This article reconstructs and close-reads the encounters and dialogues between the alternative blogosphere and key intellectual and cultural actors in contemporary Cuba. These exchanges tell the story of voices that, having forced their entrance into the public arena, go from being subjects of an imposed anonymity — the refusal by various authorities to name them in public — to becoming an inevitable, and increasingly visible, referent for authorities as well as for other citizen initiatives. I argue that the rearrangement of the ‘official’ discourses about them codify an exclusion of speech in tactics rehearsed and ingrained in cultural and intellectual discourses associated with the survival of the revolutionary political order. In turn, the way these blogs respond to these strategies provides both a sustained critique of the limitations of the current debates on political and cultural autonomy in Cuba, and a model for democratic sociability through blogging. This analysis also provides opportunities to examine the effects of digital technology on emergent notions of citizenship and cultural participation, a key issue in contemporary communication research and media studies.

‘Thus the actors become authors.’
Hans Magnus Enzensberger

On July 24, 2009 independent blogger Claudia Cadelo entered the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes to attend a concert by Pedro Luis Ferrer, only to find a swarm of moustaches and walkie-talkies guarding the doors of national culture, expecting her. A man with an illegible ID tag dangling from his neck and a smile of visible embarrassment hailed the blogger from behind: ‘The museum reserves the right to deny admission and you two cannot participate in this cultural activity because you are against this [ustedes están contra esto].’1 ‘To be against this’ conjures up at once all the ghosts of political dissidence in a conveniently vague phrase that invokes the sacred pillars of ideological loyalty simultaneously: the Revolution, the nation, the people.2

The blogger requested an explanation, questioning the mechanism by which she had been recognized and expected at the door. Yielding some confusion, another self-described ‘cultural government official’ reiterated: she was not allowed into the museum on suspicion of being a provocateur. There was no reference to her blog,
Octavo cerco, but she had lost the privilege of participating in public cultural events as a result of having ‘sabotaged’ one: on March 29, 2009, she had participated, along with many other spectators, in Tatlin’s Whisper, a controversial performance by Tania Bruguera at Havana’s X Art Biennial. 3 ‘Do you know what a performance is?’ Cadelo asked the official who informed her that she was now persona non grata in public cultural events. The blogger was informed that her intervention had not been a performance but a ‘sabotage,’ and as such she was barred from future cultural events. During her intervention in Tatlin’s Whisper, Cadelo hoped for the day when free speech in Cuba was no longer a performance. 4 It bears remarking on the three-fold meaning of performance in this context: the artistic performance itself, the performance of the government’s apparent tolerance, and the daily performance implied in their invocation of Havel’s notion of living ‘as if,’ operative in keeping an independent blog and speaking publicly under the protective cloak of art.

The aftermath of Tatlin’s Whisper poignantly highlights the necessity of studying both the online and offline exchanges of the bloggers with other social actors, as it was one of many similar encounters between alternative bloggers and key intellectual and cultural figures. At first glance, these episodes appear as just another example of governmental strategies to contain the blogosphere within the realm of the virtual — and thus beyond the reach of the average citizen. 5 However, while the bloggers’ encounters with government authorities is straightforwardly hostile, their interactions with cultural and intellectual figures reveal far more both about the possibility of autonomous citizen action and about the limitations of institutional reform in Cuba today. The texts discussed here touch on the tacit parameters of participation that allow academic and cultural institutions to export the image of a participatory public sphere while maintaining a monopoly on government criticism that benefits both the authorities and the cultural establishment.

I will argue that the peculiar language of dismissal that the cultural establishment deploys in its interactions with the bloggers, on one hand, and the sustained reflection around issues of autonomy and citizenship furnished by the bloggers’ responses to these strategies of exclusion from the public sphere, on the other, yield a ‘social text’ where the cultural policy of the Cuban Revolution and the emergence of new political subjectivities intimately intersect. This article links then the bloggers’ discourse to a strategic position where citizenship can be articulated from a new place of enunciation that challenges institutionalized forms of cultural and political criticism, charting both the effects of digital media and the role of cultural capital in the formation of political subjects.

Manuel Castells has called attention to the indispensability of an alternative media presence to social actors who seek to articulate counter-hegemonic political projects and present them to the public at large. Manuel Castells describes the coupling of new digital media with the rise of ‘mass self-communication’ as the mechanism by which horizontal networks of communication counteract the excluding effects of both established media gatekeepers and institutionalized forms of political intervention (2007: 246). This is part of the reason why the alternative blogosphere remains an uncomfortable presence for the Cuban government and its institutions, despite ample international coverage since 2008, journalism prizes awarded to Cuban blogging pioneer Yoani Sánchez, and off-line interventions of some bloggers to garner momentum, publicity and sympathy for their cause at home. Composed of bloggers
who write independently of government directives, navigating the Internet from unauthorized points of access to do so, they have only secured a very limited domestic exposure. However, while the combined effects of low connectivity, discrediting, and censorship do not permit us to speak yet of ‘mass self-communication,’ blogging becomes a type of self-communication that, lacking access to a larger domestic public, nonetheless attempts to gain visibility by engaging a specific set of prominent interlocutors. Therefore, in the case of Cuba, the bloggers’ impact on the public sphere must be examined indirectly by the effect it has on the discourse of other actors with access to it.

The nature of this interaction must be rethought because ‘formally inclusive public spheres’ can often conceal the mechanisms through which they reinforce exclusivist politics and perpetuate structural social inequalities, as Nancy Fraser cautions us, rekindling Habermas’s notion of the public sphere for contemporary theory (Fraser 1992: 526). This is particularly relevant in light of the government’s efforts to recontextualize the political order established with the Cuban Revolution as a socialism sui generis where democratic values, global market economy, and socialized profit are rendered compatible with a single party rule. Bert Hoffmann suggests that we consider the notion of a public sphere ‘with adjectives’ for cases like Cuba, where the state retains a tight grip of the media while seeking ways to administer rather than suppress claims for reform and greater autonomy — some of which arise from within the ranks of its own institutions (Hoffmann 2011: 6). Yet this public sphere ‘with adjectives’ has degrees of permissibility enforced and policed not only by the official organs of the state but also by the very same actors, such as artists and intellectuals, who bargain for more social autonomy.

The assessment of cultural policies vis-à-vis questions of autonomy remains a contested topic; a history of that debate is beyond the scope of this article. But any discussion of cultural autonomy and government policy in Cuba must acknowledge that throughout the Revolution’s history, political and cultural actors put forth diverse interpretations of how cultural producers positioned themselves ‘within’ or ‘against’ the revolutionary project, and how and whether they ought to do so. This, in turn, has allowed some state institutions and cultural programs to operate relatively independent of direct governmental oversight. In this sense, the distinction between official policy and bureaucratic overreach on one hand, and non-official, state-sponsored cultural initiatives on the other, is by no means clear cut. The specific encounters I examine here, however, purposely explore positions that test and sharpen those otherwise buried lines.

This explains why the alternative blogosphere brings into question narratives of reform and tolerance that continue to be a factor in Cuba’s exceptionality with respect to other historical experiences of Soviet-style socialism. First, the bloggers antagonize political society by rejecting the official narrative of the government — in which Cuba’s political system is portrayed as a relatively successful albeit beleaguered socialist project. Second, they impugn the government’s cultural and intellectual emissaries, whose influence and resources, bloggers claim, are misleading yardsticks to gauge the climate of tolerance and public engagement.

