Transnational Dynamics of Contention in Contemporary Cuba

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Abstract. This article explores the example of Cuba in order to understand how a contentious politics has evolved since the 2000s and especially after the semi-liberalisation of internet access in 2008. My aim is to analyse how use of new technologies impact the fragmented arenas of contention that already existed in Cuba. My argument is that they have reinforced existing dynamics, while creating new channels of expression and linkage, between contentious spaces within Cuba and with specific segments of the Cuban diaspora. Those dynamics have in turn allowed for the emergence of a transnational Cuban public arena and a more intricate contentious space in Cuba itself.

Keywords: contention, public arena, internet, diaspora, authoritarian regime, Cuba

Cuban punk singer Gorki Águila was arrested on 25 August 2008, in Havana, Cuba, under charges of 'social dangerousness' (*peligrosidad pre-delictiva*), defined in 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'.[1] Under this law, any Cuban citizen can be arrested before committing a crime, *under assumptions that he could* commit a crime. No Cuban accused of 'social dangerousness' had ever been freed after going on trial and sentences ranged from one to four years in prison.[2] But as soon as news of Gorki Águila's arrest had been publicised, a transnational campaign was launched both online and offline, in Cuba and abroad. Five days later, Gorki walked free.

The 'Free Gorki' campaign is a turning point in Cuban contemporary politics. Unlike many previous campaigns, it was organised in a decentralised, horizontal and transnational fashion. Its protagonists relied heavily on new information and communication technologies (NICTs together with the

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[1] Article 72 of the Cuban penal law (own translation).
[2] 'El juicio a Gorki Águila, visto por Camilo Loret de Mola', *El Tono de la Voz*, 31 August 2008, available at www.eltonodelavoz.com/archivo/www.cubaencuentro.com/jorge-ferrer/blogs/el-tono-de-la-voz/el-juicio-a-gorki-aguila-visto-por-camilo-loret-de-mola.html

'old media' (press, TV, radio). It was the first successful political campaign to prevent a Cuban citizen from going to prison. This success raised Cuban activists' expectations both in Cuba and abroad, and prompted the organisation of other successful transnational mobilisations in the following years. In 2010 and 2011, all the political prisoners who had been imprisoned during Cuba's 'black spring' in 2003 were released after seven years of relentless protest organised by their mothers and spouses: the 'Ladies in White'. At the same time, although the Cuban government did yield to the protesters, it was not really weakened and Raúl Castro has not announced ground-breaking political reforms. What can we learn from such a case? Is Raúl Castro's decision to free Gorki to be understood as a 'tactical concession' vis-à-vis protest or is it a sign that organised protest could now lead to regime change?[3]

Recent literature focuses on the role the internet, and more generally NICTs, can play in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. Despite pessimistic perspectives like that of Morozov,[4] most scholars tend to emphasise its democratising aspect.[5] That optimism is problematic because it often overlooks cases of failure, the role played by the breakdown of elite cohesion and the history of protest movements.[6] In fact, few studies try to understand systematically how contention, understood as collective critical discourses and actions in a context in which there are hardly any street demonstrations or strikes the way we know them in more pluralistic contexts, and the ways people use the internet for that purpose, change things inside authoritarian regimes, without always leading to regime change. For instance Goldfarb and Yurchak have described how, in the Soviet bloc, people circulated prohibited literature and censored information, voiced criticisms, made jokes or played rock music, often without intentionally organising against the government.[7] They have analysed those practices as a way of creating networks of kinship and solidarity, to live in parallel cultural and social worlds, in which

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[3] Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4] Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion. The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011); Ronald Deibert, 'Black Code: Censorship, Surveillance, and Militarization of Cyberspace', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 32: 3 (2003), pp. 501–30; Shanti Khalatil and Taylor Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

[5] David Leslie Simon, Javier Corrales and Donald Wolfensberger, *Democracy and the Internet* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002); Jens Damm and Simona Thomas (eds.), *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes and Political Effects* (London: Routledge, 2006); Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody. The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

[6] Stephen Kotkin and Jan Tomasz Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2009).

[7] Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things. The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was for Ever, until It Was No More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

people practise other modes of sociability and build other social norms of discourse and action. However, those social spaces were generally fragmented and not very visible to others. Thus, they could easily contribute to perpetuating the status quo. This same double-edged sword dilemma is also applicable to emerging virtual spaces.

Online spaces of expression and debate are even less tangible than offline spaces. Although critical uses of NICTs do impact authoritarian rule (some issues can become public, certain questions can become politicised, and some governments can lose part of their international legitimacy),[8] NICTs do not lead, as such, to social and political change.[9] Uses of NICTs need to be studied in order to understand what actually changes when they become a resource for contention. That is why my theoretical perspective intends to de-exceptionalise the way we consider contention and contentious uses of NICTs in non-pluralistic contexts, by studying how practices of online and offline contention intertwine, as well as local and transnational dynamics, and by contextualising those practices within broader social dynamics, with a focus on what changes *inside* the regime.[10]

The article will thus draw on public sphere, uses of NICTs and social movement literature in order to analyse how the emergence of a public arena can impact an authoritarian regime (Cuba), in a *non-extraordinary* conjuncture and without unsettling the regime altogether. Though we can expect the impact of contentious virtual arenas to be especially strong in contexts of state monopoly over the media,[11] we need to understand under what conditions those virtual spheres become influential, especially in authoritarian contexts in which access to the internet remains scarce and monitored.[12] My main assumption is that influence is linked to publicity: the more an issue becomes public, the more it can influence agenda-setting forces and

[8] Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006); Mridul Chowdhury 'The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution', Berkman Center for Internet and Society (2008).

[9] Séverine Arsène, *Internet et politique en Chine* (Paris: Karthala, 2011); David Faris, 'Revolutions Without Revolutionaries? Network Theory, Facebook and the Egyptian Blogosphere', *Arab Media and Society* (2008), pp. 1–11.

[10] Following a path initiated by a few scholars like Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alexander Gray and Antoni Kapcia (eds.), *The Changing Dynamics of Cuban Civil Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008); Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power and the Making of New Revolutionary Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Armando Chaguaceda, 'La campana vibrante. Intelectuales, esfera pública y poder en Cuba', *A Contra Corriente*, 7: 3 (2010), pp. 323–60.

[11] Bert Hoffmann, 'Civil Society in the Digital Age: How the Internet Changes State-society Relations in Authoritarian Regimes. The Case of Cuba', in Francesco Cavatorta (ed.), *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule. A Comparative Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 219–44.

[12] Deibert, 'Black Code: Censorship, Surveillance, and Militarization of Cyberspace'.

therefore political-decision makers. I understand publicity as a process, which allows an issue to become visible for large social groups, generally through its exposure in the mainstream media.[13] But publicity is especially problematic in an authoritarian context, with state monopoly over the media, which thus prevents the emergence of local communities, contrary to democratic and more open authoritarian contexts.[14] That is where contentious uses of NICTs come into play. Now, these uses have to be understood in their social context, in order to assess how they become resources for contention.

