

# Sub Altern Orientalism and Counter-Hegemonic Struggles. The Construction of Arab, Chinese and Russian Communities in Chavista Venezuela

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## Abstract

In its attempt to pursue an elusive Modernist vision of development, the Chávez government (1999-2013) in Venezuela concocted a fresh and very binary roster of “us” versus “them.” In its counter-hegemonic project, in Gramscian terms, Venezuela has promoted a subaltern Orientalism that has featured the demonization of the United States and its closest allies, and a rather abrupt bonding with countries and associated cultures with which it had little previous contact, as exemplified by the cases of China, Iran and Russia. Edward Said (1978) defined Orientalism as a concept with reference to imperialist powers *vis-à-vis* developing countries. However, in the case at hand, one observes a refreshing twist: here one observes Orientalism on the part of developing and non-Western nations in relation to a counter-hegemonic struggle *vis-à-vis* dominant Western countries, or what I term *Sub-altern Orientalism*. The article shall address this incipient phase of identity construction in Venezuela regarding the Chinese, Arab, and to a lesser extent, Russian presence.

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**Reception Date:** September 2013

• **Approval Date:** April 2014

## How to Cite This Article

Rochlin, James. (2014). Sub Altern Orientalism and Counter-Hegemonic Struggles. The Construction of Arab, Chinese and Russian Communities in Chavista. *Estudios Políticos*, 45, Instituto de Estudios Políticos, Universidad de Antioquia, pp. 33-54.

## Keywords

Orientalism; Counter-Hegemonic Struggle; Gramsci, Antonio; Foucault, Michel; Venezuela.

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# Orientalismo subalterno y luchas contrahegemónicas. La construcción de comunidades árabes, chinas y rusas en la Venezuela chavista

## Resumen

En su intento de buscar una esquivada visión modernista de desarrollo, el gobierno de Chávez (1999-2013) en Venezuela confeccionó una lista fresca y muy binaria de un “nosotros” contra “ellos”. En su proyecto contra-hegemónico, en términos de Gramsci, Venezuela ha promovido un orientalismo subalterno que ha contado con la demonización de los Estados Unidos y sus aliados más cercanos, y a su vez una unión bastante abrupta con países y culturas asociadas con los que el gobierno de Venezuela tenía poco contacto previo, como se ejemplifica con los casos de China, Irán y Rusia. Edward Said (1978) denomina el concepto de orientalismo como la relación entre las potencias imperialistas de cara a los países en desarrollo. En el caso que nos ocupa, sin embargo, se observa un giro refrescante: aquí se observa el orientalismo entre naciones en vía de desarrollo y naciones no-occidentales con el fin de hacer frente a la lucha hegemónica de los países occidentales dominantes, o lo que yo llamo *orientalismo subalterno*. En el presente artículo se abordará la primera fase de la construcción de identidad en Venezuela con relación a la presencia de los chinos, árabes y, en menor medida, de Rusia.

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## Palabras clave

Orientalismo; Lucha Contra-Hegemónica; Gramsci, Antonio; Foucault, Michel; Venezuela.

## Introduction

Edward Said (1978) wondered: “whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into ‘us’ [Westerners] and ‘them’ [Orientals]” (p. 45). The Venezuelan case, at least, suggests not. In its attempt to pursue an elusive Modernist vision of development, the Chávez government (1999-2013) in Venezuela concocted a fresh and very binary roster of “us” versus “them.” In its counter-hegemonic project, in Gramscian terms, Venezuela has promoted a subaltern Orientalism that has featured the demonization of the US and its closest allies, and has assumed a leadership role in uniting like-minded Latin American countries as exemplified through the Alianza Bolivariana para Las Americas (ALBA).

In contrast to the cultural and historical affinities among the ALBA countries, Venezuela has reached out to create a fresh set of global allies with which it had little previous contact, as exemplified by the cases of China, Syria, Iran and Russia. Related to the question of how a new Orientalism and set of identities are created on the global stage—the “us” of Venezuela, China, Syria, Iran and Russia versus the “them” of the United States team—another set of questions arise as to the creation of identity of the Chinese, Middle Eastern and Russian populations living *within* Venezuela. Is there a relation between Venezuela’s alliance driven foreign policy, on the one hand, and the role of Chinese, Middle Eastern and Russian communities living within Venezuela, on the other? While there is unity among this alliance in terms of global affairs, do the aforementioned communities within Venezuela experience social inclusiveness and a sense of national unity within the country? Edward Said defined Orientalism as a concept with reference to imperialist powers *vis-à-vis* developing countries. In the case at hand, however, we observe a refreshing twist: here we observe Orientalism on the part of developing and non-Western nations in relation to a counter-hegemonic struggle *vis-à-vis* dominant Western countries, or what I term “sub-altern Orientalism.” We shall address this incipient phase of identity construction in Venezuela regarding the Chinese, Middle Eastern, and to a lesser extent, Russian presence. Some tentative conclusions are that the Syrian population is perhaps the most integrated into Venezuelan society of the communities considered here, and has a clear link to the country’s policy formation. Chinese communities appear to be rather insular in Venezuela, and the case of Chinese workers within the country pose political problems for the Venezuelan government. The Russian population, the smallest of the communities considered here, maintains a low profile.

