Transnational school-based networks: diaspora, mobilities, and belonging

By Mette Louise Berg

Formal education has been a central tenet in the quest for modernity and nationhood across post-colonial societies in the twentieth century. Schools have been harnessed to 'inculcate the skills, subjectivities, and disciplines that undergird the modern nation-state' (Levinson and Holland 1996) with the aim of producing national subjects. Yet education also fosters aspirations of geographic mobility beyond national borders. In Cuba this tension has proven especially challenging for the socialist government.

The Lenin School was founded in Havana, Cuba, in the early 1970s as an academically selective boarding school for the most gifted pupils in the Province of Havana. Its founding ethos was one of creating the so-called New Man (*el Hombre Nuevo*), a gendered and racialised subject who would serve the Revolution and work towards building a communist society. The school was built on the outskirts of the city and constituted a town unto itself with accommodation, educational, sports and leisure facilities all on-site, exemplary of a kind of 'total institution' as defined by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1968). The age range of pupils has varied over time, and is currently 16–18, but in some periods children as young as 12 were admitted. The school is thus an important formative experience in the transition from childhood to adult life for its pupils. A woman now living in New Jersey stated emphatically: 'the school made me who I am'. While not all alumni feel so strongly about the school, for many it is a very significant part of their self-identification, and continues to be so even decades after they graduated, and even if they have long since left Cuba.

The degree of identification is evident in a statement by a Lenin

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graduate now living in Spain. For her, being an alumna of La Lenin is a vital aspect of her self-identification, to the extent that she claims it as her homeland: 'La Lenin is my passport' she said, and explained that when people ask her where she is from, she would say 'I am from La Lenin'. This statement resonates with similar assertions by other alumni, who, like her, live in diaspora. For these La Lenin alumni, school-based identification is experienced and narrated as a kind of homeland identification, thus enabling them to sidestep the vexed issue of allegiance to or rejection of the Cuban government which otherwise dominates Cuban diaspora discourse.

Identification with the school manifests itself in a plethora of internet sites dedicated to the school, most prominent of which is www.lalenin.com ('La Lenin' is the name by which the school is popularly known). Offline, alumni maintain friendships forged at the school, often transnationally. Such affective networks of school-based friendships and family relations – the two are increasingly intertwined as alumni inter-marry, and recent graduates often constitute the second generation in their family to attend the school – constitute a transnational web of belonging, produced and reproduced on- and offline through memories, narratives, and embodied performances of alumni identity. Given the close links between education and the objective of constructing a modern, independent, socialist state, it is somewhat ironic that La Lenin has produced subjects who identify with the school over and above the nation. It also suggests a paradox: the Cuban government founded the school to produce political subjects who would serve and govern socialist Cuba. By definition, if the school was successful, its alumni would therefore stay.

These paradoxical practices of identification and belonging raise questions about how diasporas are formed and the degree to which diasporans identify with their homeland over and above other modes of diasporic identification. To illustrate, diasporans may identify first and foremost as someone belonging to a particular family or lineage, or as someone from a specific village, region, or city rather than as nationals of a country or imagined homeland. Or they may think of themselves primarily as members of a particular religious group or a profession. In his contribution to this collection, Nick Van Hear proposes a disaggregation of three different spheres of

diaspora engagement, namely the household or extended family sphere; the known community sphere; and the imagined community of the nation. Disaggregating diaspora engagement in this way can help us understand not only the connections and disconnections between diasporans and those 'at home', but also the social texture of the engagement. In this chapter I provide an empirical example of diasporic connectedness emerging from the sphere of the known community, specifically the networks of the alumni of the Lenin School. Their engagement in this sphere is however also entangled with engagement in the two other spheres, as I illustrate below.

The majority of La Lenin alumni go on to study within the fields of science, engineering or architecture, and they are therefore often well placed to help each other in the world of work. Because their children also often attend the school, the web of connections and the scope for support has widened and deepened over time. As an example, Beatriz,[1] a woman in her fifties living in Havana, was a pupil at the school in the 1970s; several of her close relatives also attended after her. She married a schoolmate with whom she had two children, who also went to the school. After divorcing, Beatriz married another alumnus. These relations of kin, friends and marriage make up a dense web against which Beatriz's life unfolds. When she moved to a new neighbourhood, a fellow alumnus introduced her and her husband to other neighbours, and she also secured her current job thanks to her alumni network. When alumni leave Cuba, this same web of affective relationships and material support extends transnationally with alumni staying in touch like other transnational migrants do, and helping each other in the new country.

Sometimes transnational mobility itself is facilitated with the help of other alumni. To illustrate, Andris, who was at the school in the 1990s, left Cuba with a scholarship to study at a Spanish university. A friend from La Lenin who was already living in Spain helped him during the application process and when he arrived his friends from La Lenin picked him up at the airport. The scope for mutual support is greater where La Lenin alumni are residentially clustered, principally in the US – in particular in Miami – and in Barcelona and Madrid in Spain. Gladys was at the school in the early 1980s, and is married to another alumnus. She works at a public university in

Miami where she often meets La Lenin alumni among the students. She said she spots them from their manner of speaking and, when she can, helps them find jobs through other alumni who are running businesses in the Miami area.

To conclude, school-based diaspora networks are common across many diasporic groups; they can command considerable loyalty, and often mobilise diasporans who are relatively well-educated. However, school-based diaspora networks and associations have not been studied systematically. Rather, they are often lumped together with hometown associations in diaspora literature, but are in fact quite distinct from these, e.g. in the class profile of their constituents. School-based diaspora networks highlight the intimate nexus between social and spatial mobility: social mobility through schooling often leads to desires for spatial mobility, while spatial mobility is often pursued or desired in order to facilitate social mobility. The case of transnational school-based networks centring on the Lenin School in Havana illustrates this nexus. Approaching diaspora engagement from the middle sphere of engagement in the known community, in this case a school-based network, opens up the possibility of problematising the relationship between nation/nationalism and diaspora. It pushes us to consider the social texture of diaspora engagement, its affective hold on diasporans, and helps us fine-tune our understanding of social differentiation within diaspora groups.[2] □

Endnotes

1. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.
2. For further reading see Berg (2015).

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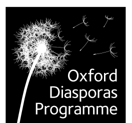

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