti-Semitism nearly vanished from America, the Jews would soon follow.

That was before the Internet, before Amazon.com, before everyone had access to the *Protocols*, not just from Iranian students’ fliers at UCB or Louis
Farrakhan’s bookstores but also from Walmart. That was before cable television and growing sophistication in movie-making in the Arab world produced serial programs bringing the Protocols to television screens around the world. And that was before, beginning in October 2000, the “New Anti-Semitism” in word and deed entered its global phase, allowing the virus that Fritz Stern had spoken of to spread far and wide, and before 9/11 triggered a wave of conspiracy theories that revived the Protocols in America, as Marc Levin suggests in his film, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Its currency today—both as a text and as an analog, as a conspiratorial idea—in so many circles, right and left, high and low, red state, blue state, has to alarm anyone who keeps track of such things and understands the stakes. How can we understand this disturbing revival?

The chapters in this volume attempt to provide the reader with a range of information and analytic tools to understand four major questions:

1. What are the cultural origins of the Protocols?
2. What explains the Protocols’ continued appeal?
3. Under what conditions does belief in the Protocols get activated and produce atrocities?
4. What, if anything, can be done to oppose the spread of belief in so dishonest and disastrous a libel?

Three major themes emerged from the conference in terms of the power exercised by the Protocols—(1) the psychological nature of paranoia in its appeal, (2) the problem of “truth” and the exegetical shiftiness that detaches the text from its empirical moorings as a forgery, and (3) the power of apocalyptic belief in “activating” the text as a social and political player. We present first two conceptual essays as introduction, then essays, primarily in historical order of topic.

Apocalyptic Conspiracy, Moral Failure, and the Crises of Modernity

We open this volume with two chapters that address this broader context on one hand from the perspective of the historical longue durée, and on the other from a psychological one.

The first chapter (by Richard Landes) explores the way in which the Protocols takes up a very long and largely dominant strain of political thought, articulated by the ancient Athenians as “the law that those who can, do what they will, and those who cannot, suffer what they must.” This represents the

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Machiavellian position in fact rejected by the very text the Protocols plagiarized, the Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu. Eli Sagan, in a remarkable book on the origins and dangers of democracy, called this position the “paranoid imperative”: Rule or be ruled.

This approach systematically projects the lust to dominate onto others, thereby justifying preemptive aggression: Do onto others before they do onto you. To understand both the logic and the appeal of the Protocols, one has to appreciate how profoundly consistent that projection is, how much it has shaped political relations both between elites and commoners and between states for millennia, during which “democracy” was a dirty word. Both Thrasymachus and Plato— “might makes right” and “justice is harmony”—at least agreed that democracy was a recipe for chaos and tyranny.

When one factors in the anxieties of freedom so lucidly analyzed by Erich Fromm more than a half-century ago, one can understand how a modernity built on egalitarian slogans and democratic freedoms represents a terrifying anomaly to this “political philosophy” of longue durée. For people steeped in this tradition, taking away their right to dominate must be part of a larger plan to destroy them; democracy must be a prelude to slavery. No one can actually push democracy and its correlates—free press, legal equality of commoner and aristocrats, free markets—honestly. There must be a hidden agenda, and that agenda must be domination.

The Jew, in the Protocols, is, thus, necessarily a demopath—one who uses and manipulates democratic values as a way to trap people for a despotic agenda, using the promise of democracy to enslave people. Only a dupe and a fool could sincerely support human freedom. The forgers of the text reason that the Jews can be neither. Behind every crusader for freedom and equality, warns the Protocols, lies a tyrant in waiting. And since both the French and the Russian revolutions rapidly turned from their egalitarian promises to dictatorial terror, the Protocols struck many an observer in the 1920s as prophetic. The Protocols was the demopath’s Bible, and its publication ripped off modernity’s beneficent mask to reveal its “true” malevolent agenda.

The more widespread modernity became, the more threatening the process appeared. And the more modernity has spread, the more globalization now penetrates into cultures the world over, the more hostility it provokes. By the early 20th century, a struggle of cosmic proportions emerged, most visibly among the humiliated and defeated Germans: This was an apocalyptic war in which “paranoid imperative” shifted from “rule or be ruled” to exterminate or be exterminated.
Strozier’s chapter explores from a psychological perspective “the links between paranoia and the apocalyptic and how and why that relates to violence.” Rooted in a therapeutic practice that involved close contact with paranoids, he offers observations that take us inside the experience of people in the grip of such compelling beliefs.