By way of context, there are a number of points to take into consideration. First, Chávez's political brilliance was manifested in his capacity to harness the support of the majority population of Venezuela, which happens to be poor. This provision of voice to the marginalized has come at the expense of the wealthy and of international business interests aligned with the United States and its commitment to neoliberalism. In Venezuela, this represents nothing short of class war. The construction of new identities has occurred against this backdrop of pronounced class conflict.

Second, the creation of the new "other" —that is, of Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Russian identities in Venezuela— should be viewed within the rubric of Foucauldian "systems of thought." This is apparent in the Chavistas' dedication to Modernist frameworks of development whereby there are clear divisions between socialism and neoliberalism, rich and poor, imperialism and social justice, and us versus them. Thus, China, Russia and Iran-Syria are part of Venezuela's new "us" through the familiar strategic formula: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. At the same time, however, a potential clash of *epistemes* must be overcome on the part of said populations. That is, there may exist formidable but surmountable epistemic ruptures between Venezuela's experience of Western thought compared to the Chinese and Middle Eastern systems of thought.

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Third, there are multiple layers of identity formation in the case at hand. We have already noted the shifting identities of "us" versus "them." Beyond this, Russia and China have changed their identities from "recipient" to "donor" countries of developmental assistance. Russia had been a recipient of developmental assistance in the post-Soviet phase of the 1990s and into the new millennium. But at the beginning of 2007, Russia attempted to re-invent itself as a donor state, and Venezuela has been a key target country (Gray, 2011). Certainly, Iran's foray into Latin America is of very recent vintage. It has provided aid to Latin American petroleum producers while attempting to cultivate allies as United States global pressure mounts against the nuclearization of the country. Simultaneously, there are also fractures within each one of the communities under consideration, among the Venezuelans themselves, as well as divisions within both, the Middle Eastern and the Chinese communities in Venezuela. Thus, there are new sprouts here on so many fronts. These nuances deserve our attention.

Finally, Venezuela is a relatively mixed society, with the majority of the population racially blended among blacks, Indians, Hispanics and others. Part of Chávez's popular support was based on his own varied ethnic

mix. There have also been notable cases whereby Latin American countries welcome *políticos* from other ethnic groups, such as Peru's support for Alberto Fujimori during the 1990s, and Ecuador's choice of Arab politicians during that decade. Generally speaking, Venezuela represents a welcoming melting pot for diverse ethnic groups.

## 1. Conceptual Considerations

Edward Said (1978) employed Foucauldian thought in his analysis of Orientalism, which he defined: "[...] not as a sudden access of objective knowledge about the Orient, but as a set of structures inherited from the past, secularized, redispersed, and re-formed" (p. 122). Orientalism, then, may be seen as a process of constructing the other while situated within a complex political context. Part of this complexity entails not only the archaeology of the political struggle that frames the construction of the other, but its wider relation to other global struggles. Said (1978) reminded us that: "The task of a critical scholar is not to separate one struggle from another, but to connect them" (p. 331). Accordingly, it is so with the case at hand. The ensuing analysis will connect some dots regarding the making of cultural identities and an assortment of interconnected political struggles.

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This process of connecting the dots between struggles entails the fundamental epistemological ideas noted by Michel Foucault, namely, the notions of series and order. First, let me make a reference to the Preface of Foucault's book *The Order of Things* that begins with an amusing and profound look at the definition of animals within an ancient Chinese encyclopedia (1970, p. xv). The reader is left initially to wonder how people could possibly concoct such an order, and then realize that the same might be said about the current order of things. It is at that point that possibilities appear for shiny new orders. A fresh constellation of power is emerging that has been replacing the bipolar Cold War as well as the ensuing false New World Order of the 1990s, whereby the United States would lead democratically and globally through the United Nations and other institutions. Among the dots to be connected are a United States war with factions of Islamists; the rise of the democratic Left in South America; the shattering of United States global economic standing and leadership after the crisis that appeared in 2007; and the appearance of an alliance of strong countries resisting United States leadership. These are augmented by an assortment of post-modern shifts in security, associated with the Revolution in Military Affairs —such as those emanating from the time-space compression, new forms of organization

(cellular and network), de-territorialized politics, the blurring of crime and war, and so on.