The article focuses on the Cuban case study, in order to try and understand how, throughout a long period of time, contention has evolved, especially after the semi-liberalisation of access to the internet, computers and cell phones in 2008.[15] My aim is to analyse in which ways contentious uses of NICTs impact the differing logics of multiple and fragmented arenas of contention that already existed in Cuba. My argument is that contentious uses of NICTs have reinforced those existing processes, while creating new channels of expression and linkage, between fragmented and polarised contentious spaces within Cuba and with specific segments of the politicised Cuban diaspora.

The first section shows that, despite the lack of a public sphere in Cuba before the emergence of the internet, there existed micro arenas of contention, which provided spaces for debate. The notion of 'arena' is well suited to describe these spaces, because despite their fragmentation, they allow for the staging of disputes about the public good in front of local and sometimes transnational communities. The second section reflects on the process of constitution of a more intricate and unified transnational public arena, thanks to the growing interactions between the pre-existing micro arenas triggered by contentious uses of NICTs. These interactions allow for information to be shared, claims to be collectively raised, and transnational action to be taken (as in the Gorki case). The third section shows how both real and virtual dynamics have led to the creation of a transnational Cuban contentious space, as a consequence of the consolidation of a more unified public arena. This new social space is characterised by the interdependence between the

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[13] Violaine Roussel, 'Occupational Logics and Political Commitment. American Artists against the Iraq War', *International Political Sociology,* 4 (2007), pp. 373–90.

[14] Wim Van de Donck, Brian Loader, Paul Nixon and Dieter Rucht (eds.), *Cyberprotest. New Media, Citizens and Social Movements* (London: Routledge), 2004.

[15] In 2008, Raúl Castro liberalised access to cell phones and computers, but access to the internet still remains restricted: only certain categories of professionals can have an email address (in.cu) and access the intranet (sometimes the internet) at home. Connections in hotels cost Cuban\$7–10 per hour (the average monthly salary is CU\$20). In 2013, internet cafés have opened and access is now much cheaper (from CU\$1.5 to CU4.5\$ per hour), although CU\$4.5 is still about a week's average salary in Cuba, and state monitoring has increased.

actors, who compose it, by its self-referentiality and by its relative autonomy vis-à-vis the political field. The emergence of such a space needs to be analysed, because it is part of the ongoing processes of growing differentiation within Cuban society, which used to be largely controlled and determined by politics.[16]

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). I have used qualitative research methods, combining long-term observations in the field and over 100 semi-structured interviews with members of dissenting collectives (especially Omni Zona Franca, Catedra Haydée Santamaría (now Observatorio Crítico) and the hip-hop movement), bloggers and independent journalists in Havana and in Spain (especially from *Voces, Havana Times, BloggersCuba, Cubaencuentro, Diario de Cuba*), local and cultural authorities in Havana, including directors, former directors and area specialists of the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (the national artistic youth association) and the Rap Agency; local cultural and political agents in Havana's suburban municipalities and prominent academics specialising in specific topics (namely race, culture and politics, protest and the public sphere) and one of the vice-ministers of culture. I regularly attended debates while in the field (El último jueves organised by the journal *Temas*, 'Vivir la Revolución' workshops held at the Juan Marinello Centre between 2007 and 2009, Popular Education workshops held at the Martin Luther King Jr. Centre, debates held at the Criterios Centre in 2007 and 2008, conferences organised during rap festivals, Poesía sin fin festivals and events organised by Cátedra Haydée Santamaría). And I also draw on the analysis of documents (images, flyers, texts and manifestos) elaborated by those activists to inform about their work, blog posts, online discussions on forums and online transcriptions of specific encounters like those that have been taking place at Espacio Laical for several years. And eventually, I also systematically collected information from the Cuban and international press (in Cuba: *Granma, Juventud Rebelde* and *Cubadebate*; from the international press, especially: *El Nuevo Herald, El País, Miami Herald, Diario de Cuba, Cubaencuentro, Café Fuerte*) and classified it according to my research interests.

Was there a Public Sphere in Cuba before the Internet?

If we use Nancy Fraser's authoritative definition of the public sphere as 'the communicative generation of public opinion' with normative legitimacy

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[16] I rely on Bourdieu's social theory of social differentiation between fields of power (economic field, political field, cultural field, etc.) in *Propos sur le champ politique* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2000).

(social inclusiveness) and political efficacy (making governments accountable),[17] then there was no public sphere in Cuba before the internet. Fernandes challenged this assumption in her research about the art worlds in Cuba and coined the notion of 'artistic public spheres'.[18] She contended that artists and art works create spaces 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. Such an interpretation is stimulating because it shows that there is plasticity in the way Cuban leaders wield power, but it is also partly questionable because it overemphasises artists' intentions to reconcile old ideals and new realities, while it overlooks the existence of other kinds of spaces for debate, in which artists may or may not be involved.

In Cuba, before access to the internet was liberalised, there were multiple, small, closed spaces. Although they managed to attract varied audiences, they were not public in the sense of being visible and accessible to large audiences.[19] 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' is here better suited than that of public sphere because it points to the multiple and fragmented spaces of debate and discussion, which all share certain characteristics: a dispute about public goods, visibility or publicisation of that dispute and a performative dimension, that is the staging of the dispute in front of (albeit very limited) audiences.[20]

A tentative map of existing arenas

Perestroika prompted the emergence of circles of debate in Cuba in the second half of the 1980s. Whereas discussions had until then mostly taken place behind closed doors, they started taking place in the street and in parks, at universities and in research centres, among colleagues at work and during official neighbourhood assemblies, i.e. they staged debates and became visible for entire social circles. But most of those spaces did not survive the sudden crush, decided by the government in 1996, on all attempts at creating a more inclusive and freer sphere of debate and self-expression. The Centre for the Study of

[17] Nancy Fraser, 'Transnationalizing the Public Sphere', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24: 4 (2007), pp. 7–30.
[18] Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!* (Introduction).
[19] Roussel, 'Occupational Logics and Political Commitment'.
[20] Daniel Cefaï, 'Qu'est-ce-qu'une arène publique? Quelques pistes pour une approche pragmatiste', in Daniel Cefaï and Isaac Joseph (eds.), *L'héritage du pragmatism. Conflits d'urbanité et épreuves de civisme* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2002), pp. 51–81. Cefaï's theorisation of public arenas is an expansion of Stephen Hilgartner and Charles Bosk, 'The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 1 (1988), pp. 53–78.

the Americas (CEA), where vibrant debates about Cuba's future had taken place, was suddenly closed and its researchers individually relocated to other places.[21] Pressure was put on Paideia, a group of young artists and intellectuals. Tercera Opción, which regrouped some of the most politicised of those artists and intellectuals, advocating reform, was harshly threatened.[22] The cost of protest skyrocketed and many activists went into exile. As a result, one could only map three micro arenas of debate inside Cuba in the mid-2000s,[23] and a diasporic arena outside Cuba.

I propose to name those arenas: the dissident, contentious, critical and diaspora arenas. The classification I propose here is based on an analytical distinction I make between these arenas' political positions and strategies vis-à-vis the Cuban government. Dissidents directly confront the government, find the socialist regime to be illegitimate, and call for free and fair elections. Contentious voices accept the socialist heritage as legitimate, but they disagree with the current socialist rule. Critical voices remain within authorised boundaries and do not question the government's legitimacy. As far as the diasporic arena is concerned, I chose to focus only on the intellectual and political circles organised around the journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* (Encounter with Cuban culture), based in Spain, because other sectors (namely the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), the Centre for Cuban and Cuban American Studies at the University of Miami, and the Cuban Research Institute at the Florida International University) have not played a key role in the emerging transnational arenas this article deals with. I will here present a tentative map of those arenas.