The paranoid lives in a world of heated exaggerations, one in which empathy has been leached out and one that lacks as well humor, creativity, and wisdom. The paranoid lives in a world of shame and humiliation, of suspiciousness, aggressivity, and dualisms that separate out all good from pure evil . . . grandiose and megalomaniacal and always has an apocalyptic view of history that contains within it a mythical sense of time. Many paranoids are very smart . . . paranoia focuses all of one's cognitive abilities in ways that can make one's schemes intellectually daunting—which is why I have always thought that paranoia is a pathology of choice for the gifted.

Apocalyptic intensity creates a self-enforcing cycle, throwing the paranoid into a projective feedback loop.

The awful and disgusting evil other, who is created from within the self of the paranoid, serves as an objective correlative to stir desire and fantasy deep within the paranoid, who in turn strives to find relief by intensifying the imago of the evil other through more projection. The apocalyptic other is always objectified as the subjective self in this way, becoming in the process a ludicrous tangle of desire, power, and malice.

Strozier’s paranoids experience a sense of fragmentation that closely resembles what some argue is the experience of modernity for many—what Sayid Qutb referred to as the “hideous schizophrenia” that the West insists on inflicting on the world.

But to think in self terms, what we can surmise is that the paranoid's response to the crisis of fragmentation is a frantic attempt to stave off what he inevitably experiences as the psychological equivalent of death by constructing an alternate universe of imagined dangers populated with projective imagoes of inner experience. That new reality fills in for the old. The new reality is bursting with terror and is not a stable terrain—paranoia, like anxiety, spreads—but at least this new world of malice is familiar.
And, above all, the paranoid is a victim. Part of his megalomania of paranoia is believing that the entire world has nothing better to do with its time than scheme against him. And victimization justifies violence, what Strozier calls the “extraordinary sequence from victimization to violence.”

The paranoid intimately understands the secret world of evil he has created in his projective schemes. His rigid dualistic outlook further removes him from the malice as it loads him with virtue and righteousness. That other becomes, then, the embodiment of evil and not only can but must be dispensed with. In its more extreme cases, when fantasy turns to action, the paranoid feels more than simply an allowance to kill. It becomes an obligation. And, since in the paranoid world one acts on behalf of absolute righteousness, killing becomes healing, as Lifton wrote so eloquently about with the Nazis, or as Aum Shinrikyo, the apocalyptic Japanese cults in the early 1990s, sought in its wild schemes to carry out Armageddon.

*Medieval Prologue: Cosmic Christian Anxiety and Global Modern Paranoia*

Norman Cohn has laid out the medieval contributions to the Protocols, in particular the pervasive medieval Christian association of Jews with the devil and, by extension, of the Jews as forerunner and agents of the Anti-christ. Jeffrey Woolf explores further elements in this medieval matrix in this volume, some directly linked to this diabolic Jew: the assumption of an undying hatred of Jews for Christians and the tendency to see the Jew not as person but as symbol. In particular, he focuses on the 12th- and 13th-century awakening of Christian thinkers to the development of Talmudic and (later) Qabbalistic thinking among Jews, which fed both their fears and their hatreds.

Here he finds an interesting paradox that sheds light on one of the major hermeneutic problems posed by belief in a patent forgery such as the Protocols (Hagemeister, Mehlman, Berlet). Both the Talmud and the Qabbalah are at once attacked as lies and scanned for proof of Christianity’s truth: The selfsame text embodies both sacred and satanic “truth.” The paradox embodies the deeply contradictory relationship of medieval Christians to Jews, a schizophrenic ambivalence that would only intensify under conditions of Jewish freedom in modern society. As Trachtenberg pointed out long ago, the demonization of Jews reached its height under early modern conditions, in the 16th
and 17th centuries, when witchcraft paranoia struck so often, particularly in the modernizing regions of northern Europe, especially in Germany.

In the second chapter on the medieval origins of the Protocols, Johannes Heil explores the ways in which the anti-Semitism of medieval Christians produced narrative lines very similar to the conspiratorial one that lies at the base of the Protocols forgery. Heil starts with the novel Biarritz (1886), the text that prefigures the shift in antidemocratic conspiracy theory from the evil Masons trying to enslave mankind (ca. 1800) to the evil Jews (ca. 1900). Here, in one of the chapters, we find out that, every hundred years, an international gathering of rabbis meets in the graveyard in Prague to advance their long and patient plan to enslave mankind. “Eighteen centuries our enemies dominated—the new century will be Israel’s century’ the assembly concluded.” This chapter had a far greater impact than the eight-volume novel in which it was embedded and circulated widely as an independent tract. And it resembles closely the tale told by the mid-13th-century chronicler Matthew of Paris of the alleged enthusiasm with which Jews greeted the news of the Mongol hordes coming from the East in the 1230s.