At the level of the world order, these phenomena are associated with the decline of United States hegemony and, in Gramscian terms, the subsequent Crisis of Authority (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 210; 275-276). Venezuela's relations with China, Russia, Iran and Syria should be viewed within this context. They represent a counter-hegemonic movement. The situation reflects Foucault's reversal of the famous Clausewitzian *dictum*: "Politics is war by other means [...] a sort of silent war to re-inscribe that relation of force" (Foucault, 1997, pp. 15-16). It is through this context of counter-hegemonic struggle, this political war, that the construction of Chinese, Arab and Russian identity occurs among their *émigrés* in Venezuela. While Said's Orientalism focused on the domination of Egypt by imperial powers, it is a subaltern and counter-hegemonic struggle that defines the "Orientalism" of identity construction in Venezuela among said populations.

The construction of identity among Chinese, Arab, and Russian populations occurs within a clear political context. Hence, we observe the relation between power, knowledge, political truth, and the construction of identity (Foucault, 1994b, p. 131). While the politics of representation has figured highly in so many of Foucault's works, such as the playful "This is Not A Pipe" (Foucault, 1994a) it was Said (1978) who closely framed the task at hand here: "how does one represent other cultures?" (p. 325). He suggested that the task is further complicated by the importance of not homogenizing or totalizing other cultures (p. 317).

## **2. Identities in the Making: the Middle Eastern, Chinese and Russian Communities in Venezuela**

The project at hand is at an incipient phase, due both to the relative newness of much of the Chinese, Middle Eastern and Russian populations in Venezuela, as well as to the newness of this project that aims to delve further into the Venezuelan case and later to compare it to those of Ecuador and Colombia. Initial sketches of these cultures will be presented, followed by a comparative conclusion.

### **2.1 The Middle Eastern Population: Syria and Iran**

Waves of Middle Eastern emigration to Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America can be linked to periodic political and economic crises in the

region. For example, the first major wave of emigration from the Middle East to Venezuela occurred during the period 1880-1913, amidst the fall of the Ottoman Empire and related imperialist endeavors in the region (Bhajin, 2008). It was the Syrians and Lebanese that have dominated Middle Eastern emigration to Venezuela. More recently, Syrian and Lebanese waves of emigration occurred just after the 1947 formation of Israel stretching into the early 1950s, and then during the late 1960s and 1970s in the context of the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars (Bruckmayr, 2010; Salloun, 2000). Many of these immigrants to Venezuela were escaping economic hardship in rural areas of their home countries, and wished to become merchants in Latin America. This led to a keen interest among this population to learn Spanish, and to assimilate sufficiently into Venezuelan culture to trade with and prosper among the local population.

Adel El Zabayar, the President of the Venezuelan-Arab Federation (Federación Venezolano-Árabe), is also an elected member of the country's National Assembly and a member of its Permanent Commission for Defense and Security. He indicated that there are currently about 1.5 million Arabs in Venezuela, one of the largest such populations in Latin America. The most populous among them are, in order, Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians and Egyptians. He indicated that generally "Arabs assimilate very easily wherever they reside, and have a long history of this. But they also preserve their own identity in terms of religion and culture, and generally do not inter-marry with the Venezuelans".<sup>1</sup> In his view, then, Arabs tend to maintain a fluidly dual identity, one that swims with the Venezuelans, and another that preserves distinct Arab culture.

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El Zabayar perceived "no racism against Arabs," and said he would not be elected to the National Assembly if racism had occurred to any significant extent in his constituency where Arabs are in a clear minority. He suggested the general absence of racism toward Arabs was a result of two principal factors. First, Venezuelans are generally a mixed culture and are very accepting toward other cultures and populations. Part of Hugo Chávez's vast appeal was his multi-ethnic background. As a Chavista, he also emphasized the strong multi-culturalism promoted by Chávez and incorporated into the country's new constitution in 1999. It recognizes all religions as equal, and avoids the hegemony of Catholicism present throughout much of Latin America. El Zabayar indicated that the Venezuelan government attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> El Zabayar, Adel. Caracas, Venezuela. Interview, February 20, 2013.

send a representative to most major cultural celebrations across the country in its commitment to multi-culturalism.

When the issue of assimilation is raised, a number of issues come to the fore. One of those, discussed above, concerns the possibility of celebrating one's own culture and identity while simultaneously mingling sufficiently with the broader Venezuelan population to participate in national economic and political life. But the Arab hesitance toward intermarriage with the broader Venezuelan population has led to the perception by some that the Arabs are a rather closed society within the country. Interestingly, when I asked Mr. El Zabayar about perceptions that the Arab community is a rather closed one in Venezuela, he suggested that the "conquering populations" of the Spanish and Portuguese are the most closed of any social groups in the country, and "stay to themselves." It is this class fracture, in his view, that divides the country, rather than ethnic or racial barriers. Further, although he indicated there is not racism directed particularly against the Arab population, he noticed a general racism seems to predominate on television, where whiteness and United States standards of beauty are pervasive.