In the wake of Bruguera’s Tatlin’s Whisper, such a claim took the form of a clash between the alternative blogosphere and the Ministry of Culture. It forced the latter to publicly recognize the existence of the bloggers, and marked a shift from a total absence of recognition (at least outside the government’s online campaigns) to an
inevitable presence in public discourse that cultural authorities were quick to qualify. In declarations to the Mexican newspaper La Jornada, for example, then Minister of Culture Abel Prieto reluctantly condoned the performance itself, but not the citizens who participated. The artistic gesture was deemed valid only as pure form, within the self-referential logic of the space of art. In the interview Prieto refers to the artist by name, but when talking about the participation of Yoani Sánchez dismisses her as ‘la muchacha famosa esta,’ ‘this famous girl’ (Prieto 2009). Not being an isolated occurrence, the widespread anxiety about naming bloggers in official speech denotes a group of individuals denied public presence as full citizens, as constitutive subjects of the nation, demonstrating once again the ideological contingency of that category.

Against the very logic of Bruguera’s interactive performance, the circumventive language of the ensuing official remarks after Tatlin’s Whisper is significant in its activation of a new category of citizens – non-artists who make troublesome interventions in public cultural events – that is coupled with the familiar charge of being hired labor for an international smear campaign against the regime.9

The Organizing Committee of the Tenth Havana Biennale (Décima Bienal de La Habana), considers this an anti-cultural act . . . [M]any people outside of culture [ajenas a la cultura], spearheaded by a professional ‘dissident’ fabricated by the powerful media conglomerate PRISA, took advantage of the artist Tania Bruguera’s performance to carry out a provocation against the Cuban Revolution. These are individuals at the service of the anti-Cuban propaganda machine.10

The language is revealing, since the phrase ‘ajenas a la cultura’ can be translated as either outside of, or foreign to culture, simultaneously denoting people who are not associated with cultural institutions, and, more telling, people who have no relationship to culture or are somehow beyond its bounds, and therefore, presumably, have no voice within it. In the interview with La Jornada, Prieto11 recalled the domestic avenues open to criticism: ‘We are encouraging a critical, reflecting art, to help us discover our distortions, to defend the utopia. When criticism comes from a position of compromise with the country, the results are truly fruitful’ (Prieto 2009). Such statements distance cultural authorities from independent initiatives that threaten the negotiated model of sanctioned criticism by situating the bloggers in a known oppositional stance: as avatars of the ongoing campaign to discredit the Revolution. Having received coverage in the international media, Bruguera’s piece required yet another tuning in the censorship machine: the citizens who spoke at Tatlin’s Whisper were not allowed to participate in the kind of critique that the performance was designed to produce.

The spatial prepositions of Fidel Castro’s old dictum thus continue to have a protagonic role, as the sole criterion of citizenship seems to be from what position one speaks. For Cadelo, the old dictum becomes:

Within art everything, outside of art nothing. . . . Maybe a new government strategy has traced a sharp red line between us: Criticism from art (valid), criticism outside of art (counterrevolutionary). I would not want this post to offend anyone, it is just the opinion of someone who criticizes outside of art and without aspirations to ‘make culture.’12
For Rafael Rojas, critical of the way the state’s ideology mediates in cultural affairs, a model of selective tolerance was already rehearsed in the early 60s: ‘when the ideological plurality of the [political] elites entailed a certain flexibility, the circulation [of cultural production] is not determined by this or that socialist idea, but by backing the island’s political system or opposing the global hegemony of the United States’ (2009: 19). The vital difference, however, is that this confrontation is no longer between artists and professionals. These new voices do not try to negotiate a cultural space within the Revolution, as censored writers and artists once did – and arguably still do – but the very parameters upon which the right to exercise those exclusions hinge. This presence is particularly problematic to a ministry invested in appearing accessible to alternative cultural projects that constitute potential sites of contestation for disgruntled youths. By providing space and resources, and sponsoring avenues for professionalization, the cultural sphere has been able to expand the limits of Castro’s dictum’s ‘within’ by effectively managing the ‘against’ – the Cuban Agency of Rap, studied by Sujatha Fernandes, the Cuban Agency of Rock, and the Muerta Joven are unequivocal examples of this.

These issues bring to the fore the patterns of selective tolerance that cultural historians have associated with the official cultural politics of the Cuban Revolution since the early ’90s; a state policy that José Quiroga has called ‘disciplinary’ and Antonio José Ponte has described as a new symbolic codification of the revolutionary project, customized to redress Cuba’s entrance into the new geopolitical order in the aftermath of the crisis of 1989. The combined result of these policies and of the gradual exodus of a large group of artists and intellectuals who attempted more radical aesthetics and theories in the late ’80s and early ’90s gives preference to modes of representation and critique where political society is not confronted as such. These cultural endeavors inhabit an explicit schism between artist qua artist and artist qua citizen, which paradoxically, de facto inverts the notion of ‘committed art.’ This is the case of some figures like singer/songwriter Carlos Varela, or writer and filmmaker Eduardo del Llano – both also involved in encounters with the blogsphere – whose performances and work were scandalous during the late ’80s and early ’90s, but who continue to work with formal concepts like allegory or the absurd, while publicly they shy away from political disagreement, shifting the responsibility onto the interpreting agent. The disavowal of the narrow political implications of their works, expressed in interviews and statements, often appeals to matters of interpretation, or underscores the universality of the problems they address instead of acknowledging their obvious, though potentially compromising, local referents. At the same time, however, they are often called to serve as emblems of freedom of speech in Cuba and to justify cultural and political policy while being subjected to censorship as well. Politically, it is a discourse of few demands, protected by and restricted to the categories of author, artist, and art.

The cultural interventions of bloggers like Sánchez, Cadelo, and OLPL – who in 2009 presented his censored novel Boring Home in a courtyard in front of, and excluded from, Havana’s Feria Internacional del Libro – upset this balance and therefore must be read against this backdrop. Cadelo’s post ‘Who misinterprets whom?’ cited above, illustrates the disappointment of the contemporary spectator with the public projection of many Cuban artists. The exclusion from that cultural zone and its rules of
engagement – as a person ‘foreign to, or outside of, culture’ – delimit the very space from which it is possible to voice an uncompromising critical stance. This is not an ethical demand that all art and criticism legitimate itself by being politically committed or by addressing a political theme (this is a moot point when the political content – or lack thereof – is always already an issue). Rather, it is the recognition that for the contemporary spectator certain aesthetics of political intervention are no longer solvent. The criteria at work in playing art sponsored or tolerated by the establishment against the criticism put forth by the alternative scene should not suggest an indictment of the ethics and choices of the individual cultural actors, nor remit us to judgments regarding the aesthetic value of concrete works. They can be compared only as distinct discourses engaged with and deeply implicated in a shared socio-political horizon; discourses that nonetheless register each others’ effects in indirect and direct dialogues such as the ones discussed here. The bloggers’ engagement in political criticism often relies, then, on an oblique relationship with culture as they bargain for public exposure at home: temporarily fulfilling the role of critics or artists by commenting or participating in events and performances; sponsoring alternative outlets for their works, such as the literary supplement Voces; organizing workshops and festivals such as Academia Blogger, ‘Una isla virtual,’ and ‘Festival Clic’; supporting controversial artists like Omni Zona Franca, Los Aldeanos, and Porno para Ricardo.