Comparing modern and medieval versions of the cosmic conspiracy, Heil finds important similarities—secret meetings of an international elite, use of complex communications systems, a malevolent conspiracy to harm Christians and benefit Jews, cosmic/apocalyptic stakes. But he also finds two telling contrasts. In the medieval versions, the Jews have Christian allies who are essential to their success and they work, however maleficently, as part of a divine plan. In modern versions, the Jews (like the Promethean West) have broken free of a divine framework; they work alone, independently. In this desacralized tale, Jewish malevolence has survived the discarding of both the sacred and the satanic. Jews are no longer “messengers of the Antichrist” in any formal sense but agents of unnamable and unmitigated dread. Ironically, as modernity cast off the shackles of medieval theology, it retained avatars of medieval anti-Semitism and apocalypticism that, in the new, desacralized and technologically empowered setting, had still more explosive impact.

New Look at the Early Years: The Apocalyptic Matrix of Genesis and Launch

Despite the extensive medieval and religious prehistory to the Protocols, modern secular historians have paid little attention to the apocalyptic and religious dimensions of the book. Michael Hagenmeister’s chapter here, however, highlights the role that the Russian Sergei Nilus played in framing
the Protocols in a religious and apocalyptic discourse. Nilus, for a long time, was not a religious man, but eventually he

succumbed to the apocalyptic mood that was taking hold of the country . . . joining those victims of rapid modernization and secularization who identified the downfall of their own world with the end of the world in general.

Rising to prominence with his historical writings (both his own and epigraphic), Nilus had a broad antimodern reading public that relished “Doomsday scenarios” as the answer to revolution brought on by Jews and Freemasons—henchmen of the Antichrist. Indeed, as Nilus presented it, the text was an apocalypse, a revelation: Its publication revealed the workings of Paul’s katéchon (the mystery of lawlessness), and the text sounded the alarm at the imminent appearance of Antichrist.

For Nilus, the “truth” of the text resided in its urgent and holy message. As he said to a skeptical Frenchman,

Let us admit that the Protocols are a forgery. Cannot God make use of a forgery in order to illuminate the iniquity of what is about to occur? Cannot God, in response to our faith, transform the bones of a dog into the relics of a miracle? He can thus place into the mouth of a liar the announcement of truth.

At one level, this is what Plato might call a “noble lie” and a medieval cleric might call a “pious forgery.” But this was an apocalyptic forgery—a crucial, cosmically salvific, lie.

Understanding that framework makes it easier to realize how, with the rebirth of “faith” in post-Soviet Russia, the Protocols is back, as well. In a passage, much of whose detail could be written about the Arab world, Hagemeister notes:

In Russia today, there is a widespread belief in a conspiracy hatched by satanic forces and their earthly helpers. Through countless tracts and brochures, these eschatological, demonological, and anti-Jewish predictions—evolved over centuries—are being revived and propagated: expectations of the Antichrist, a Jew from the tribe of Dan who was born in Israel in 1962 and will become the false messiah of the Jews; rumors of the secret
construction of the future base of the Antichrist, the third Temple under the Al Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem; manifestations of the “Seal of the Anti-christ” and the “Number of the Beast,” which are believed to be printed in bar codes and on tax IDs; the appearance of demonic beings in the guise of aliens and unidentified flying objects; and, significantly, Jewish ritual murder of Christians.

Mehlman’s argument takes us in a different direction, but one critical for understanding the epistemological stakes in the tale. Viewing the Protocols as the equivalent of a medieval “pious forgery,” he examines the shifty and shifting boundaries between truth and lies, politics and philosophy, in Dreyfusard Paris. Indeed, Napoleon III’s rule, with its strange combination of authoritarianism and revolutionary rhetoric, produced Joly’s Dialogue in Hell between Montesquieu and Machiavelli, in which Machiavelli was a “stand-in” for the emperor. Ironically and appropriately, Joly sided with Montesquieu, whereas the conspiracists who plagiarized his work had their authors, the Jews, side with Machiavelli.

We end up in the twisting corridors of the Dreyfus Affair. Here, on the one hand, Charles Maurras could defend Lieutenant-Colonel Henry for forging evidence against Dreyfus for the sake of the truth about the Jewish peril—a “patriotic forgery” to match Nilus’s pious one—and not only gain the support of so exceptional a poet as Paul Valéry but launch a stellar career at the head of the royalist Action Française. On the other hand, Marcel Proust, Dreyfusard and Jew, entertained the possibility that Lieutenant Colonel Picquart had forged the material accusing Esterhazy in order to achieve the higher “truth” of Dreyfus’s innocence. Ultimately, one gets the impression that alongside the “intellectuals” ready to let the evidential chips fall where they may stood many highly intelligent men for whom forgery was a vehicle to truth.