The dissident arena is composed of groups and individuals who call themselves 'political dissidents' and are either party activists, human rights activists or specific project leaders (such as the late Oswaldo Payá of the Varela project to reform the constitution, the Ladies in White whose objective was to free their imprisoned husbands, mostly dissidents and independent journalists), generally active since the mid-1980s. Those dissidents converged around shared beliefs and ideas. They clearly rejected the revolutionary utopia, denounced the political order as authoritarian, and their strategy was to appeal to embassies and obtain international media coverage in order to gain foreign support for their cause (very much like the dissidents of the ex-communist bloc). This strategy worked as far as generating international audiences, especially among the Cuban diaspora. Oswaldo Payá, the Ladies

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[21] Mauricio Giuliano, *El caso CEA: Intelectuales e inquisidores en Cuba* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1998).

[22] Archives of Paideia and Tercera Opción are available online: http://cubistamagazine.com (special issue of *Cubista Magazine*, Summer 2006).

[23] I spent most of my research trips in Havana, therefore I am overlooking existing spaces elsewhere. Those spaces, when they exist, are often short lived because of lack of resources and strong pressure, whereas Havana is a freer place, as a capital city.

in White and Guillermo Fariñas, an independent journalist, famous for his hunger strikes, won the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize in 2002, 2007 and 2010 respectively, which gave them even more international exposure. But their cause remained almost invisible within Cuba, except for the Ladies in White, who organised street protests and were thus cruelly repressed, because they met behind closed doors and did not manage to create local audiences. That dissident arena was therefore fragmented into 'micro spaces', characterised by their boundedness and their local illegitimacy and invisibility despite international support.[24]

The critical arena is constituted of the semi-public debates organised within state institutions such as research centres (the Juan Marinello Centre), foundations with legal status (allowed to receive foreign funds, such as the Felix Varela Centre), Cuban NGOs (the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Centre) and a few critical magazines (*Temas, Criterios, Espacio Laical*). Two of those spaces have become particularly famous: El último jueves, organised monthly by Rafael Hernández, the director of *Temas*, and the debates organised on a less regular basis by Lenier González and Roberto Veiga, former editors of *Espacio Laical*. Despite the visible heterogeneity of those entities, they share the same local audiences: critical intellectuals, writers, artists, journalists and teachers, 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.[25] This intermediate position has led the participants in that arena to formulate their criticism with a low profile, out of fear that crossing the imprecise and fluctuating boundaries of tolerated criticism[26] would backfire and put an end to the existence of more open spaces for debate. To protect that arena, its main protagonists therefore try to control its boundaries themselves through restrained information politics (limiting access), a very controlled discourse towards foreigners and foreign media and partial collaboration with the state (as far as the questions discussed and the control of public attendance during certain events). That

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[24] The 2008 Freedom House report 'El cambio en Cuba, como en los ciudadanos el futuro de su país', shows that most Cubans know little or nothing about Cuban dissidents. And when they do, their opinion about them is negative.

[25] For an exploration of the emergence of that arena in the 1990s, see Hugo Azcuy, 'Estado y sociedad civil en Cuba', *Temas* 4 (1995), pp. 105–11; Haroldo Dilla, 'Controversia: sociedad civil en los 90: el debate cubano', *Temas*, 16/17 (1999), pp. 161–5; Gillian Gunn, 'Cuba's NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?', *Cuban Briefing Paper 7* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1995).

[26] Yvon Grenier makes a distinction between first parameters, which are stable (criticisms against Fidel, the party and the state are always sanctioned) and secondary parameters, which are more 'elusive' (criticisms of social problems are tolerated as long as their political roots are not mentioned) in 'Cultural Policy, Participation and the Gatekeeper State in Cuba' (Miami, ASCE Conference, 2014).

arena is therefore best characterised as a micro space of limited exchanges between peers, who are critical of (some aspects of) the regime without challenging it as such and who stage their debates only in front of selected audiences.

The contentious arena was consolidated at the end of the 1990s, although some previous collectives did emerge at the beginning of the 1990s (writers and artists in Diaspora(s) and El Establo, and later with Cacharro(s)). It is the product of the convergence of contentious collectives of self-educated artists (with low access to state venues and resources), art managers, community activists and somewhat marginalised intellectuals (with no regular university employment). Omni Zona Franca, the hip-hop movement (especially Grupo Uno, la FabriK, Real 70 and Comisión Depuradora) and Cátedra Haydée Santamaría were the core protagonists of that arena, although other collectives such as Nuestra América, Revolution Evening Post, BlackHat, Teatro Espontáneo, Radio Bemba, Arbat 23, Descontaminación Mental, to name a few) also participated in different collective activities.

Created from below, at the local level, often within marginalised neighbourhoods, this arena is characterised by its open criticism (against censorship, racism, social inequalities and in favour of more grassroots autonomy) and practices of direct action often aimed at finding solutions for concrete problems of daily life. Although heterogeneous, these collectives all play a game with political red lines, trying to push them further away, although they sometimes issue confrontational political statements. They also collaborate in organising events (artistic workshops, debates, performances and festivals, often well attended by residents of their neighbourhoods, where they negotiate space to work or to organise their activities. This arena is therefore the most publicised and inclusive one, though only at a local level.

Apart from those three main Cuban arenas, there existed a diasporic arena outside Cuba, which connected (1) minor parts of the cultural milieu in Cuba and in the diaspora and (2) politically active members of the Cuban diaspora whatever their geographical location. Literary journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, created by exiled Cuban writer Jesús Díaz in Spain, constituted its main space of convergence. From its creation in 1992 until its last issue in 2009, this journal published contributions by writers and intellectuals from Cuba and from the Cuban diaspora and sustained polemical debates about both the arts and politics. In addition to the journal, online exchanges in blogs and forums started between diaspora internet users, thanks to its online offspring *Encuentro en la Red* (now *Cubaencuentro*), which collected alternative information from Cuba, thanks to collaboration 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.[27] That is why *Encuentro* worked as a focal point until the late 2000s: it was the only place where Cubans could get independent information made by Cubans for Cubans, both on the island and in the diasporic communities.

Despite their political and strategic differences, these arenas nevertheless share three characteristics, which makes it relevant to analyse them comparatively: 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 cohesion and their netness interpersonal communication can be said to have remained weak.[28] That is why they qualify as micro arenas or partial arenas rather than as public spaces per se. Although they do stage a debate about public goods, this debate is constrained in terms of content, unequal in terms of means, and it has little visibility and little performativity.

Loose connections and logics of competition

Before NICTs started to be used in Cuba, there was very little connection between the four arenas. This disconnection is partly linked to the lack of communication tools, but it should also be understood as a game. Indeed, one of the major problems faced by activists in the 1990s and early 2000s was how to strike a balance between contention and conformity in order to avoid repression.

