Internet, Public Space and Contention in Cuba

Bridging Asymmetries of Access to Public Space
through Transnational Dynamics of Contention

Marie Laure Geoffray

Working Paper Series

desiguALdades.net
Research Network on Interdependent
Inequalities in Latin America

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Abstract

This paper explores the Cuban case to understand how contentious voices have managed to bridge asymmetries of access to public space thanks to their critical use of new information and communication technologies (NICTs) Internet. I argue that we need to look at how contentious uses of NICTs have reinforced existing processes on the island, while creating new channels of expression and linkage. The paper shows that the transnational dynamics of linkage put into place by a lively web of émigrés, Cuban activists and intellectuals as well as foreign journalists and scholars have allowed for the convergence of contentious micro arenas which already existed but were formerly segmented. This process of convergence has in turn allowed for the emergence of a more intricate public space and for the creation of a somewhat autonomous contentious space. Although this evolution of the Cuban regime is positive as far as freedom of speech, it is clear that new inequalities in access to voice emerge: the protagonists of those new social spaces are limited to specific social categories, namely the urban, young and highly educated.

Biographical Notes

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1.   Introduction

The joke that circulated in January 2011 in Tunisia, "Why do the young Tunisians demonstrate in the streets, whereas they could do just the same on Facebook?" (Béchir Ayari 2011: 56) tells us much about the established dichotomy between street mobilizations and online mobilizations. Many analysts of Cuban politics and society tend to think that way when they consider the fast growing community of contentious bloggers in Cuba to be the new "civil society", which will finally be able to break down the socialist regime. This perspective is flawed in two ways: it follows a logic of technological determinism (see Arsène's literature review, 2011) and it simply restates the common illusion that the demise of authoritarian regimes is brought about by social actors seen as heroes (see Dobry's criticism 2000). My perspective intends, on the contrary, to de-exceptionalize the way we consider protest and contentious uses of new information communication technologies (NICTs) in non-pluralistic contexts, by studying them together with practices of offline contention.

It is also striking to observe the dichotomous nature of studies about the uses of NICTs in authoritarian regimes: either very optimistic or very pessimistic. Optimists rather emphasize the democratizing aspect of those uses (Shapiro 1999; Rahimi 2003; Davis 2008), the way they allow to subvert the government's social control (Simon et al. 2002), to put an end to the state monopoly on information (Damm and Thomas 2006), and to organize without organizations while documenting the state's repression (Shirky 2008). They overlook the new asymmetries that access to NICTs creates between (generally) young urban professionals and poor and rural uneducated citizens. Pessimists rather stress the abilities of authoritarian regimes to use NICTs for economic development (Kalathil and Boas 2001, 2003) and to control and repress (Hughes 2002; Deibert 2003; Morozov 2011) while the emerging virtual spaces actually seem to be fragmented and not so visible (Flichy 2008; Lonkila 2008; Arsène 2010). In fact, very few studies try to understand systematically how contentious uses of NICTs do change things inside authoritarian regimes, without always leading to regime change (notably because few people do have access). Some researchers have shown how critical uses of NICTs do impact authoritarian rule in different ways: some issues can become public (Tai 2006; Thireau and Linshan 2005), certain questions can become politicized (Arsène 2011), and some governments can lose part of their international legitimacy (O'Leary 2000, Chowdhury 2008). But these questions remain understudied.

This paper focuses on the Cuban case study, in order to try and understand how contention, including contentious uses of NICTs impact the Cuban authoritarian regime, especially after the semi liberalization of access to new NICTs in 2008. I want to argue

here that contentious uses of NICTs do matter in Cuba because they have reinforced existing processes, while creating new channels of expression and linkage, especially with specific social segments of the politicized diaspora. The paper deals with the emergence of a more intricate contentious space in Cuba thanks to the constitution of a transnational Cuban virtual space. I will show how the transnational dynamics of linkage established by a lively web of émigré and exile Cuban citizens, groups of contentious activists and individual bloggers on the island and foreign experts, journalists and scholars has contributed to the creation of a contentious space (Mathieu 2007a) with characteristics of both "catness" (strong group cohesion) and "netness" (interpersonal and inter-network communication) (Tilly 1978) in Cuba. In that case, asymmetries between actors are not linked to differences as far as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1980) since most protagonists of the virtual space are well educated, but rather to their material and relational resources (Mathieu 2007b). My aim is to understand:

(1) in which way these new social actors impact the differing logics of multiple and fragmented arenas of social and political protest that already exist in Cuba;

(2) what the reconfiguration of those arenas (notably through their transnationalization) tells us about changes within the regime.

Those changes testify to the growing space for criticism in Cuba, but at the same time inequalities keep widening between those who have access to NICTs, and thus to the Cuban public arena, and those who do not.

The analyses presented in this article are based on data collected during six research trips to Havana (between May 2006 and November 2011) and one research trip to Barcelona and Madrid (summer 2011). The last two research trips were conducted during my research stay at desiguALdades.net where I was part of Research Dimension II (Socio-political Inequalities). The paper is a longer draft of my presentation at LASA 2012, in San Francisco, which I attended as a desiguALdades.net researcher.

I have mainly worked with an ethnographic research method, combining long term observations in the field, more than one hundred semi directed interviews with members of contentious collectives, bloggers in Havana and in Spain, local authorities in Havana and cultural authorities in Havana, and the analysis of documents (images, flyers, texts to inform about activities and texts to present the protagonists' work), blog posts and online discussions on forums.

2.   Was There a Public Sphere in Cuba Before the Internet?

If we use Nancy Fraser's definition of the public sphere (2007) as "the communicative generation of public opinion" with normative legitimacy (social inclusiveness) and political efficacy (making governments accountable), then there was no public sphere in Cuba before the internet. Sujatha Fernandes (2006) challenged this assumption in her research about the art worlds in Cuba and coined the notion of "artistic public spheres". She contended that artists and art works do create a space for people to voice criticisms, which are later (partly) incorporated into official discourse. The art worlds are here presented as intermediaries between the population and the state. Although such an interpretation seems quite intriguing because it shows that there is a certain plasticity in the way Cuban leaders wield power, it is also partly questionable because it overstresses artists' intentions to "reconcile" old ideals and new realities and underestimates their professional self-interest and constraints, while at the same time overlooking the existence of other kinds of spaces for debate.

In Cuba, before access to the internet was semi-liberalized, there were multiple, small, closed spaces. Although they manage to attract varied audiences, they are therefore not public in the sense of Violaine Roussel (2009): visible and accessible for large audiences. How then should we understand those micro spaces where people met and interacted to voice concerns, discuss issues and formulate claims without developing a wide audience? The notion of "arenas" seems here better suited than that of public sphere because it points to the multiple and fragmented spaces of debate and discussion (Costa and Avritzer 2009), which all share certain characteristics: a dispute about public goods, visibility or publicization of that dispute and a performative dimension, that is the staging of the dispute in front of (albeit very limited) publics (Cefaï 2002).

2.1.   A Tentative Map of Existing Arenas

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 prompted the emergence of hundreds of micro circles of social and political debate in Cuba. Whereas most discussions had until then taken place behind closed doors, often in the private sphere, they suddenly took place in the street and in parks, at university and in research centers, among peers at work and during official neighborhood assemblies, i.e. they staged disputes and became visible for some social circles. But most of those spaces did not survive the sudden crush, decided by the government in 1995, on all attempts at creating a more inclusive and freer sphere of debate and self-expression. As a result, when I started my doctoral

work, in the mid-2000s, I could only map three micro arenas of debate inside Cuba.[1] Outside of Cuba, though not much larger, I localized a diaspora arena.[2] I will here describe them in order to present a tentative map of the then existing arenas.

