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The geopolitics of academic plagiarism[17]

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1. Just how serious an offence is academic plagiarism?[1]

Judging by the ominous warnings issued to students by universities in the Anglo-Saxon world (Abasi & Graves, 2008) and the sense of moral outrage with which transgressors are pursued (Pennycook, 1996; Martin, 1994), the answer to that question would seem to be 'very serious indeed'. In fact, the University of Oxford's website (n.d.) is unequivocal on the matter:

> 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.

Consequently, those found guilty of 'committing' plagiarism (the collocation is significant) face the most severe penalties that academia can muster: expulsion, disgrace and, in extreme cases, even prosecution under the Copyright Act.

Yet in many other countries of the world, plagiarism, like other forms of academic corruption, is not viewed with quite the same degree of opprobrium. Gadpaille (2004, p. 57) reports that, in the unspecified Central European country where she worked, not only was cheating endemic in the culture, no shame seemed 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'. Similarly, Sherman (1992, p. 191) found that first-year students in an Italian university gave verbatim answers

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without any kind of analysis or sourcing, clearly viewing this as 'not only legitimate but correct and proper'; while Deckert (1993) claimed that the Chinese students in his study routinely engaged in a form of 'learned plagiarism' (p. 95), which involved, amongst other things, rote memorising and recycling (p. 140).

Clearly, then, there is a cultural dimension to plagiarism that urgently needs to be addressed in the increasingly globalised world of modern academia.

Attitudes towards authorship, originality and intellectual property have not always been what they are today (Randall, 2001; Kewes, 2003; Love, 2003). In mediaeval Scholasticism, the term 'author' (auctor) was reserved for those ancient authorities that had produced great truths in accordance with Christian doctrine, and contemporary writers, considered mere *scriptores*, *compilatores* or *commentators*[2], were expected to copy them as faithfully as possible for the purpose of dissemination. In fact, decontextualised fragments of text from ancient sources (*sententiae*) circulated freely at this time with no reference to the original author at all. Similarly, in Humanism, imitation (*imitatio*) had an important part to play in the learning process, and students would copy tropes and phrases of the masters into commonplace books for incorporation into their own work (Randall, 2001; Kewes, 2003). Indeed, the notion that words/ideas can be owned only really developed in the 16th/17th centuries, when the emergence of a market for print meant that people could now earn a living by publication.[3]

In this article, therefore, I consider plagiarism not as a universal or unequivocal evil, but as one component of a particular ethical system that took hold within a specific historical and social context, roughly contemporary with the European Enlightenment (Scollon, 1995; Pennycook, 1996). Today, that ethical framework is so deeply entrenched in the power structures of the modern world that its values go largely unquestioned in countries at the centre of the world economic system. However, as we move away from the centre towards the semi-periphery and the periphery, we find that those values become weaker, and may enter into conflict with another moral code, which is usually more traditional in nature, though no less coherent. Indeed, in some parts of the world, those traditional values actually hold sway in local universities (Canagarajah, 2002), thus raising serious problems for academic mobility and the internationalisation of knowledge.

There has been a certain amount of cross-cultural research into attitudes to plagiarism, with most of the early work (for example, Matalene, 1985; Myer, 1998; Sherman, 1992; Bloch & Chi, 1995; Deckert, 1993) stressing the influence of home

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

3   Other important influences were the advance of technology (particularly the printing press), capitalism, and the development of modern science, which discredited the emulation of textual authorities, placing the emphasis firmly upon observation and experimentation (Johns, 1998, pp. 445-62).

culture norms upon foreign student production in English. Much of this is very culture-specific. For example, Gadpaille (2004) describes how communism is often blamed for the lack of respect for individual intellectual property in eastern European countries, while Harris (as cited in Pennycook, 1996) suggests that Confucianism may have conditioned Chinese students' attitudes to textual authority. In this chapter, however, I would like to put forward a more wide-ranging explanation based upon Tönnies's 1887 model of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, which, I believe, can account not only for present-day disparities in attitudes to plagiarism, but also for changes in those attitudes over time. What is more, this model also offers a much-needed critical perspective on the values that centre scholars take so much for granted, providing a sympathetic view of the mechanisms generating plagiarism and other forms of academic 'corruption' amongst non-centre scholars.

