

Research

Plagiarism Reassessed: A Culturalist Take on Academia's Cardinal Sin

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My interest in the cultural dimensions of plagiarism was first aroused by an article published in the *European English Messenger* some years ago, which recounted one woman's teaching experiences at some unspecified Central European university. The reality described in the article clearly comes as a shock to someone brought up on North American standards. For not only is "cheating" endemic in that culture ("my students ask each other for answers in exams, and copy from their neighbours' scripts, or from half-concealed notes – all without apparent knowledge of wrongdoing or expectation of punishment" [Gadpaille 2004: 57]), more significantly, no shame seems to accrue to the practice. Instead, "information is widely viewed as common property; honour lies in sharing rather than monopolizing, and competition for grades is minimal" (idem).

Reflecting upon possible causes for this discrepancy, Gadpaille considers, but rejects, the commonplace notion that "group support is blameable on the socialist past, which encouraged collective activity and identity" (idem); for as she points out, the students in question were very young when the political system changed and therefore could not be expected to have fully internalised the tenets of "brotherhood and unity".

Moreover, the attitudes she describes are by no means limited to socialist countries. My own experience as a teacher in several southern European and Middle Eastern countries has led me to realise that notions of academic integrity can by no means be taken for granted everywhere at any level of the academic system. That is to say, in addition to student cheating, I have also encountered widespread plagiarism amongst established academics, not to mention other forms of "corruption", such as trading in influence, endogamous appointments, and other non-democratic procedures. The fact that most of these have only recently begun to be viewed with opprobrium suggests that some other dynamic is at work in these countries, an issue that merits further attention.

In this short article, I would like to tentatively put forward a different culturalist explanation for the phenomenon that is hopefully not constrained by particular political regimes. It is based upon Tönnies' 1887 model, in which he distinguishes between two broad social systems he labels *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (2002). The former is understood as an organic community, bound by a common *geist*, whose members share bonds of kinship and land, with common ownership and a strong sense of intra-group cooperation. The latter, in contrast, is an artificial aggregate of individuals linked only by the rational ties of contract, and where notions of individual ownership prevail over the

communal.⁷ In this context, competition is strongly encouraged as a way of generating wealth and expertise; hence, failure to abide by the rules is perceived as an affront to the whole notion of citizenship and fair play.

In the *Gemeinschaft* model, members of the group cooperate with each other against the 'Other', which may be a foreign tribe or the organisms and representatives of the modern State. This may help to explain the tolerance of plagiarism found in such cultures. For what the *Gesellschaft* views as despicable cheating is a normal, even honourable, mode of being in the *Gemeinschaft*. As with other forms of "corruption", it is a way of displaying loyalty to the immediate group, which is privileged over and above abstract notions of state, citizenship or humanity.

The clash of values that this represents is worthy of further reflection, particularly in the light of contemporary critiques of globalization. For, as Love (2003: 149) points out, "what most of us would call plagiarism has not always been wrongful". Indeed, the notion that words/ideas can be owned is actually a relatively new one in the scholarly context, and seems to have coincided with the onset of *Gesellschaft* values. Kewes (1998) suggests that the perception of texts as private property took place around the same time as the land enclosures and derived from a similar impulse. Other important influences will have been the development of technology (particularly the printing press), capitalism and modern science, as described below.

The word "plagiarism" derives from the Latin *plagiarius*, which actually meant "the abductor of someone else's slave or child". It was Martial (Epigram, i.72) who first applied it to literary theft, though it does not appear to have elicited the same degree of condemnation as it does today, being deemed on a par with "...old women wearing dentures, or unattractive women wearing makeup or bald men wearing wigs!" (Orgel, 63-64). Its first modern usage was in Lorenzo Valla's treatise of Latin Stylistics, the *Elegantiae* (1444), in which the author describes how he discovers that one of his friends had been passing his work off as his own. "I recognize this little lesson", he says. "I claim it as my own chattel and I can have you up on charges under the law of kidnapping" (cit. Bjørnstad, 2008: 5-7). Clearly, individual authorship was by now becoming important and people had started to become precious about their words.

However, this had not always been the case. Pre-modern (*Gemeinschaft*) epistemological systems had a more communal attitude to texts, seeing them as repositories of knowledge which individuals could draw upon at will (Randall, 2001: 33-35; Kewes, 2003: 7-8; Love, 2003: 150-153). Medieval Scholasticism reserved the term "author" (*auctor*) for those ancient authorities that had produced great truths in accordance with Christian doctrine, and these were copied and repeated by modern writers (known as *scriptores*, *compilatores* or *commentators*⁸) in an effort to disseminate them as widely as possible. Indeed, decontextualised fragments of text from ancient

⁷ There have of course been other designations for the same phenomenon: Marxist discourse speaks of feudal vs. capitalist economies, while Giddens (1991) labels them "premodern" vs. "modern" societies.