The first one can be called the dissident arena. It was composed of groups and individuals who wished to overthrow the Cuban government, called themselves "political dissidents" and were either party activists (Marta Beatríz Roque), human rights activists (Elizardo Sánchez) or specific project leaders (such as Oswaldo Paya with the Varela project), generally active since the mid-1980s. Those dissidents converged around shared beliefs and ideas: they clearly rejected the revolutionary utopia, they denounced the political order as authoritarian (if not totalitarian), and their strategy was to appeal to embassies and get international media coverage in order to gain foreign support for their cause (very much like the dissidents of the ex-communist block). This strategy worked as far as generating international publics. Oswaldo Paya and the Ladies in White obtained the Sakharov prize of the European Parliament in 2002 and 2007, which gave their respective fights even more prominence in the international media and thus generated more international publics (support committees etc.). But their cause remained almost invisible within Cuba, because their internal fights together with their total lack of local publics (due to their radical marginalization from the rest of the population[3]) isolated them and contributes to create a microcosm of very few individuals who met behind closed doors. The dissident arena was therefore fragmented into delimited "micro spaces", characterized by their boundedness, local invisibility and illegitimacy (Freedom House 2008) despite the staging of their protest in front of international publics.

A second arena is constituted of the semi-public debates organized inside state institutions like research centers, foundations with legal status (allowed to receive foreign funds), Cuban NGOs and a few critical reviews or magazines like *Temas* (created by Rafael Hernández) and *Criterio* (created by Desiderio Navarro). This

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1   I must state here that I spent most of my research trips in Havana, therefore I am overlooking existing spaces elsewhere. At the same time, those spaces, when they exist, are often short lived because of lack of resources and strong pressure, whereas Havana is a place where it is easier to have access to resources and escape pressure.

2   I do not take into account here the Cuban-American diaspora's many arenas of debate in the United States, because they take place in an entirely different political, economic, and cultural environment. Since my focus is on how participants in Cuba can create new spaces despite the changing set of obstacles and opportunities within a rather closed system, non-U.S. diaspora groups are more relevant, since they are not part of highly professionalized U.S.-based fundraising and lobbying networks.

3   Once an individual declares himself as a dissident, he loses his job, is constantly watched over by the state security, his neighbors are most likely to be part of the state apparatus (for purposes of close observation), and he is constantly threatened. Peers, family and friends of dissidents thus step back[1] due to the concern that to maintain social relations with dissidents would harm them.

arena has a broader membership than the artists-only sphere identified by Fernandes (2006). Despite the visible heterogeneity of those entities, they actually share the same local publics: critical intellectuals, writers, artists, journalists and professors, in other words, parts of the intellectual and cultural Havana milieu with a commitment towards the revolutionary utopia but with the will to reform its implementation in Cuba. This intermediate position and the difficulty to strike a balance between too little and too much criticism have led the participants of that arena to strive to remain within acceptable boundaries of criticism, out of fear that crossing those imprecise, fluctuating boundaries would backfire and put an end to the existence of those more open and more critical spaces for debate. To protect that arena, its main protagonists therefore try to control its boundaries themselves through restrained information politics (to limit access), a very controlled discourse towards foreigners and foreign media and partial collaboration with the state (they for instance let state security officials prohibit entrance to certain people during certain events). The arena of critical intellectuals is therefore best characterized as a micro sphere of limited exchanges between peers, who are critical of (some aspects of) the regime without challenging it as such and who stage their disputes only in front of chosen publics.

The third arena emerged at the end of the 1990s. It was the product of the convergence of contentious collectives of self-educated artists (rappers, performers and visual artists, with no or very low access to state venues and resources), art managers and somewhat marginalized intellectuals (with no regular university employment). These are the actors overlooked in previous scholarship since their status is ambiguous. Created from below, at the local level, often within marginalized neighborhoods, this arena is the most contentious one as far as the radicalism of expressed criticism (against censorship, racism, social inequalities and in favor of more grassroots autonomy) and practices of direct action often aimed at finding solutions for the concrete problems of daily life. Although it is composed of very heterogeneous spaces and participants, the distinct collectives which sustain this contentious arena often collaborate to create specific workshops, mini congresses and festivals, which take place either in the street or in local cultural institutions. These events are well known and well attended by residents of their neighborhoods where the collectives negotiate space to work or to organize their activities. This arena is therefore the most publicized and inclusive one, though only at a local level. Moreover, the "critical but revolutionary" ethos of its protagonists led them to negotiate with authorities, so as to use official venues for debates and activities, which in turn contributed to the moderation of the most critical claims of the arena.

Apart from those three main Cuban arenas, there existed a diaspora arena outside of Cuba, which connected (1) parts of the cultural milieu in Cuba and in the diaspora and (2) politically active members of the Cuban diaspora whatever their geographical location. The main space of convergence was organized around literary journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, created by exiled Cuban writer Jesús Díaz in Spain. From its creation in 1992 until its last issue in 2009, this journal published both writers and intellectuals from Cuba and from the Cuban diaspora and thus sustained polemical debates about both the arts and politics. Those polemics took place inside the journal and outside of it since the very possibility of the existence of such an endeavor was addressed as a threat by both the politically radicalized exile milieu in Miami as well as the Cuban official press and authorities, who both strove to maintain separate spheres of influence. In addition to the journal, online exchanges in blogs and forums started between *exile* and *émigré* internet users. But most virtual spaces were isolated spaces, which interacted little with other spaces and more often than not did not seek contact with Cubans or Cuban information providers from Cuba. The one exception to this rule was *Encuentro en la Red*, the online offspring of *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, which did attempt to collect alternative information from Cuba – though most of the news still came from news agencies – by collaborating with dissidents. The *Encuentro* team also strove to circulate information in Cuba by sending a biweekly newsletter to an email list. For that purpose, they built and updated regularly a database of several thousand Cuban email addresses (in .cu) in the late 2000s.[4] That is why *Encuentro en la Red* worked as a focal point until the late 2000s: it was the only place where Cubans could get information made by Cubans for Cubans, both on the island and in the diaspora. Nevertheless, since they only loosely interacted with one another, this diaspora arena is best characterized as an ensemble of juxtaposed and fragmented spaces.

Despite many differences these arenas nevertheless share three characteristics as discussed above: their reduced size (limited publics), their heteronomy – despite their claim for autonomy – vis-à-vis the Cuban state, and their poor connectivity and interactivity. In this way, both their "catness" (strong cohesion) and their "netness" (interpersonal communication) (Tilly 1978) can be said to have remained weak. That is why it is more relevant to consider those spaces as micro arenas or partial arenas. Although they do stage a dispute about public goods, this dispute is constrained in terms of content, unequal in terms of means, and it has little visibility and little performativity.

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4 Interviews with Manuel Desdin (technical support for *Encuentro en la Red* until 2009 and now its main coordinator), with Pablo Díaz (ex chief editor of *Encuentro en la Red* and now director of Diario de Cuba) and with Antonio José Ponte (co-director of journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* until its end and now co-director of news platform Diario de Cuba) in June and July 2011.

2.2. Loose Connections and Logics of Competition

It would be empirically untrue to state that those four micro arenas were parallel arenas with no interconnection whatsoever, but it is relatively true to present the dissident arena (despite some contacts with both transnational arenas) as quite isolated within Cuba, and the diaspora arena as quite segmented from Cuba, since there was little interactive contact with publics on the island until the liberalization of NICTs in 2008 (despite the fact that *Encuentro en la Red* – the journal's online information platform – sent regular information to people in Cuba through email lists). At the same time, despite those strong constraints, there did exist a complex game of partial connection and disconnection between them, which is to be understood by looking at certain specific constraints and logics concerning (1) access to and circulation of information and (2) the question of balance between contention and conformity.

When I was conducting research in Cuba, I realized that I often provided information to the people I was working with. I knew more about what was happening where, who was taking part in such and such endeavor and about what the people who were involved in some collective project thought of other people in other projects. To put it in a nutshell, I had a wider and more complete perspective on the existing micro arenas of debate and alternative social practices than most people who were actually involved in some of those spaces. It seems partly self-explanatory since I had an interest for all kinds of "alternative projects" as Cubans themselves called them, whereas those who were involved were generally busy implementing their projects. But what struck me was that the contingency of the connections between people and between projects, which contradicted the expressed desire to work in a more collective way and to impact more publics.