2. What is academic plagiarism?

Before launching into our geopolitical exploration of academic cultures, let us begin by establishing exactly what is meant by plagiarism today. Modern dictionaries tend to be laconic on the matter, defining it as the 'appropriation of the writings or ideas of another' or as 'literary theft'. However, in practice the word is used to cover a wide range of related offences. The Oxford University website (n.d.) includes not only 'the verbatim quotation of other people's work without acknowledgement', but also 'paraphrasing with only minor alterations', 'collusion', 'inaccurate citation', 'failure to acknowledge all assistance', recourse to 'professional agencies' and 'self-plagiarism'.

Moreover, the meta-discourse surrounding the subject of plagiarism is confusingly ambivalent. Despite the fact that it is not in itself a legal offence (Goldstein, 2003/1994), it is often presented as a form of 'stealing' — that is to say, a crime against the inalienable property rights of the individual (Pennycook, 1996) — though as Bjørnstad (2008) points out, it is difficult to see just what has been stolen, since the author does not have fewer words after the theft. Others prefer to cast it as 'fraud'[4], thereby emphasising the dimension of deceit and illicit gain. Yet others adopt a quasi-religious moralistic tone, rather than a legalistic one, seeking to shame potential perpetrators into obeisance with references to 'dishonesty' and 'integrity' (Abasi & Graves, 2008, pp. 228-9) or 'sin' (Martin, 1994, p. 36; Sutherland-Smith, 2005, p. 90). Hence, although there is a general consensus amongst centre institutions and commentators that it is wrongful, not everyone agrees as to why exactly it is, with plagiarised authors and educators tending to mobilise quite different arguments in their own defence.

What all of these discursive strands have in common, however, is that they are all tightly enmeshed in the network of Enlightenment values and beliefs underpinning

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4   For example, St Onge (1988, p. 62) describes it as 'verbal fraud', involving 'illicit gains by illicit methods'.

modern society. This ideology not only conceives the individual author as sovereign, rational and autonomous, and in full conscious possession of his words (Scollon, 1995), but has also elevated the pursuit of material gain into a fundamental principle, holding private property sacrosanct and fostering competition as an incentive to productivity and excellence. Hence all practices that undermine these basic market principles are viewed with great distrust, both because they are unfair on 'honest' competitors, and because they threaten the very infrastructure of the whole economic game.

Modern academic transactions, like other marketplace operations, are governed by relationships of *contract*, which presuppose a need for transparency and respect for certain fundamental rights (such as the right to property, the fruits of one's labour, and so on). Whether plagiarism is framed as theft, fraud or simple dishonesty, it therefore constitutes a breach of contract, which inevitably injures other parties — authors, teachers, examiners, fellow students, the academic institution (the name of which may be tarnished), future employers or, in some high-profile cases, the public at large. A British study into students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997) showed that students who had been raised in that culture clearly shared these basic principles. For example, one student commented about cheating: 'It's not fair on other students, because I think we are all in competition with each other for the 1st, 2i's and 2ii's' (as cited in Ashworth et al., p. 190). Another believed that 'pressing tutors for help with assignments is a bit wrong because that information should be shared to the whole class' (p. 191). Similarly, the respondents who actually justified cheating and plagiarism did so on the grounds that the university assessment systems and teaching methods were flawed, thereby drawing on the same fundamental argument of 'fair play'.

