The Contribution of the Catholic Magazine *Espacio Laical* and the Constitution to the Cuban Public Sphere

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In contemporary political, cultural and communicational debates, the idea of the public sphere has a notable presence. According to the classical Habermasian perspective, the public sphere is the realm of social life in which public opinion can be shaped by principles such as free access for all citizens, inclusion, reciprocity, reflection, equality, and the rational justification of arguments. In this domain, people act as public when they discuss topics of general interest in conditions of equality and without coercion. These conditions guarantee, in normative terms, that the citizens can meet freely to express their opinions and points of view (Habermas, 1989). Nancy Fraser defends the influence of public discussions on decision making and believes that the formation of public opinion can be a counterweight to discourses in formal deliberative arenas. She adds that sometimes the arguments put forward by civil society actors succeed in influencing the decisions of executive and legislative powers (Fraser, 1992). Reinforcing that idea, Avritzer and Costa (2004) argue that issues, positions, and arguments defended by the new social actors must infiltrate the state through institutional mechanisms, and thus democratize and put it under the control of citizens.

However, not all real public spheres are democratic, since cultural and material inequalities determine the differentiation between publics and their capacities, especially in spaces characterized by

dependency relations and state interference (Chaguaceda, 2011). It has been pointed out that a merely conversational public sphere will not succeed in subverting power relations or guaranteeing the pursuit of the common good. The Habermasian model has also been criticized because it is confined to the analysis of the bourgeois public sphere and ignores that, together with the formation of the dominant bourgeois public, the publics were composed of peasants, workers, women, and nationalists, who constituted competing public spheres (Fraser, 1992) and complement each other. Therefore, one should not speak of sphere (singular) but of public (plural) spheres that together form the public space.

In later texts, Habermas admits the coexistence of various public spheres and the need to observe the dynamics of the communicative processes that occur outside the dominant spaces of discussion. Now the public sphere is defined as a complex network of a diversity of forums for public discussion—both in formal institutions and outside these, articulated through communicative activity, when different publics come together in organized networks to debate topics of common interest, contrasting points of view, and assuming or reaffirming positions (Marques, 2008).[1]

Whatever position one takes within that debate, the notion of the public sphere reveals its value not only for critical social theory and democratic practice, but also for understanding the limits of democracy within existing capitalism and for the construction of alternative democratic projects (Fraser, 1992), both to the present neoliberal order and to socialist experiences of Soviet court. However, the Habermasian theory did not propose a universal law applicable to any context: it is a normative model to which existing societies relate or not. As has been stated (Chaguaceda, 2011), the concept must be anchored in specific contexts and subjects, given that the analysis of the public sphere in concrete spaces shows its normative limits. Limits appear when one analyzes countries that are not governed by the principles of liberal democracy, such as Cuba.

The peculiarities of the social system established in Cuba in the early 1970s make it necessary to consult some of the sources that discuss the emergence, structure and functioning of the public spheres in the Soviet Union and the rest of the countries that made up the former socialist camp. Most of the empirical research done on the public sphere in socialist regimes has a historical-descriptive character and was carried out after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union. In general, these investigations analyzed the

emergence of public spheres integrated by dissidents and intellectual criticizers. Some scholars (Bathrick, 1995; Lauristin, 1998; Rittersporn et al, 2003; Silberman, 1997; Voronkov, 2003) state that the process of de-Stalinisation in the communist countries of Europe and the USSR, in particular, made possible the emergence of multiple spaces of organization, debate, and exchange of ideas that can be seen as prototypes of the public sphere operating without legal guarantees and under precarious conditions.

Bathrick (1995) proposed a mapping to illustrate the growing differentiation of public space in East Germany from the 1970s until the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The author defines three major interconnected spheres: the official public sphere, controlled by the Communist Party (unique); the unofficial or counterpublic sphere; and the media based in West Germany. Other studies recognize how in the official public sphere the leaders sought to legitimize the regime through educational and cultural institutions, trade unions, subordinate Party organizations, state media, study centers, and institutionalized public spaces for debate. They point out how, despite the need for criticism, and that sometimes the leaders recognized certain errors, the state apparatus was unlikely to be criticized, as the state could close the spaces of discussion before any tension arose. In practice it was a fabricated, controlled, uncritical, and restricted sphere. One of the objectives of this official structure was to make the population believe that public opinion was participatory and that the voice of citizens was heard amid decision making. However, attempts were also made to create a public space to neutralize the image of a rigid bureaucracy and a partisan state apparatus that had drifted apart from the masses. The objective was to create a public opinion that would align with the elite's discourse. Through letters with criticisms, petitions, and complaints published in the official press, most of the population was drawn into the practice of public criticism (Rittersporn et al, 2003).