To give a few examples: some rappers would not go the annual rap festival because they had not been invited personally by their fellow rappers and did not know for sure where and when concerts were taking place, intellectuals would not show up at a workshop to which they had been invited because the person who was supposed to contact them was not reachable and nobody knew for sure what had happened, rumors circulated constantly about no shows (if the absentees had preferred to go somewhere else, for instance to meet with foreigners for better deals?), etc. Those few examples show that contingency prevailed and that personal contacts were crucial. People's perceptions mainly depended on tales told by intermediaries (on whom they relied for information) between social circles and arenas, rather than on available information given either by public sources (media) or by the concerned people themselves. I believe it is one of the reasons why the projects of political dissidents were always dismissed

as "counter revolutionary" (as in the official discourse) rather than discussed by critical individuals and other projects. There was almost no way for people to know who the dissidents were and what they actually stood for. This explains why it was easier for many contentious collectives to build a negative image of dissident groups: it was safe to do so, and it was part of their overall strategy to remain within more or less tolerated boundaries.

To sum it up, interpersonal relations were used to cope with the lack of access to a more visible and central source of information, due to the lack of alternative media channels to circulate propositions and concerns and to organize meetings and events. Before the partial liberalization of access to NICTs in Cuba in 2008, there was a dire lack of communication facilities (few people had a telephone line and even fewer had an email account and those who did, would not dare use it for contentious purposes). This situation explains partly why connections between micro arenas were always precarious and contingent, depending on individual agents' goodwill and availability rather than on visible and established routes of contact. This also meant that the costs of entrance in a collective project were high because it was only possible though direct contact with already involved actors.

The second constraint had to do with people's perception of the possible and fear of repression. One example is particularly telling as far as the game played by many protagonists of the micro arenas between conformity and contention. Since the 1990s, Cuban artists and intellectuals had become more fashionable abroad because Cuba was undergoing reforms and because some of them had started to express certain kinds of criticism towards their political regime. This foreign interest allowed those critical voices to travel and present their works abroad, and thus to earn both an international professional recognition and some extra money for themselves and their projects. At the same time, they believed too much criticism could be harmful for their career inside Cuba, where they lived. State security officials did indeed intervene often in order to curb those whom they thought were crossing the line (being overly critical in front of the foreign media or in foreign academic settings, etc.). Their rhetoric was based on the "enemy" who attempted to "manipulate" well-meaning revolutionary Cubans. They advised people to stay away from activists who were not clearly in favor of the revolutionary government. But the right balance was hard to strike: too much contact even with Cubans abroad could be harmful, as poet and journalist Raúl Rivero's imprisonment in 2003 demonstrated,[5] but too little criticism could lead them to be stigmatized abroad as "officialists" and to lose part of their reputation and maybe

5   One of the main charges against him when he was jailed in 2003 was the fact that he had regularly contributed to *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* and *Encuentro en la Red*. See Eliseo Alberto (2003): "En defensa de Raúl Rivero", in: *El País*, April 20, at: http://bit.ly/WaSIK5 (last access: 13/03/2013).

funds from foreign cooperation agencies or invitation from foreign universities, etc. There were different possibilities to appease both sides: Be more critical abroad than in Cuba, publish in polemical *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* but only about art theory or political philosophy, speak in metaphors and then claim to have been misunderstood if questioned, and strive not to be associated with people who appeared to be more critical than oneself. On the whole, the best strategy was to seem not to be clearly positioned, and thus hard to blame.

There were also elaborate games of connection and disconnection within Cuba. The interplay between protagonists of the contentious and critical arenas is here quite telling. Participants in the contentious arena sometimes participated in the critical arena, to get information, bring some input, and become better known by people who enjoyed a higher degree of legitimacy within the cultural Havana milieu. They invited some of those legitimate artists or intellectuals to specific events they organized, in order to benefit from their "protection" against state officials' censorship. But they also criticized the "soft" positions of the established intellectuals and artists, particularly their inability to appeal to larger publics (the youth and the lower classes). Despite this apparent antagonism, the more legitimate artists and intellectuals interacted with the contentious arena, because they were interested in its emergent ways of formulating criticism and in its younger publics, and also because it gave them the reputation to be able to "deal" with the youth, which was seen by state officials as something positive. But they also handled differently those whom they considered as "mature" and those whom they singled out as "immature" or "disrespectful" of certain norms and rules of "good behavior" in order to protect their own legitimacy and sphere of influence (which needed to be bounded in order to be tolerated). The latter were not invited to official events, for instance, and resented those labels. But they often were able to access other resources like foreign counterparts or foreign cooperation agencies, which sometimes directly financed some of the "disrespectful" projects or gave them support in one way or another, thus helping them to get back into the game and to be taken into account by "legitimate" participants. Transnational resources can, in that case, compensate local inequalities.

What is here striking is the precariousness of the horizontal dynamics of contact and exchange, and the considerable weight of vertical logics of control over alternative or semi-autonomous collective projects. Moreover, the absence of focal points like national media (which seldom wrote about polemical issues at that time) and of mobilizations (still prohibited) prevented the constitution of a "public opinion" that could have counterbalanced the power of state authorities. And finally, there were no large incentives for protagonists of the different micro arenas to push boundaries further,

because they had more or less managed to strike a balance between their need to protest and the necessity to remain within certain limits in order for their protest to be tolerated and for their career not to be too adversely affected (most protagonists are either Havana-based artists or intellectuals), although it meant – except for political dissidents – that their voice had become tolerated because it was perceived by the authorities as not being harmful enough. Those diverse logics and dynamics explain why there was no public sphere – inclusive enough and efficient enough to fit Fraser's (2007) definition – in Cuba before the internet. The different arenas of debate had not managed to overcome their micro dimension and had remained heterogeneous, limited and controlled by the Cuban authorities.

3.   From Micro Arenas to a Semi-Integrated Public Arena

How did those micro arenas, which were only loosely connected, subjected to logics of competition and overshadowed by the fear of and the actual repression from Cuban political authorities, converge into a transnational semi-integrated space of debate, discussion and deliberation, with agenda setters, focal points and shared references? I here contend that we need to study interactive dynamics between "real" spaces and virtual spaces in order to understand that process. The question is thus the following: what roles have access to and contentious uses of NITCs played in the enlargement of the boundaries of the arenas, related to their capacity and will to interact more intensely with other arenas, and with respect to the change in their perceptions of what is possible and doable within the Cuban authoritarian context?

I find it useful to study heightened "moments" of conflict, rather than the entire range of possible interactions, in order to understand how those perceptions have evolved and led to more intense interaction and interactivity between the different arenas. My approach combines a social movements perspective (Oberschall 1973: 114 on high risk activism; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 43), an opportunity structures approach that focuses on people's perceptions (Mathieu 2007a) a meaning-centered approach focused on people's understanding of their own actions (Cefaï 2007), along with more specific hypotheses from the literature on political uses of NICTs (Cardon 2010; Cardon and Granjon 2010). Indeed, what matters here is to understand how visibility, which used to be seen as a threat, is now seen as an asset.

To understand that process, I propose to look at specific moments of net activism (mobilizations and "coups" Dobry 2000), which have transformed existing but poorly developed interconnections into more durable dynamics of interactivity, both within Cuba and between Cuba and the Cuban diaspora since 2007. Those moments have

impacted people's perceptions because they have clearly showed that there was more space for contention and that it was possible to voice concerns without being violently repressed and to win fights against the Cuban government. In turn, this increased visibility of contention led the Cuban government to respond by creating online spaces designed to defend the state ideology.

3.1.   Shifting Norms: From Voicing Criticism to Collective Mobilization

In January and February 2007, the first virtual mobilization took place in Cuba. A handful of artists and intellectuals – known for their critical stance and their participation into or organization of critical debates – started exchanging emails after several TV programs broadcast interviews with three former officials who had been responsible for the implementation of intensive censorship and repression in the cultural sphere from 1971-1976. After a few days, hundreds of emails started circulating, and intellectuals and artists in Cuba and abroad were exchanging messages on the same topic. Why would those censors be given publicity almost forty years after their deeds? Did that mean that the liberalization of cultural politics that had started in the early 1990s was over? And people debated how to counter a potential repressive turn. The scope of the debates, the different kinds of protagonists and the conflictive dynamics of that polemic – or "email war" as it was termed – led me to understand it as a first turning point in the enlargement and in the growing interactivity within arenas and between them.