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The non-Arab Iranian presence is relatively recent and is distinct contextually from Syrian and Lebanese experience. The small Iranian population, predominantly, is centered in the upper strata of the Venezuelan government —especially regarding managerial and other upper echelon positions in *Petróleos de Venezuela S. A. (PDVSA)*, the nation's oil company, and in developmental projects.<sup>2</sup> The Chávez government has moved closer than previous ones to Iran, especially after the 2002 *coup* in Venezuela that had the apparent support of the United States (Rochlin, 2011b). The 2002 coup radicalized Chávez, and led him to seek other key global players to contest the power and threat of the United States. This includes Iran, North Korea, Syria, China, Russia and others. Chávez united with Islam to the extent that Islam was targeted by the United States. This political context set the backdrop for an approach to Arab culture that was welcoming and engaging. Drawing the link between power, knowledge and identity construction, the politically favored Arab population faced in Venezuela a country willing to embrace them anew —welcoming newfound political allies among an Arab population such as the Syrians and Lebanese who had populated the country for more than a century.

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<sup>2</sup> Arellano, Félix. Head of the School of International Studies at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela. Interview, 2013.

Iran's President Ahmadinejad had visited Latin America five times by 2012, with Venezuela as his focus point. The Iranian government, as the object of United States' wrath, has allied with Venezuela for trade and sanction evasion, general political support, and for possible assistance in the case of asymmetric warfare (Walser, 2012). There is now a direct air-link between Iran and Venezuela, and the Iranians have invested in car, bike and cement factors, and also in joint mining and oil projects with the Venezuelan government (Walser, 2012).

Iran's attempted inroads to Latin America have not escaped the attention of United States officials. In December 28, 2012 President Obama enacted the "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere" Act, which requires the United States Department of State to address within six months "Iran's growing hostile presence and activity" (Fernandez, 2013). Chavista Venezuela represents Exhibit A in this case. Iran, no doubt, hopes that the government of Nicolás Maduro will maintain friendly relations. More broadly, what is important to consider is the extent to which identity construction for the Arab and Middle Eastern population in Venezuela is affected by shifts in global constellations of power and alliances, I shall return to this in the conclusion.

Of the three communities under consideration here, the Syrian and Iranian populations are perhaps the politically closest to Chávez and now to Maduro governments. Over the last decade, Venezuela, Syria, and Iran have been the subjects of vehement attacks by the United States and its allies. This shared vulnerability, and the commonality of their enemy, have created a solid bond between these states and members of their communities that support them. Overall then, perhaps the Middle Eastern communities within Venezuela experience the highest level of inclusiveness of the groups considered here, and remain actively linked to national policy formation.

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**Table 1.** Venezuelan Exports to Selected Countries, 1998-2011. US Millions.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Iran</b>	5.79	0	0.003	0.019	0.101	0.056	0.772	0.275	13.54	5.42	0.73	0.302	0.513	0.721
<b>China</b>	0	0	23	41.6	90	165	277	293	205	2.006	3.481	3.320	5.070	1.1585
<b>Russia</b>	8.59	0	41.37	23.11	21.53	23.05	27.54	49.73	24.47	2.50	0.76	6.30	0.713	108

Source: International Monetary Fund, Direction of Trade Statistics, DOTs, 2013.

**Table 2.** Venezuelan Imports from Selected Countries, 1998-2011. US Millions.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Iran</b>	0.054	0	0.163	0.255	0.252	0.496	0.337	15.26	36.7	39.5	60.4	40.2	15.7	9.93
<b>China</b>	26.7	0	186	348	227	157	392	808	1.485	2.807	3.314	3.204	2.911	3.462
<b>Russia</b>	18.6	0	15.2	17.24	19.15	19.3	27.5	12.2	57.3	395.4	231	150	108	169

Source: International Monetary Fund, Direction of Trade Statistics, DOTs, 2013.

**Table 3.** Arms Exports from China and Russia to Venezuela, 1998-2012. US Millions.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<b>From China</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	27	41	54	89	8	115
<b>From Russia</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	356	758	702	252	557	274	410

Source: SIPRI (N. D. a).

**Table 4.** Military Expenditures, Selected Countries, (First figure is in constant 2005 prices, US millions; Second figure, military spending as percentage of GNP).