The lack of telephone facilities (few people had a landline and there were no mobile phones prior to the second half of the 2000s) and access to the internet (even fewer people had an email account) prevented people from directly communicating with one another. Interpersonal relations were thus 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 broadcast concerns and to organise meetings and events. This situation explains partly why connections between micro arenas were always precarious and contingent, depending on individuals' goodwill and availability rather than on visible and established routes of contact. This also meant that joining a collective project was difficult because it was only possible though direct contact with actors already involved in it. There were thus few ways for people to know what each group actually stood for. This explains why it was easier for critical and contentious voices to

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[27] Interviews with Manuel Desdín (technical support for *Cubaencuentro* until 2009 and now its main coordinator), Pablo Díaz (journalist, former chief editor of *Cubaencuentro* and now director of *Diario de Cuba*) and Antonio José Ponte (writer, co-director of journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* and now co-director of *Diario de Cuba*) in June and July 2011.

[28] Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1978), pp. 62–9.

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.

Because they feared repression, Cuban activists were indeed constantly playing a game between conformity and contention. Protagonists of the critical arena were especially expert at that game.[29] Many had been able to publish or exhibit abroad after the 1990s, thanks to more liberal cultural politics and increased foreign interest in Cuba. This foreign interest allowed those critical voices to travel and thus to earn both international professional recognition and extra income. At the same time, those artists and intellectuals believed too much criticism could be harmful for their career inside Cuba, where they lived. They feared state authorities, who usually threatened those who crossed the line. But the right balance was hard to strike: too much contact with foreigners and Cubans abroad could be harmful, as poet and journalist Raúl Rivero's imprisonment in 2003 demonstrated,[30] but too little criticism could lead them to be stigmatised abroad as *oficialistas* and to lose some of their reputation and thus invitations from foreign universities.[31] There were different possibilities to appease both sides: be more critical abroad than in Cuba, publish in the 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 quite telling. Participants in the contentious arena sometimes participated in the critical arena to get information, make a contribution, and become better known by people who enjoyed a higher degree of legitimacy within the Havana cultural milieu. They also invited some of those legitimate artists or intellectuals to specific events they organised, in order to benefit from their 'protection' against state officials' censorship.[32] But they criticised the 'soft' positions of the established intellectuals and artists, particularly their inability to appeal to larger and younger audiences. Despite those criticisms, the more legitimate artists and intellectuals interacted with the contentious

[29] More for elaboration on this, see Grenier, 'Cultural Policy, Participation and the Gatekeeper State'.

[30] 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 *Cubancuentro*. See Eliseo Alberto, 'En defensa de Raul Rivero', *El País*, 20 April 2003.

[31] *Oficialista* (officialist) is a negative term to describe people who support the Cuban government with no distance.

[32] For instance Omni Zona Franca often invited well-known writers and poets during their *Poesía sin Fin* festivals to gain legitimacy and prevent them from being censored.

arena, because they were interested in its emergent ways of formulating criticism and because it gave them the reputation to be able to 'deal' with the youth, which was regarded positively by state officials. But they used their own categories to bestow legitimacy or not on their younger counterparts. The categories of 'maturity'/'immaturity' and 'respectfulness'/'disrespectfulness' were used to single out those who showed they had understood the norms and rules of 'good behaviour' (i.e. the capacity to play the game) and those who had not (who were too blunt). Artists and intellectuals used their cultural capital to create hierarchies among the younger protagonists of the contentious arena to protect their own legitimacy and sphere of influence (which needed to be restricted in order to be tolerated). Those who, as a result, were not invited to official events and did not win prizes and recognition resented those labels, and often looked for foreign (material or financial) support, in order to get back into the game and to be taken into account by 'legitimate' participants. Transnational resources could, sometimes, compensate local inequalities.

What is striking here is the precariousness of the horizontal dynamics of contact and exchange, and the considerable weight of vertical logics of control over the micro arenas. Moreover, the absence of focal points like national media (which seldom wrote about polemical issues at that time) and of mobilisations (prohibited and curbed) 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 in the different micro arenas to push boundaries further. 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 criticisms to be put up with and for their careers not to be too adversely affected,[33] although it meant, except for political dissidents, that their voice had become tolerated because it was perceived by the authorities as not too harmful. Before the end of the 2000s, the different arenas still remained small, divided, heterogeneous and controlled by the Cuban authorities. This explains why there was no public sphere, inclusive enough and efficient enough to fit Fraser's definition, in Cuba before the internet.

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, with agenda setters, focal points and shared or

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[33] Grenier speaks about a 'comfort zone' in 'Cultural Policy, Participation and the Gatekeeper State'.

contested ideologies? Whereas this process of convergence can be long, sinuous and reversible, it is too often taken for granted by analysts, who prefer to focus on the causal relationship between uses of NICTs and the emergence of mobilisations. I argue that we need to focus more on the role contentious uses of NICTs play in the enlargement of the boundaries of the arenas described above, in their heightened interactivity, and in the change in perceptions of what is possible and achievable within the Cuban context. Such a focus is relevant because it allows us to understand how a whole process of technical, social and political learning takes place and how the process triggers more interactions between online and offline activities, which in turn lead to the configuration of a public arena, where potential mobilisations can arise.

To understand the process of convergence of the micro arenas, I chose to focus on heightened moments of conflict, which have transformed existing but poorly developed interconnections into more sustainable dynamics of interactivity. Those moments are relevant to study because they have impacted people's perceptions. They have shown that there was more space for contention: that it was possible to voice concerns, organise debates and action without being violently repressed and to win disputes with the Cuban government.

Shifting norms: from voicing criticism to collective mobilisation

Although Raúl Castro's decision to semi-liberalise access to NICTs took place in 2008, the first virtual mobilisation, labelled the 'email war', preceded the reform. It took place in January and February 2007. A handful of artists and intellectuals (notably Desiderio Navarro, Antón Arrufat, Reynaldo González and Arturo Arango) started exchanging emails after several television channels broadcast interviews with three former officials who had been responsible for the implementation of intensive censorship and repression in the cultural sphere from 1971 to 1976. After a few days, hundreds of emails started circulating on the topic: 'Why would those censors be given publicity almost 40 years after their deeds? Did that mean that the liberalisation of cultural politics 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 allow us to understand it as a first turning point in the enlargement and in the growing interactivity within arenas and between them.[34]

[34] Most of the exchanged posts are documented here: http://desdecuba.com/polemica. For a thorough account of the 'email war', see Antonio José Ponte, *Villa Marista en Plata. Arte, política, nuevas tecnologías* (Madrid: Colibri, 2010); Par Kumaraswami, '"El color de nuestro futuro": Assessing the Significance of the encuentros of 2007', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 15: 2 (2009), pp. 103–20.