From the very beginning, then, the status of the Protocols as a forgery, so critical to the modern consensus on the text, carried dubious weight. This helps to explain why the trials in which the Protocols was exposed to the evidence, most famously in 1923, had less traction than the book’s opponents might have hoped for. But when one adds to this general epistemological permissiveness the semiotic arousal of apocalyptic time, the combination becomes, for some at least, irresistibly toxic. The Protocols, in fact, gained traction in the “apocalyptic” period after World War I and the Great Influenza of 1918:
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

Yeats wrote *The Second Coming* in 1919 and published it in 1921 to an audience soon torn between the appeal of Marsden’s approving translation of the *Protocols* in 1922 and Yeats’s ironic lament: “The best lack conviction; while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.” And, for “the worst,” the *Protocols* was a most attractive revelation.

Paul Zawadski examines the role of the *Protocols* as part of that ominous new phenomenon that took shape in precisely these years: secular “political religions.” He argues that the *Protocols* offers us a remarkable case study in the way that, under the secular pressures of modernity’s skepticism, scientific rigor, and drive to separate church and state, religious beliefs reemerged in a new and different idiom. The *Protocols* appeared in the middle of the “1900 moment” (1880–1910), when “the general worldview was affected by the fall in influence of the great religions” and when that collapse of traditional religion created a devastating psychological void, in Weber’s terms, “an iron cage.” In this sense, the *Protocols* as a mythical narrative participated in the “re-enchantment” of the world, not a regression from modernity but a response to it.

Zawadski quotes Cassirer’s postwar reflections about the failure of prewar intellectuals (1946), which could equally describe those who, in the 1990s, thought the *Protocols* were dead and buried.

> We [intellectuals] have underestimated the power of myths. When we first heard about political myths, we found them to be so absurd, so ridiculous, and so crazy, that we had trouble taking them seriously.

And yet, for all their woes, early-20th-century observers who dismissed these allegedly “regressive forces” soon found themselves overwhelmed by forces of zealotry that made the coming decades the bloodiest time in recorded history. “Political” or “secular religions,” it turns out, are “secular” millennial movements that promise salvation in the present, and, precisely because they are secular (no “God” will effect the necessary transformation), they are all the more active in bringing about the perfect society. Indeed, if more gentle approaches fail, zealots of secular religions will not hesitate to carve their imagined perfection out of the very body social if necessary.
And, at the heart of these ruthlessly coercive “secular religions” lay a new, a “modern” conspiracy theory.

In a secularized world [conspiracy theories] claimed to make sense of the enigma of evil and more generally of everything that went wrong (crisis, revolutions, wars and natural catastrophes). One could ironically say that they brought the Devil back, only this time it was a human Devil. And he is not a character from a Boulgakov novel but the real-life prosecutor Vichinksi, who, during the Moscow trials, questioned Zelenski, one of the accused who was the head of the distribution network of consumer goods, in these terms: “Were there instances when members of your organisation who were in charge of stocking butter put crushed glass in the butter? . . . Were there instances when your co-workers, your criminal accomplices, plotted against the Soviet state and the Soviet people by spreading nails in the butter?” A scene of such absurdity would be laughably comic if we did not know that eighteen of the accused were immediately executed.

Conspiracy theories negate the terrible tensions and the permanent and acute cognitive dissonance of modernity. They “recompos[e] a holistic vision of a social group that is homogeneous and in fusion, and yet that is threatened by the outside world.” As a result, rather than see modern conspiracy theories, and in particular, the Protocols, as a regression to ancient religious beliefs, Zawadski argues that they arise from and answer the doubts and uncertainties of modernity, in modern, empirical (scientific) terms.

David Redles examines perhaps the most famous case of a “political” or “secular religion” in his chapter on the Nazis. He argues that the apocalyptic urgency and the absolute stakes of the Protocols appealed to precisely those Germans filled with passionate intensity who, embracing the text as “true,” unleashed the “blood-dimmed tide” upon the world in the following decades. Hitler looked deep into the Protocols and discovered himself—what he wanted and how to get it. Hitler’s attitude toward the Protocols reveals not a shrewd politician manipulating the masses but a profoundly religious mind struggling with apocalyptic gnosis:

Hitler and his inner circle believed that world history was essentially the struggle of . . . two chosen races, one Aryan, chosen of God, and one Jewish, chosen of Satan. These two races were locked in mortal combat, with a final reckoning imminent. In this scenario, “the Jew” became an abstract and symbolic Evil Other whose extermination was essential for ultimate
salvation. Once again, this was not simply rhetoric designed solely for audience effect but a believed vision of a coming eschatological battle that could have only one end possible: extermination of either the Aryans or the Jews. The Protocols was taken to be a revelation of the Jews’ attempt to take over the world in fulfillment of the covenant. The Nazis then extended this myth to include the notion that, once the covenant was fulfilled, the Jews would attempt to exterminate the Gentiles. Only a counterextermination of Jews could prevent this apocalypse. While exactly how this apocalyptic scenario would play out was unknown to Hitler and his inner circle, the belief that it would occur in their lifetimes was absolutely an article of faith. Germany, and the world for that matter, had arrived at an eschatological turning point. It was a time of apocalypse or salvation in a millennial Third Reich. In this way, an imaginary enemy, involved in an imaginary world conspiracy as revealed in the imaginary Protocols, led to a very real genocide.

Postwar Protocols: Non-Western Variants

However thoroughly banned from the public sphere in the West, the text continued both to survive at the margins of Western culture and to thrive outside the West. In particular, during the 1970s—a time when Zionism had been declared “racism,” and the PLO had an honored place in the United Nations led by the ex-Nazi Kurt Waldheim—the Protocols was translated into virtually every major language in the world and distributed worldwide from Turtle Bay.

Goodman’s chapter on Japan traces the long-standing presence of the text there, its natural alliance with a number of both Christian and Buddhist millenarian traditions, and the political—often imperial—schemes it helped inspire among its “believers.” He then examines in more detail its heyday in the 1980s via the writings of a Christian preacher, Uno Masami. By assuring Japanese that he could help them understand the world and Japan, he wrote huge bestsellers, and the Protocols got a respectful, even enthusiastic look in mainstream, even academic circles.

And yet, he notes, despite the text’s popularity, it did not necessarily translate into the atrocities characteristic of the Nazis; on the contrary, in some cases it led to alliances with the Jews, efforts to bring them to Japan so that Japan could benefit from their intellectual and cultural resources. (This is not infrequently the reason that many world leaders today consult with international Jewish agencies.) In part, Goodman’s chapter illustrates the point
made by Bronner that not all believers in the *Protocols* take it as a “warrant for genocide” against the Jews. On the other hand, however, in the one fairly clear case of Aum Shinrikyo, a group that first emerged in the Protocols-saturated atmosphere of the 1980s and did indeed commit terrorist atrocities on the principle of “destroying the world in order to save it,” we find the telltale conjunction of *Protocols* and apocalyptic paranoia.

If Japanese culture managed, however, to integrate the *Protocols* into a mainstream public discussion without necessarily melting down into toxic conspiracism the way Japan’s wartime allies, the Germans, did, the same cannot be said about the Arab world, the other major adopter of this text in the postwar world. Marcus and Crook’s chapter documents a public sphere that offers an almost mirror image of the Western one. Conspiracism, as Dan Pipes pointed out in his 1998 study, is coin of the realm. Or, as Thomas Friedman quipped in the third of his “Mideast Rules to Live By”: “If you can’t explain something to Middle Easterners with a conspiracy theory, then don’t try to explain it at all—they won’t believe it.” In this cultural sphere, exacerbated ferociously by contact with the “real” Zionists who so humiliated the Arabs in 1948 and 1967, the text penetrates from the top down, embraced by rulers, religious figures, academics, journalists alike . . . red meat for “the Street.”

Nowhere do we find stronger examples combining acceptance and action of this “atrocity-provoking narrative” than in the Palestinian Authority (1994–?). Marcus’s study makes it clear that the consequences of this belief for political actions are both consistent and devastating for any possible coexistence with Jews.

The Palestinian Authority successfully used the *Protocols* libel, together with other hate propaganda, to transform the killing of Jews from immoral murder into legitimate self-defense and even a service to humanity. The overwhelming Palestinian popular support for the suicide terror war against Israeli civilians and the transformation of the murderers of Jews into Palestinian heroes and role models for children can be seen as proof of the complete success of the Palestinian Authority’s policy of demonizing Jews and Israelis. This revival of the *Protocols* libel was for the Palestinian Authority an important component, as it gave academic support and “authentic” authorization to the intrinsically evil depiction of Jews and Israelis that was so important to the PA, and it made for Palestinians fighting and killing Jews a natural response.
When the dust settles, it may well be that historians will identify belief in the Protocols as one of the major poisons that made the “Oslo Peace Process” a failure.

