Cuban Dissidence in the Age of Political Simulacra

Coco Fusco

There have been Cuban dissidents for as long as there has been a revolution in Cuba but they have never been as visible, as vocal, or as popular abroad as they are now. A new generation of independent journalists and human rights activists has captured the attention of the global mediasphere, Miami-based exiles, and Beltway think tanks. Armed with cell phones and Twitter accounts, they are challenging the state’s hegemonic control over the country’s public image, and they have assumed a leadership role within an opposition that for decades was dominated intellectually by Cubans based in Europe and controlled politically by exiles based in Miami. Putting Cuba’s recent migratory reforms to the test, the country’s most prominent opponents recently toured of Europe, US and Latin America, picking up numerous awards, speaking to TV talk show hosts, meeting with politicians, posing with celebrities and managing pro-Cuba protesters with such aplomb that they have put their government on the defensive.

The most well-known member of this new dissident wave is Yoani Sánchez, who boasts over 500,000 Twitter followers (@yoanisanchez) and whose blog Generación Y, which details the difficulties of daily survival on the island, receives millions of hits per month. The new wave of international opponents also includes dozens of other bloggers and citizen journalists who use cell phones cameras to document police brutality, public health crises and decaying urban infrastructure; advocates working on behalf of political prisoners, proponents of new political parties, and hackers who dish up details about the lavish lifestyles on Party officials. They operate alongside a growing cadre of politically minded artists and musicians who are able to operate outside the domain of state sponsored culture by using digital technology and the Internet to distribute their work.

These tech-savvy dissidents are part of a global net-based activism movement that rejects authoritarian states and embraces autonomous cultural organization, but they circulate in an unusually stark context. Cuba has the lowest rate of connectivity in the Western Hemisphere (less than 1% of the country’s population has regular access to the Internet), while telecommunications infrastructure is fragile and limited, and lacks any broadband Internet access. The Cuban government treats Internet access as a national security issue, claiming that it is a threat to political stability. The state manages an Internet system for the circulation of information primarily for scientists that also hosts domestic email accounts. Dial up Internet access via satellite is only officially available to government officials and those tourists and foreign workers who are willing to pay unusually high rates. Most of those who do have Cuban email accounts—professionals in the sciences, medicine and culture—can only send and receive email, but do not access the web. The state monitors email fastidiously and controls Cubans’ Internet access through censorship and pricing: anything considered counter-revolutionary, which includes a good deal of foreign media, is blocked and one hour of Internet access from hotels or cybercafes costs as much as half of an average monthly salary. Call phones, which became legal for Cubans to purchase in 2008, are also extremely expensive but the number of mobile telephone owners on the island is increasing rapidly, and has already surpassed 1 million. The Cuban government claims it, in order to regulate communications to protect the Revolution from subversion, but it capitalizes on its monopolistic control of communications technology by existing steep fees for long distance calls and cell phone charges, which are most often paid for by visiting Cubans seeking to maintain contact with relatives and friends.

Not all Cuban activists are bloggers; however, blogging, text messaging and texting are the principle means of communication for Cuba’s internal opposition. At the same time, not all Cuban bloggers identify themselves as dissidents. The Cuban government employs dozens of “official” bloggers who follow dissident posts and often respond vituperatively in their comment sections; as well as authoring many pro-Cuba blogs themselves. One of the best known official bloggers is Iroel Sánchez, author of the orthodox hard-line commentary in the blog “La pupila insomne” However, the official blog domain also includes more moderate, reform-oriented professors and journalists such as Elías Díaz Rodríguez. Cuban dissident Elian Ávila claims that while he was a college student he was recruited by Cuban state security to defend the Cuban Revolution in cyberspace. His job was part of “Operación Verdad” (Operation Truth), and involved insulting and attacking the integrity of dissident bloggers in an effort to undermine their credibility. It was his exposure to the dissidents through his counter-intelligence work that eventually led him to join the opposition.