First of all, the polemic did not take place in one specific arena, but in virtual space. It is the ambiguous status of the space, chains of email addresses, where the polemic developed, which allowed for large trans-arena participation. The use of that space was perceived as somewhat 'safe' since it did not really transgress the informal rule 'bajo techo todo, en la calle nada' ('everything under the roof, nothing in the street'), according to which criticisms should be voiced within state institutions and directly to the authorities in charge, and not publicly, in the street for instance.[35] At the same time, the structure of virtual communication was still problematic since email accounts could only be given by institutions, to chosen professionals, and only for professional use. Criticisms and claims thus circulated in a space which was parallel to existing institutions, and in a horizontal way, that is, among peers, and not directly to state authorities, although the medium was diverted from its supposed use. Despite this ambiguity, the horizontal way of debating and the possibility of joining 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 people involved, which finally transformed private communication between a few peers into a semi-public debate within the cultural sphere, 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 deterritorialisation. Territorial boundaries were transgressed by the active participation of émigré artists and intellectuals 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 territory.[36] The tangible freedom of tone with which most non-Cuban residents indeed intervened in the debate to formulate overt criticisms of revolutionary cultural policies led some to fear that discursive boundaries (the limits of what is tolerated) were being transgressed in such a way that their participation would be counterproductive.[37]

And finally, the content of the debates is also worth commenting upon. The scope of the debates, spanning historical periods such as the 1960s and 1970s

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[35] Hoffmann, 'Civil Society in the Digital Age'.

[36] Ponte, *Villa Marista en Plata,* p. 100. See also 'La política cultural de la revolución es irreversible', statement issued by the Secretariat of UNEAC (Cuban artists and intellectuals' union), published in *Granma* on 18 January, 2007.

[37] This idea is also shared by some exiles who say they remain 'revolutionaries'. See Eliseo Alberto's email about other exiles' positions available at http://www.desdecuba.com/polemica/articulos/77_01.shtml

until the present day, 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 policies. These historical discussions led to a collective questioning of individual responsibilities in upholding a system of censorship and repression.

Although the Ministry of Culture managed to tone down the polemic,[38] this first heightened moment of conflict has to be considered as a landmark of collective action under the Cuban authoritarian government. First, contention took place both online and offline (in venues negotiated with the minister of culture) in a country where access to the internet was extremely scarce at the time. Second, the protest was truly transnational, since both Cubans from the island and abroad participated. Third, the tone of the debates and the arguments exchanged showed that the 'critical ethos' had become more valued than the 'compliant ethos' among participants in the debate, and especially among legitimate members of the cultural sphere. Those who had collaborated with such a system were stigmatised by those who had suffered under it. Whereas protagonists of the critical arena had often felt they were a tolerated minority, the polemic made it clear that there was a shift in norms and that their critical stances towards revolutionary politics were shared by many more.

Although those dynamics of intense connectivity and interactivity were limited in time (a few months), in actors (well-connected people related to the cultural sphere) and in publicity, since the general (unconnected) public never learnt about the polemic, this virtual mobilisation constituted a first step in the process of convergence between the above mentioned arenas. First, the protagonists of the polemic set new norms as far as critical behaviour vis-à-vis the government. Second, the legitimacy of exiled participants was partly questioned, but it was taken into account. It thus enlarged the critical arena in terms of claims and audiences, and allowed for the transnationalisation of debates held in Cuba. And eventually, the mobilisation triggered more conflictive dynamics vis-à-vis the political authorities. Positions were clarified and contentious actors could start to identify potential allies and opponents, thus allowing for the emergence of larger and more collective contentious practices.

The 'email war' set a precedent, created a learning process among its protagonists, and allowed further experimentation. Nevertheless, that mobilisation never became public. It is thus necessary to analyse a second heightened moment of conflict in order to understand concretely how contentious practices built up over time, and in particular how visibility, which used to be seen as threat, started to be seen as an asset.

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[38] Ponte, *Villa Marista en Plata*, p. 134.

When visibility becomes an asset

Visibility is a main component of the definition of 'public'. Indeed, inclusiveness and efficiency (the two essential components of Fraser's definition of public sphere) rely on visibility. Information needs to be widespread in order for public opinion to emerge, and largely available negative information should push towards more state efficiency, because it questions state legitimacy. But in Cuba, visibility was long seen as a threat by those who tried to voice concerns or implement alternative social practices. Although some defied that norm, most complied and focused on local low-profile activism, because invisibility seemed to guarantee continuity of action. This perception dramatically evolved after the unexpected success of the transnational campaign to free punk musician Gorki Águila.

As presented earlier, Águila was charged on 25 August 2008 with 'social dangerousness'. No one had ever been released after being accused of such charges. However, in 2008, Gorki Águila walked free after five days and an intense transnational campaign.

This campaign was made possible thanks to recent developments in Cuba. The cultural sphere had become more autonomous vis-à-vis state power and some artists and intellectuals had even started to befriend human rights activists.[39] Thanks to those new connections, Águila's fellow band members launched a transnational campaign and a trans-arenas support committee, in which dissident artists met famous blogger Yoani Sánchez and human rights dissidents.[40] The story they told framed Águila as the paradigmatic repressed artist under authoritarian rule. Quickly picked up by the exiled Cuban media in Florida, the case also attracted significant publicity both within exiled Cuban cultural circles and more widely within the transnational artistic and intellectual milieu. The petition launched by well-known exiled Cuban writer Zoé Valdés and leading exiled blogger Ernesto Hernández Busto on the latter's blog *Penúltimos Días* was quickly signed by famous Cuban artists abroad and by big names in the musical sphere (there were 8,000–14,000 connections per day to *Penúltimos Días* during the Gorki campaign). When Águila was released on 30 August and sentenced to pay a minor fine, his case had become so commented upon that even leftist celebrities like Sean Penn and José Saramago were said to be ready to participate in the campaign.[41]

[39] On the process of autonomisation of the cultural sphere, see Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!*
[40] See interview with Claudia Cadelo by Tracey Eaton on his blog (*Along the Malecón*), available at http://alongthemalecon.blogspot.fr/2011/05/interview-with-cuban-blogger-claudia.html
[41] See Carlos Alberto Montaner's post on *Penúltimos Días*: 'La libertad de Gorki Águila y de todos los Cubanos', http://www.penultimosdias.com/2008/08/31/la-libertad-de-gorki-aguila-y-la-de-todos-los-cubanos/

The case had wide implications beyond this particular musician: Águila's release catalysed a shift in perceptions. Whereas critical and contentious voices in Havana thought that there was no chance that the musician would walk free, the fact that he did, after obtaining such transnational visibility and being supported by a trans-arena coalition, led them to adjust their perceptions of what was possible in many ways. First, the singer's release was interpreted both as a defeat for the Cuban authorities and as a sign that they were more flexible than before, lending evidence to the fact that Raúl Castro's reform politics were structural and not temporary like those of his brother's.[42] This interpretation led collectives to start building alliances both in Cuba and abroad, whereas such alliances had been ignored earlier on. NICTs also became prominent for Cuban critical voices as communication tools, in order to disseminate information about their activities, and to control their image by crafting a presentation of themselves, which could counterbalance potential attacks by state officials.[43] Networks of friends and collaborators emerged and mutual assistance developed especially between bloggers on the island and bloggers abroad (to circulate information, translate posts, send technical and financial support, monitor human rights violations, etc.). And finally, dissidents started to be looked at with a different perspective, especially by members of the contentious arena, who had long dismissed their voice as irrelevant. This last aspect is crucial, because it put an end to the extreme segmentation, which had characterised the dissident arena until then.