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Argentina</b>	\$2.082 1,1%	\$2.048 1,2%	\$1.692 1,1%	\$1.748 1,1%	\$1.813 1,0%	\$1.912 0,9%	\$1.776 0,9%	\$1.738 0,9%	\$2.077 0,8%		1% 0,9%
<b>Brazil</b>	\$12.910 1,8%	\$14.879 2%	\$14.998 1,9%	\$12.089 1,5%	\$12.392 1,5%	\$13.381 1,5%	\$12.720 1,5%	\$14.737 1,5%	\$15.477 1,5%		1,6% 1,6%
<b>Chile</b>	\$3.050 3,7%	\$3.166 3,7%	\$3.377 3,8%	\$3.428 3,6%	\$3.975 3,7%	\$4.266 3,6%	\$4.996 3,7%	\$4.864 3,4%	\$4.778 3,5%		5,9% 7,4%
<b>Colombia</b>	\$3.431 3%	\$3.786 3,2%	\$4.023 3,4%	\$4.687 3,7%	\$4.621 3,4%	\$4.782 3,3%	\$5.422 3,4%	\$5.579 3,4%	\$6.568 3,5%		3,8% 3,6%
<b>Peru</b>	\$1.078 2%	\$1.044 1,7%	\$975 1,5%	\$988 1,5%	\$1.047 1,4%	\$1.159 1,5%	\$1.193 1,3%	\$1.145 1,2%	\$1.301 1,1%		1,4% 1,3%
<b>Venezuela</b>	\$1.484 1,5%	\$1.500 1,6%	\$1.102 1,2%	\$1.072 1,2%	\$1.520 1,3%	\$2.054 1,4%	\$2.709 1,6%	\$2.262 1,3%	\$1.987 1,4%		1,2% 0,9%

Source: SIPRI (N. D. b).

## 2.2 The Chinese Population in Venezuela

The former director of the Club Social Chino estimates that there are approximately 100,000 people in Venezuela of Chinese origin, with about half of these arriving in the last ten years.<sup>3</sup> Some of the more recent arrivals are guest workers rather than citizens or permanent residents of Venezuela, a point to which I shall return. Like the Arab population in the country, most of the Chinese who populated Venezuela prior to the last ten years were shopkeepers. They established a small Chinatown in Caracas, with the Club Social Chino representing its cultural center.

While the Arab population has remained rather constant with the Syrian-Lebanese population arriving in the historical waves we noted, the situation regarding the Chinese population in Venezuela has undergone a major shift since the new millennium. This has been a result of two factors: the transformation of China into a pre-eminent global economic power; and Chávez's search for alternatives to relations with the United States. The context from which to frame the Chinese identity in Venezuela has crucially shifted markedly in the last fifteen years or so. It is a wealthy and powerful country with increasingly influence in Venezuela. The recent Chinese population in Venezuela is more variegated now, ranging from guest workers on construction sites, to very wealthy investors, to high placed Chinese government and economic officials, that is, the population of ethnic Chinese in Venezuela is divided by class.

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As we see in table one, Venezuelan exports to China went from about US\$23 million in 2000, to US\$11.59 Billion in 2012, with most of this being oil. PDVSA (2011, p. 132) notes that Venezuela sent to China 225 thousand barrels of oil daily in 2011, up from 155 in 2010. As table two indicates, imports from China have grown from about \$27 million in 1998 to about US\$3.5 billion in 2011. Further, global delivery service DHL indicated in 2012 that Venezuela had the largest parcel traffic with China, more than any other Latin American country (Diaz, 2012, November 11). Beyond trade, China has loaned Venezuela about US\$40 billion over the last decade (Rogers, 2013, March 8). In fact, Venezuela is the largest foreign borrower of the Chinese Development Bank. These loans have fostered a variety of investments in areas such as satellites, railways, highways, and energy and mining project. Venezuela is to repay the loans in oil —rendering the country

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<sup>3</sup> Tong, Victor. Past President (2004-2008) Club Social Chino. Caracas, Venezuela. Interview, February 20, 2013.

far less vulnerable to a foreign debt bubble than had occurred during the crisis years of the 1980s and 1990s (Downs, 2011). Moreover, China has worked hard to ensure that the loans it provides are for projects that benefit Venezuela as a whole rather than just the interests of the Chávez governments, since it expects future Venezuelan governments to respect the debt.

China has also emerged as a major arms exporter to Venezuela, following the refusal of the United States to supply the Chávez government with spare parts for United States made military hardware purchased by previous governments. As table three indicates, China exported US\$14 million in arms in 2006, rising to US\$115 million in 2012. While this pales in comparison with Russian arms exports to Venezuela, it is significant politically and strategically. Overall, in a political, economic, and strategic sense, China has emerged as a major alternative to United States influence in Venezuela. Thus, the identity of Chinese people in Venezuela is being constructed against this backdrop.