However, we cannot take it for granted that members of non-centre countries have all internalised these principles quite so fully. As has already been mentioned, early studies into attitudes to plagiarism amongst EFL students (Matalene, 1985; Myer, 1998; Sherman, 1992; Bloch & Chi, 1995, Deckert, 1993) suggested that they were operating according to norms imported from their own cultures and were often shocked to find that these were incompatible with the requirements stipulated by universities in the host country. Consequently, authors such as Scollon (1995) and Pennycook (1996) have called for a more relativistic view of such practices:

> … [W]hereas we can see how the notion of plagiarism needs to be understood within the particular cultural and historical context of its development, it also needs to be understood relative to alternative cultural practices. (Pennycook, 1996, p. 218)

It is in this light that Tönnies's model of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft seems particularly relevant, as it offers an explanation of not only the dynamics operating in different cultural situations today, but also the way in which these change over time.

3. Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Ferdinand Tönnies's influential work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* was first published in 1887 at a time when the traditional peasant lifestyle in Germany was being irrevocably transformed by the rationalistic forces of mechanisation and commercialisation. Having been brought up in an affluent peasant family, Tönnies naturally viewed these changes with some alarm (Loomis & McKinney, 2002/1957), a personal perspective which undoubtedly coloured his judgement about the relative merits of the two social systems in question. Despite this bias, however, his model has proved to be very influential, offering, amongst other things, a useful counterpoint to Spencer's evolutionary model that was dominant at the time.

In Tönnies's work, the everyday German words *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (literally 'community' and 'society') acquire the force of technical terms within a coherent sociological theory. 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 co-operation. The latter, in contrast, is an artificial aggregate of individuals linked only by the rational ties of contract, where notions of individual ownership prevail over the communal.[5] 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.

Crucial for our understanding of plagiarism and other forms of 'corruption' in pre-modern societies is the fact that, in the Gemeinschaft, members of the group co-operate with each other against the 'Other', whether this be a foreign tribe or the organisms and representatives of the modern state. What the Gesellschaft views as despicable cheating is a normal, even honourable, mode of being in the Gemeinschaft, to the extent that, if a 'friend' requests help in drafting a text, passing an examination or acquiring a position or privilege, it would be extremely impolite to refuse. That is to say, loyalty to the immediate group is privileged over and above abstract notions of state or citizenship.

Similarly this notion of 'commonality' that pervades human relations in the Gemeinschaft[6] also extends to property, with obvious repercussions upon the issue of plagiarism. Canagarajah (2002, p. 131), in his seminal work *The Geopolitics of Academic Writing*, explains that, in peripheral academic cultures, such as his own home country of Sri Lanka, 'the idea of intellectual property is less clear-cut' than in centre universities:

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5   There have been other designations for the same phenomena. Marxist discourse speaks of feudal versus capitalist economies, while contemporary sociologists such as Giddens (1990) and Bauman (2000) refer to 'premodern' versus 'modern' societies.

6   'Common goods — common evils; common friends — common enemies' (Tönnies, 2002, p. 50).

> Borrowing from other texts, like borrowing freely from others' words in the communal stock of oral knowledge, is unrestricted. The ownership of knowledge is fluid, just as copyright laws are hardly in operation. Local scholars see themselves as freely borrowing from and contributing to the pool of available knowledge.

This implies that plagiarism is scarcely recognised as an issue in such environments, much less a reason for expulsion or disgrace.

The question of authority is also of interest here, as it reflects directly upon the notion of 'originality', so highly prized by the modern university (Pennycook, 1996). Tönnies (2002, p. 41) distinguishes three forms of authority in the Gemeinschaft — 'the authority of age, authority of force, and authority of wisdom or spirit', all of which are united in the figure of the father, 'who is engaged in protecting, assisting, and guiding his family'. This paternalistic prototype is reproduced in the master/disciple relationship (Tönnies, 2002) found in institutions such as craft guilds, professional corporations and, by extension, the university. It is significant that originality, in the modern sense, has little role to play in the disciple's training. Instead, the dominant attitude is one of acquiescence, passive reproduction of authoritative models, and absorption of the master's skills and knowledge, in exchange for protection and promotion.