In ‘La ética dormida’ Cadelo also addresses the betrayal of artists and intellectuals regarding their support for politically controversial projects that cannot procure institutional backing or reject it entirely. As if resigned, Cadelo gives her own concrete reasons for not considering them meaningful interlocutors either:

How should I tell some one so smart, so wise, something so obvious? Don’t you think he/she knows it? How should I tell a curator that I think the exhibit must be canceled because participating artists are being threatened by state security? How should I advise a musician that I think it would be ethically correct to cancel the concert because the public outside cannot enter, the place is occupied by the political police? How should I hint to an academic that a conference should not take place since many of those interested will not be able to listen to it; they are considered ‘counterrevolutionaries’?15

Ironically, the post accomplishes what it claims it should not attempt to do. The text plays with the tension between knowing and (not) telling, while the refrain ‘How can I tell […]?’ reveals a jaded spectator, who is aware that the game has been rigged and that the players know it. Thus the apparently rhetorical question ‘Don’t you think he/she knows it? [¿Crees que no lo sabe?]’ conveys a subtle yet significant disclosure addressed to another, absent interlocutor: ‘Don’t they think I know too?’ The authorial voice deploys a didactic, almost chastising tone in response to the perceived paternalism concealed in the arguments behind discursive inequality, especially when they do not concern specialized academic or aesthetic matters per se but rather issues of public interest such as the management of internet access. Under the tag ‘Derecho de admsión vs. Cyberchancleteo’ Octavo cerco has collected the posts recording denials of admission to public events. Together with the saga of Cadelo’s legal suit at the Ministry of Justice for ‘cultural apartheid,’ this compilation betrays in its most vivid contrasts the dialogical impasse. Posts such as ‘El Ministerio y yo’ (‘The Ministry and I’) cited
below — an open letter to Abel Prieto and the Ministry of Culture —, ‘Escoliosis ministerial’ (‘Ministerial Scoliosis’), and ‘Separados por la “cultura”’ (‘Separated by “culture”’) attest to how the public aspect of public participation in cultural events can be arrested by the arbitrary suspension of rights.\(^\text{16}\)

The most salient feature of the alternative blogosphere, in contrast to similar approaches to cultural criticism, is not the topics it addresses, but its underscoring of the fact that the bloggers portray themselves as ordinary citizens, and not as credentialled professionals. Most posts follow a simple format, choosing personal anecdotes that evoke the familiar tropes of scarcity and moral deterioration in a tone reminiscent of the first-person intimacy that marks the literature of the Special Period. Nonetheless, the texts always operate as vehicles to trace the genealogy of these experiences to a larger institutional or political problem, posed as a formal question to political society. The frustration of the speaking subject is directed explicitly at the political as its source, and always staged at its highest point of antagonism, claiming a constitutionally guaranteed right for citizens by citizens in any society that defines itself as democratic:

I demand that the Ministry of Culture makes public said list [of banned citizens], that it clarifies the reasons why I cannot attend concerts and participate in debates, that it shows its face and stops hiding behind the vague notion of The institution reserves the right to deny admission. I want Abel Prieto to articulate the exception legally so that I, legally as well, can bring suit to the Ministry of Culture of cultural and ideological discrimination.\(^\text{17}\)

The autobiographical tone of these posts, coupled with the density of the data allowed by technology — photos, video, audio, facsimiles — provides an unusual and disproportionate visibility to the opinions of otherwise regular citizens. That is, not as artists, or intellectuals, or writers, or any other official position recognized by the proper institutional channels and/or protected by ideological loyalty to a particular order. Concerned authorities thus find it more difficult to publicly manage the bloggers’ personas given the latters’ ability to produce and articulate a competing narrative from the inside. Furthermore, these narratives circulate, however limitedly, much more than previous attempts at open confrontation from traditional dissidents; by putting in play their cultural capital and their technical know-how these bloggers try to disentangle, precisely, the two options given: within or against. This site of enunciation, not the content or the quality of elaboration, is what sets them apart; they are more dangerous as models of citizen autonomy than as models of government criticism.\(^\text{18}\)

The issue of autonomy has been a particularly thorny subject to intellectuals engaged in the redefinition of civil society, customarily on the defensive regarding the degree of autonomy that both academic institutions and mass organization actually enjoy in practice. In this sense their exchanges with bloggers parallel those with the cultural establishment. Intellectuals and academics also resort to a pattern of depreciative taxonomy to define the rules of participation in the public sphere — upholding both its patterns of exclusion and their own position as gatekeepers. This was made clear during an academic conference at FIU on October 22 of 2009, for instance, when Cuban academic Rafael Hernández coined a derogatory term for the
alternative blogosphere: ‘cibercanchleteo,’ the virtual equivalent of the sound made by flip flops, which in Cuban slang refers to the mannerisms of the uneducated and the poor, the marginal sectors of society. It would later be frequently repeated as a felicitous term for dismissing the debates taking place in the blogs. The following month, on November 29, Hernández’s journal hosted in Havana a public debate entitled ‘Internet in Culture’ to which Yoani Sánchez, Claudia Cadelo, and Reinaldo Escobar, who were seeking to represent independent Internet publications in Cuba, were denied entrance. As a response to Hernández’s publicized FIU comments, Sánchez published videos of the hostile reception they received at the door, and of her intervention after gaining entrance disguised with a blonde wig. Resorting to a banal and unsophisticated disguise, invoking a certain chancleteo in its bluntness, was an intentional hint: it proved a viable strategy to expose the implications of a sanitized academic language for a democratic construction of the public sphere. The same terms were again in play when the Academia Cubana de la Lengua refused to participate in the V Congreso Internacional de la Lengua Española to be held in Chile in 2010 because Sánchez had been invited, when the language of the declarations to the press also implied that, just as the bloggers were not artists or ‘people of culture,’ they were poorly qualified to speak on this occasion. On February 24, the international version of Granma published the Academy’s declaration: ‘individuals without credentials to discuss and reflect about the future of the Spanish language have been invited; their presence in the conclave can only be interpreted as a political provocation’ (Granma 2010). It again did not mention Yoani Sánchez by name, or the fact that she was denied an exit visa to attend the convention.

In a post that asks ‘What is an academic? What is an intellectual?’ Sánchez explains her distance from the intellectual world she once partook of and romanticized during her university years. She highlights the difference between the open demeanor and nuanced statements Cuban intellectuals adopt abroad on one hand, and their timid domestic interventions, or lack thereof, on the other: ‘upon returning home, if there is an invitation to exchange ideas from civil society, the opposition, or the alternative scene, he/she pretends not hear it or insults the interlocutor. Discredits, convulses, calls Father State to defend him/her….’ In this post Sánchez addresses the 2011 controversy in light of Mariela Castro’s participation in LASA as the head of the Cenesex (Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual) and as sociologist of LGBT rights and activism in Cuba. Castro and Sánchez had an earlier exchange in 2008 when the blogger irked Castro by asking her in a conference whether the pursuit of tolerance for sexual orientation entailed a move toward openings in other areas, such as political opinion, that were still considered ‘closets.’ Arguing that the subject was beyond her purview, Castro later published comments in the Cenesex website accusing Sánchez of being a mercenary, of being ‘insignificant’ and ‘poorly educated,’ called her a lying ‘gallita’ (cocky hen) and a ‘pobre mujer’ (unfortunate woman) and invited her to Cenesex where the expert sociologists could help her out of the ‘vicious circle of chauvinism’ in which she was clearly caught.