Since there exists only scant literature regarding the construction of Chinese identity in Venezuela, it was a fortune to have the chance to interview a former director of the Club Social Chino in Caracas on this general theme. This bustling place features a large recreation area, many offices, an inviting restaurant, and wallboards filled with Chinese language newspapers. He suggested that there is no evidence of racism whatsoever among native Venezuelans toward Chinese newcomers. The Chinese community, he said, feels very welcome in Venezuela. He described the Chinese community, however, as relatively closed —choosing to associate mostly among themselves during leisure time. I asked why, in his view, the Chinese community in Venezuela remains rather isolated. The Chinese, he said, have “a completely different culture, different food, a different way of thinking, everything”.<sup>4</sup> His suggestion of a distinct mode of thinking is particularly intriguing. He indicated that the clearest and quickest example he could provide regarded the respective culture’s attitudes toward work and time. There is much Chinese investment in the construction sector, especially regarding the office and residential towers sprouting all over the affluent parts of the city. As mentioned earlier, there are many Chinese guest workers in Venezuela, and particularly in the construction industry. Some of the Chinese loans coming to Venezuela through the China Development Bank are linked to hiring Chinese workers (Downs, 2011, p. 50). “Venezuelan workers,” Tong

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<sup>4</sup> Tong, Victor. Past President (2004-2008) Club Social Chino. Caracas, Venezuela. Interview, February 20, 2013.

said, “are not hard workers and work for seven hours a day. The Chinese work hard for fourteen hours.” While he did not observe any racism or exclusion by the Hispanic population *vis-à-vis* the Chinese in Venezuela, he suggested that the rich Chinese do not associate with the poor. Perhaps the biggest fracture of Chinese identity within Venezuela is class, and this is the case with the Hispanic population as well.

However, there may be resentment against Chinese investment and guest workers in cases where they threaten the environment and or are perceived to threaten the jobs of Venezuelans. For example, in February 2013, the Pemones indigenous group in Venezuela kidnapped forty-three soldiers and military officials to protest Chinese investment in the mining sector, which its leader said harmed the environment and did not hire Venezuelan workers. The leader of the indigenous group suggested that: “Before we resisted Spanish colonialism, and now Chinese colonialism” (Lorenzo, 2013, February 19). Here we note a similarity to newfound resentment of the Chinese in other parts of the developing South. The leftist guerrilla group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), for example, kidnapped executives from a Chinese oil firm in 2012, leading to the departure from the country of the company. For the FARC, Chinese Transnational Corporations were no different from their Western counterparts. Similarly, there is mounting evidence of resentment toward Chinese investment in the extractive sector in parts of Africa (Mawdsley, 2012).

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Thus, there are a variety of identities among ethnic Chinese in Venezuela. At the level of Venezuelan society, some have been naturalized citizens of Venezuela for generations, and have often taken jobs as merchants. Newcomers seem to be divided between working class, guest workers at Chinese construction and extractive sites, and wealthy Chinese investors — groups that do appear to mix. In some cases, Chinese investment schemes and their Chinese workers are perceived as a threat to the jobs of Venezuelan workers and to the environment.

An interesting PhD dissertation was written recently that looked at the identity construction of Chinese-Venezuelans who are sent by their parents to China for education. The dissertation is appended with a variety of comments from these students. Here are a couple of passages that relay the complexities at play:

Dolly, 17, four years in China: My passport is Venezuelan, but in Venezuela, people say that I’m Chinese. In China, I’m called a *yang ren*

(Westerner), which means I'm not Chinese but also not from another country. I feel Venezuelan, I can't explain why, but my grandmother tells me that I'm Chinese, because my parents and all my family are Chinese; [...] Carlos, 17, I see myself as Venezuelan because I was born there, but thinking about it more, I would say that I'm Chinese, because my parents are Chinese, I love China, and I have Chinese blood; [...] Eliza, 17, I think that I'm Venezuelan, but in Venezuela, people call me Chinese, and in China people call me Venezuelan. In China you can only have a Chinese passport, I'm not Chinese because of this, and my siblings are also not Chinese (Sterling, 2010, p. 217).

At the global political and economic levels, China has served as a key foreign investor and purchaser of oil at a time when US-Venezuelan relations have never been worse. Chávez had portrayed China as a state that can help Venezuela develop independently of Western imperial interests. The nuances and complications of all this are just starting to appear. Compared to the Middle Eastern population within Venezuela, the Chinese communities seem to choose a more insular space within Venezuelan society. If there is a relation between this community and Venezuelan foreign policy, it is a strained one in the sense that some members of the Venezuelan community resent the fact that Chinese investment in the country insists on Chinese rather than Venezuelan workers. Here then, we find a contradiction of sorts between China as Caracas' external ally, and the insular space of the Chinese community within Venezuela.