First of all, the polemic did not take place in one specific arena, but in the virtual space of emails. It was triggered by three artists and intellectuals, who, even though they participated very unevenly in the critical arena, were known for their critical attitude. They wrote the first texts and circulated them by email. It is thus rather the ambiguous status of the space – chains of email addresses – where the polemic developed, which allows for a large and trans-arena participation. Indeed the use of that space was perceived as somewhat "safe"[6] since it did not really transgress the informal rule "bajo techo todo, en la calle nada" (under the roof everything, in the street nothing), according to which critics should be voiced inside state institutions and directly to the authorities in charge, and should not be voiced publicly, in the street for instance (Hoffmann 2011). At the same time, the structure of virtual communication was still problematic since email accounts could only be given by institutions, thus linked to their owner's professional status. They were nevertheless allowed to circulate critics and

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6   One of the three initiators of the polemic, told me he was actually very afraid during the first days after the first emails were sent, because they had taken a totally unprecedented step and did not know how cultural and political authorities would react to that. But he had also calculated that the voicing of concerns by email could not be assimilated to demonstrating in the streets. D. Navarro was interviewed on September 8, 2008.

claims in a space which was parallel to existing institutions, and in a horizontal way, i.e. among peers, and not directly to state authorities, which is exactly what authorities had always tried to prevent from happening. Despite this ambiguity, the horizontal way of debating and the possibility to join the polemic while under way allowed each individual to step in when he or she deemed it appropriate. This led to a progressive growth in the numbers of involved people, which finally transformed private communication between a few peers into a semi public debate within the cultural sphere (understood in a broad sense: art, academia, cultural reviews etc.), and it became more difficult for state authorities to repress the whole movement. The medium that actors appropriated to debate thus provided some of the conditions for the convergence and interaction of social actors, who were often already connected, though only partially, and in a loose and fragmented way.

The second remarkable characteristic of this contentious moment is its deterritorialization. Territorial boundaries were transgressed by the active participation of émigré artists and intellectuals (like Duanel Díaz, Eliseo Alberto and José Prats Sariol) in the debate, thanks to the massive and multiple forwarding of emails, which also reached them. Their participation did not go unnoticed, however, and some members of the cultural sphere in Cuba strove to keep the debates exclusively on Cuban grounds (Ponte 2010: 100). The tangible freedom of tone with which most non-Cuban residents indeed intervened in the debate to formulate overt critics of revolutionary cultural politics led some to fear that discursive boundaries (the limits of what is tolerated/or rather seen as such) were being transgressed in such a way that their participation would be counterproductive.[7]

And finally, the scope of the debates, spanning historical periods such as the 1960s and 1970s until the present, challenged the cultural sphere's heteronomy vis-à-vis the political sphere because it questioned and attempted to rewrite the official history of revolutionary cultural politics. These historical discussions led to a collective questioning of individual responsibilities in upholding a system of censorship and repression (especially at the beginning of the revolutionary period but also in recent times).

The fact that the Ministry of Culture finally managed to tone down the polemic, thanks to the organization of many *bajo techo* debates (one must be formally invited to attend, with names checked against an invitation list) was understood by some analysts as a failure for the first virtual mobilization in Cuba (Ponte 2010: 134). But beyond the dissolution of the polemic, the polemic has to be considered as a landmark of collective action under the Cuban authoritarian government, because of the (virtual) space where

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7   This idea is also shared by some exiles who say they remain "revolutionaries". See Eliseo Alberto's email about other exiles' positions at: http://bit.ly/13TdzVt (last access 13/03/2013).

it took place, its scope and the number of participants (and their localization). The tone of the debates and the arguments exchanged moreover clearly show that the "critical ethos" has become more valued than the "compliant ethos" (people who do not – at least never overtly – criticize the rules of the system, so as to benefit from it) among participants in the debate, and especially among legitimate members of the cultural sphere. Those who had collaborated with such a system (and even some who had remained silent while they could have bent the rules of the system) were stigmatized by those who suffered from it or criticized it and thus were marginalized or worse. Whereas protagonists of the critical arena had often felt as a tolerated minority, the polemic made it clear that there was a shift in norms and that their critical stances towards certain aspects of revolutionary politics were shared by many more. It is the high and interactive participation of many well-known and legitimate protagonists of the cultural sphere which made this shift in norms visible, whereas it was either not so accepted and/or not so visible before.

On top of it all, many new spaces of debate emerged both *bajo techo* and online, with the emergence of tens of bloggers in Cuba in the following years. Desiderio Navarro opened his cycle of encounters, which remains famous and well-attended up to today Yoani Sánchez, the most famous Cuban blogger, said clearly that she decided to open a blog, when she was excluded from most *bajo techo* debates organized after the virtual polemic. To put it in a nutshell, the contentious moment triggered by a few artists and intellectuals' critical responses to what they interpreted as the sign of a repressive turn in cultural politics has in fact enlarged the critical arena in terms of claims and publics, intensified conflictive dynamics vis-à-vis the political authorities and allowed for the transnationalization of debates held in Cuba. Positions were moreover clarified and thus helped participants to recognize potential allies and opponents.

Although those dynamics of intense connectivity and interactivity were limited in time (a few months) in actors (only well-connected people related to the cultural sphere) and in publicity, since the general – unconnected – public never learnt about the polemic,[8] this virtual mobilization constituted a first step in the process of convergence between different micro arenas both in Cuba and abroad. First, the protagonists of the polemic set new norms as far as critical behavior vis-à-vis the government. Second, the legitimacy of exile participants was partly questioned but it was fully taken into account and commented upon by those who still lived in Cuba. And eventually, the

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8   The only clue official media provided for Cubans was a very short article in *Granma* (the Communist Party newspaper), published on January 18, 2007 "La política cultural de la Revolución es irreversible", stating ambiguously that the revolutionary cultural politics will remain the same (open to creativity) while at the same time quoting a text by Fidel Castro, which is seen as the beginning of the censorship era of the 1960s and 1970s.

first virtual mobilization was a first step in the transformation of critics formulated by individuals or small groups into more collective contentious practices.

3.2.   When Visibility Becomes an Asset

Visibility is a main component of the definition of "public". A public arena is an arena which is visible for large social segments of a given society (Roussel 2009). But in Cuba, visibility had long been seen as a threat by those who tried to voice concerns or implement alternative social practices (see the *bajo techo todo* norm). Both the fate of the dissidents and state security agents' special visits paid to specific protagonists were clear signs that proximity with foreign media, foreign embassies and foreign academia (and even with foreign leftist activists) was seen as a problem by high state officials. Although some defied that norm, most complied and focused on local, under the radar, activism, because invisibility seemed to guarantee continuity of action. This perception dramatically evolved after the unexpected success of the transnational campaign to free punk singer and musician Gorki Aguila.

On 25 August 2008, Gorki was charged with the frightening crime of "social dangerousness", defined in the Cuban law as "the specific proclivity of a person to commit crimes, as shown by his conduct, when in manifest contradiction with the norms of socialist morality".[9] With this law, any Cuban citizen can be arrested before he commits a crime, under assumptions that he could commit a crime. No one had ever been released after being accused with such charges, but Gorki walked free after five days, thanks to a massive and intense transnational campaign.

Although Gorki enjoyed a degree of local fame because of his flowery contentious lyrics and attitude, he was almost completely unknown abroad before he was imprisoned for the first time (2003-2005) under manufactured charges of drug dealing. At the time, a few international organizations like Freemuse (support for repressed musicians) and Amnesty International had worked on his case but to no avail. In 2008, the charges were so blurred that Gorki's friends and fellow band members interpreted them as a clear sign that state officials had decided to silence Gorki for good. It was their hopelessness which pushed them to go public and launch a campaign both in Cuba and abroad, by contacting all the people whom they thought could help, either because of their fame, influence or links to foreign media.[10] Thanks to a few friends in Mexico and the United States, the story was quickly published in Cuban media in Florida, and Cuban bloggers

9   Article 72 of the Cuban Penal Code (own translation).

10 See interview with Claudia Cadela by Tracey Eaton on his blog (*Along the Malecon*), at: http://bit.ly/13Te1TE (last access 13/03/2013).

and artists in Spain and in the United States soon picked up the story and circulated it broadly, framing Gorki as the paradigmatic repressed artist under authoritarian rule. This framing of the case increased its publicity dramatically both within Cuban exile circles and more widely within the transnational artistic and intellectual milieu. The petition launched by Zoé Valdés and Ernesto Hernández Busto on the latter's blog *Penúltimos Días* was indeed quickly signed by famous Cuban artists abroad and by big names in the musical sphere like Miguel Bosé and Alejandro Sanz (there were 8-14,000 connections per day to *Penúltimos Días* during the Gorki campaign). When Gorki was released on 30 August, after only five days in prison, and sentenced to pay a minor fine, his case had become so commented upon that even celebrities like Sean Penn and José Saramago were said to be ready to participate in the campaign.[11]