The master/disciple unit is also the building block of the whole system of patronage that is central to social relations in the Gemeinschaft. Unlike the modern university, where there is stringent competition at all stages of the academic career, the Gemeinschaft university is viewed more as a traditional Alma Mater that nurtures its offspring and encourages their trajectory through the system. Hence, in such cultures, mobility tends to be *vertical* rather than *horizontal* (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 197), as teachers are typically recruited from the student body and propelled through the various stages of the academic career fairly automatically (p. 190). As a result, there may be no real competition for jobs; instead, junior staff enjoy the support of more senior professors, who operate 'minifiefdoms' (p. 195), promoting their protégés and cultivating extensive circles of influence in the process. Moreover, as career progression depends more upon interpersonal connections than upon academic production, the 'publish or perish' ethos that dominates in the Gesellschaft also tends to be absent from the Gemeinschaft (pp. 14, 190), and publications, where they occur, are not usually peer-reviewed. Once more, originality is not at a premium. Instead what counts, in editorial decisions, is ensuring that local authorities are properly represented and that due respect is paid.

Given the *magister dixit* ethos that prevails in the Gemeinschaft, students are not encouraged to challenge or dispute authority. In lectures, they are expected to take down the professor's words and to reproduce them verbatim in examinations. Consequently, their intervention in class will be minimal, couched, when it occurs, in highly respectful language. It is hardly surprising, then, that students from Gemeinschaft cultures have difficulty coping with the demands for originality that are made of them in Gesellschaft

universities. Indeed, the very concept of student originality must appear to them as deeply at odds with their whole notion of what education entails.

4. The limitations of the model

Despite its usefulness for explaining some of the discrepancies between different academic cultures, the Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft model does, however, have limitations, as pointed out by Loomis and McKinney in their introduction to the English edition of Tönnies's work (2002/1957, p. 7). In particular, it should be remembered that the two categories are ideal types that are rarely found in a pure form today. So, although Canagarajah's (2002) description of the 'peripheral' academic community has much in common with Tönnies's notion of the Gemeinschaft, such cultures are nevertheless subject to a centripetal force that puts pressure upon them to adapt to centre values (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 41). In such environments, we find modern science existing alongside indigenous forms of scholarship (pp. 50-4), and old-style professors whose social status is 'ascribed' by the traditional hierarchy (p. 226) sharing departments with young socially mobile researchers who have been trained abroad. This conflict of values is particularly evident amongst countries of the 'semi-periphery'[7], which, for geographical and economic reasons, have strong incentives to assimilate to the centre, in some cases becoming more precious about centre values than the centre countries themselves.[8]

Conversely, within the most 'developed' Gesellschaft societies, there are inevitably pockets of Gemeinschaft culture which prove resistant to modern market values. For example, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge have often been accused of non-meritocratic practices, such as favouring students from certain independent schools (with which they have traditional ties) above brighter students from state institutions, and awarding degrees to undeserving candidates on the basis of social status or family connections. And even the more progressive universities are not always single-minded about the role ascribed to them by neoliberal governments (a role which usually involves training highly specialised personnel to supply the organs of industry and capitalism) or about the fact that they are now expected to function almost as bureaucratic corporations committed to the pursuit of 'excellence'. These uncertainties generate tensions that may filter down and affect university practices in the most unexpected ways.

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7   The term 'semi-periphery' was coined by Wallerstein (1984) and refers to those countries that are positioned, geographically and economically, between the core and the periphery of the world system and have characteristics of each.

8   This centripetal pressure may explain why Abasi and Graves's (2008) more recent survey of foreign students' attitudes to plagiarism in a Canadian university presented different results to the earlier studies described above. Rather than expressing bewilderment at the whole notion that copying might be wrong, these students now seemed to share the same basic moral framework as the host culture, but claimed that, in their home countries, the offence was treated as less serious and not subject to the same harsh sanctions.