In addition to this diversity of official public spheres, there were others considered as alternatives. Alternative public spheres took shelter in limited spaces and developed different ways of communication. In practice, these were divided into small groups with little influence on everyday life (Killingsworth, 2012). The peripheral position of these critical public environments reinforced fragmentation as the major feature of public spheres in Soviet-type societies (Rittersporn et al, 2003). These alternative spheres existed with the consent of the Party-State and both their level of activity and their expansion showed dramatic fluctuations (Killingsworth, 2012). Periods of apparent openness and expansion of public debate were followed by the

restraint and repression of critical dissidents and intellectuals. Religious organizations were a bastion of resistance to the official ideology of socialist states. Rittersporn et al (2003) point out that, in the German Democratic Republic (DGR) and in Poland, the meeting spaces sponsored by the churches constituted a very influential public sphere. These institutions had infrastructures and networks of communication perhaps more developed than those of the partisan authorities in the early years of the socialist regimes. Linz and Stepan (1967) claim that the Polish Catholic Church maintained a relatively autonomous sphere of government, which generated a complex pattern of reciprocal recognition and negotiations between the high clergy and the state. In contrast, Motly (1978) points out that in the Soviet Union various religious groups (Roman and Greek Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Buddhists) in opposed the regime.

As we noted earlier, the media played a key role in the functioning of the public sphere. Party control over the state media and the book industry, the instrumental nature attributed to the press,[2] and the absence of laws recognizing the rights of access to information of public interest have been essential features of the systems of public communication in socialist countries. The process of de-Stalinisation of Soviet society and the dissatisfaction of dissidents and intellectuals with the monopoly of symbolic production favored the emergence of typed publications circulated clandestinely. The main function of *samizdat*, as it was known, was to show the realities ignored by the official press. These publications concentrated a diversity of opinions and a wide range of information—a threat to the ruling elite—as well as acting as a link between people and as a means of communication that could overcome the atomization of society (Motly, 1978).

Motly (1978) pointed out that some of the religious denominations mentioned earlier distributed their publications covertly. One of them was *Exodus*, edited by the Hebrew community, and the magazine *Lithuanian Chronicle*, which provided information on the activities of Catholics and dissidents in Lithuania. British investigator Brian McNair, however, asserts that *samizdat* never threatened party control on the flow of information in Soviet society and that its circulation was restricted to small groups of political and religious dissidents. Although it played an important informative role within these groups, most of the population ignored it or did not care (Mcnair, 2006). Nonetheless, these publications were the main example of the alternative press in the USSR (Motly, 1978) and the countries of the socialist bloc.

The search for theoretical references and empirical studies on the public sphere in socialist regimes has been a complex and unfinished task. Almost all the consulted authors who investigate the spaces of debate in the countries of the former socialist camp (Bathrick, 1995; Rittersporn et al, 2003; Killingsworth, 2012) adapted the Habermasian notion to particular contexts, without ignoring its normative limits. Hence it is difficult to find an original model of socialist public sphere. According to Valdés Paz (2015, interview), the scarcity of autochthonous theoretical proposals about the public sphere in socialism can be explained by the non-incorporation of the concept in the socialist political culture, and its absence in the official ideology has resulted in the dogmatisms that reject any term or idea of liberal origin.[3] Guanche (2009) also refers to the lack of theoretical proposals on the public sphere of socialism by linking the poverty of existing theories on that subject to the precariousness of its development, as was shown in the previous section. In the past decade and a half, Cuban researchers (Guanche, 2013; Navarro, 2002; Leyva and Somohano, 2007, 2008; Valdés Paz, 2009) have contributed to the theoretical discussion on the public sphere in socialism.

In line with Fraser (1992) and Valdés Paz (2009), Leyva and Somohano affirm that the public sphere in Cuba should not be limited to opinion formation, but act as a place of confrontation between social actors with possibilities of transforming politics. Confrontation "can promote the active participation of citizens to delimit, solve and evaluate the surrounding problems" (Leyva and Somohano, 2008, p.45). The public sphere must be reconfigured, since the reproduction of socialist hegemony necessitates the formation of that sphere of citizen confrontation. The debate, criticism, and confrontation between diverse interests and different worldviews are necessary for the construction of an active consensus (Leyva and Somohano, 2007).

Julio César Guanche, jurist and researcher, defends the constitution of a public sphere where "a social space opens to the intervention of its multiple actors, which denounces and corrects the asymmetries and inequalities that make this public sphere a private enclave of the powerful" (Guanche, 2013, p.3). He adds that it is essential to develop democratic policies that empower the popular sectors to establish egalitarian interactions in a truly public sphere.

Nevertheless, we consider that the most complete normative definition made on the island has been a result of the reflections of the sociologist Juan Valdés Paz. He argues that, in socialism, the public sphere is not the liberal image of a "communicative sphere" nor the neoliberal vision that conceives it as a non-state space. The socialist

public sphere would be "a space intersected by all social systems, to which all are taxed" and where "the public good is defined and performed." Although "it is an area limited by the current legal order, its powers are determined by popular sovereignty and culture" (Valdés Paz, 2009, p.212).