What is remarkable in Gorki's case is that it led to the crystallization of a small network of bloggers in Cuba and abroad (Yoani Sánchez, Claudia Cadelo, Orlando Luis Pardo, Lia Villares, Ernesto Hernández Busto, Zoé Valdés, Jorge Ferrer, Enrique del Risco, etc.), who had collaborated on the circulation of news about the Gorki case. The case has wide implications beyond this particular musician: Gorki's liberation catalyzed a shift in perceptions. Whereas people in Havana thought that there was not a single chance for Gorki to walk free after being charged with "social dangerousness", the fact that he did, after obtaining such transnational visibility, led people to adjust their perceptions in many ways. First, Gorki's liberation was interpreted both as a defeat for the government and as a sign that Cuban authorities were more flexible than before. Secondly, whereas contentious collectives had often shunned foreign attention, they started to look systematically for allies abroad because they now understood transnational relations as one way to be protected against potential state repression. And thirdly, whereas they had until then rather disregarded NICTs as a communication tool to inform others about their activities, they started to create blogs or websites in order to have visible platforms which could also attract foreign support, and to control their image by crafting a presentation of themselves which could counterbalance potential attacks by state officials (Geoffray 2012).

This second contentious moment was crucial to push critical voices inside Cuba to search for wider and more diverse publics. Whereas those critical protagonists often saw the meaning of taking the risk of protest as a way to be at peace with their own values and – for some of them – to try and change things at a very local level, they subsequently started to want to contribute to social and political change in Cuba in a much larger way. Common work on causes like Gorki's freedom began to be seen as

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11 See Carlos Alberto Montaner's post on *Penúltimos Días*: "La libertad de Gorki Aguila y de todos los Cubanos", at: http://bit.ly/ZzTvAI (last access 13/03/2013).

common ground even by people who were previously divided by differing ideological positions. Beyond the fact that the Gorki campaign led to dynamics of convergence between protagonists of different micro arenas, this mobilization should be considered as a turning point as far the configuration of a transnational Cuban public arena. It indeed created the shift in perceptions which was needed to have activists take more risks, be more visible and connect more with transnational networks of support for their cause.

3.3. The Configuration of a Transnational Cuban Public Arena

The "war of visibility" (Cardon and Granjon 2010) and the exchange of "coups" (Dobry 2000) are the two dynamics which characterize the process of configuration of the transnational Cuban public arena. The "war of visibility" is the result of the lack of gatekeepers on the internet, which allows subaltern social groups to express themselves more than earlier. But their influence in the virtual sphere is linked to their ability to become visible for large publics. In the Cuban context, this war was quite specific, since prominent actors are subaltern at home while dominant abroad: now, non-governmental online actors actually became visible faster than governmental actors thanks to foreign publics. The transnational dimension of NICTs is here a threat to authoritarian governments in small countries, since in many ways, audiences on the domestic internet are still dominated by central actors, just as in the traditional media (Hindman 2009). But in a small country like Cuba – unlike China – the state does not have the ability to counterbalance international mainstream media influence. That is why national and transnational asymmetries (or inequalities) between online actors, as far as incorporated, material and relational resources (Mathieu 2007b), are essential in the understanding of the exchange of "coups" and "contre-coups", which gave its actual configuration to the transnational Cuban public arena.

The most paradigmatic example of transfer of relational resources between the politically-active Cuban diaspora online and contentious Cubans in Cuba is the relationship between bloggers Yoani Sánchez and Ernesto Hernández Busto.[12] Busto was one of the bloggers who decided to launch their blogs after Fidel Castro retired in 2006. His blog *Penúltimos Días* was and remains relevant and topical because it strives to get fresh, alternative and trustworthy information about daily life, problems and challenges in Cuba, "as seen by the Cuban people themselves". That is why Busto was extremely active in mapping the emerging Cuban blogosphere in Cuba, and he frequently linked from some of the posts on his own blog to others, so as to give even more incentives to readers to go and discover those blogs by themselves. Busto did so out of curiosity

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12 Interviews with Ernesto Hernández Busto 17th, 18th, 21st of June 2011.

about political change in Cuba and because he felt close to the emerging contentious voices on the island. A member of previous contentious experiments (*Paideia*[13]) Busto felt they had picked up his old fight about democratization of culture and politics and decided to give them as much visibility as he could. He especially promoted Yoani Sánchez's writings, which he found particularly well written and well informed, by copying her posts (with her agreement) on his own blog. *Penúltimos Días* (PD) thus worked as a focal point since its very beginnings (bloggers, activists, journalists as well as academics admitted that PD was a main source of information for them[14]), which facilitated the circulation of information, improved net activists' knowledge of one another, and connected many virtual spaces together. He thus contributed crucially to enlarge the Cuban virtual arena abroad while connecting it with similar emerging blogger counterparts on the island.

This early connection with Yoani Sánchez bore important consequences for the configuration of the transnational Cuban public arena. Thanks to her abilities, to her audacity and to her timing (she was the first non-anonymous critical Cuban voice online) which attracted an quickly growing readership in the Cuban diaspora and beyond, and promoted by Busto and other exile bloggers, Sánchez obtained high visibility in the mainstream media and quickly received prestigious prizes, the first one being the Spanish Premio Ortega y Gasset in 2008 for her activism as a citizen journalist. Her fame translated into transfers of material and relational resources. Sánchez, who had earlier participated in collective contentious projects, took the opportunity to widen the circles of visible contentious voices. She promoted the creation of blogs with material incentives (computers or spare parts given by her readers, giving prizes) and with the sharing of her own resources (by teaching would be bloggers the basics to launch their own blogs). She also used her relational resources with the mainstream media and famous exile blogs to give more visibility to certain causes (like state corruption or freedom of speech) and certain contentious groups (especially the *Ladies in White* and Omni Zona Franca). Because her blog, and later on, her tweets, were read by at least tens of thousands of followers and her posts constantly commented on by other bloggers and the mainstream media, for which she also started writing (*Huffington Post, El Pais, Il Corriere della Sera* etc.), Yoani Sánchez became an agenda-setter. This meant that when she tackled an issue, other people in the blogosphere then needed to comment on the same issue in order to become visible (the "war of visibility", Cardon and Granjon

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13 *Paideia* (1988-1990) was a cultural project meant to democratize access to culture and especially to foreign culture and to foster more autonomy in the cultural sphere vis-à-vis the political sphere. Some of their members later become politicized and got involved into more political endeavors. Almost all of them went/were sent into exile. See special issue on *Cubista Magazine*, at: http://bit.ly/10GB3IV (last access 13/03/2013).

14 See post "Se ha dicho", at: http://bit.ly/WaYX0y (last access 13/03/2013)

2010). In Cuba, this was all the more so since the Cuban government had tried to control internet politics through gatekeeping (lack of access) before new strategies of control of the internet were implemented (monitoring of access). Whereas the creation of *La Jiribilla*, an online official magazine, had been a quick answer to the creation of the Spain-based news platform *Encuentro en la Red* in 2000, the Cuban government understood quite late the importance of individual blogs and virtual forums. The launch of new virtual spaces like as *Cubadebate* and blogs written by official journalists like Enrique Ubieta thus took place relatively late and attracted far fewer readers. That is why it became necessary for them to respond to Yoani's stands in order to create their own place and readership online. Yoani Sánchez therefore became their favorite object of attacks.

The configuration of the emerging public arena is marked by such fights, which we can analyze as a continuous exchange of "coups". Official bloggers and media indeed constantly attempt to delegitimize the most critical online voices by associating them with the "enemy". And critical bloggers respond by delegitimizing the categories used to characterize them. A first example is the creation of Yohandry's blog. It seems that a single "Yohandry" does not exist and that different people write on the blog. Whereas it is hard to know for sure, it is clear that the blog was intended as an anti-Yoani online space. Yohandry is indeed a typical 1970s' name, just like Yoani. Whereas Yoani invited all the young Cubans whose names start with a Y to join her in her endeavor, Yohandry is on the contrary just as revolutionary as Yoani is critical of the revolutionary government.