Independently produced culture and private libraries featuring ideologically suspect publications have been circulating clandestinely on flash drives for more than a decade in Cuba, expanded upon the practice of sharing censored books, films and music in which intellectuals and dissidents have engaged for decades. The risk involved in producing or possessing counterrevolutionary material is high: Cuba’s penal code includes an enemy propaganda law that criminalizes anti-socialist verbal utterances as well as the writing, publication, circulation or possession of printed matter that contains “unauthorized news” or that “incites against the social order, international solidarity or the socialist state.” Scores of writers, independent librarians, musicians, and other artists have been arrested and given harsh sentences for such infractions since 1990. Among the most infamous cases was that of the 1991 Declaration of the Cuban Intellectuals), addressed to Fidel Castro, that called for an inclusive civic dialogue about the post-Soviet crisis on the island, a popular vote for National Assembly members, the liberation of political prisoners, the elimination of exit visas and the reinstatement of independent farmers markets. Penned by poet Mario Elena Cruz Varela and signed by nine other writers and artists, the declaration led to the arrest, imprisonment and eventual exile of the entire group. Another well-known case is that of the 75 writers, independent librarians and activists who were arrested in the 2003 sweep known as the Black Spring. Among them were 25 members of the La CUCP, a group effort initiated by the late Oswaldo Paya to circulate a proposal of law advocating democratic reforms in Cuba such as freedom of association, speech, press and religion, and amnesty for political prisoners.
Digital technology has made it easier for Cuban dissidents to disseminate their views, but economic support is also crucial to their being able to communicate with the world beyond the island. The extent to which Cuban dissidents benefit from or depend on financial support from those living abroad varies. Some dissent from the perspective that Cuban dissidents who receive financial support from outside Cuba are little more than mercenaries for the US State Department, while others view it as an effort to whitewash support for the Revolution from the US State Department. The government and its supporters claim that Cuba has maintained public silence on the country’s human rights record. Strangely, many Cuban dissidents who support academic freedom in the US and Europe seem all too willing to value the state’s prerogative over demands for transparency, which is available in Cuban English. The widespread circulation of cell phone camera photos and videos of street protests, police harassment, prisoniet protests, collapsing buildings, and emaciated hunger strikers has galvanized international support while challenging the veneer of a tropical socialist paradise put forth by Cuba’s tourist industry and cultural ministries.

Despite Cuba’s comprehensive communication restrictions, the vast majority of those funds remain in the US, going to Beltway Cuba Money Project while modest remittances are sent to the family members of political prisoners, who invariably lose their jobs when their relatives are sentenced.

Cuba’s future may be quite precarious, but the reception of the latest wave of dissidents is making it very clear that... and outside the island are finding each other as they look beyond the revolution to imagine a world without the Castros.

The presence of Cuban dissidents in the public arena is nothing if not controversial. It is impossible to speak of Cuba without encountering resistance to the notion of its very existence. There are many inside and outside Cuba who suspect that anyone from the island claiming to be an opponent of a Cuban government agent or a professional of the US State Department. For some anti-Castro hardliners, the dissidents’ calls for reforms of the existing system are insufficient. Many Cuban support remain committed to the government has widespread popular support and that substantive reform can occur within a one party state. While persistent cadre of revolutionary fellow travelers, the recent visits of prominent Cuban dissidents to the US... have brought more significant changes into relief. The overwhelmingly positive response from the Cuban exile community to the announce of the release of... Cuba is read in English. The widespread circulation of cell phone camera photos and videos of street protests, police harassment, prisoniet protests, collapsing buildings, and emaciated hunger strikers has galvanized international support while challenging the veneer of a tropical socialist paradise put forth by Cuba’s tourist industry and cultural ministries.

The Huffington Post and El País, as well as numerous specialized magazines.

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Coco Fusco is a New York based artist and writer and a 2013 Guggenheim Fellow. Her 2012 video La Plaza Vacia is a collaboration with Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez.

Notes


2 Many of these bloggers can be found through the website “Desde Cuba.” English translations of many Cuban blogs are gathered at “Translating Cuba.”

3 See the multimedio on the radical poetry-performance collective Omni Zona Franca in this issue of e-misférica for one example.


5 On the recent opening of public internet salons across the island, see Victoria Burnett, “Salons or Not, Cyberspace Is Still a Distant Place for Most Cubans”, New York Times, 9 July 2013; and the editorial in Diario de Cuba “A 4.50 CUC la hora de internet. La Habana dice que ‘no será el mercado quien regule el acceso al conocimiento’,” 29 May 2013.

6 Iroel Sánchez’s blog posts can be found on CubaDebate, an online publication whose tagline is “contra el terrorismo mediatico” or “against media terrorism”: http://www.cubadebate.cu/categoria/autores/iroel-sanchez/

7 See the November 2011 interview with Eliécer Ávila with Estado de Sats, as well as Yoani Sánchez’s February 2013 interview with Ávila; see also “Eliécer Ávila explica su evolución de estudiante revolucionario a disidente” in Diario de Cuba (14 May 2013).


12 On Orlando Zapata Tamayo, see the blog he and his supporters maintained throughout his hunger strike: [http://orlandozapatatamayo.blogspot.com/](http://orlandozapatatamayo.blogspot.com/).

13 Cuba Money Project: [Where the $ Goes?](http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org)