This reception of the alternative bloggers, critical of the kind of organized civic autonomy promoted by governmentally backed cultural and academic institutions, refracts the contradictory pacts of professional conscription. The bloggers’ choice of interlocutors, who enjoy a high profile both domestically and abroad, also guarantees an exposure that would otherwise be precarious at best. Moreover, it suggests that
bloggers like Sánchez and Cadelo intentionally target figures who, by virtue of their public and professional image as moderates or progressives, become vulnerable when pressed on social and political issues that are not yet open to public contestation except in highly controlled environments. Their position is further complicated by the fact that bloggers’ posts are more difficult to dismiss as the harangue of mercenaries, since they consistently and explicitly construct a discourse based on personal experience documented through pictures, video, sound files and other material evidence, and do not belong to any political association.21 Furthermore, by using the very epithets with which they are excluded in order to legitimate their voice as regular citizens, bloggers embody the fundamental misappraisal of the intellectuals’ call, from the theoretical benches of academic debate, for more social autonomy within an imagined revolutionary consensus.

The public exchanges between independent bloggers and the intellectual establishment force us to rethink the academic debates on civil society that took place in the ’90s.22 The bloggers challenge the ‘organic’ and critical features of the intellectuals’ stance more pressingly than do their internal frays, or the theoretical contradictions of their work. Considering Rafael Hernández’s celebration of participatory politics and grassroots organizing, for example, and his defense of the democratic fabric of Cuba’s civil and political society, his dismissal of the blogosphere is all the more uncivil.23 Rojas has often highlighted the shortcomings of these intellectual tendencies, though his focus has been on the politicized suppression of cultural discourses within the lettered city as such, both from the Cuban republican past and from the contemporary cultural production of the diaspora. In a debate with Arturo Arango published in Temas, Rojas has called for Cuban intellectuals living in the island to recognize the impossibility of a real debate about the autonomy of cultural and academic institutions: ‘The absence of a public debate, electronic or in print, among Cuban socialist critics about the institutional structure of the Cuba political system leaves room for two possible interpretations: either they agree with it, or they cannot discuss it openly’ (2011: 147).24 What he has called elsewhere ‘the tactics of visibility and concealment’ of the intellectual and political elites he reads here as symptoms of a compromised autonomy: effects of the substantial subordination of cultural institutions to official ideology (2009: 198). This characterization of the intellectual field situates the exclusion of bloggers as another chapter in a longer history of rhetorical tactics, rehearsed and ingrained in cultural and intellectual discourses and associated, ‘in the last instance,’ with the survival of the revolutionary political order. More recently, researcher Bert Hoffmann has also argued that these new social actors must be understood in the context of a strained relationship between contending definitions of civil society and the public sphere. Hoffmann provides an excellent account of the history of the debates on civil society and the impact of the Internet in the state-society relation, advancing a similar analysis of how the current redefinition of social autonomy and citizenship must pass through the alternative uses of media by new actors.25

Why do these new voices constitute more effective challenges to political society than previous — and ongoing — attempts by critical, reformist intellectuals? First, although the latter also bargained for institutional autonomy, they continue to deny it to the constituencies on whose behalf they claim to speak; second, because, like Prieto’s ‘critical art,’ the intellectual’s plight neither threatens the government’s efforts to thwart citizen initiatives nor weakens its grip on the media for those outside
the reach of institutional protection. For the same reasons we must distinguish the older political organizations of the opposition, which suffer a constant crisis of credibility, from these new initiatives that develop alternatives to activism aided by testimonial intimacy and media overexposure.  

The bloggers’ writings and public appearances stage a precarious occupation of the empty space left by the ghosts of public intellectuals, rendering this vacancy even more visible. Cast as inconvenient interlocutors even to the most critical intellectual sectors within the cultural establishment, only a painstaking reconstruction of these dialogues opens to scrutiny the linguistic axes that frame social relations and symbolic representations in a cultural field of notoriously opaque power dynamics, unstated etiquettes of tolerance, and intricate circuits of clandestine communication. This recent surge of conscious initiatives to work outside institutional spaces can thus be characterized as emergent democratic discourses, regardless of their precarious conditions of possibility and success, if we consider, as does Bobes in La nación inconclusa, that ‘more than half of today’s Cuban population was born after 1959, which means they have been socialized exclusively in a symbolic horizon that does not provide alternatives to develop autonomous political projects or abilities and skills to participate in democratic politics’ (2007: 174). The political use of personal blogging, public reiterations of the displaced musings of a private self, interrupts rooted notions of citizenship currently sustained on what Bobes terms the accepted collapse of ‘represented’ and ‘representant’ in Cuban political discourse. In other words, these narratives call into question the normative patterns of participation inherent to an understanding of civil society where popular mobilization stands in for participatory citizenship (ibid.: 114, 119). Linking their writing to competing definitions of civil society and cultural participation, alternative bloggers recast any writing by regular citizens as an inchoate exercise in individual autonomy.

This autonomy, experienced as a stance made public in the form of an individual demand against authority, transforms the public sphere by bringing into question how the public is constituted as both a space and a subject. Such discourse constructs an alternative citizenship by flooding the public space with the disclosure of private experiences. This gesture demarcates their social position as private citizens, enhancing their credibility and authenticating their demands by dint of a rhetoric that often betrays a certain anxiety of legitimation, but whose overly self-reflexive narrative is as much a part of the ethos of blogging as it is an operation of self-validation that challenges the rules of public discourse. Habermas identifies a perversion of the notion of public in relation to the personal biography that can be useful to rethink how personal blogs can be read in light of Publizität – the process of submitting political decisions and authority to a reasoning political body. Habermas averts that the bourgeois public sphere lost its potential once its public character became a mere simulacrum produced by the mass media and where ‘the public sphere becomes the sphere for the publicizing of private biographies’ and not a space where the rights of the individual are exercised in public, guaranteed by his status and right to privacy (1991: 171).

It would be possible to think of blog writing – not as a general practice, but in this particular juncture – as an inversion of that dynamic. Here, the publication of personal biography, where testimony also attempts to articulate a collective right, does constitute a legitimate public exercise by and from the private individual as a site of democratic discourse. Since the publication of the personal biography goes against the
traditional channels of criticism authorized by the state and its cultural institutions, and the content of that biography belies the narratives about the regime’s achievements, the publicizing of private lives unveils mass media’s simulation of a political consensus. Habermas is strictly concerned with how certain notions of private and public interact to constitute a bourgeois public sphere that is historically unique, but his discussion of how different actors manage their entrance into such a space helps to underscore how these voices contest the meaning of public, claiming a right to political autonomy as reasoning individuals with private interests and independently formed opinions – a process of formation that blogs consciously and explicitly discuss. Now it is the interests and the autonomy of a homo informaticus that define a form of citizenship derived from the right to know in the age of digital technology.\textsuperscript{27} As developed by these bloggers, this model ushers in an alternative to a public sphere largely characterized by simulated conformity and passive consumption of propaganda.