TV program *Razones de Cuba* is another example. It attacked Yoani Sánchez in 2010 with the argument that her blog was located on a German platform and that her posts were translated by people all around the world. That was a clear sign – according to the program – that the CIA was involved in the endeavor.[15] Yoani Sánchez responded with a long article about the "making off" of her blog. She explained that lack of steady access to the internet in Cuba prevented her from creating her blog on a Cuban platform, thus criticizing the Cuban government's authoritarian internet politics. She separated physical location (the technical support of her virtual space) and symbolical location (where she writes from and what she writes about). The platform she shared with her husband is indeed called *desdecuba.com* (fromcuba.com). Against the vertical perspective of Cuban officials on her work (CIA and US government involvement) she explained how her readers' interest progressively transformed into transnational and horizontal relationships of solidarity, which provided her with affective, logistic and

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15 See TV program on http://bit.ly/dwdk46 and more attacks on http://bit.ly/pQwuq4 and Yoani Sánchez' answer at: http://bit.ly/Yb0u2Z (last access 13/03/2013).

material support. Her post was widely commented and circulated throughout countless other blogs and virtual spaces. This answer did not stop attacks against her from *Razones de Cuba*. But Yoani Sánchez and her close circle of friends/bloggers launched their own TV program (only accessible on the internet): *Razones Ciudadanas*, the name of which is a clear reference to the official TV program, so as to oppose the reasons from above – from "Cuba" (since the political leadership refers to the socialist government as such: any critic against it is always presented as a critic against "Cuba") – to the reasons from below: citizens' voices.

We can here clearly follow the exchange of "coups" and "contre-coups", which characterizes the process of configuration of the transnational Cuban public arena. This exchange of "coups" is of course relevant to describe as such, but it is even more when analyzed as a configuration of interdependent relationships among the involved actors. Indeed when official blogger Ubieta argues with Yoani Sánchez he recognizes her – even indirectly – as a legitimate protagonist of a debate. And when Yoani Sánchez responds to Ubieta's attacks, thus taking those attacks seriously enough not to ignore them, she also recognizes the blogger who writes them as a legitimate partner in the debate. The same happens when the contentious leftist project *Observatorio Crítico* comments on the plans of more liberal bloggers for Cuba's future, they also take these plans as a legitimate object of discussion, though they seldom mention Yoani Sánchez and her fellow bloggers, because they do not want to be associated with them.

Whereas protagonists of each micro arena were formerly almost only talking to each other, protagonists of the transnational Cuban public arena are now addressing larger audiences (although those audiences are still restricted to mostly young, urban and highly educated with access to NICTs), recognizing one another as legitimate opponents and eventually playing the same game. That is why I use here the notion of "configuration" (Elias 1991) to understand the process of constitution of the transnational Cuban public arena. It allows me to show that a game was progressively put into place by diverse protagonists with divergent ideologies. The game exists because all actors are playing the game, because they all find an interest in playing it in order to gain visibility, conquer new publics and win the battle of influence on the Cuban state.

Although I focus here more on the growth of contentious voices online and on the weight of the interactive process of constitution of virtual spaces of debate, "real" mobilizations and contentious actions should not thereby be underestimated in the determinants of the configuration of the transnational Cuban public arena. They provided indeed the necessary elements to be commented upon in virtual spaces and they provided the necessary links with previously existing contentious endeavors. Next, I will show

how both real and virtual dynamics have led to the creation of a transnational Cuban contentious space which is distinct from the public arena.

4.   Towards a Transnational Cuban Contentious Space?

What is a contentious space? The notion of "space of social movements" (Mathieu 2007a: 133) is defined as "a universe of meanings and practices, which is relatively autonomous within society, and in which mobilizations are linked by relations of interdependency". The notion is useful to understand the growing differentiation of social spaces within society, and in this particular case, the fact that the "space of social movements" is distinct from the political field. The use of that notion seemed inappropriate in Cuba until recently, since Cuban society could not be categorized (depending on the theoretical school) as a differentiated society, i.e. as a society in which different autonomous fields (Bourdieu 2000) or social sectors (Dobry 1986) or systems (Luhmann 1982) – I will use Pierre Bourdieu's notion of fields – something defined by the interaction of internal logics and self-referentiality and ensuing production/reproduction of the fluid equilibriums which make up a society. The process of autonomization of several spheres (especially the economic and cultural spheres, see Fernandes 2006; Geoffray 2012), which progressively transform into emergent fields, persuades me that the notion of "space", understood that way, now makes sense to best describe the evolution of the Cuban society.

The notion of "space of social movements" is as such only of limited use in understanding contentious dynamics in contemporary Cuba. It is more relevant to apply the concept of "protest space" as proposed by Frédéric Vairel (2005) in another authoritarian context, that of Morocco. I here propose to name the process of convergence of the micro arenas described above, which I analyze as an emerging configuration of interdependency, a transnational Cuban contentious space. I use the notion of contention rather than that of protest because there are still very few street mobilizations, strikes or demonstrations in Cuba the way we know them in more pluralistic contexts or even in certain authoritarian contexts like Morocco, where they are often tolerated. The appeal of that notion here is that it helps us describe and analyze the growing interconnections between micro arenas, the growing self referentiality of individuals and collectives and the interdependencies between their political positions (their relationships of cooperation as much as of competition with one another) and the growing delimitation of frontiers of that space, by its protagonists themselves. I will analyze the configuration of that space through discourses, practices and strategies.

4.1. Converging Norms of Expression

It is striking to observe, in the last two to three years, how segmentation logics between the different groups of contentious protagonists in Cuba and abroad have been subverted. This new dynamic is linked to the fact that these social actors no longer accept the political dichotomy imposed by the Cuban government (between those who are "with Cuba": "good revolutionaries", and those who are "against Cuba": "traitors and mercenaries") as legitimate. They have become open to all forms of contention and interested in the plurality of that contention.

We therefore need to look at the way contentious individuals and collectives refer to themselves and to their practices. Differences and oppositions were previously organized around divisions like being a "revolutionary or a "counter revolutionary", being a "militant" or a "dissident", and being a "patriot" or a "mercenary". Counter revolutionaries, dissidents or mercenaries were often called as such when they voiced any political dissent and when they had relationships with people abroad (with similar political opinions). Since all contentious groups now maintain transnational connections with similar groups abroad, perceptions of relations with foreign individuals and groups have changed. They thus strive to make it commonplace by stressing the fact that it is extremely undemocratic for the Cuban government to prevent its citizens from exchanging ideas, sources of information, arguments, etc. with foreign individuals or collectives (from below), whereas authorized organizations can do so (from above).

Moreover, people's perceptions of political dissidents have changed. The Ladies in White have, to a large extent, contributed to this change in perceptions. First, their struggle has often been seen as legitimate since it was led by women and apparently non-political and non-violent. Secondly, when that struggle was not seen as legitimate (because some still thought that their husbands deserved to be imprisoned), the fact that they were often violently repressed, sometimes by men, was found to be ugly by all contentious groups. And thirdly, increased repression against individuals who have become targets for state officials, generally because they have started to associate with bloggers like Yoani Sánchez, have led them to reconsider their interpretation of the dissident movement. Orlando Luis Pardo is a good case in point. As a poet, Pardo used to refuse to interpret his critical art as political and did not want to be associated with political dissidents.[16] A few years later, after he became a blogger and a close

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16 Notes from a meeting about the future orientation of newly-emerging contentious network "Voltus V", August 2007. Some present clearly stated that although politics was not the main purpose of that network, their practices of contention were political. Orlando was one of the few who opposed that interpretation of their practices.

friend of Yoani Sánchez, Orlando stated in an interview[17] that he had understood how manipulative the Cuban government was. His argument was the following. He said that dissidents were constantly accused of being paid to criticize the government and thus to be only interested in money and not in real values and ideas. Since he had been accused of the same and since he knew that that was not true, he concluded that it was also probably untrue for dissidents. I am less interested here in whether dissidents were actually are paid or not. What interests me is the fact that people have changed their minds about the dissident movement after being stigmatized the same way that dissidents have always been stigmatized.