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### 2.3 Venezuela's Russian Community

The Russian Community in Venezuela is relatively small, estimated at to be just 5.000 in 2009 (Naumov, 2009). They are generally those, or relations of those, who left Russia after 1947 to escape economic hardship after World War Two. The Russian population, in general, does not have a strong outward presence in Venezuelan society.<sup>5</sup>

The construction of Russian identity in Venezuela, given the tiny Russian population in the country, has to do with Russia's political role with the Venezuelan government over the last decade or so. And it is here that we find a double identity construction at play. Not only are Venezuelan's

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<sup>5</sup> From the personal communication held with Félix Arellano, Head of the School of International Studies at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. Caracas, Venezuela. February 18, 2013, and the personal communication held with Rodolfo Magallanes, Assistant Director of the Institute of Political Studies at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. Caracas, Venezuela. February 22, 2013.

busy concocting a view of their Russian allies, but Russia itself is undergoing a transformation of identity from Soviet superpower, to recipient of Western developmental aid during the 1990s and into the new millennium, and beginning in 2007 as a Northern donor (Gray, 2011). There are shifts in the identities from donor to recipient to donor, from “The Second World” to BRICS member.<sup>6</sup> This is viewed within the context of a Southern view of Russia that is neither Western nor Eastern.

Russia has growing economic relations with Venezuela. Russia exports busses and other industrial products to Venezuela, while cacao, flowers, bananas and other agricultural items dominate Venezuelan exports to the country. As tables one and two show, Venezuelan exports to Russia have almost tripled between 2000 and 2011, and imports have grown over tenfold during that period. Russia has been involved in a joint venture with PDVSA in the lucrative Orinoco oil patch since 2005. Russia has sponsored developmental projects in Venezuela through the creation of a bi-national bank whereby Russia controls 51% and the Venezuelan treasury controls 49%.

[ 48 ] As table three shows, Russia has sent almost \$3 billion in arms to Venezuela between 2006 and 2012, and has become Venezuela’s largest supplier of military equipment. This has helped the Chávez government to close the gap regarding the \$7 billion in United States military assistance provided to its rival since the year 2000 through Plan Colombia (Rochlin, 2011a). Russian military assistance has included anti-aircraft missiles, attack helicopters, combat aircraft, tanks, fighting vehicles, armored personnel carriers, assault rifles, ammunition, as well as the construction of a maintenance center for Russian military equipment. Russia’s first official naval visit to the Caribbean after the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in Venezuela in 2008. Along with China and Iran, Russia helped Venezuela create its first three drones (Kroth, 2012, July 16).

Russia has provided much more military assistance to Venezuela than has China, as table three demonstrates. Furthermore, Russia has also been much louder than China with regard to its anti-United States rhetoric that has rhymed with Chávez’s infamous tirades against Washington. That is, both Putin and Chávez have been strident critics of United States policy, while China has assumed a lower political profile in Venezuela. While China seems

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<sup>6</sup> The association of the five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

more focused on its economic interests in Venezuela, especially oil and minerals, both Russia and Iran have represented strong political and perhaps military allies with Chávez. Russia's membership as a BRICS country lends support to Venezuela's attempt to promote a new world order. Thus, the construction of identity of Russia in Venezuela, at the level of government, is that of staunch political ally in the fight against United States and Western imperialism.

The identity of Russia as ally is one that may not be shared by the rich and middle class in Venezuela, who are staunch supporters of the United States. While China will likely play an important presence in Venezuela beyond the Chávez government, due to its entrenched economic investments and projects designed to help the country as a whole, Russia's relations with Venezuela are much more tentative and dependent on the persistence of Chavismo through Nicolás Maduro and future politicians. Any shift to the right in Venezuela could spell the abrupt decline of Russian relations with Venezuela. Russian identity is being constructed in Venezuela in a shaky context.

## Conclusion

Venezuela continues to pursue a Modernist *episteme*. Within this framework that is filled with binary divisions, a new "us" and "them" is being constructed at the level of the world order. The context is subaltern counter-hegemony from those in the global system that believe the US is facing what Antonio Gramsci (1971) described as a crisis of authority, a crisis to its hegemonic status. Within this global struggle, Chávez created an alliance of the like-minded in Latin America, through vehicles such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America-Peoples' Trade Treaty (ALBA for its acronym in Spanish), linking countries with a relatively common experience of history and culture. Beyond this, Chávez forged links with countries that had relatively little to do with Venezuela became prominent political allies during Chavista rule, following the old formula: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Russia, Iran, Syria and China are among these. It is within this context that identity is being constructed in Venezuela regarding Middle Eastern, Chinese and Russian communities. Here we confront the power/knowledge/identity link. Global power has shifted, political power has shifted from the rich to the poor under Chávez; new political allies are sought within a changing constellation of global power, and identity is constructed under a generally welcoming political environment.