And, since the outbreak of the “Al Aqsa Intifada,” in late 2000, as Marcus further points out, the belief in the Protocols has joined up with apocalyptic Muslim beliefs—in particular the Hadith of the “Rocks and the Trees”—to produce genocidal urges unrivaled since the Nazis. Indeed, German priests and ministers during the Nazi period, unlike Palestinian imams, never openly espoused genocide from the pulpit.14

Postmodern Protocols: The Return of the Repressed

The consistent and tragic conjunction of belief in the Protocols, a sense of apocalyptic urgency, and the genocidal urges that we see in the Nazis, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Palestinian Authority become all the more problematic as we move further into the 21st century. Here we find the Protocols not only reactivated within the mainstream of one of the largest religious movements on the planet—Islam—but reentering the Western public sphere from both secular and religious sources.

Above all, we reencounter the epistemological problem: The modernist bulwark against the Protocols depends on a commitment to some idea of “objective” reality. We reject the Protocols as a legitimate narrative in part because it is a documented forgery but also because we have documented that this forgery has led people to do abominable things. Revisionism, however, can undermine all kinds of “objective truths,” something that, Jeffrey Mehlman’s piece reminds us, happened at the highest levels of cultural discourse in Dreyfusard France. However sophisticated one gets, the chips don’t all fall neatly along the lines of the modernist narrative. And, as soon as one opens up the definition of reality, one finds oneself faced with “higher truths”—narratives, myths, legends, conspiracy theories.

Michael Barkun’s chapter on UFOs and the Protocols, in which beings from outer space “reveal” the fact that the Zionist conspiracy reaches into the worlds beyond ours, may seem like the comic relief of this collection. And it certainly provides examples to smile at. But it gets at one of our epistemological vulnerabilities. Having discarded the modernist grand narrative, we discover that elaborate fantasy narratives can adopt the Protocols without even bothering to address the critical issue of forgery. They assume the conspiracy and move on to tell their tale.
In response to criticism for fomenting genocidal hatreds, the UFOlogists using the *Protocols* plead innocent. They distinguish between “true” and “false” Jews. On the contrary, they insist (much as did Nilus) that they do not hold innocent Jews guilty for the sins of the “Elders,” who victimize Jews every bit as much as they victimize Gentiles. (Post–World War II believers in the *Protocols* explain the Holocaust by asserting that the “Elders” willingly sacrificed six million Jews in order to get sovereignty in Israel, the next phase of the plan.) Such believers protest that they actually want to save the Jews from their fate at the hands of these evil men. Thus, in one deft move, they avoid the accusation of malevolence and reassert the supersessionism of their narrative. The good Jew is one who denounces the “Elders” among his people.

These narratives allow the return of the *Protocols*, among other ways, by leveraging their status as “stigmatized knowledge.” Resistance to modern or Western hegemony (however one conceives of it) can take the form of privileging precisely that *gnosis* that the hegemon stigmatizes: The powerful banish it because it is true. Notes Barkun, “the *Protocols* is compelling because it has been rejected, not in spite of it.”

As a result, a collection of discredited and fantastic ideas gains mutual affirmation—that the *Protocols* is true, that on their way to Earth are spaceships peopled with “Ascended Masters” carrying directions from Atlantis for the next evolutionary leap in humanity. Together, they make a compelling narrative attractive to far more people than “modern” intellectuals imagine.” And we can expect patterns among the UFOlogists similar to those that characterized Henry Ford (who also did not think himself an anti-Semite): “ignorance, unpredictable absurdity, utter conviction, and naivety.”

Moreover, not all UFOlogy is explicit about the *Protocols*. Much of the discourse uses analogs—the oral (improvised) performances of the written text, with or without specifically identifying the evil Elders of Zion. Conspiracism permeates the discourse. Barkun ends with the paradox that defines our postmodern dilemma:

[The inability to convince that audience [of believers in the *Protocols*] hinges not so much on the intensity of its anti-Semitism (although that may certainly be a factor) as on the *Protocols*’ stigmatization, leading to the paradox that discrediting them is precisely the characteristic that makes them attractive and that the more convincing our arguments, the less their power to persuade.]
But since, as Barkun deftly analyzes, these narratives “draw the Protocols into a formidable modern religious tradition, Theosophy and its offshoots,” we can unfortunately glimpse a terrain that resembles the world of the Thule Society of Ariosophists in post–World War I Germany whence sprung Nazism, discussed by Redles. These are not problems we can safely disregard.