This change in perceptions has had relevant consequences for this study. On the one hand, projects and collectives stigmatized by the government as "dissidents" or "mercenaries" have become objects of attention for other contentious groups, whereas they did not use to be discussed before. On the contrary, many collectives had built an image of dissidents as "enemies", from which it was both strategic and safe to distinguish themselves, and in order to guarantee the continuity of their actions. But collectives did not only start to discuss those stigmatized individuals and groups' work, they also started to use the notion of "dissent" to characterize their own position. During a meeting of *Havana Times* bloggers in November 2011 I was surprised to hear one of them, who was still at the time a UJC (Communist Youth) activist, declare that "in the end we all are dissidents". Given the disapproving grunts that her statement provoked, she corrected herself and said that what she wanted to say is that "everybody somehow dissents and it is ok to do so". Some started to argue that to talk about "dissidents" was complicated anyway, since Yoani Sánchez was for instance stigmatized as such by officials whereas she did not identify herself with the term. And they all referred to a text written by Alexis Jardines,[18] a Cuban philosophy teacher who had emigrated to Puerto Rico, who analyzed all contentious initiatives in Cuba as a "new dissidence". Although not everybody agreed on which term to use, it is relevant to underline that they had all read Jardines' text as well as other texts, meaning they were all actively interested in knowing more about the multiplying contentious endeavors, and about how those endeavors are understood, perceived and analyzed by fellow Cubans both in Cuba and in the diaspora.

Although some of this might seem quite banal to specialists of social movements in more pluralistic contexts, the simple fact that contentious collectives start discussing all contentious projects, and not just those which are safe to discuss, does indicate that a

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17 Interview with Orlando Luis Pardo November 20, 2011

18 Alexis Jardines, "Hacia una resistencia inteligente", published on *Penúltimos Días* on August 30, 2011, at : http://bit.ly/ZzVuVG (last access 13/03/2013).

major change is underway. They are switching from micro self-referentiality (linked only to their own micro arena) to a much larger self-referentiality, which now encompasses the whole spectrum of contention, from veiled criticism to open political dissent, from contention taking place in Cuba to contention organized abroad. This also means that contentious collectives have started to accept the legitimacy of positions which are not their own, and thus to link the strength of the contentious space with its plurality. To put it in a nutshell, there is now a "zone of mutual evaluation" (Mathieu 2007a: 135) between the different groups and poles of the contentious space.

4.2.   Strategies of Cooperation and Competition

This widened self-referentiality is not exempt from ambiguities, alliances and modes of distinction. Political positions, choices as far as practices of contention, perceptions of transnational fame and envy weigh on relationships of cooperation and competition within the emerging contentious space. The description of forms of solidarity (or the lack of solidarity) towards the segments of the space which are specifically targeted and repressed by state officials is meaningful to understand those logics of cooperation and competition, because they tell us about the ways collectives try to manage their public identity.

When Yoani Sánchez and Orlando Luis Pardo were severely beaten after they attempted to join a street march co-organized by performance collectives Omni Zona Franca and Demongeles in November 2009, not all groups and collectives from the emerging contentious space showed solidarity with them. One text was especially commented upon by Yoani Sánchez herself, because although it described a number of forms of repression which had struck contentious collective since a few months earlier, her case was not clearly mentioned.[19]

The text, written by the collective *Observatorio Crítico*, constituted a landmark at the time. The protagonists of the collective indeed read the text aloud at the end of a workshop organized at a research institute (a space which I consider part of the critical arena). They also circulated it widely by email and posted it on their blog. It was the first time that such a text was publicized in such a way. Moreover, it was also the first time that a text written by a group of young activists who define themselves as revolutionaries took the risk to clearly oppose "official institutions" and "cultural projects", to compare logics of repression in "capitalism" and in "socialism" and to criticize the way some people were stigmatized as "counter revolutionaries" with no

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19 See the text published on the *Observatorio Crítico's* website on December 18, 2009, at: http://bit.ly/10GDVpc (last access 13/03/2013).

reason. Finally, it was also the first time that many different social, cultural and political endeavors were mentioned in one single text, as part of the same process of creative criticism, and defended together against arbitrariness. By appealing to their rights, they transcended conflicts and individual positions and created a "public standard", i.e. a basis to negotiate those rights (Hanna Pitkin 1981). With this text, they constructed divisions between "above" and "below", between "bureaucracy" and "autonomous" initiatives, thus showing a form of solidarity with all contentious arenas.

But this text was also written with a style which still borrowed from the specific socialist language of euphemisms. The title of the text is a clear example of that. It is entitled: "Letter of Rejection of Current Obstructions and Prohibitions of Social and Cultural Initiatives". It is not entitled: "Letter against Censorship and Repression". Yoani Sánchez and Orlando Luis Pardo's case is described as a case of "obstructions, arrests and impediments" linked to the organized march, not as a case of brutal repression, including physical violence and kidnapping. This is the reason why Yoani Sánchez answered dryly that members of the *Observatorio Crítico* were not able to position themselves clearly enough vis-à-vis the government. Rather than "official institutions" and "cultural initiatives", she opposed a "small circle of power" (made of Raúl Castro and his followers) with the rest of the Cuban society. She thus contested their definition of the existing divide between "above" and "below". The same happened again with another text promoted by Cuban émigré Ariel Hidalgo, but obviously inspired by members of the *Observatorio Crítico*.[20] In that case, blogger Miriam Celaya answered bluntly in order to criticize their strategic way of selecting cases of censorship and repression.

In fact, *Observatorio Crítico* does consist of a network of different cultural, intellectual and ecological projects with a leftist political position, and its members do not want to be associated with any liberal project of any kind. When I asked some of its members in November 2011 why they never went to *Estado de Sats*' debates, they answered that they refused to participate in a space of debate known to be politically liberal. Some also admitted that they feared that they would be associated with some stigmatized contentious personalities such as Yoani Sánchez and Antonio Rodiles (the founder of *Estado de Sats*). This strategy is resented by more liberal contentious voices, especially bloggers like Yoani Sánchez, who criticize this revolutionary ethos as irresponsible, because it does not allow contentious voices, whatever their differences, to converge in a collective effort to push together for regime change.

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20 "Appeal against censorship in Cuba", published March 4, 2011 on Armando Chaguaceda's diary in *Havana Times*, at: http://bit.ly/w0MChS (last access 13/03/2013).

It is clear that logics of horizontal solidarity (between contentious groups) do not always prevail over vertical logics of repression but this does not invalidate my argument that this social space is in the making. On the contrary, it shows that the poles within that space are becoming visible, interactive and interdependent (Mathieu 2007a) since they keep referring themselves to one another through praise, attacks or comments, positioning themselves in relation to others' positions, and developing their own logics, interests and characteristics.

4.3.   Delimiting the New Contentious Space

My last argument addresses how a social space starts to exist when people try to delimit its frontiers. It thus becomes territorialized (Ripoll and Veschambre 2005). In the case I am interested in, there are at present constant struggles to define people's legitimacy to voice criticism of the Cuban government. Some protagonists intend to open up the space as much as possible, while others, on the contrary, try to restrict entrance. While that game is going on, some frontiers are being delimited. Although they remain blurred and constantly moving, a few elements do create distinctions between what I call the transnational Cuban contentious space and other social and political spaces.

Interestingly enough for this paper, whose ambition is to show the intertwined links between local and transnational dynamics, the first text which had an impact as far as the delimitation of the new contentious space was written by US diplomats at the United States Interests Section in Havana. A secret cable on the matter, published by Wikileaks, was widely commented upon both in the mainstream international press[21] and on blogs. It stated bluntly that the US should now bet more on younger contentious voices than on "old dissidents" to push for regime change. The cable distinguished between the old and the young, the obsolete and the innovative, and between those who remained little visible whereas others managed to attract massive attention. Since this vision was imposed from external actors, we could have expected "old dissidents" to challenge it. On the contrary, many endorsed it, therefore enforcing this framing further, in order to defend their own legitimacy vis-à-vis the new voices. They accused the new contentious voices to be a "light" dissidence and to be thus objective allies of the Cuban government.[22] Some of those new dissenting protagonists then counter-attacked with the following argument: "old dissidents" were those whose actions

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21 "EEUU apuesta por la disidencia juvenil", in: *El País*, December 16, 2010: http://bit.ly/Z2czK9 (last access 13/03/2013).

