

The New Criterion

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Socialism of fools

by Michael Weiss

Francis Wheen's new book, *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia*, contains an insight that deserves to be the final word on every phenomenon from Freemasons to grassy knolls to Ron Paul For President: "Irrationality is both cumulative and contagious. You start by reading your horoscope in the newspaper; then you dabble in chakra balancing or feng shui, saying that it is important to keep an open mind; after a while your mind is so open that your brains fall out, and you read the Protocols of the Elders of Zion without noticing anything amiss."

That this aperçu was made by the author of a brilliant biography of Karl Marx is not without its irony. Conspiracy theories were long thought to be the jagged frontier navigated exclusively by the political right, an assumption largely propounded by the historian Richard Hofstadter in his examination of McCarthyism and Goldwaterism in the 1960s. Yet they've had just as much purchase in the left-wing landscape. Where superstition and ignorance remain impervious to bust or boom, Jew-hatred will remain a sentiment that marches just as easily under a Red banner as it does under a Black one. How else to explain the growing alliance between Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose fraudulent "re-election" in July Chavez described as "very important for the peoples who are fighting for a better world"? Their mutual suspicion of Jews is the best example yet of "fusion paranoia," the late journalist Michael Kelly's term for how radicals and reactionaries rationalized the Oklahoma City bombing in similar language at the fin de siècle. Obsessions over big government and a cabal of elites are fungible, and it may well be the case that conspiracist logic--which explains the "real" cause of the Twin Towers' collapse as tidily as it does the U.S. invasion of Iraq--is emerging as the dominant ideology of the 21st century.

A fine essay on Chavez's exploitation of anti-Semitism, co-authored by Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez, appeared in the July/August issue of the *Boston Review*. They note that since the caudillo's election in 1999, a country previously immune to widespread attacks on its Jewish population, has had its synagogues raided, its buildings defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti, and its airwaves filled with innuendo about the acquisitive enemies of "Bolivarian" socialism. Chavez himself has seen fit to articulate exactly the kind of egalitarian society he aims to create in the hemisphere. Speaking on Christmas in 2005, Chavez said: "The world has enough for everybody, but some minorities, the descendants of the same people that crucified Christ, and of those that expelled Bolivar from here

and in their own way crucified him...have taken control of the riches of the world."

This no doubt flattered the mullahs, who, as Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau has shown, have happily opened major banks and factories in Venezuela—all with the fiduciary purpose of furthering Iran's nuclear weapons program. But Chavez has strong homegrown catalysts as well for subscribing to the oldest conspiracy theory on record. Lomnitz and Sanchez demonstrate that he places great stock in the Venezuelan writer Noberto Ceresole, an ultra-nationalist and Holocaust-denier whom Chavez called a "great friend" and an "intellectual deserving great respect." In 1999, Ceresole published *Caudillo, Army, People: The Venezuela of Commander Chavez*, a primer on the political underpinnings of chavisma and its then-nascent personality cult of which he was only too fond. Lest the reader be mistaken just how much primacy Jews are given in the pathological construct of pre-Chavez Venezuela, the first chapter of the book is titled, "The Jewish Question and the State of Israel," in which Ceresole writes:

The first time that I perceived the 'Jewish problem' was when I discovered, empirically, that the so-called 'terrorist attacks of Buenos Aires' (1992 and 1994)...corresponded with an internal crisis of the State of Israel and not with the action of a supposed 'Islamic terrorism.' From that time onward, the Jews erupted in my life. I suddenly discovered them not as I had known them until then, that is as individuals distinct from one another, but rather as elements for whom individuation is impossible, a group united by hatred, and, to use a term that they like, by ire.

What Ceresole means here by the word "empirically," the reader can never divine. But thus do acts of violence perpetrated against Jews—and who could excuse the verb "erupt" in that paragraph?—become mere political concoctions of Jews themselves. In responding to this year's looting of the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas, Chavez offered his own Leninist *cui bono* in the form of: "Like any police investigator, you have to ask yourself: who benefits from these violent acts? Not the government, not the people, not the Revolution...It is they themselves who did it!" From here, it's not hard to see how Hamas and Hezbollah can be depicted not as thuggish theocratic movements but as aspiring expropriators of the world's expropriators.

Another unmistakable thread of chavista anti-Semitism is the comparison it makes between Israeli policies and Nazi atrocities—a common anti-Zionist trope that, as British novelist Howard Jacobson has noted, amounts to "[b]erating Jews with their own history, disinheriting them of pity, as though pity is negotiable or has a sell-by date." It is also a sophistic new form of Holocaust denial. In this befuddled, grab-bag matrix, history is not seen as a series of actual events with size and scope unto themselves but rather as an agglomeration of catchphrases ("Gaza is the Warsaw Ghetto") and abstractions for browbeating or inflaming observers of current events. If a Middle Eastern state with civil liberties, tolerance of

faction and dissent and parliamentary democracy represents the recrudescence of Nazism then what does that say about the Third Reich or the legacy of its victims? Erasing the Shoah from the pages of time is a prelude to erasing Israel from them.

A totalitarian mode of thought emerges in which socialists and Islamists both “revise” history while failing to appreciate their contemporary re-enactment of it: the left pretends that the crimes of the right never took place, except when those crimes can be fashioned into cudgels for use against the center. Stalin’s entry into a friendship pact with Hitler after years of equating liberals and social democrats with fascists is no different from Chavez’s promotion of Ceresole, who disclaims Nazi butchery, while Chavez equates IDF soldiers with Nazi butchers.

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