Valdés Paz' concept is based on the legacy of critical Marxism and particularly on the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, who defined the proletarian public sphere as the key space for building the hegemony of socialism. The absence of a public sphere or the limitations that impede its normal functioning would preclude socialist democratic construction. For the author of *El Espacio y el Límite*, the political participation of citizens demands the establishment and expansion of the public sphere in Cuba (Valdés Paz, 2009). Such a commitment implies some prerequisites: a legal framework, an institutional space, political will that supports participation, and the formation of a culture of participation (Guanche, 2009).

In each country, the structuring of the public sphere is a prolonged phenomenon historically conditioned by cultural, political, economic, and other mediations. One of the shortcomings of the classical studies consulted is that they do not refer to the public sphere that existed prior to the adoption of one-party socialist regimes. This is an important question because, at least in Cuba, there was a diversity of spaces for political debate and publications available for different forms of thought, as well as a legal framework guaranteeing freedom of association, word, and press without any restrictions other than the respect of public morality. During the republican period (1902–58), the public sphere was one of the sources that fed the citizenship of the generation that made the 1959 revolution possible, based on principles of social justice, democracy, and national sovereignty (Chaguaceda, 2010).

During the first years of the Cuban Revolution, Cuban public space experienced great dynamism. The media environment was the main arena of debate between supporters and detractors of measures such as Agrarian Reform, as well as the concerns of the Catholic Church about the growing ideological proximity of the revolutionary government to the Soviet Union. Between 1959 and 1962 the universe of private Cuban media was nationalized, and the opposition lost its main space of expression (Valdés Paz, 2009). The Catholic Church had to be content with sending its messages through bulletins and flyers (Trujillo, 2011).

The unity of organizations and sectors related to the revolutionary government would require the necessary means and for all to work together. "The Party's Revolutionary Orientation Commission

(which led to the current Party Ideological Department) took control of the media and the press. The restructuring of the press imposed partisan discipline and partisan agenda in the newsrooms and on the reporters," but failed to produce a better journalism than previously (García Luis, 2013, p.81). Although organic to the government, the media mirrored the limited (but real) heterodoxy of thought existing within the revolutionary ranks. An indicator of the level reached by public debate in that period was the controversy about the role of art and culture in the education of the population in 1963 prompted by veteran communist leader Blas Roca and ICAIC's director Alfredo Guevara in the newspaper *Noticias de Hoy* (Leyva and Somohano, 2007). According to Fernández Retamar (2004), Che Guevara created a magazine in the Ministry of Industries to argue that if the right to dissent was denied to the revolutionaries, the conditions for the most steadfast dogmatism would be created. Thus, Cancio Isla (2002, p.57) concludes that the 1960s press "is truly attuned to the will to open society, and its contents will still be very distant from the ritualization and advertising enthroned at the end of the sixties prevailing in the following decades."

The entrance of Cuba to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in 1972 was based on the establishment of a social, political, and economic order similar to that of the USSR and its European satellites. After the First National Congress of Education and Culture, in 1971, the subordination of culture to the state and to the designs of the Party was established. The theses and resolutions on mass media approved at the First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), in 1975, guided the adoption of the Soviet press model. The media, defined as organs of the Party, the state, and the organizations related to both, became instruments of ideological and political struggle (García Luis, 2013; Valdés Paz, 2009). The media monopoly had to show the political, economic, and social achievements in Cuba and in other socialist countries. While a bureaucratic mechanism was established to regulate the critics on specific economic and administrative questions, the analysis of political and ideological questions depended on the guidelines of the Party leadership (PCC, 1975).

The Socialist Constitution promulgated in 1976 (inspired by its Soviet counterpart of 1936) recognized speech and press freedom but subordinated them to the achievement of the construction of socialism, and it established state and social ownership of the mass media. It prohibited the existence of private media, which, in theory, would

guarantee the use of the media to the "exclusive service of working people and social interest" (Constitution, 1976, Article 52).

The constitutional text does not make it clear whether "rights of assembly, demonstration and association" can be exercised outside "social and mass organizations" and that "they have all the facilities for the development of such activities" (Article 53). One of the consequences of the Sovietization of the Cuban state and society was the closing of critical publications and a reduction in spaces for discussion (Leyva and Somohano, 2008), encouraged by the intellectual vanguard of that time. The ideological parametrization (or the imposition of ideological parameters) and the impoverishment of the culture of debate was, perhaps, the legacy of that period (Alonso, 2006). In those years, there was no alternative field for the advancement of Marxist positions different from the Soviet one (Martínez Heredia, 2001).