22 See those two texts, written a few months after the US cables were made public. Darsi Ferrer, "Los blogueros alternativos, un mal menor para los Castro", *Encuentro en la Red*, April 12, 2011, at: http://bit.ly/ZmPXTN (last access 13/03/2013), and Marta Beatríz Roque, "Fábrica de disidentes", *Diario de Cuba*, August 4, 2011, accessible at: http://bit.ly/Y1g0Ce (last access 13/03/2013).

actually echoed those of the government, since they used the same language and the same practices of exclusion and stigmatization.[23] Thus far, the division was clearly along generational lines.

This division was soon reconsidered by scholar Alexis Jardines.[24] While Jardines also opposed a "new" and an "old dissidence", generation was not used as a dividing line. The ladies in white were indeed classified as part of the "new dissidence", whereas they fought for the liberation of their husbands and sons, who were members of the "old dissidence" (mostly dissident party members or independent journalists). In Jardines' perspectives, modes of action rather than identities (generational or sociopolitical identities) distinguished between new and old dissidence: diversity versus unity, openness and publicity versus conspiracy and secrecy, the mingling of art with activism versus dry confrontational politics. In that perspective, the "old dissidence" becomes an "opposition" movement, to insist on their focus on power politics, whereas the new contentious voices become the "dissidence". Two elements need to be underlined here. The first one is that this second attempt at delimiting the borders of the new contentious space is made from outside Cuba, by a transnational actor (an exile intellectual who maintains strong connections with the cultural and intellectual spheres in Cuba). The second one is that it is precisely because this text was written by an outsider (not a member of any contentious group) that it had a strong impact as far as the framing of the new contentious space: it was widely circulated (since it was published on famous exile blog *Penúltimos Días*) and it was seen as relatively unbiased.

Those framings of the frontiers of the new contentious space had not, however, been discussed among the more left oriented social circles within that space (mainly *Havana Times* bloggers and *Observatorio Crítico*) until they read Jardines' text. They indeed considered that they did not belong to the same space as many bloggers, older human rights activists or the Ladies in White, since they were at the opposite end of the political spectrum. They rather referred to studies done by a neomarxist exile intellectual (Haroldo Dilla) who analyzed the contentious spaces in Cuba according to their political stands: "liberal" spaces on the one side and neomarxist or libertarian spaces on the other side. Jardines' text was the first one to bridge the gap between both sides, by emphasizing modes of action rather than political positions. He stressed the groups' converging perspective on politics (politics from below), rather than what made them differ. The text triggered heated debates among members of the *Observatorio Crítico* (some of

23 Antonio Rodiles, "Espejismo y realidad. Una respuesta a Marta Beatríz Roque", *Diario de Cuba,* August 5, 2011, http://bit.ly/qscRzC (last access 13/03/2013); Ailer Gonzalez, "Fábrica de alas", at: http://bit.ly/YtuzLf (last access 13/03/2013).

24 Alexis Jardines, "Hacia una resistencia inteligente", *Penúltimos Días*, August 30, 2011, at: http://bit.ly/149E753 (last access 21/03/2013).

which I could attend during my stay in November 2011) which led to an opening of the network towards other contentious endeavors. Although most protagonists still strove to maintain their own framing of the emerging contentious space – in terms of political orientation – they did agree that they shared some characteristics with other groups, despite their differing political opinions. All agreed, for instance, that the particularly violent repression wielded against the Ladies in White was wrong. This is significant because for the first time elements of convergence (their fight against censorship and repression) emerged, while they had long been discarded in order to preserve the group's political cohesion. It is also interesting to underline that those debates enabled the bridging of the gap between the protagonists' curiosity and their fear. Some of them indeed started to attend some meetings and activities of the more "liberal" spaces (which they had never done before), thus creating further contacts, exchanges and possibilities for convergence between those spaces.

Although the contours of the emerging contentious space remain ill defined, we can observe clear dynamics of interaction between different contentious arenas, which used to be quite segmented and marginal. Those interactions have led to the creation of a common space where meanings and practices of contention are shared, debated upon and constantly defined and redefined. It therefore is relevant to analyze that space as a specific "contentious space". Although discourses, practices and strategies may vary within that space and thus contribute to debates about its frontiers, one characteristic clearly distinguished this space from the political field : its protagonists are not – at least apparently – professional protagonists of that field. They do not have political programs and they do not intend to compete for political positions. At the same time, their position might be more ambiguous than that of protagonists of social movements elsewhere because autonomy is still a challenge for every social sector in Cuba today, including for the political sector which is still entirely controlled by the highest ranking civil servants of the present Cuban government. A second characteristic also distinguishes that new social space from other dynamics, especially from dynamics of resistance as they are often called by researchers. Visibility and collectivity have indeed become criteria for belonging to the contentious space. They are necessary in order to be commented upon, thus to become legitimate, especially among the diaspora protagonists of the contentious space. Invisible (below the radar) and individual modes of resistance become segmented from that space, because they do not exist publicly if they are not acknowledged as clearly contentious and claimed as such.

5.   Conclusion

The objective of the paper was to understand how contentious voices have managed to bridge inequalities of access to spaces of public debates while creating and enlarging the reduced and fragile public sphere that had started to exist when NTICs were liberalized recently in Cuba. Through an extensive empirical analysis, I have demonstrated how precarious horizontal dynamics of interaction have turned into a living web of intricate interpersonal and collective communication, debate and exchange, which led to campaigns and direct actions, thanks to critical uses of the internet. These virtual and real activities have played a crucial role for the convergence of micro arenas that used to be segmented from one another because they have changed people's perceptions of visibility, pushing contentious protagonists to expose themselves online, and thus have enabled more interaction between them.

These heightened interactions have led the contentious protagonists to recognize one another as legitimate opponents; that is, as players in the same game. It is indeed the emergence of a more plural and connected public arena which has made it easier to identify potential enemies and potential allies. Here it is important to note that allies are not always politically aligned. Although political positions of course matter, what actually mattered more to lead to the constitution of a transnational contentious space was a common goal: to contribute to social and political change within Cuba, from below. This common goal, which is understood strategically by most protagonists, has in turn allowed them to unite forces to gain visibility, conquer new publics and wage a battle of influence over Cuban politics, despite diverging ideologies.

This approach also illuminates how those dynamics of convergence between different social arenas have contributed to create a specific space of contention which has gained autonomy from both the political sphere and the cultural sphere. That space is interesting to study as such, to understand the possibilities of protest under an authoritarian government. It is for instance clear that those possibilities are rather restrained, often to urban and highly educated people in the capital city: in the Cuban case, inequalities between Havana and the rest of the island are clearly visible and they will certainly keep growing during the next years. I did not study those dynamics thoroughly in that paper because it was first necessary to understand to what extent the emergence of a somewhat autonomous transnational contentious space was changing the way power was wielded in Cuba.

This paper has analyzed one element of the process of complexification of the Cuban society: the emerging transnational contentious space. Indeed the emergence of that

space is linked to the process of differentiation of fields (in the sense of Bourdieu) within Cuban society. Since the 1990s, the economic and cultural fields have undergone reforms, which have allowed their protagonists to obtain more autonomy vis-à-vis the political field and thus to organize according to their own professional interests (to a certain extent). Such processes are also at work within other social sectors of the Cuban society, specifically in the media and in the sphere of law. To understand the contemporary evolution of the Cuban society, it would therefore be necessary to conduct a broader analysis of that process in cooperation with specialists of economics, politics, contention, the legal and judicial system, etc.

As for now, I chose to focus on the emergence of a new social space, a transnational space of contention, because it crucial to analyze it in order to understand how certain issues now become partly public, and therefore discussed by some segments of the Cuban society in Cuba as well as in the diaspora. It is a crucial social space because it is situated at the margins of the political field and constitutes a space where conflicts are staged, concerns and claims are raised, issues are discussed and eventually the future of Cuba is being debated. That is why it will be important for future research to bear in mind that this space is mostly shaped by young, urban and highly educated protagonists from Havana, while poorer and rural uneducated Cuban citizens have very few possibilities to join the process. At the same time that the Cuban government's power is being contested, new social and economic hierarchies are clearly being established. They will probably make Cuba look more and more like many other Latin American countries over the next five to ten years.

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