This is the issue at stake in a key text like Yoani Sánchez’s ‘Habeas data,’ for instance, which implicates the appropriation of the concept behind a constitutional writ in the construction of an alternative, critical public:

The times when the only source of information – or disinformation – we had were the official newspapers, the national news, or the Cuban radio, are now behind. Technology has come to help us. [...] It already seems impossible to deactivate that precarious and clandestine network that brings us ‘news about ourselves.’\textsuperscript{28}

The right of habeas data – ‘[we command] you to produce the data’ – emerges in the ’90s out of concerns for the protection of storage as well as gathering practices of individual information by both public and private institutions.\textsuperscript{29} At its core is the notion of ‘information self-determination’; akin to habeas corpus, it is legally construed as a constitutional right against unlawful or arbitrary seizure, in this case, of information. In this text Sánchez uses it to describe a process of developing awareness of that right – and of its absence – through the encounter with technology, but she links that individual claim to the collective right to know data about itself as a political body, which in turn is essential to secure an informed public opinion and to make autonomous political decisions. The interest in knowing one’s data arises then out of unauthorized searches for information, out of stumbling upon incommensurable versions of the same reality, but it may also be achieved by publishing one’s own data (that can be of public interest), and then spreads with the acquisition of technological proficiency. The public domain is reshaped by the aggregate efforts of public biographies, of leaked news, of personal uses of technology embedded in a network of instant mass connectivity through e-mail, flash memories, text messages, and proxy servers. It involves an autonomous subjectivity increasingly invested, and exercised, in this sense of ‘news about ourselves.’ The search for, and dissemination of, a certain kind of individual data links the subject as an individual to a larger political body, offering a challenge both to prevailing accounts of social autonomy and to information blackouts mediated by the state. This clandestine practice of the right of habeas data becomes the first step toward the possibility of a new political subjectivity, activating a shift in the circuits that now mediate the sphere of information, the state, and its constituency.
While focusing on the language of representation has allowed us to gauge the limitations of public participation in these spheres, we must briefly address the role of the Internet and of digital technology in prying open that gap. The experience of authoritarian governments with the Internet and social media, given their exercise of more explicit and coherent policies regulating the production and circulation of knowledge and information, is a privileged environment for the study of the link between processes of democratization and the use of digital technologies by new social actors. In this case, new technologies have provided user-friendly spaces and networks that do not require institutional support to thrive and thus are not accountable to government interference – other than through direct intimidation. Along these lines Manuel Castells has argued for the counter-hegemonic potential and significance of technologies of mass self-communication as symptoms of ‘a culture that emphasizes individual autonomy, and the self-construction of the project of the social actor’ (2007: 249). The alternative blogosphere displaces the language of traditional ideological opposition used by dissident discourse with the demands of an informed citizen, thus recasting the use of technology as a result of a changing subject; a political subject whose relationship to government and civic participation is not entirely regimented by grand narratives of national teleology but, rather, who seeks to reconstitute the public realm as a negotiated aggregate of plural interests. The digital age reconfigures the public sphere by allowing the participation of these new actors in spaces of relative autonomy, and where, as blogger Reinaldo Escobar and intelligence officer Eduardo Fontes (‘the cybercop’) both point out, doing ‘prohibited things’ becomes not only logistically easier, but also contagiously attractive (Escobar qtd. in García Mendez 2011; Fontes, ‘Campañas’).

Technologies that allow easy self-publishing and provide alternative routes for information access and distribution are implicated in the development of autonomous subjects in two senses: as tools to create and promote discursive spaces independent of institutional support or oversight, and as pedagogical and autodidactic tools that beget practices associated with critical thinking and self-determination. As Clay Shirky has indicated, continuing Enzenberger’s early efforts to portray digital media as a vehicle for the repositioning of autonomous subjectivities, the structural transformation of the public realm under way is conditioned by the physical displacement of the origin of production and the increasing amplification of broadcasting capabilities:

Owning a television does not give you the ability to make TV shows, but owning a computer means that you can create as well as receive many kinds of content, from the written words through sound and images. Amateur production, the result of all this new capability, means that the category of ‘consumer’ is now a temporary behavior rather than a permanent identity. (2008: 108)

There are parallels between this passage from ‘consumer’ to ‘amateur production’ on one hand, and a figure of contemporary citizenship on the other: a mode of ‘becoming’ citizen that describes the changing roles of this subject, from being a passive spectator of national debates to the development of an autonomous, publicly engaged political voice. In the sense that we can trace an evolution of the blog from personal ‘catharsis,’ as both Yoani Sánchez and Rafael Hernández have described her blog, to a coherent political discourse, let us keep in mind the heuristic dimension of blog writing
in the formation of a new political subject, an *amateur citizen*.\(^3\) By heuristic I mean precisely a gradual process of learning and self-assertion, where the nature of political participation unfolds to that subject, the conditions of possibility for alternative forms of intervention – or their absence – are learned through the public experience of publishing one’s writing. The figure of the amateur emerges here as strategic to the transformation of the public sphere, and as the voice of the ultimate democratic demand. The citizen becomes manifest as an amateur in a double sense: as an amateur in a particular outlet of expression, and as an amateur in terms of autonomous political participation.

This new actor is able to articulate, in the name of the collective, two rights of the modern citizen in its classical formulation: the right to know and the right to act, and thus constitute itself as a political subject. This is sought through the demand for first and foremost a plural public sphere – a demand for freedom of speech and information – and second, for a transition to a democratic government. This second goal is radically different from internal party reform, which perpetuates the fantasies of a socialist triumph in progress. What the voices of bloggers like Yoani Sánchez and Claudia Cadelo offer then is a contrast and a serious challenge to the prevalent modes of protocolary criticism. They are dismissed in public and harassed in private by the government but, perhaps more telling, by the cultural establishment as well, threatening the credibility of those places from which one is authorized to speak under government aegis.

The study of Cuban political blogging has focused either on the short-term effects of new technologies on policy and regime change, or on virtual presences isolated from other spheres of social meaning. The exaltation of these voices as definitive factors in a future democratic transition, as well as the pessimistic dismissals of the role of the Internet in political change, overlook these blogs as symptoms of a change that has already taken place and yet is besieged by its own limitations.\(^3\) These lines of questioning may miss the gradual yet enduring mutations in political subjectivity I have mapped so far. Because they do not seek rights associated with identity discourses, or with specific political factions, they bear the demands of citizenship itself. By taking advantage of a medium that rearranges the hierarchy of production and circulation of social meaning and information, the citizen – as spectator, consumer, and political subject – finds the place of enunciation for his/her demands, that is, the possibility to speak as constituent part of the *res publica* beyond matters of content and regardless of the qualifications of the speaker. Thus appears a public social figure that through a form of cultural amateurism – precisely the quality that is often invoked against them – is also an amateur citizen, the manifestation of an emergent democratic ethos.

In order to investigate the conditions of possibility of this ethos, Peter Sloterdijk (2005) proposes that we rethink the public sphere in terms of atmospheric politics: human praxis and interrelations imagined as ecosystems meant to sustain and optimize particular modes of being. Democracy comes to mean then something like a mode of being – of living in common – no less dependent on a favorable habitat than any other life form: an environment capable of sustaining human life, perhaps even of optimizing that life (taking to heart Nietzsche’s precept that philosophers be physiologists too). But the success of that form of life will also depend on the development of its proper political subject and its ‘virtues’ as observer, in the ancient Greek sense of excellence. Sloterdijk appeals to the logic of installation art to investigate the function of the *agora*
vis-à-vis the subject of democracy, the citizen of the *polis*: ‘The citizen as a highly improbable artificial figure of political anthropology would thus first become possible by a combination of actor and spectator in a single person, and that said, the entire public domain would have to consist of this type of agent’ (2005: 948). Is not *Tatlin’s Whisper*, the episode that opens the present reflection, an installation activated as performance only through the participation of such a spectator? It would seem to suggest that a citizen’s ability to observe and act simultaneously, to approximate that ideal of citizenship, will depend on the degree to which the realm of culture, the public realm of representation of the objects and things in question, is able to support those political modes of being.