The influences of the Soviet model encouraged the distrust of Cuban politicians in relation to the cultural sphere that was seen as a potential opposition force. In this scenario, public interventions by intellectuals should address cultural and artistic issues. Social and/or political criticism should be carried out by professional political cadres, experts, or specialists. The transgression of the tolerated limits could mean the exclusion of the intellectual from the public sphere (Navarro, 2002). The disarticulation of cultural policies that responded to the political and aesthetic postulates of socialist realism encouraged the reappearance of social and political criticism in the plastic arts, theater, literature, cinema, and essays.

To contain the influence of the Soviet *perestroika* and *glasnost*, a new offensive of the state against the interventions of intellectuals in the public sphere was unleashed in 1988 (Navarro, 2002). With the growing criticism and freedom of the publications of the Soviet press, in August of that year the distribution of magazines *Sputnik* and *Moscow News* was suspended (Rojas, 2008).

The break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991 led to an economic crisis in Cuba—not yet overcome—worsened by the strengthening of the US embargo. The crisis itself and the adjustments adopted to guarantee the country's survival significantly altered the Cuban social fabric. The opening to foreign capital, the development of international tourism, the free circulation of foreign exchange, the reception of remittances, and the resurgence of small private businesses consolidated the role of the market in the economy and created a gap of inequality among Cubans with access to the foreign currency and those who depended on wages and state assistance. The concept of

"working people" did not account for the diversity of identities, projects of life, or the plurality of forms of thought that, since the previous decade, had begun to emerge from the various sectors of society. In the margins of the political system were the actors who defended the *status quo*, those who advocated a regime change that would put Cuba back on the tracks of liberal democracy and economy, as well as those who called for democratization without abandoning socialism. The latter constituted an alternative to neoliberalism in Latin America as well as to the continuity of a model of socialism that restricted freedoms and rights.

When the most critical stage of the crisis was over, some publications in the cultural sphere changed into spaces of debate about controversial topics, including civil society, civic participation, political culture, religion, and migration. Magazines such as *Temas, La Gaceta de Cuba, Criterios*, and the Catholic ones *Vitral* and *Palabra Nueva* contributed to the shaping of broader and plural discourses (Leyva and Somohano, 2008). There are essays from this period about the concepts of civil society, developed both by Marxist scholars linked to the Centro de Estudios de América (CEA), an institution subordinate to the PCC, and by Catholic intellectuals such as Dagoberto Valdés and Enrique Estrella (1994). However, this spring of tolerance did not have stable development and duration. The publication of these discussions led to another moment of tolerance that did not last long. The most emblematic case was the repression against CEA researchers (Hoffman, 2003). In March 1996, the CEA was abolished by order of the Party Political Bureau, after the state press questioned the relevance of a discussion (Castro, 1996) and labeled the participants as members of a fifth column (Valdés Vivó, 1996). The Communist Party's monopoly was reaffirmed in the debate and promotion of issues with high political sensitivity, in addition to preventing the consolidation of an alternative current within its ranks. This stance remained mainly throughout the next decade and was characterized by the personalization of power and the greater ideologization of public debate and communication.

On July 31, 2006 Fidel Castro suffered intestinal bleeding and his brother Raúl assumed the leadership of the state and the Communist Party. In 2007, the Party encouraged popular consultations and urged citizens to openly express their views on the various internal problems affecting the economy and society. The consultations lasted until 2010, and some of the opinions and suggestions of the participants were included in the guidelines about the economic and social policy of the Party and the Revolution, a guiding document for updating or reforming the Cuban economic model. In evaluating the

results of the first popular consultation, the president reinforced the importance of public debate and the participation of the population in the economic and social transformations that the country had to initiate. He also acknowledged that the best solutions emerged from the exchange of divergent opinions and added that there was no need to fear discrepancies in a society where there were no antagonistic social classes (Castro, 2008). However, the results of this controlled debate revealed the limitations of information, articulation, political culture, and incidence of Cuban citizenship (Chaguaceda and Azor, 2011).

Although in his pronouncements Raúl Castro appeals to deepen democracy and dialogue, the political practice of the partisan elite legitimating any proposals remained.

These proposals could be modified or removed during the consultation with leaders and other members of social mass organizations. These consultations seek to rearticulate the social pact between a Party-State—whose ideology has not undergone significant changes—and a more diverse and plural society. Twenty-five years after the end of the Soviet Union, the political regime prevailing on the Caribbean island retains characteristics like those of the Eastern European regimes (single party, state ideology, political and police control) in the functioning of public everyday life. At the same time, after almost three decades of crisis and reforms within the system, certain features of social, cultural, and economic pluralism have been observed as a result of economic reforms, political liberalization, and openness to the outside world. While the monopolistic power of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) continues, leadership based on charisma[4] is being replaced by institutionalization, and compulsory mobilization is being replaced by new patterns of political acquiescence. It is also more common to implement pragmatic political solutions that do not break with official ideologies and there is still selective repression against those who oppose the system. The convergence of the described features describes a political regime in transition toward early post-totalitarianism.