While Barkun takes us on a magical mystery tour of the marginal world of UFOlogy, Deborah Lipstadt begins her chapter in the world of mass marketing at Walmart. Here, in 2004, the Protocols appeared on the shelves, and the Walmart management’s response to the uproar was that it had not “seen a clear and convincing version” of the argument that the Protocols were a fake. It cited Henry Ford and “certain Russians” to suggest that the book was not only valid but that we need it to understand current affairs. Lipstadt expresses the rightful indignation of the sane scholar as she laments that “statements by scholars and serious historical research were being given the same weight as the claims of anti-Semites.” Welcome to the 21st century.

Lipstadt examines the history of the Protocols in America, from Henry Ford and Father Coughlin in the 1920s and 1930s to the anticommunism of the 1950s—when a reluctant J. Edgar Hoover had to assign precious resources to examine the validity of the text, so often did some anticommunists invoke it—to Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam, starting in the 1970s and continuing into the present. Her study illustrates how the Protocols is a constant if largely marginal presence on the American scene. Together with Berlet’s analysis of the parallel history of Masonic and Jewish conspiracy theory in U.S. history, her essay serves as excellent preparation for Berlet’s analysis of the Protocols in the United States at the turn of the third millennium.

Here we find the “usual suspects”—Christian Identity, Nation of Islam, neo-Nazis—but also some new and troubling ones in “New Age” circles and on the “left.” Indeed, just as the right-wing popularity of the Protocols forced Hoover to investigate, so, notes Berlet:

anti-Semitic conspiracism has become such a problem on the political left that the international progressive magazine New Internationalist published a special issue on Judeophobia, including a refutation of the Protocols.

And, just as Jeffrey Mehlman picks his way through a 19th-century France in which the boundaries between “left” and “right” were transgressed by semi-otically promiscuous seekers, so does Berlet present us with a world of constantly shifting boundaries rendered all the more porous by a shared conspiracist metanarrative that permits people “to take conspiracy allegations rooted
in the *Protocols*, sanitize the anti-Semitic references, and peddle the resulting analogs to the political left.” Berlet’s extensive and thickly textured analysis of the currents at work in American political discourse deserves close attention. We ignore these players at our peril because, their moment come, they can end up becoming foreign policy experts, as happened with Hitler.

Berlet’s analysis also opens up a window on one of the most disturbing directions in recent politics—the wildly self-contradictory alliance of progressive pacifists and war-mongering jihadis in the same “peace protests” against the war in Iraq in the winter and spring of 2003. There, side by side with pacifists, one found marchers parading pictures of Saddam Hussein and Yassir Arafat and wearing headbands saying “Death to the Jews.” In part, this had been set in motion in 1991, when George H. W. Bush’s remark about a “New World Order” set off apocalyptic alarm bells the world over. The American protests against the first American Gulf War fostered an alliance between *Protocols* conspiracists and leftists dedicated to fighting “American/Western hegemony.”

It is unclear how much of this [alliance] was latent anti-Semitism among leftists and how much was picked up from the right-wing groups using the Gulf War to recruit from the left, but this period opened up new vistas for right-left synergy, especially around anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

But, still more important, Berlet explores the impact that apocalyptic beliefs can have on *Protocols*-inspired conspiracism in triggering murderous scapegoating. Apocalyptic beliefs dualize all human interactions into good and evil forces. In Berlet’s words, they “transmogrify”

contemporary sociopolitical or socioreligious forces . . . into absolute contrast categories embodying moral, eschatological, and cosmic polarities upon which hinge the millennial destiny of humankind.

Citing other students of millennialism, including R. J. Lifton and Damian Thompson, Berlet suggests that, when Hofstadter wrote of the “paranoid style,” he actually meant the “apocalyptic style.” He then traces the career of the “Heroic Gnostic” who gains a following and, using scapegoating of the apocalyptic enemy as his major rhetorical trope, launches a movement that moves from the margins to the center. Like Hitler with his “Nationalsozialismus,” the Gnostic hero moves back and forth from right to left, from authoritarian to egalitarian, with ease, making sure at every step to foment violent hatred. The *Protocols* is nothing if not protean.
Assessments: The Protocols, the New Anti-Semitism, and the Jews

What to do? How can sane people, Jews and non-Jews, respond to beliefs that defy the very rules of discourse and nonetheless get traction? Berlet, at the end of his chapter, makes clear the necessity of engagement:

Nonetheless, the spread of conspiracy theories across a society is perilous to ignore because scapegoating and conspiracist allegations are toxic to democratic civil society and are tools used by cynical demagogic leaders to mobilize a bigoted mass base. There is no reason for intellectuals to feel smug and superior. History demonstrates that conspiracism cuts across political, social, economic, and intellectual boundaries. We need to teach each generation about the dangers of apocalyptic dualism, demonization, scapegoating, and conspiracism. The forgery of the Protocols needs to be a centerpiece of such a curriculum. We must never forget that tragic apocalypticism merged with aggressive dualism and demonization can create social movements that use conspiracist scapegoating to justify genocide as a final solution.