Beyond the fact that the Gorki campaign led to dynamics of convergence between protagonists of different micro arenas, this mobilisation should be considered as a turning point as far as the configuration of a transnational Cuban public arena. It indeed created the shift in perceptions, which was needed to allow activists to take more risks,[44] be more visible and connect among themselves and with transnational networks of support for their cause. It allowed for small and segmented arenas to start interacting and to publicise information for other audiences. The configuration of a transnational Cuban public arena is thus not the result of a 'boomerang effect',[45] but rather a sinuous process, which involves organisation, competition and calculation.

[42] For an analysis of Raúl Castro's economic reforms, see Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Cuba en la era de Raúl Castro. Reformas económico-sociales y sus efectos* (Madrid: Colibri, 2013).
[43] Marie Laure Geoffray, *Contester à Cuba* (Paris: Dalloz, 2012).
[44] The fact that singer Robertico Carcassés voiced criticisms of the Cuban political system during an open air concert on 13 September, 2013, in favour of four Cuban spies imprisoned in the United States, clearly shows that there is a shift in discursive norms as far as criticism. Moreover, the fact that Cuban authorities did not really sanction the singer (a few threats of censorship) also demonstrates that such criticism has become more tolerated (thus blurring the distinction made by Grenier between first and secondary parameters).
[45] Margaret Keck and Katherine Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 13.

The configuration of a transnational Cuban public arena

Two dynamics characterise the process of configuration of the transnational Cuban public arena: the 'struggle for visibility' and the exchange of 'coups'.[46,47] The notion of 'struggle for visibility' was coined in pluralistic contexts, in which the distinction between professional and amateur production of information is subverted. In such contexts, information online flows in a decentralised, open and non-hierarchical way. But competition between the different sources of information production remains strong and asymmetrical. The lack of gatekeepers on the internet, which allows subaltern social groups to express themselves more than earlier, generates a 'struggle for visibility'.[48] For instance, blogs have an extremely skewed readership, meaning that few blogs are read by many, while most blogs are not read at all.[49] Influence in the virtual sphere is thus linked to people's ability to become visible for large publics.

In the Cuban context, this struggle is quite specific. On the one hand gatekeepers remain strong; on the other hand the prominent actors of this struggle are low key at home while dominant abroad. While the Cuban authorities were indeed busy keeping their monopolistic information model, they were superseded by young contentious bloggers, who found their way into the international media and managed to create enthusiastic foreign audiences.[50] The fact that local actors can manage to obtain transnational resources has to be taken into account for understanding the exchange of 'coups' and 'counter-coups', which gave its actual configuration to the transnational Cuban public arena.

The example of Yoani Sánchez's success is a case in point. As the first, non-anonymous, Cuban voice online, Sánchez benefited both from exiled Cuban bloggers' interest and curiosity from foreign mainstream media. Sánchez was heavily promoted in Ernesto Hernández Busto's blog *Penúltimos Días*, which was one of the very few focal points for activists, journalists and scholars interested in contemporary Cuba, since it was particularly well informed and gave reliable information directly from the island, before the creation of other blogs and Twitter,[51] because he found her posts particularly well written and

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[46] Dominique Cardon and Philippe Granjon, *Médiactivistes* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010), p. 132.
[47] Michel Dobry, 'Paths, Choices, Outcomes, and Uncertainty'.
[48] Cardon and Granjon, *Médiactivistes*.
[49] Henry Farrell and Daniel Drezner, 'The Power and Politics of Blogs', *Public Choice*, 134 (2008), pp. 15–30. See also Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[50] For a map of the Cuban blogosphere, see Ted Henken, 'Una cartografía de la blogosfera cubana', *Nueva Sociedad*, 235 (2011), pp. 90–109.
[51] See post 'Se ha dicho': http://www.penultimosdias.com/se-ha-dicho/

well informed.[52] Sánchez's blog was also frequently commented upon because it was the only non-anonymous blog in Cuba for more than a year after its creation in April 2007. Sánchez' timing, her youth (she was 30 at the time) and her writing skills (she is a philologist) attracted a fast-growing readership in the Cuban diaspora and beyond. She soon won prestigious media prizes for her activism as a citizen journalist.[53] Sánchez was subsequently asked by international media to become a regular contributor, which gave her even more visibility, since mainstream media continue to be major players in the virtual world.[54] Up to today, Sánchez remains the only Cuban blogger with such fame and visibility. In fact, this situation turned her into an agenda-setter.

Being an agenda-setter has strong implications for the 'struggle for visibility'. It means that other information producers need to follow and comment on the issues, which are already selected and commented upon by the agenda-setter in order to become visible.[55] 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 were implemented (monitoring of access). Although the creation of the official *La Jiribilla* was a first response to that of critical *Cubaencuentro*, in 2002, the launch of new official virtual spaces such as *Cubadebate* and blogs written by official journalists took place relatively late and attracted far fewer readers. That is why it became necessary for them to respond to Sánchez's stands in order to create their own place and readership online, thus contributing even more to the reproduction of her centrality in the Cuban virtual sphere.

Such interactions can be analysed as a continuous exchange of 'coups' and 'counter-coups'. To counter Yoani Sánchez's fame with her blog *Generación Y* ('Generation Y' because many young Cubans, born in the 1970s and 1980s, have names which begin with 'y'), the authorities created Yohandry's blog. And after official media attempted to delegitimise the most critical online voices by associating them with the 'enemy' in a television show called 'Las razones de Cuba' ('Cuba's reasons'), aired on 21 March 2011, Sánchez and fellow activists launched their own online show 'Razones ciudadanas' ('Citizens' reasons') to oppose the 'reasons' from above, from 'Cuba', (since any criticism against the government is always presented as a criticism against 'Cuba') – to the 'reasons' from below: citizens' voices. This exchange of 'coups' and 'counter-coups' is of course relevant to describe as such, but it is even more so when analysed as a configuration of interdependent relationships

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[52] Interviews with exiled blogger and writer Ernesto Hernández Busto, 17, 18 and 21 June 2011.

[53] For a list of these prizes, check Sánchez's post on the subject at http://lageneraciony.com/?page_id=1333

[54] Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*.

[55] Cardon and Granjon, *Médiactivistes*, pp. 130–2.

among the involved actors. Indeed when official bloggers argue with Sánchez, they recognise her, even indirectly, as a legitimate protagonist in the debate. And when Sánchez responds to their attacks, thus taking those attacks seriously, she also recognises the bloggers who write them as legitimate partners in the same debate.

Whereas activists were formerly almost only talking to one other within micro arenas, they are now addressing larger audiences, i.e. recognising one another as legitimate opponents and eventually playing the same game.

Towards a Transnational Cuban Contentious Space?

In this last section, I will show how both real and virtual dynamics have led to the creation of a transnational Cuban contentious space, as a consequence of the consolidation of a more unified public arena. It is relevant to analyse such dynamics, because they are part of the ongoing processes of differentiation in Cuban society.