The adaptation of the mapping proposed by Bathrick (1995) for the observation of Cuban public space allows us to identify four main areas: a) official public sphere; b) intellectual cultural sphere; c) oppositionist public sphere; and d) critical tolerated public sphere (1995). The official public sphere would be integrated by formal deliberative arenas: the vital organs of the Party, the parliament, ministers and state councils, municipal and provincial popular people assemblies, social mass organizations' forums, academies, state means of communication, and cultural and educational institutions. The intellectual public sphere has

a semiofficial character here because most of its members maintain links with state cultural or academic institutions with access to the internet and email, technologies that allow the establishment of national and international information exchange networks. In addition to literature, and social and cultural research, this sphere includes artistic expressions such as cinema, plastic arts, theater, and music. Not infrequently it has generated pockets of tension with the authorities.

The opposition sphere is made up by organizations and individuals that advocate the transformation of the Cuban political system in a peaceful way. Banned from the public space and the state media to publicize their actions, ideas and proposals, Cuban opponents go to the international press or use virtual platforms. In the past few years, *estado SATS*,[5] a space of debate coordinated by Antonio Rodiles, has stood out. Another significant vehicle is the *14 y Medio*,[6] an independent virtual newspaper, founded and directed by the renowned activist Yoani Sánchez, who is also author of the *Generación Y* blog. Finally, it is the critical tolerated public sphere formed by debate and publishing spaces that gather intellectuals with a critical position in relation to the government that propose the democratization of the real political system while recognizing the legitimacy of the Cuban authorities. Many of these voices manifest through personal blogs or websites such as *Havana Times*,[7] *Observatorio Crítico*[8] and *Cuba Posible*.[9]

Despite this diversity, the Cuban public space has not yet overcome its plight and fragmentation. The plight is given by the very constitution of spheres, their argumentative basis, the material conditions, since most of the spaces are indoor, some private, where few people enter. The fragmentation itself is evident in the disconnection between the different fields and discussion vehicles since some people who cannot attend certain spaces and are not allowed entry in others. It is often a fragmentation created by the official policy that actors reproduce to stay "inside the game"; as the evidence of events—in particular some outside the country, such as Latin American Studies Association (LASA)—and the very nature of the ideas espoused by them have repeatedly indicated the possibility of respectful dialogue/ debate and even the existence of common grounds, which are then blurred/repressed as the official pattern is adopted. In general, these spaces resemble the French 18th-century model of the public sphere, where an autocratic regime coexisted with spaces of debate open but restricted in access, disconnected from each other, and with relatively little impact on current policies.

The state media monopoly aggravates the fragmentation of the public sphere by ignoring discussions on issues of public interest, including

those organized in semiofficial spaces such as *Último Jueves* (Last month's Thursday).[10] Without access to the internet and other sources of information, most citizens do not know the existence of arenas of public debate outside those coordinated by the Party and traditional organizations, and lose the opportunity to participate in the formation of public opinion. Some of the mediations affecting the conformation of the public sphere in Cuba are: the limits of the structures to foment and channel the debate; the absence of a means to engage in a critical discourse that dialogs with power; and the presence of mentalities that reject exchange between subjects with diverse and contradictory ideas (Leyva and Somohano, 2007).

According to Habermas, in authoritarian regimes communicative exchanges through the internet can challenge the censorship that tries to control or repress the public opinion (White, 2008). While the fragmentation of the public face-to-face remains, the virtual environment is consolidated as a space of tensions, where important debates and disputes take place between actors from different sectors of civil society. The gradual widening of access to email and the internet, the promotion of distribution networks and consumption of alternative cultural products, popular consultations convened by the Party, the emergence of physical and virtual discussion spaces, and the appearance of dozens of digital publications are examples of the dynamism that the Cuban public sphere has gained since Raúl Castro took power. At the same time, the appropriation of information and communication technologies (ICT) threatens the control of the Cuban government over the production and distribution of information. For Rafael Hernández (2014), internet access made the traditional media lose its monopoly of information and it would be a "political illusion" to think that issues not addressed by the official press will remain silent. The diversity, the political plurality, or the realities that the official press ignores emerge through blogs, digital platforms, and publications in social networks. Díaz (2013) and Geoffray (2013) affirm that since many critical voices began to use ICT to overcome isolation, they have contributed to the configuration of a more branched and integrated virtual public sphere.