This nascent construction zone of identities occurs along multiple planes. Beyond the new roster of “us” versus “them”, we observe the shift of Russia and China as recipients of developmental assistance to major world power and global donors. The most numerically significant population considered here are that Arabs which number at about 1.5 million people in Venezuela, which is about three times the size of the Chinese population in the country and in a different orbit from the relatively tiny Russian population there of just 5.000. Obviously, the size of these communities affects the weight of its cultural and political presence. Given that the vast majority of Venezuelans are ethnically mixed, they provide a more welcoming environment to newcomers from other cultures than might a more racially segregated society.

[ 50 ] The Arabs and Chinese face what has proven to be bridgeable ruptures between the *epistemes* of their home country and that of Venezuela. The Arabs, while maintaining their own ethnic identity, seem to be among the most fluid in their ability to connect with Venezuelan culture and society. The Chinese are perhaps more closed, exemplified by their spatial concentration in their original Chinatown in Caracas, and now fractured between wealthy Chinese investors and Chinese guest workers who seldom mingle. While Chinese economic power is appreciated, there has been friction, as we have seen, regarding the use of Chinese workers in Venezuela and perceived threats posed by Chinese investment in the extractive sector. The construction of the Chinese presence, then, is nuanced and variegated. There is a “disconnect” between Venezuela’s foreign policy of courting Chinese investment, and the social tension within Venezuela as a result of China’s insistence on hiring Chinese workers.

The Russian and Iranian communities are relatively invisible on the street, and are concentrated in high governmental circles. Their identity is centered on the role of being a political ally, rather than being viewed as integral and visible members of the Venezuelan society. Their identities are the most vulnerable to winds of change in Venezuela in the sense that they are contextually linked to the profound class conflict in the country. Thus, while China will likely remain an economic necessity in Venezuela even if a more right wing government were to return to the country, the Russian and Iranians represent political allies strictly to the Chavista leftist forces in the country. Hence, they are more vulnerable to a shift in the political climate of the country.

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Since Chávez's death, the Bolivarian Revolution has become more vulnerable. With the absence of his extraordinary charisma and leadership capacity, there is no clear leader of this revolutionary movement. Nicolás Maduro has not yet shown a capacity for strong leadership, and his razor thin victory over the Right in the February 2013 elections has weakened the political grip of the Chavistas. Beyond this, other Bolivarian allies —such as Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Daniel Ortega— do not preside over sufficient material power such as oil or military materiel to exert broad regional leadership. Given this scenario, it is highly likely that the United States and its local allies will take advantage of the situation to promote their Rightist agenda and to do what they can to cripple the Bolivarian Revolution both as a national movement in Venezuela and as a regional project in the Americas. Within this context, the Maduro government will attempt to generate all the support it can get from countries such as China, Russia, Syria, and Iran.

The media construction of Chávez's death varied widely around the planet in a highly polarized fashion. Perhaps the least respectful and unprofessional response came from Canada with Stephen Harper, who said "At this key juncture, I hope the people of Venezuela can now build for themselves a better, brighter future based on the principles of freedom, democracy the rule of law and respect for human rights" (Blanchfield, 2013, March 5). Other harsh responses came from conservative newspapers around the world, not from a political leader as in Canada's case. For example, the Israeli media portrayed Chávez as a political enemy to both Jews in Venezuela and to Israel (Shefler, 2013, March 13). By contrast, warm and thoughtful tributes to Chávez came from China, Russia and Arab countries. Articles in the Chinese media included those entitled "Hugo Chávez - Latin American Hero," and "Hugo Chávez: the man who moved a continent!" (Jinglun, 2013, March 12; Khoo, 2013, March 7). Given Chávez's unbending support to beleaguered Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the President praised Chávez: "The demise of this unique leader is as much a great loss for me personally and the Syrian people as it is for the people of Venezuela" (PressTV, 2013, March 6). Iran's President Ahmadinejad said: "As long as justice, love and freedom are alive, Hugo Chávez will be alive as well" (Fars News Agency, 2013, March 6).

Overall, his eulogies were polarized along national axes of class struggle and global planes of counter-hegemonic struggle. Within Venezuela's modernist system of thought that sees binary visions of "us" versus "them," alliances were constructed with countries that shared Chávez's anti-United States quest. While they all played with the modernist norms of international

relations, Chávez's new allies had cultures and systems of thought that are clearly distinct to the Western model as found in Venezuela. Some of these epistemological distinctions are manifested in the realm of religion and the role of divinity with regard to knowledge and power, and others have to do with attitudes toward time, as we have seen. These distinctions have not resulted in any apparent racism on the part of Venezuelans, who, in the main, have provided a welcoming multicultural society. Indeed, we have seen that the divisions within Venezuelan society seem much more focused on class than race, since the election of Chávez in 1998 class has eclipsed other factors as the primary pole of political contention. This, combined with Venezuela's relatively mixed ethnic society, has muted racism.

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