⁸ Even Chaucer considered himself to be no more than a compiler or 'rehearser' of others' stories (Randall 2001: 35; 197-205).

sources (*sententiae*), which would freely circulate without any reference to the original author, were an important tool of Scholasticism.

With the advent of Humanism, there was a shift away from the notion of copying to that of imitation (*imitatio*). Students assiduously studied the rules of composition by paraphrasing and translating the works of the masters, copying tropes and phrases into commonplace books for incorporation into their own work. However, now slavish adherence to the form of the models was rather looked down upon, and it became important to transform that old material in some way (Randall 2001: 37-8).

Nevertheless, the concept of original authorship was not the same as it is today. Medieval and Renaissance societies were both *Gemeinschaft* structures, which aimed to reproduce the traditions of the tribe. It was not until the 16th/17th centuries that the great upheaval began that converted the old feudal *Gemeinschaft* system into a modern *Gesellschaft*. The emergence of a market for print meant that people could now earn a living by publication, which boosted the status and economic standing of professional authors, while at the same time, the scientific revolution discredited the imitation of authority, laying the focus very clearly upon individual discovery. New genres, such as the experimental paper, scientific journal and book review appeared at this time, which Johns (1998: 464) suggests “may plausibly be seen as mechanisms for making and protecting the credit of documentary evidence when that credit was otherwise insecure”. Indeed, the scientists of the Royal Society were very concerned about plagiarism and piracy, as their honour as gentlemen, and the reliability of their findings were at stake.

Today, of course, plagiarism is taken very seriously indeed, as reputations and funding depend upon it. The website of Oxford University (www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism) states the issue in the clearest possible terms:

It would be wrong to describe plagiarism as only a minor form of cheating, or as merely a matter of academic etiquette. On the contrary, it is important to understand that plagiarism is a breach of academic integrity.

The same website goes on to provide a long list of forms of plagiarism, which not only includes common offences such as verbatim quotation of other people’s work without acknowledgement, cutting and pasting from the Internet, and the use of professional agencies, but also lesser known transgressions such as paraphrasing with only minor alterations; collusion (eg. collaboration from students); inaccurate citation; failure to acknowledge all assistance; and self-plagiarism.

Yet in the postmodern era, there has been something of a backlash against this proprietorial attitude towards words and ideas. “It is language that speaks, not the author” said Barthes in “The Death of the Author” (1968), suggesting a return to a situation not unlike that which dominated in the premodern era. Other contributions to this revision include Foucault’s “What is an author?” (1969), Derrida’s “Différance” (1972), Bakhtin’s dialogism and Kristeva’s intertextuality, all of which challenge concepts of originality. As a result, the closing decades of the 20th century saw a proliferation of experimental academic discourses that incorporated fragments of different voices and unreferenced pieces of text in conscious defiance of the hegemonic model.

However, the extent to which these experiments are influential today in the Anglo-Saxon world is debatable. The overwhelming pervasiveness of the capitalist mindset and ever-stronger links between the universities and business seems to be reinforcing the sense of proprietorship over intellectual produce. One of the results of this is that we seem to be moving inexorably towards a multi-tiered academic world in which readiness to uphold and enforce the standards of the centre is perceived as a marker of a nation's maturity. Irrespective of the ideological justifications mobilised, tolerance of plagiarism or "cheating" of any kind is now likely to result in the countries or institutions concerned being relegated to a lower league, and ultimately denied a place at the centre of influence.

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Reports and Reviews

Crossing the Borders. Transgressing the Boundaries in Literatures in English.
University of Prešov, Slovakia (26-27 October 2009).

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The study of new literatures in English and post-colonial studies have become a rapidly developing field of study in Europe in the past decades. In Slovakia, the University of Prešov and Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra have been particularly active in promoting this field: among the results of these activities was a conference focusing on New Literatures in English in Nitra in 2006 and three following conferences organized by the University of Prešov in 2007, 2008 and 2009. The focus of the last conference reported here was a metaphorical understanding of the idea of crossing borders and transgressing boundaries, echoing the post-structuralist, postmodern and recent re-definition of literary canons and