Since the 1980s, religious entities have used their magazines, newsletters, and flyers to introduce alternative voices to the official discourse, including criticisms of state policies and programs (Crahan, 2013). In 1991 the entry of religious people to the Communist Party was approved, and 1992 constitutional reform eliminated references to scientific atheism in the charter, restoring the secular character of the state. The consolidation of the Catholic press took place during the

economic crisis of the 1990s, with an increase in religious practices in Cuban society and an improvement in Church–state relations. *Palabra Nueva* and *Vitral* were the two most public Catholic magazines and their critical headlines rekindled tensions between the Party and the hierarchy of the Church. With the support of ecclesiastical authorities, the laity of the Church has turned religious publications into vehicles for the dissemination of political subjects and ideas that are deprecated by the official media. In October 2010, the Church had dozens of parish publications, 46 newsletters and magazines, 12 websites and seven electronic bulletins with an audience of 250,000 readers (Grogg, 2010). Farber (2012) says that, although less than 5% of the adult population is reached by the Catholic press, these publications have been the most significant alternative to the regime's media monopoly and have set up new audiences. Among these publications, the Catholic magazine *Espacio Laical* has been one of the most outstanding vehicles of the critical public sphere tolerated by the government. Founded in 2005 by Cardinal Jaime Ortega and led by the Lay's Council of the Archdiocese of La Habana, the magazine proposed "to create a space for the different spheres of social, political, economic and cultural activity, with the commitment of insert ourselves and contribute... [to] an increasingly prosperous and fraternal society."[1]

However, the insufficient number of Catholic intellectuals willing to send collaborations prevented the magazine from being consolidated as a Catholic publication in the style of the Italian magazine *30 Giorni*[12] (González, 2015, interview). During the advisory processes required by the Party, the editors of *Espacio Laical*, Roberto Veiga and Leinier González, considered the possibility of making the journal a facilitator of social dialogue, taking into account the diversity of actors that did not have spaces to publish their opinions, expanding the scope and inclusion of the magazine. Thus, in a context characterized by state control over public spheres, they felt the need to make visible a plurality of actors who were outside the official institutional framework (González, 2015, interview). Between 2008 and 2010, the magazine started to present more politicized speech (Corcho, 2014; Crahan, 2013; Padilla, 2016). In different texts and articles published until early 2014, it openly defended that change, as well as the strengthening of economic reforms initiated by President Raúl Castro, and the changes in the political and legal order to promote people's involvement in the shaping of their own destiny. In 2013 around 4,500 copies of the magazine were published; every three months 3,000 were circulating in churches and facilities of Havana's Archdiocese, the remainder were sent to other archdioceses of the country; the magazine also has its own

website (www.espaciolaical.org). By 2013, the site was receiving around 20,000 visits each month. Additionally, an email bulletin was used to inform the readers with little or no access to the internet (González, 2014 cit. Corcho, 2014). In April 2006, a digital supplement to deliver the contents produced between issues also started.

In 2012 the magazine ceased to be an official organ of the Council of Laity—whose leadership did not approve the political turn of the editorial line—and renewed its editorial board, which maintained the preponderance of Catholic laity but incorporated intellectuals who did not profess that faith. In this new phase, the editors reaffirmed their commitment to dialogue and consensus among Cubans with divergent political positions. In addition to continuing to critically and constructively accompany the progress of economic reforms, they advocated a political adjustment that would facilitate the flow of all political pluralism in the nation. It would continue an open-door policy to encourage citizen participation in discussions sponsored by the magazine (*Espacio Laical*, 2012). From there, some opponents of the government begin to participate in the debates.

On October 29, 2011, the intellectual Alfredo Guevara, former president of ICAIC and with institutional and personal ties with Fidel and Raúl Castro, led the conference *Dialogar, Dialogar*. Guevara expressed his views on the economic adjustments promoted by the government, criticized the bureaucracy, and advocated respect for diversity and tolerance, as promoted by *Espacio Laical* (Guevara, 2013). What was most significant were not the words of the speaker but the presence of Cardinal Jaime Ortega, lay leaders, intellectuals, and academics linked to state institutions, opponents, and ex-political prisoners. At the end of his presentation, Guevara answered questions from the audience, including those of dissident economist and former political prisoner Oscar Espinosa Chepe. Chepe thanked *Espacio Laical* for organizing civilized debates, without offense, without exclusions or absurd prejudices, because, he felt, ideological diversity exists in Cuba. Despite the natural ideological disagreements between a state official and an opponent, the economist also thanked Guevara for the open, illustrative, and democratic character of his conference.