Sloterdijk’s atmospheres seem tailor-made to consider the issues raised here. The alternative blogosphere is not the first, nor the only, outlet to make certain issues public in the sense of disclosure, of revealing anything new as such. But it is unique in how it reflects on the (im)possibilities of making them issues of public debate, and in creating ‘atmospheres of democracy’: spaces and subjects ready for future forms of democratic sociability. As a provisional answer I have stressed the heuristic role of blogging in the formation of a political subject that experiments with alternative ways of participating in the public sphere; and heuristic here must be understood in both senses, as a method or vehicle of discovery, and as a praxis that in itself encourages or stimulates learning — a kind of learning that in this context acquires a narrow political meaning tied to the understanding of how a democratic subject would behave, how its duties and rights are defined as a citizen of a state. In this specific case, the fundamental Do-It-Yourself logic intrinsic to new media and the resulting dispensability of institutional support have proven decisive.

Blog writing in Cuba, where political subjectivity and cultural participation have been historically articulated upon national identity, involves at this particular juncture a search for a new kind of discourse on citizenship that denounces and subverts the power dynamics of the public sphere — though not directly the political order. The way these citizens rehearse, in writing, alternative narratives of their daily experience under that order — while negotiating a visibility and legitimacy for their demands in their encounter with various public authorities — allows us to discern links between emergent notions of citizenship, interventions in the cultural and public spheres, and their link to new media and technology. If, in fact, we are looking at a new form of political subjectivity and praxis, then it is critical to distinguish these from other attempts at political activism and cultural criticism in content, form, and constituency.

Faced with escalating confrontations against voices that the new media has potentiated, interpellated authorities have reactivated strategies of discursive regimentation invoking categories such as non-artists, non-intellectuals, or non-professionals. This is reflected in the rearrangement of the official discourses that codify the rules of public discourse, while the cultural and intellectual elites are involved in a revisionism that attempts to bracket periods of harsher censorship as historical exceptions that have long been left behind. In turn, the blogs’ responses to such exclusions provide a sustained critique of the limits of the current debates on political and cultural autonomy in Cuba. The relationship between this subject and the cultural establishment is a step further in the elucidation of how concepts like autonomy and hegemony are not only absent from the cultural politics discourse in Cuba, as Rojas has argued, but are the key to understanding the significance of new discursive
interventions. The bloggers have responded by presenting themselves as spectators turned actors within culture at a specific moment — in the sense understood by Hall — as a strategic site of hegemonic battles for political and social representation. The issue at stake is precisely that their demands are incommensurable with the parameters of participation intrinsic to the very organizational structure of the ‘really existing public sphere’ they attempt to infiltrate. The exclusion of speech is turned thus on itself: the place occupied by those who are not artists or intellectuals, who are not recognizable subjects of the current constitutive order of the nation, can then speak as to the transformative limitations of those roles.

Notes

1 The author witnessed this first-hand when she was mistaken for another unidentified blogger and initially asked to leave the event as well. This incident evokes the famous passage in Louis Althusser where the philosopher elaborates an alternative to J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts. In Althusser’s ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,’ the policeman’s hailing of a citizen furnishes a paradigmatic example of the interpellation of power as a ritualistic constitution of the subject by ideology. This is a process of mutual recognition and reproduction between subject and ideology that is completed the moment the subject turns around to answer the call — a temporality that is only hypothetical in Althusser’s example. It is Judith Butler’s take on both Austin’s and Althusser’s formulations, however, that lengthens the encounter until a scene where discursive agency — and with it the chance of talking back — becomes possible: ‘one would need to offer an account of how the subject constituted through the address of the Other becomes then a subject capable of addressing others. In such a case, the subject is neither a sovereign agent with a purely instrumental relation to language, nor a mere effect whose agency is pure complicity with prior operations of power’ (1997: 25–26). All translations from Spanish, unless otherwise noted, are the author’s.

2 The examination of the cultural politics of the Cuban Revolution inevitably remits to that inaugural scene when Fidel Castro sat down in 1961 with writers, artists, and intellectuals to draft their contractual relationship with the revolutionary project. Also forged in an incident of censorship, Castro then pronounced the much quoted sentence whose very ambiguity would become a spectral but constant referent for cultural politics throughout the following decades: ‘Within the Revolution everything, against the Revolution nothing’ (Castro 1961). The strange syntax of this sentence where ‘within’ — a spatial preposition — becomes an antonym of ‘against’ — the preposition of an ideological stance — must be highlighted once more, since the contradictions that arise out of this maxim index the precarious place of enunciation embraced by the bloggers. Inspirationally utopian, dangerously ambiguous, and foundational all at once, the speech has since been the backdrop of many projects whose vitality and autonomy vary widely. The degree of influence and the fluctuating interpretations of Castro’s ‘Palabras a los intelectuales’ has been the subject of heated debates among scholars, cultural producers, and state officials alike, as well as the center of a growing critical bibliography. Par Kumaraswami (2009) has reread more positively Castro’s speech by skillfully deconstructing the text and its two structuring tropes ‘dentro/contra’ while downplaying its historical reception and implementation. The polemic between Arturo Arango and Rafael Rojas featured in
Temas (Rojas 2011: Vol. 66) is particularly informative because it features two radically opposed points of view regarding the relationship between intellectuals, cultural institutions, and the political establishment. For a more comprehensive study of canon formation and the history cultural politics in Cuba, Rafael Rojas’s Tumbas sin sosiego (2006) is mandatory reading.

Tania Bruguera, the artist who conceived Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version), set up a podium that recreated the first address of Fidel Castro to the Cuban people after the triumph of the Revolution, January 8, 1959. The performance consisted of granting a minute of uncensored speech to anyone in the public who wished to participate: a rationed suspension — recalling the rationing of basic goods by the State — of the government’s censorship practices within the space of the artistic performance. Here art assumes a political authority to grant a minute of freedom, as the spectator assumes the role of the artist by taking over the performance, occupying a representation of power in both the aesthetic and the political sense.


Alternative blogs, when not actively blocked from inside, do not obtain heavy domestic traffic though they circulate off-line in CDs and flash memories. The types of online activity available to each user — from navigating only within Cuba’s Intranet to more sophisticated forms of circumventing blocked sites via proxy servers — also vary according to expertise, account type (legal, restricted accounts are often shared illicitly among many users), and purchasing power. In addition, the rates of connectivity wane considerably from urban to rural zones. For the logic of access distribution see Kalathil and Boas (2003), an early mapping of Cuba’s information policies in the Internet age. For a quantitative analysis from a global comparative perspective consult the latest annual report ‘Freedom on the Net 2012’ on Cuba, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2012/cuba; Internet (accessed February 26, 2013). While the theoretical premises underlying Freedom House’s project can be taken to task in its rudimentary definition of freedom, its 2012 report can be marginally useful insofar as it does provide a point by point global comparison of concrete restrictions of usage.

Instead of using authorized — and thus more tightly controlled — points of entry (mostly a job-dependent prerogative in Cuba), they operate relatively free of any ties to officialdom by connecting to the Internet in hotels, foreign embassies, and semi-illegally through borrowed Internet accounts.