Despite the fact that most people brought up in centre countries tend to subscribe unequivocally to the Enlightenment values of fair play and transparency, the whole issue of plagiarism is rife with contradictions. Take the question of originality. As Pennycook (1996) has pointed out, at undergraduate level, students are usually engaged in acquiring a fixed canon of knowledge and terminology (not so different, in fact, from Gemeinschaft apprentices learning the tools of the trade); they are often encouraged to imitate published models in order to acquire agility in the disciplinary discourse.[9] In the light of this, exhortations to be original seem rather misplaced, for until one has firmly mastered the discourse norms, reformulation is a risky business. As one Taiwanese student pointed out, if she didn't stick closely to the terms used in the book, she would never learn to use them effectively (as cited in Currie, 1998, p. 11).

Then there is the question of authority. The very fact that this is a more fluid notion in the Gesellschaft than in the Gemeinschaft brings its own problems. Students learn that they are expected to quote authorities in the field to demonstrate their breadth of reading and knowledge of the state of the art. But just who or what should be quoted? Is the professor that provides a potted overview in a lecture a worthy source? What about the introductory textbook? And just how much basic knowledge is required before one is even in a position to approach those authorities critically?

There is also a hierarchical dimension to plagiarism that is at odds with the Gesellschaft's view of itself as eminently meritocratic. That is to say, students that fail to acknowledge their sources are open to charges of plagiarism, while established academics are rarely considered to be committing the same offence when they 'borrow' ideas from their students or juniors. Indeed, in the sciences, where teams of researchers habitually collaborate on papers, it is often a junior that writes up the article while the senior researcher (who may have played a minimal role in practice) receives the credit. As Pennycook (1996, p. 213) points out, 'much of what gets claimed as the result of original academic work actually draws heavily on the work of silent others — women, graduate students, research assistants and so on'.[10] Ironically, the justification given is that the junior in question is a 'novice' or 'trainee' who is operating under the supervision of someone more experienced — which suggests that the power balance involved is remarkably similar to that operating in the traditional Gemeinschaft relationship of master/disciple.

Finally, the question of plagiarism is also underpinned by the gritty philosophical problem of the relationship between words and things. Modern science is predicated upon a philosophy of linguistic realism, which posits the ultimate separability of form

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9   Indeed, many of the books used for the teaching of Academic English today employ techniques of *imitatio* not so different from those used in the Early Modern period within the Humanist rhetorical tradition.

10   Martin (1994) has dubbed the socially acceptable practice of plagiarising the work of subordinates 'institutionalised plagiarism'.

and content; enjoinders to reformulate, paraphrase and summarise therefore presuppose that 'reality' is prior to language and has an objective existence independent of perception or the forms that are used to encode it. Yet this philosophical viewpoint is by no means shared by all intellectual cultures (Pennycook, 1996), nor is it internally coherent. For if science does indeed lift the veil on some pre-existing objective reality, then where does authorship come in? How can such 'truth' be referenced?

Of course, the answer to this is that the 'facts' that science purports to reveal are merely claims that have been sanctioned by the discourse community:

> The construction of academic facts is a social process, with the cachet of acceptance only bestowed on a claim after negotiation with editors, expert reviewers and journal readers, the final ratification granted, of course, with the citation of the claim by others and, eventually, the disappearance of all acknowledgment as it is incorporated into the literature of the discipline. (Hyland, 1999, p. 342)

However, there is clearly a discrepancy between the constructed nature of scientific knowledge and its meta-discourse of transcendent truth, and this possibly raises the most complex challenge to the whole issue of plagiarism. Traditional science textbooks, at undergraduate as well as high-school level, tend to present accepted knowledge as incontrovertible fact, using grammatical structures such as nominalisations, impersonal verb forms and cause-and-effect linkers (Veel, 1998; Halliday & Martin, 1993) to build a picture of an objectively existing world from which all human agency is removed. It is therefore not surprising if students are perplexed when they are faced with all the messiness and uncertainties of 'science in the making' (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981). As Scollon (1994) has pointed out, it takes considerable expertise to know just when a claim has achieved the sort of consensual recognition that allows referencing to be dispensed with — that is to say, when it is no longer considered to be merely some scientist's theory and has passed into the exalted realm of 'fact'.