On March 30 2012, at the Centro Cultural Félix Varela in Havana, Cuban-American Carlos Saladrigas, an important businessman and chairman of the Cuba Study Group, gave a lecture entitled "Cuba and its diaspora: attitudes and policies to be adopted by the diaspora to reintegrate into Cuba" (Saladrigas, 2012). This was one of the rare occasions when a Cuban exile who was linked to anti-Castro organizations spoke publicly in Cuba. In this second meeting were Party

members (for their own interest or sent to monitor the event), priests, laymen, opponents, academics, diplomats and correspondents of the foreign press (Ravsberg, 2012). Access was free. In the crowded room there gathered around 200 people. You could see alternative bloggers such as Yoani Sanchez or Miriam Celaya; independent journalists such as Reynaldo Escobar and Miriam Leyva; dissident economists such as Oscar Espinosa Chepe; activists for the racial integration such as Juan Antonio Madrazo and Leonardo Calvo, and the new dissident's generation, such as Eliecer Ávila or Antonio Rodiles (Muñoz, 2012). In contrast to the silence of the Cuban media, the foreign press covered Saladrigas' lecture and the debate between him and the members of the audience (García, 2012). According to Fernando Ravsberg, BBC correspondent in Cuba, the interventions of the members of the audience made evident the controversy between the different points of view: on one side the defenders of the free market and on the other side, critical communists of the government that refuse the Cuban–American capitalist's participation in the Cuban economy and insist on the construction of a true socialism system. About the politicians that attended the meeting, he said that they did not have much experience in debating with an adversary but he praised the fact that persons with antagonistic ideas can gather and share their differences with respect (Ravsberg, 2012). The presence of Saladrigas in Cuba was a step for his inclusion in the national public debate (Arreola, 2012).

The multiplicity of subjects, ideologies and currents of thought that converged in Espacio Laical, through the publication of articles, interviews and dossiers of questions on issues related to the press, the future of the Communist Party, and the rule of law, among others, formed an arena of public discussion based on rules and dynamics close to those described in the Habermasian model of the public sphere. However, the most evident legacy of the magazine was to show and to legitimize the dissent in a more diverse and plural society.

Between 2010 and 2014, activists, bloggers, intellectuals close to government, critics and dissidents, university students, officials of state institutions and Party militants, Cuban religious leaders, and academics residing abroad collaborated directly with *Espacio Laical* by sending papers or participating in face-to-face discussions. According to Veiga (2015, interview), Cuban emigrants wanted to make the most of the opportunity to exchange ideas with their fellow citizens living on the island. The magazine defended the diaspora's participation in the debates about the present and the future of the country. Collaborators and participants accepted the rules of the debates in a civilized way,

based on respect of diversity of thoughts. That dialogue reflected a pragmatic prudence of the editors and the Church, who wanted to maintain good relations with the government. It also closed doors to overt opposition, and related ideological positions. However, academics like Rafael Rojas, Haroldo Dilla, and Carmelo Mesa Lago, critics of the economic model and institutional Cuban policy, published articles in the magazine. But at the same time, social-democrat or Catholic thinkers, like Manuel Cuesta Morúa and Dagoberto Valdés—known by their opposing activism—who maintain moderate political positions towards the government and are intellectually highly productive, were not invited to publish their papers in the magazine. However, the interventions of the participants in the debates—including the dissidents—were entirely published.

We believe that *Espacio Laical*, as part of the public sphere, gave dynamism to the Cuban public space and created a network between public spheres from which collaborators emerged (to publish and to give lectures). The participation of Roberto Veiga and Leinier González in discussions organized by semi-official publications (such as *Temas* and *Criterios*), and the presence of Rafael Hernández in events sponsored by *Espacio Laical* portray the mobility of actors between different nodes of public discussion. Like most Cuban Catholic publications, *Espacio Laical* was not registered in the National Register of Serial Publications, which prevented its distribution in bookstores and newsstands, and it being made available to readers in public libraries. This state of quasi-secrecy makes it difficult for the magazine to gain a larger audience. The influence of this publication was limited to the intellectual and religious spheres.

Political scientist Esteban Morales (2015, interview) also believes that the debate was incomplete, because important academics and representatives of civil society did not collaborate with the magazine or take part in the debates. For Valdés Paz (2015, interview), himself a collaborator, the editors were able to connect actors with different visions, promote a dialogue between them, and spread it. The relationship established between groups of reviewers, the exchanges between them, the magazine itself, and public exhibitions constitute an insufficiently connected micro-network. Reception studies would be needed to prove that *Espacio Laical* articulated a larger network. Knowing the limitations that the distribution of the magazine would imply outside the Church's spaces, its editors decided that the publication would be sent directly and essentially to the academic field, the intellectuals, key actors within the Cuban government and Party, as well as all people interested in discussing political, economic, cultural,

social and religious issues (González, 2015; Veiga, 2015, interview). According to Veiga (2015, interview), the collaborations of specialists in areas deemed strategic for the development of the country captured the interest of the authorities, who began to look at the magazine with more interest.

This interest and the improvement of the distribution channels allowed *Espacio Laical* to be read by the political class. Nevertheless, Pablo Odén Marichal, Reverend of the Episcopal Church, has confirmed that he knows the magazine but does not believe that it has affected political activity or that the debates in the National Assembly take into account what is said in that publication (Marichal, 2015, interview).