Rafael Rojas (2006, 2009), José Quiroga (2005), and Antonio José Ponte (2007) have studied these problems at length and will be cited throughout the article. Other Cuban scholars such as Arturo Arango, Rafael Hernández, Desiderio Navarro, and Ambrosio Fornet have sought to reevaluate more positively the history of cultural politics as well as its present logic. For approximations that correlate moments of flexibility or sternness with internal or global pressures rather than with strictly self-serving political motivations see for example Antoni Kapcia’s article ‘Celebrating 50 Years’ (Bulletin of Latin American Research 31: 58—76, 2012), Kapcia and Gray’s The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society (2008), and Cristina Venegas’s Digital Dilemmas (2010).

Government censorship has been articulated as raison d’État against the interventionist policies of the United States or, alternatively, underplayed by misappropriating a pre-existing Marxist critique of bourgeois individual rights. A thorough analysis from this angle would require a more sophisticated reading of foundational texts of the debate.
such as Marx’s ‘On the Jewish Question’ and Lenin’s ‘“Democracy” and Dictatorship’ (1919) than we can carry out here. It is not uncommon to conflate the critique of censorship in Cuba with the naïve defense of so-called bourgeois freedoms so often touted yet so precariously practiced in ‘actually existing democracies,’ to use Fraser’s term. While the focus of the article does not allow for extant commentary on this problematic, the critique of the government’s censorship practices in the name of socialism should not be indicative either of a repudiation of the possibility of radical left politics, or of a regression into obsolete Cold War dichotomies. However questionable the interventionist foreign policy of the United States might have been, or continues to be, with respect to Cuba, it does not immediately follow that vigorous criticism of Cuba’s policies is inherently allied with the unquestioned celebration of either U.S. policy on Cuba or a neoliberal political framework.

9 One of the first group demonstrations of this kind was during a concert by Pablo Milanés where they tried to raise awareness of the incarceration of Porno para Ricardo’s frontman Gorki Águila. This would not be the first or the last instance from which they were banned as public. See Cadelo’s ‘Apartheid en la Muestra de Jóvenes Realizadores’ in her blog Octavo cerco, for an account of how multimedia artist Lia Villares, self-described ‘autodidact’ and blogger, did not go in to see her own short films after her friends were denied entrance. See also in Sánchez’s ‘La cultura para un grupo de elegidos’ and OLPL’s ‘Bullets over habanywood,’ in the blogs Generación Y and Lunes de post-revolución respectively.


11 Former Minister of Culture Abel Prieto has been fundamental to the idea of a more inclusive notion of national culture through the redefinition of ‘cubanía.’ His articulation of national culture would vertebrate the updated cultural policy from the ’90s onward. It allowed for the vindication of certain previously suppressed figures of the republican past, the revolutionary period, and the diaspora, while being vague and politicized enough to maintain the suppression and demonization of others. See for example his conference ‘Cultura, cubanidad y cubanía.’

12 Claudia Cadelo, ‘Quién malinterpreta a quién?,’ Blog Octavo Cerco, August 22, 2009; Internet.

13 See Ponte (2007) and Quiroga (2005) for assessments of the transformations that have taken place in cultural policy in relation to both political criticism and increased efforts to market Cuban cultural products abroad. For the development of a new literary market during the ’90s and its aesthetic projections, see Whitfield (2008) and the Special Issue of the Revista de Estudios Hispánicos, ‘Cuban Literature of the 1990s.’

14 Del Llano’s statements regarding the politicization of his work have appeared both in his personal blog and in the publication La Jiribilla. He repeats the official discourse of the Ministry: ‘...to criticize one has to know’ (Del Llano 2005). In his blog del Llano accuses blogger/writer OLPL from Lunes de post-revolución, after OLPL’s negative review of his work, of not liking anything ‘Cuban,’ accompanying it with unfortunate insults which illustrate the kind of toxicity involved in these exchanges: ‘sodomized northern farmer,’ ‘pederast.’ See Del Llano’s entry ‘La noche y el día,’ February 16, 2012, eduardodelllano.wordpress.com; Internet (accessed February 17, 2012).

15 Claudia Cadelo, ‘La ética dormida,’ Blog Octavo cerco, December 17, 2010; Internet.
The language of the oft-cited constitutional articles 53 and 54, which deal with association and expression rights in Cuba, is significant in this regard. Citizens enjoy unlimited freedoms only as ‘members of social and mass organizations,’ as constituents of socialist society. The right of association is reserved for the ‘working people,’ though the category of women appears unqualified: ‘los trabajadores, manuales e intelectuales, los campesinos, las mujeres, los estudiantes y demás sectores del pueblo trabajador’ (Artículo 54). The infamous Law 88 of 1999 would explicitly penalize providing information to third parties, particularly the United States, that could further foreign interests in destabilizing the political order in Cuba.

Claudia Cadelo, ‘El Ministerio y yo,’ Blog Octavo cerco, October 31, 2009; Internet.

That remains true even when their domestic audience is small: people are increasingly aware that independent bloggers exist and understand what they do even if they do not regularly read their blogs, but, like the government itself, both simultaneously resent, mistrust, and/or are attracted by their resources and technical savvy. Workers in cultural and educational sectors have been instructed to steer away from those centers of political provocation in the typical language of the party: ‘orientaciones.’ Eduardo Fontes, better known in the Internet as ‘ciber policía,’ appeared in a leaked video instructing military personnel about new technologies and about their use by dissident groups. He recognizes their ‘cool’ factor and the dangers to the ideological commitment of the young cadres posed by indiscriminate socialization on the web. The conference is titled: ‘Campañas enemigas y política de enfrentamiento a los grupúsculos contrarrevolucionarios’ and has been widely distributed, especially through Facebook and YouTube, and covered by news sources El Nuevo Herald, Diario de Cuba and Penúltimos Días.

Yoani Sánchez, ‘La intelectualidad cubana: debatir o esconderse,’ Blog Generación Y, May 26, 2012; Internet. As of February 2013 Yoani Sánchez has been allowed to leave Cuba after a general reform on Cuban exit permits went into effect. While she has been invited to participate in various events and conferences in Europe and the Americas, it remains to be seen if it will impact her image at home, and whether the government’s travel reforms are indicative of more flexible information policies to come.


For a discussion of the relationship between alternative bloggers and other opposition groups with more defined political platforms, see, for example, Miriam Celaya, ‘Contrarréplica sobre los comentarios,’ Blog SinEvasión, April 11, 2011; Internet (accessed September 15, 2011).

The academic debates of the ’90s emphasized the protection of this consensus against the backdrop of economic and social transformations brought on by the Special Period following the collapse of the Soviet bloc. They explored revolutionary conceptions of civil society within the socialist tradition, contrary to the liberal conception of civil society as a distinct sphere from political society that ricocheted from the Eastern European transitions. Sustained solely in academic circles and publications, these debates were linked to an intellectual current of domestic loyalty ‘in the last instance.’ As self-defined socialist critics they insisted on their commitment to the Revolution, even though the intellectuals and institutions involved, like Rafael Hernández,
Fernando Martínez Heredia, and the Centro de Estudios sobre América, were not devoid of clashes with more orthodox party politics. To defend the rigid political structure of Cuban civil society’s authorized, state-oriented mass organizations, Cuban intellectuals offered a decontextualized reading of Gramsci’s politization of civil society as a critique of, and successful counterexample to, liberal, bourgeois notions of autonomy and civil rights. Deploying Gramsci’s notion that civil society is not necessarily antagonistic to the state but rather constitutive of the political process, they could then retain a nominal alliance to theoretical formulations of socialist democracy. For a gloss of these debates see also the Special Issue of the Journal of Latin American Studies (2008) 40 (4).