The notion of 'space of social movements' was coined in reference to Bourdieu's theory of fields, elaborated to understand the growing differentiation of social spaces within complex societies.[56] Fields of power, as Bourdieu calls them, are defined by their relative autonomy within the social world. Fields are characterised by their internal logics and self-referentiality. They are spaces of position and position taking, with dynamics of competition for positions within the fields. Struggles take place within the fields, in order to conserve or transform the fields of force, but fields are relatively stable over time, which ensures the (re)production of the fluid equilibriums which make up a society.[57] According to Mathieu, there exists a specific space of social movements, which is distinct from the political field. Because of its informality, its heterogeneity and the lack of a central regulating body, it is not structured and institutionalised enough to be analysed as a field. Rather than a 'sub-sector' of the political field[58] or a 'contentious field',[59] Mathieu thus understands the space of social movements as a specific social space, which interacts with many different (political, religious, legal, etc.) fields according to the conjuncture and the interests of specific social movements within that space. He defines the notion of space of social movements

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[56] Lilian Mathieu, 'L'espace des mouvements sociaux', *Politix*, 77 (2007), pp. 131–51. Own translation.

[57] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), pp. 30–2.

[58] Gérard Mauger, 'Pour une politique réflexive du mouvement social', in Pierre Cours-Salies and Michel Vakaloulis (eds.), *Les mobilisations collective: une controverse sociologique* (Paris: PUF, 2003), pp. 33–42.

[59] Nick Crossley, 'From Reproduction to Transformation. Social Movement Fields and the Radical Habitus', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20: 6 (2003), pp. 43–68.

as 'a universe of meanings and practices, which is relatively autonomous within society, and in which mobilisations are linked by relations of interdependency'.[60]

This theorisation of complex societies was not particularly appropriate for Cuban society until recently. But since the mid-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 organise according to their own professional interests (to a certain extent). Since Raul's limited liberalisation of access to NICTs, other spheres have started to gain some autonomy from the political sphere. It is especially the case with the legal sphere, with the emergence of an independent legal association the Asociación Jurídica Cubana (Cuban Juridical Association, AJC),[61] which organises workshops to train activists about their rights, and defends people like Gorki Águila and Michel Matos (organiser of the Rotilla electronic music festival, which was 'confiscated' by the authorities in 2011). It is also the case with the media, with the creation of multiple press agencies (Cubanacanpress, Hablemospress, Jaguapress), information websites such as *Cubanet*, and the first online journal *14ymedio*, created by Yoani Sánchez and her husband Reinaldo Escobar in May 2014.

This evolution is also visible in the process of convergence of the micro arenas described above, which allows for the creation of a transnational Cuban contentious space, more and more distinct and autonomous from the cultural sphere, which used to shelter it. This space cannot be understood as a space for social movements yet, because its boundaries are blurred and its causes ill defined. But it is a space in which criticisms are voiced, contentious action is organised and a process of learning (of activist knowledge and know-how) is taking place. I will study the configuration of that space through an analysis of discourses, practices and strategies.

Converging norms of expression

Segmentation logics between the critical, contentious, dissident and diasporic arenas described in the first section have been subverted in recent years. This new dynamic is linked to the fact that these social actors no longer accept the discursive 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. That dichotomy used to be endorsed by the protagonists of the critical and contentious arenas, to distance themselves from the dissident arena. But the rise of contentious uses of NICTs, which generated broader dynamics of transnationalisation of contention, led

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[60] Mathieu, 'L'espace des mouvements sociaux', p. 133.
[61] See their website, http://ajudicuba.wordpress.com

to changes in practices. Practices, which used to be stigmatised are now widely shared and discourses have thus changed.

A good example of that change can be provided by observations I made during a meeting of *Havana Times* bloggers (www.havanatimes.org, one of the four large platforms of Cuban blogs, with which many protagonists of the critical and contentious arenas collaborate), in November 2011. Those bloggers met to discuss current social and political issues, which is something they do on a regular basis. That day, state repression against the Ladies in White was a prominent issue in the debate. All the bloggers found that repression unacceptable, but many stated that they felt ill at ease with their modes of action and political stands. That is why I was surprised to hear one of them (at the time an activist in the Communist Youth) declare boldly that their struggle was legitimate and that 'in the end we all are dissidents'. Given the disapproving grunts that her statement provoked, she corrected herself and explained that what she wanted to say is that 'everybody somehow dissents and it is OK to do so'. The discussion that followed was unexpected since most bloggers were also part of leftist Observatorio Critico (OC) and had struggled for years in order to differentiate themselves from dissidents. Although the use of the notions of 'dissident' and 'dissent' led to heated debates, many referred to a text written by Alexis Jardines (a Cuban philosophy teacher who emigrated to Puerto Rico), which analysed all contentious initiatives in Cuba as a 'new dissidence'.[62] Although disagreement on the use of the term lingered on and many strove to maintain their framing of the dividing line within the emerging contentious space, in terms of political orientation: 'liberals' and 'capitalists' against 'libertarian socialists', they did agree that Jardines was somehow right, insofar as they actually shared some characteristics with other groups, especially their struggle against censorship and repression, despite their differing political opinions. The conclusion reached by the participants was very significant because for the first time a common identity with other movements was being forged, whereas it had long been discarded.

This switch from a micro self-referentiality, within each micro arena, to a much larger self-referentiality, which now encompasses the whole spectrum of contention, indicates a major change. It means that contentious collectives have started to accept the legitimacy of positions which are not their own, to relate their actions and positions to those held by others, and thus to start being involved in a complex process of interdependence within a new, larger, contentious space. To put it in a nutshell, there is now a 'zone of mutual evaluation' between the different groups and poles of the contentious space, which pushes towards more isomorphism between them.[63]

[62] Alexis Jardines, 'Hacia una resistencia inteligente', published in *Penúltimos Días* on 30 Aug. 2011, available at www.penultimosdias.com/2011/08/30/hacia-una-resistencia-inteligente/

[63] Mathieu, 'L'espace des mouvements sociaux', p. 135.

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 and defend their public identity within the broader emerging contentious space.

One contentious practice is especially relevant to study in order to understand those logics: the crafting and signing of petitions. Petitioning is nothing new in Cuba, but never before has it been so prominent. Petitions were either sent directly to state institutions (often to no avail) or circulated in the international media (with little impact). Thanks to NICT liberalisation, petitioning has become a useful tool to denounce repression or to unite in favour of political change in Cuba, because it reaches more people. Petitioning has also become a way for individuals and collectives to position themselves within the fast-growing contentious space. The language in which petitions are crafted, the references which are being used, and the list of people who sign them indeed delineate positions.

The first petition of this new kind is relevant to analyse because it is both a claim for autonomy (from state politics) and a political statement. The text was written by OC to denounce the rise of repression against contentious initiatives at the end of 2009.[64] The peak of that repressive wave was the arbitrary detention and beating up of bloggers Yoani Sánchez and Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo by state security agents, so as to prevent them from joining an unofficial march against violence in November 2009.

The text constituted a landmark in many ways. It was the first time such a move was made, from within Cuba, so as to reach as many different audiences as possible. The text was first read aloud at the end of a workshop organised at the Juan Marinello Centre. It was then circulated widely by email both inside and outside Cuba. It was sent to news agencies and finally posted on the collective's blog. 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 criticise the way some people were stigmatised as 'counter revolutionaries' with no reason. Finally, it was also the first time that many different social, cultural and political endeavours were

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[64] See text published on Observatorio Critico's website on 18 Dec. 2009, http://tinyurl.com/ObsCrit18-12-2009./

mentioned in one single text, as part of the same dynamics of contention, and defended together against arbitrariness. By appealing to their rights, the petitioners transcended conflicts and individual positions and created a 'public standard',[65] i.e. a basis to negotiate those rights. With this text, they constructed divisions between 'above' and 'below', between 'bureaucracy' and 'autonomous' initiatives, thus showing a form of solidarity with all the arenas.