Although no political leader has praised or objected to the work of the magazine, arguments between both detractors and defenders of the Cuban government exemplified pluralism of the Cuban public space. These controversies reinforce the idea of the public sphere as an arena for ideological dispute. Unfortunately, in these disputes, the intervention of unofficial spokespersons (but supported and oriented by political authorities) is not to encourage dialogue about differences, but to question the political debate or any citizen initiative that emerges outside the political system (Padilla, 2016).

In an interview published on the official website *Cubadebate*, Director of *Temas* Rafael Hernández referred to the different spaces and publications that promote social criticism. Hernández emphasized the importance of religious magazines such as *Espacio Laical*, and stated that he had cooperated with the journal more than once and defended its legitimacy (Sánchez, 2013). In the words of Valdés Paz (2015, interview), the great success of *Espacio Laical* was to be the greatest space of plurality the country had at that time. Neither governmental institutions nor mass organizations provided a space for pluralized dialogue in the way that *Espacio Laical* did. It included Cubans residing on the island and those who had emigrated, supporters of the Cuban revolution and oppositionists, as well as others who, despite advocating the continuity of socialism, are excluded from public debate. The magazine not only had an impact on the Cuban public sphere, but also marked a new possible path.

Conclusions

The notion of the public sphere refers to social models ruled by the principles of a liberal democracy and with a legal framework that guarantees the free exercise of association, expression of ideas, and their

dissemination by any means. However, research has shown that the de-Stalinization process of Soviet-style societies favored the flourishing of autonomous and semi-autonomous debate spaces, mainly among intellectuals.

Since the Cuban revolution, especially after the adoption of the Soviet model in the 1970s, the history of the transformations of public space has been characterized by cycles of openness and closure; moments of tolerance, and practices of coercion and repression. In Cuba, the existence of a public space composed of semi-official and relatively autonomous public spheres is observed. Within this universe, academic and cultural publications, along with some edited by the Catholic Church, have contributed to the configuration of a more diverse public discourse that, because of its critical nature, distances itself from official political discourse. However, it is a precarious public space, without legal protection, lacking in political recognition; a result of a mixture of thrust from below and tolerance from above, at any time reversible.

In this context, the Catholic magazine *Espacio Laical* contributed to the expansion of public debate. Between 2008 and 2014, this publication was the focus of the debate on social issues and a critical accompaniment to the process of economic reforms initiated by President Raúl Castro. *Espacio Laical* configured and sustained a true public sphere, belligerent and plural—an arena in which Catholic thinkers, liberals, and Marxists could accept each other, and discuss with civility and respect. It was a space of limited pluralism, based on the links with the Church and the type of discourse assumed by its editors, but still much wider than that of other Cuban publications that critically analyze the reality of the country.

Notes

[1] Although Habermas initially expressed his pessimism about the role of traditional media, in the 1990s he recognized the complexity of its participation in the discursive processes of legitimation and political participation (Maia, 2009). Without forgetting the mediations that affect the production of its contents, the German philosopher affirmed that in the public sphere the media acts as a kind of boundary and permeable space between the different sands that make up the center and the periphery of the political system (Marques, 2008). The media and information technologies play a key role in the constitution of public spheres, especially when the public involved are in different locations and time zones.

[2] Lenin defined the functions and principles of the revolutionary press. According to him, the press should be an instrument for information, organization, and social mobilization (García Luis, 2013; McNair, 2006). In 1905, Lenin advocated a centralized press model (Hopkins, 1965) in which the media would act as propaganda vehicles and cause collective agitation.

3   It is probable that before the 1990s the Habermasian model was little known in the international academic field. His book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, published in 1962, was translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

4   Fidel Castro occupied the apex of the pyramid during his long presidency, during which he enjoyed all-encompassing powers. After his death, in 2016, attempts have been made to turn his thinking into ideology, with open discussion of "fidelismo."

5   www.estadodesats.com

6   www.14ymedio.com

7   havanatimes.org

8   observatoriocriticocuba.org

9   cubaposible.com

10   A space for debate organized by the magazine *Temas*, it aims to stimulate critical reflection and diversity of perspectives on specific issues, to examine current problems of a cultural, social, and ideological nature that have an impact on the situation of Cuba and the world, and to facilitate a flexible and flexible discussion on these issues, for a broad audience, not necessarily specialists; www.temas.cult.cu/ultimo-jueves

11   www.espaciolaical.org/contens/ind_qs.htm; With the change of editorial board after the departure of Roberto Veiga and Lenier González (in the latter half of 2014), the magazine's objectives have undergone some modifications; this chapter refers to the magazine's approach before that change.

12   *30 Giorni* is a monthly magazine, established in 1988, which discusses ecclesiastical geopolitics.

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