On the other hand, Deborah Lipstadt urges caution in carrying out the task:

Even as we are alert to the Protocols and to the conspiracy theories they spawn, we must be careful not to become our own worst enemies by aggrandizing the potential of that threat—thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, giving this century-old forgery an importance and publicity it would otherwise not get. In short, let us—for possibly all the right reasons—not do for the Protocols what the American Jewish community did for the Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ.

Stephen Bronner extends Lipstadt’s warning from a matter of practical tactics to one of moral strategy. We must, above all, he argues, not allow fears of the Protocols in the 21st century to blind us to the differences between the text’s role in our day and its role a century ago on the one hand, and not allow our fears of anti-Semitism to silence responsible self-criticism, in particular that of Jews criticizing aspects of Israeli policy, on the other. A rigorous critique of Israel, he argues, is not only legitimate, but necessary.

The very creation of Israel has fundamentally changed the situation. No clear moral thinking about the Protocols can take place if we do not “admit that Jews are no longer in the ghetto or an oppressed minority.” Thus, Bronner suggests, one cannot compare the “real victims” of Protocols-inspired genocidal
paranoia to Israeli Jews, who can now defend themselves. In particular, he is concerned with the misuse of accusations of anti-Semitism in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This practice, he holds, impairs a real, potentially fruitful dialogue between the two antagonists in the conflict.

Richard Landes warns against the possibility that, in an effort to avoid the Scylla of a tribal “Israel, right or wrong,” one can fall into the Charybdis of “Palestinians right or wrong.” Indeed one can end up adopting Protocols-inspired Palestinian narratives about their own innocence and Israel’s guilt in place of the discarded Zionist “myths.” As a result, by adopting a postcolonial language of Israeli imperialism and antidemocracy, one can end up feeding the paranoid fantasies of Arabs who believe that the two stripes on Israel’s flag represent the stretch of their imperial ambitions to rule from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Landes argues, on the contrary, that a careful analysis of the way the paranoid apocalyptic themes found in the Protocols operate in Palestinian and, more broadly, in Arab-Muslim culture suggests that the scrupulous, often rhetorically inflated self-criticism that some Jewish “progressives” engage in—Israel is imperialist, colonialist, racist, fascist—has a noxious dual impact. First, rather than encouraging dialogue, it fuels hatreds by confirming the paranoid fantasies on the other side. Second, it produces an epistemological crisis among outside observers who do not know how to factor in both Jewish tendencies toward self-criticism and Arab tendencies toward scapegoating in assessing the information they receive about what has happened.

“Those who are merciful to the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful,” commented the rabbis in the 2nd century. “The best lack conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity,” wrote Yeats in 1921. When paranoid intensity meets misplaced mercy, the results can be terrifying.

Indeed, the spread of paranoid conspiracy theory and Protocols-inspired anti-Semitism has arguably done terrible things to both European and Arab culture in our young century. While some argue that “it’s not so bad,” some argue that we live in a dynamic like that of the 1930s, when well-meaning progressives placated remorseless imperialists (who accused the Jews of imperial plots), in the hope of bringing “peace in our time.” In the 1930s, that appeasement failed spectacularly. Whether or not this is the 1930s and, if it is, no matter where we are in the apocalyptic curve of totalitarian violence, we now have another chance to deal with a waxing wave of Protocols-lubricated anti-Semitism. Can we—can modern culture—do better? Can we choose life this time before tens, even hundreds of millions have drowned in that blood-dimmed tide?
NOTES

6. See David Redles in this volume.
8. Quoted by Jeffrey Mehlman in this volume.
9. For the most recent study of these trials, see Haddasah Ben-Itto, The Lie That Wouldn’t Die—The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2005).
13. “The Hour [of Judgment] will not arrive until the Muslims fight the Jews, and the Muslims will slaughter them, until the Jew will hide behind the rocks and the trees. The rocks and the trees will say: ‘O Muslim, O Servant of God—there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him!’” Hadith related by Abu Haraira (603–681), one of the most quoted reciters of Hadith. One should note that, although there are a number of classical versions in which Jews are not mentioned, modern apocalyptic literature cites only the versions mentioning the Jews: David Cook, Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 36.
14. For the extensive examples of Palestinian (and other Arab) groups preaching genocide against the Jews, see PMW (www.pmw.org.il) and MEMRI (www.memri.org).]