The text was nevertheless also written in a style, which still borrowed from the socialist language of euphemisms. Whereas the content of the text made it a letter against censorship and repression, it was actually entitled 'Letter of Rejection of Current Obstructions and Prohibitions of Social and Cultural Initiatives'. Sánchez and Pardo's case is described as a case of 'obstructions, arrests and impediments' linked to the organised march, not as a case of brutal repression, including physical violence and arbitrary arrest. This is the reason why Sánchez answered dryly that members of OC were not able to position themselves clearly enough vis-à-vis the government.[66] She also contested their definition of the existing divide between 'above' and 'below'. The conflict has continued to unfold since then, as many more petitions have been written and signed (or not), and new dividing lines are being delineated between a more liberal front (in favour of economic and political liberalisation), which strives to build a large contentious movement against the Cuban government and what we could call the 'new left', whose fear is that such a front would lead to a capitalist transition, on the model of what happened in Eastern Europe.

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 a contentious space is in the making. On the contrary, it shows that the poles within that space are becoming visible, interactive and interdependent since they keep commenting on one another through praise, criticism or comments, positioning themselves in relation to others' positions, and developing their own logics, interests and characteristics.

Delimiting the new contentious space

A social space is eventually defined by its frontiers, namely by people's struggles to delimit those frontiers. In our case, 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, frontiers are being delimited.

Interestingly enough for this article, whose aim is to show the intertwined links between local and transnational dynamics of contention, the first text which performed a delimitation of the new contentious space was written

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[65] Hanna Pitkin, 'Justice. On Relating Public and Private', *Political Theory*, 9: 3 (1981), p. 347.
[66] Yoani Sánchez, '¿Que hiciste cuando vinieron buscando al inconforme?', Generación Y, 29 Dec. 2009, available at http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?p=2722

by US diplomats at the US Interests Section in Havana.[67] That text was a secret cable, published by Wikileaks, and then widely commented upon both in the mainstream international press and on blogs.[68] It stated bluntly that the United States should now bet more on younger contentious voices, described as innovative and popular, than on 'old dissidents', described as obsolete and locally unpopular, to push for regime change. 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.[69] Some younger activists then counter-attacked with the following argument: 'old dissidents' were those whose actions actually echoed those of the government, since they used the same language and the same practices of exclusion and stigmatisation.[70] Thus far, the division was clearly along generational lines.

This division was soon reconsidered by scholar Alexis Jardines.[71] 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 release of their husbands and sons, who were members of the 'old dissidence'. In Jardines' perspectives, modes of action rather than generational or socio-political 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, involved in power politics, whereas the new contentious voices become the 'new dissidence'. Two elements need to be underlined here. This second attempt at delimiting the borders of the new contentious space is again made from outside Cuba. But Jardines' position, as an émigré intellectual who was still well connected with the Havana cultural milieu, contributed to the wide circulation of the text (as well as the fact that it was published on famous blog *Penúltimos Días*).

[67] The interests section represents American interests, in the absence of formal diplomatic relations which are to be re-established in 2015.

[68] 'EEUU apuesta por la disidencia juvenil', *El País*, 16 Dec. 2010.

[69] 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', *Cubaencuentro*, 12 April 2011, available at www.cubaencuentro.com/cuba/articulos/los-blogueros-alternativos-mal-menor-para-los-castro-260459 Marta Beatriz Roque, 'Fabrica de disidentes', *Diario de Cuba*, 4 Aug. 2011, available at http://www.ddcuba.com/opinion/6216-fabrica-de-disidentes

[70] Antonio Rodiles, 'Espejismo y realidad. Una respuesta a Marta Beatriz Roque', *Diario de Cuba*, 5 Aug. 2011, available at www.ddcuba.com/opinion/6226-espejismo-y-realidad-una-respuesta-martha-beatriz-roque; Ailer González, 'Fabrica de alas', available at http://estadodesats.blogspot.com/2011/08/fabrica-de-alas.html

[71] Alexis Jardines, 'Hacia una resistencia inteligente'.

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 is thus relevant to analyse 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 professional protagonists of that field. They do not have political programmes and they do not intend to compete for political positions. At the same time, their position might be more ambiguous than that of social-movement protagonists elsewhere because autonomy is still a challenge for social sectors in Cuba today. A second characteristic also distinguishes that new social space from other dynamics, especially from dynamics of resistance. 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. 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.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to understand to what extent uses of NICTs have contributed to connect existing contentious endeavours in Cuba since Raúl Castro's semi-liberalisation reforms in 2008. 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 digital technologies. These dynamics 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 recognise 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/or allies (which are not always politically aligned). It is relevant to analyse the emergence of that arena, because it is the place where conflicts are staged, concerns and claims raised, issues discussed and eventually the future of Cuba is

being debated, by contentious activists and the diaspora, as well as by party members and official journalists.

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 contention under an authoritarian government. But it would also be relevant to analyse it within the broader process of differentiation Cuban society is currently going through. As I suggested earlier, there seems to be similar processes at work in other spheres (especially in the legal sphere and in the media), albeit with different actors, scales and temporalities. To understand the contemporary (specific) evolution of the Cuban society, it would therefore be necessary to conduct a broader analysis of these processes and compare them to the socio-economic and political transitions, which have been taking place in the former communist bloc.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo explora el caso cubano con el fin de entender cómo el debate político ha evolucionado desde los años 2,000 y en especial luego de la liberación parcial del acceso al internet en 2008. Mi intención es analizar cómo los usos de las nuevas tecnologías impactan en las fragmentadas arenas de disputa política que ya existían en Cuba. Mi argumento es que lo anterior ha reforzado las dinámicas existentes, mientras que han creado nuevos canales de expresión e interconexión entre dichos espacios políticos disputados al interior de Cuba junto con segmentos específicos de la diáspora cubana. Tales dinámicas a su vez han permitido la emergencia de una arena pública cubana transnacional y un espacio más intrincado del debate político en Cuba.

Spanish keywords: disputa política, arena pública, internet, diáspora, regimen autoritario, Cuba

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo explora o caso cubano de forma a compreender como a contestação tem evoluído desde os anos 2000, especificamente após a abertura parcial do acesso à internet em 2008. Meu objetivo é analisar como os usos de novas tecnologias para fins de contestação têm impacto nas arenas de disputas que já existiam em Cuba. Meu argumento é que as novas tecnologias reforçaram as dinâmicas já existentes, enquanto criaram novos canais de expressão e ligações entre espaços de contestação dentro de Cuba e segmentos específicos da diáspora cubana. Por sua vez, estas dinâmicas têm permitido a emergência de uma arena política pública transnacional cubana e um espaço de contestação mais intrincado em Cuba.

Portuguese keywords: contestação, arena pública, internet, diáspora, regime autoritário, Cuba