23 See Hernández (1999). Though we refer here to a lack of civility the term is intentionally borrowed from Kotkin’s study of how the collapse of Eastern European regimes was managed from above – he refers to the *nomenklatura* as ‘the uncivil society’ (Kotkin 2009). These governments, argues Kotkin, were forced into a political transition by bankruptcy rather than by the pressures of a political opposition that ‘imagined itself as civil society’ (ibid.: xiv; emphasis in the original). Kotkin’s differentiation between a fully functioning civil society and a discourse that presents itself as such can be useful in evaluating the critical potential of initiatives like the alternative blogosphere without falling into overly optimistic idealizations. Kotkin limits the impact of these opposition voices to a ‘moral’ value in retrospect. I insist here on their symptomatic significance – gaining visibility for a more general, though largely invisible, demand –, and on their performative effects – much as the echoes of the Eastern European opposition elsewhere, which have spearheaded debates on democratic values in other circles, creating expectations of behaviors related to other political orders that have not been experienced by a people as such. As a result of their heavy media presence and the consistent narrative of being private citizens rather than political dissidents, the alternative blogosphere is more difficult to criminalize and isolate than other projects from civil society. As the 2003 ‘Black Spring’ showed, however, when the government incarcerated 75 independent journalists and activists, the policy of toleration is inversely proportional to the repressive needs of the state apparatus. This illustrates one aspect in which Evgeny Morozov’s warnings might prove justified: the variable and unpredictable weight of international public opinion in authoritarian governments when it comes to periodic crackdowns remains a veritable danger (Morozov 2011).

24 A propos of Hernández, Ponte (2009) also glossed briefly these incidents to argue how this ‘excluding debate’ exploits the abstract academic language of theory by marshalling the hierarchical nature of aesthetic categories against competing demands for political inclusion. These points are developed at greater length in his most recent book, *Villa Marista en Plata*, where he maps the uses of new technologies in contemporary cultural production. While delivering strong criticisms to the cultural establishments, however, neither Ponte nor Rojas has dedicated significant attention to the distinctive strategies of citizen initiatives that challenge these models of institutionalization and absorption of critique in art and culture.

25 A ‘diachronic’ analysis of these concepts, such as the one Hoffmann undertakes, cannot fully account for the significance of the synchronic discordance evident in their interactions (2011: 7).

26 One of the distinguishing factors of some prominent bloggers of the alternative blogosphere is that their position is not one of ideological opposition to socialism or communism *tout court*, rather, to the idea that the system of government in place can

For Habermas, that bourgeois sense of political autonomy emerged out of the public pursuit of the interests of the homo economicus: private individuals whose claim to autonomy hinged on their double identity as men with natural rights and as property owners. The focus of market interests in the public sphere, while granting it political weight, gradually erodes the democratic, enlightened character of the public sphere transforming it into one of passive consumption of advertisement (1991: 55–56, 175).

This post opens with a comparison between the little-known uprising of ’94, the Maleconazo, and the publicity of the UCI incident, where student Eliecer Ávila confronted President of the National Assembly Ricardo Alarçon about the limitations imposed on Cuban youth in a leaked Internet video, found in Yoani Sánchez, ‘Habeas Data,’ Blog Generación Y, February 12, 2008, http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?p=190&cp=all; Internet (accessed September 15, 2011).

The notion of habeas data has gained worldwide importance with the rapid development of security risks, given the new patterns in which our personal information circulates the globe: from a simple credit transaction, to a Google search profile, to stored data on company and government servers. Various versions of these laws refer to both the protection of an individual’s data and to his/her rights to access it and/or be informed of their existence and collection.

The effect of technologies on authoritarian governments and the role of digital technologies in democratization processes is an ongoing debate among media scholars. Evgeny Morozov (2011) argues against ‘cyber utopianism’ by stacking evidence of what he describes are ‘the dark consequences of connectivity,’ which show authoritarian states using technology overwhelmingly in their favor (xiii). While the examples he provides are indeed well researched and often insightful, the argument seems useful only to Western policy makers that do not calculate the possible drawbacks of blind technological optimism, Morozov’s main target. However, his overall conclusion can only refute a straw man version of more complex accounts of the ways both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic agents deploy Internet and social media technologies in particular contexts. He fails to address, for example, why some connectivity might be better than none for agents working outside state and institutional channels; how, even though authoritarian states have effectively developed digital updates of the trinity of control – ‘propaganda, censorship and surveillance’ – the structural characteristics of digital technologies have transformed not only the relationship between the state and its constituents but the nature of activism and political participation as well (ibid., 82). Both Malcolm Gladwell’s and Morozov’s pessimistic accounts of online activism part from the generalization that online activist networks and offline political interventions are insurmountably distinct, and that the only way to measure their conditions of success is through the short-term effects of their mobilization capability weighed against that of the government. For more on these debates see for example Gladwell (2010) in The New Yorker and the debate between Clay Shirky and Morozov in Prospect (Shirky 2009).

‘Becoming’ in the Platonic sense of approximating a figure of ideal – or impossible – citizenship, since most citizens in ‘actually existing democracies’ are not active participants, or informed voters. Positing any model of democratic citizenship is
further complicated by the fact that, as Fraser elaborates, formally inclusive public spheres are also beset by exclusions of counter-hegemonic publics that remain invisible within formally instituted principles of plurality. ‘Becoming’ also connotes the dynamic and gradual escalation of the public engagement and political consciousness of this figure.

32 I refer to this figure as an ‘amateur citizen’ to underscore the lack of a continuing tradition of autonomous democratic participation (Bobes 2007), but also because generally — though not always — they have left their former professions to engage in cultural practices as ‘amateurs,’ often as a result of non-compliance with ideological requisites for job retention. The ambiguity of the term amateur must not be taken in its pejorative sense of denoting absence of professional quality but is used here precisely to question how these categories are deployed. Contemporary debates on the uses of new media by citizens have also taken an interest in the figure of the amateur. See, for example, Anna Lee’s entry for the term in W.J.T. Mitchell’s keywords project for ‘Theories of Media.’ The link between digital technology and the use of media by private individuals in this sense can be traced to Enzensberger’s ‘Constituents of a Theory of the Media’ (1970). Sociologist Robert A. Stebbins also identifies a new form of ‘modern amateurism’ in the 20th century that cannot be contrasted with the professional in terms of lack, but which instead fulfills a complex function in the circulation of cultural goods as ‘a special member of the public,’ as a practitioner who may become professionalized, or as one who engages in a practice that does not have parameters or institutions for professionalization yet (1977: 583–87). Blogs have been approached in this sense as ‘citizen journalism,’ but we want to emphasize here the bloggers’ position in the public sphere as an ‘active public,’ rather than contrast them with the professional practice of journalism proper.

33 Hernández Busto in ‘Los límites de la ciberdisidencia’ follows closely Morozov’s reasoning in favor of off-line activism. Ted Henken in his blog el Yuma, Shanti Kalathil and Taylor Boas (2003), Cristina Venegas (2010), Bert Hoffman (2011), and Nanne Timmer (2013) have touched on the use of digital technologies by social and cultural actors from different perspectives.

34 Stuart Hall’s approach to the articulation of political subjects in the public sphere through the analyses of cultural representations remains a rigorous model for the work of cultural studies: ‘[W]hile not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the machineries and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive and not merely reflexive, after-the-event role’ (1996: 224).

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