The issue of plagiarism is therefore something of a minefield that one has to be very adept to negotiate. No wonder, then, that so many students, foreign and domestic, take the 'safe path' of constructing their texts as 'patchworks' or 'mosaics' of referenced citations from different sources, in which their own input is limited to linking those sources together (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Currie, 1998; Ashworth et al., 1997). In the current climate of persecution, this is at least one way of 'staying out of trouble' (Currie, 1998).

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the concept of plagiarism is deeply embedded in the web of values and beliefs that sustains modern society, and as such, may be a source of (understandable) confusion for students and scholars raised in Gemeinschaft cultures, where a whole different ethos may prevail with regard to property, knowledge and authorship. What is more, the concept itself is also full of inherent contradictions,

caused, at least in part, by historical tensions generated by the passage from one kind of society to the other. Vestiges of the Gemeinschaft continue to penetrate all aspects of modern university culture, ranging from teaching practices (the persistence of *imitatio* in academic writing courses) and hierarchical relations (the power balance inherent in the tutor/student dynamic) to the very philosophy of knowledge underlying modern science (where the rhetorical implications of the citation procedure sit uncomfortably alongside a meta-discourse of transcendental truth).

I have not even mentioned here the wide-ranging critiques of modernity brought by the poststructuralists, despite their profound implications for the subject of plagiarism, as they have been amply treated elsewhere (Randall, 2001; Pennycook, 1996; Thompson & Pennycook, 2008; Scollon, 1995). However, what links Barthes's 'Death of the author' (1968), Foucault's 'What is an author?' (1969), Derrida's 'différance' (1972), Bakhtin's 'dialogism' (1975) and Kristeva's 'intertextuality' (1966) is the belief that all knowledge is mediated by language, which is culturally constructed, and therefore partial and value-ridden. Not only does this makes a mockery of the whole notion of originality (since we learn about the world through the categories set up by our discourses), it also undermines any attempt to claim ownership of words, which are common property and resist appropriation.

At the end of the last century, when poststructuralism was at its height, it seemed as if we might be returning to a Gemeinschaft notion of intellectual property; indeed, a number of alternative academic discourses sprouted up at that time[11], some of which self-consciously employed (unacknowledged) fragments of other discourses, creating deliberate echoes and patchwork effects. However, this tide seems to have receded. Instead, the forces of capitalism, industry and technology which govern our world have tightened the rules of the game, pushing universities into ever-closer partnerships with business, as public sector funding recedes. In a world dominated by patents and copyrights, the plagiarism police are, if anything, becoming even more relentless.

It is curious that the first person to use the term *plagium* in its present-day sense, the Roman poet Martial[12], did not deem it very serious at all. In fact, he rated it on a par with 'old women wearing dentures, or unattractive women wearing makeup or bald men wearing wigs!' (Orgel, pp. 63-4). Today, however, the rewards for youth and beauty are so high that many are turning to drastic forms of plastic surgery to achieve that goal. Instead of persecuting these imposters, perhaps we should first question the social pressures operating upon them and the dominance of a value system that prompts them to act in this particular way.

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11   These include the various experimental discourses of qualitative research, the emancipatory 'écritures' of feminism and postcolonialism, and the dense interventionist prose of Critical Theory.

12   In his Epigram I.72, Martial applied the Latin word *plagium* (literally 'kidnapping', usually of a slave or child) to the practice of passing off someone else's literary work as one's own (see Orgel, 2003; Randall, 2001; Goldstein, 2003/1994).

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