Plagiarism: A Misplaced Emphasis

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The Problem as Normally Conceived

Among intellectuals, plagiarism is normally treated as a grievous sin. In higher education, which is both the central training ground and a key employer of intellectuals, students are warned of the seriousness of the offense. Some teachers have developed laborious or sophisticated means of detecting it. The authors of one paper on the subject recommend reading essays four times as part of the process of rooting out plagiarism (Bjaaland and Lederman, 1973). Meanwhile, computer scientists have studied complex algorithms for assessing likely cases (Faidhi and Robinson, 1987). An alternative is to prevent plagiarism by designing assessment procedures appropriately, for example, by getting students to use their own experiences in creative writing (Carroll, 1982). Academics can set a good example by giving appropriate credit for sources used in preparing their lectures and notes (Alexander, 1988). At the institutional level, plagiarism is normally addressed through formal policies, including penalties for transgressions (Thomley, 1989). Another approach is to introduce an honor system in which students pledge to not cheat and to report cheating by other students (Fass, 1986). The problem of plagiarism can also lead to a reconsideration of educational philosophy (Malloch, 1976).

In spite of the seriousness with which student plagiarism is treated by academics, their collective efforts seem to be inadequate to the size of the problem (Baird, 1980; Connell, 1981; Galles, 1987; Stavisky, 1973; but see Karlins, Michaels, and Podlogar, 1988). Undoubtedly no more than a small fraction of student plagiarism is ever detected and, of that which is detected, serious

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penalties are imposed on only a minority of offenders. It is safe to say that if rules against cheating were able to be strictly and effectively enforced, failure rates would skyrocket. But this is unlikely. The introduction of word processing and computer networks makes plagiarism easier to execute and even harder to detect. Computer sampling of music recordings and incorporation of samples (copied portions) in other music is already an established practice, with associated problems of credit and copyright (Keyt, 1988).

At this point it may be useful to make a few distinctions (Martin, 1984: 183–184). The most obvious and provable plagiarism occurs when someone copies phrases or passages out of a published work without using quotation marks, without acknowledging the source, or both. This can be called word-for-word plagiarism. When some of the words are changed, but not enough, the result can be called paraphrasing plagiarism. This is considered more serious when the original source is not cited. A more subtle plagiarism occurs when a person gives references to original materials and perhaps quotes them, but never looks them up, having obtained both from a secondary source—which is not cited (Bensman, 1988: 456–457). This can be called plagiarism of secondary sources. Often it can be detected through minor errors in punctuation of citation which are copied from the secondary material. More elusive yet is the use of the structure of the argument in a source without due acknowledgment. This includes cases in which the plagiarizer does look up the primary documents but does not acknowledge a systematic dependence on the citations in the secondary source. This can be called plagiarism of the form of a source. More general than this is plagiarism of ideas, in which an original thought from another is used but without any dependence on the words or form of the source. Finally there is the blunt case of putting one's name to someone else's work, which might be called plagiarism of authorship.

Most of the plagiarism by university students that is challenged by their teachers is word-for-word plagiarism, simply because it is easiest to detect and prove. One of the most serious types, plagiarism of authorship—which occurs when a student gets someone else to write an essay—can be extremely difficult to detect and prove. This creates a suspicion that most of the concern is about the least serious cases. Undoubtedly, much of the word-for-word plagiarism by students is inadvertent. They simply do not know or understand proper acknowledgment practice. Sometimes they are taught in high school to copy from sources without acknowledgment (Dant, 1986; Schab, 1972) and the problem persists in higher education. Students are apprentices, and some of them learn the scholarly trade slowly.

Academic institutions have the power to fail and even expel student plagiarizers, although this power is seldom exercised (Mawdsley, 1986; Reams, 1987). But colleagues are a different matter. Plagiarism among practicing intellectuals is widely considered to be completely unacceptable, but doing something about it is another matter. As in the case of students, word-for-word plagiarism is easiest to prove, and it might be expected that most blatant plagiarizers would be weeded out during their student years. There are some

dramatic cases in which word-for-word plagiarizers have been exposed and penalized, but there are plenty of contrary cases in which plagiarizers have fashioned successful careers (Broad and Wade, 1982; Mallon, 1989; Spender, 1989: 140–194).

For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s plagiarism seemed to provide no hindrance to his career as a preacher and leader of a social movement, but the subsequent exposure of the plagiarism caused anguished reconsideration among scholars sympathetic to King's role in the civil rights movement (Thelen, 1991). This case illustrates both the ease with which plagiarizers can escape detection or penalty and the enormous impact on a person's reputation of exposure of plagiarism (in this case, posthumously). As for those who plagiarize ideas, it is virtually impossible to take action. Among many academics and scientists, there is a great fear that one's ideas will be stolen by unscrupulous competitors. This often results in an unwillingness to share ideas.

The standard view, subscribed to by most intellectuals, is that plagiarism is a serious offense against scholarship and should be condemned and penalized. It is strongly discouraged among students. It is thought to be rare among scholars. The revisionist picture, subscribed to especially by those who have studied plagiarism, is that it is much more common among both students and scholars than usually recognized and hence infrequently punished. Both the standard and revisionist views agree on the seriousness of plagiarism and the need to be vigilant against it. They also agree that the problem of plagiarism is largely due to inexperienced or errant individuals—on the psychology of plagiarists, see Shaw's (1982) insightful account—and that penalties and policies should be designed to encourage individuals to avoid plagiarism.

The argument in this paper is that both the standard and revisionist pictures are inadequate because they deal only with a particular type of plagiarism in the scholastic world, where credit for ideas is of great significance, because it is the currency for status and advancement.

Institutionalized Plagiarism

In a number of social circumstances, plagiarism is such a pervasive and accepted practice that it is seldom considered worthy of concern or mention. A few examples are given here before turning to the significance of this type of plagiarism. Ghostwriting is commonplace in the popular press (Posner, 1988). When a politician, famous sports figure, business executive, or movie star gives a speech or writes a book or newspaper column, frequently the actual writing is done by someone else. Sometimes, in books, this is acknowledged, as in the case of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* written by "Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley" (X, 1965). The "with" in such cases precedes the person who did the writing. (Haley was later accused of plagiarism over his book *Roots*; the question of authorship is seldom a simple one!) But in many cases the

writer is listed only in small print on an acknowledgments page, or not at all. Ghostwriting is a type of plagiarism of authorship: a failure to appropriately acknowledge contributions. The weirdest development along this line is the use of ghostwriters by famous journalists who are too busy to write their own columns (Posner, 1988).

In scientific research, the phenomenon of "honorary authorship" is commonplace. In typical cases, a supervisor or laboratory director, who has done little or none of the research, is listed as co-author of a research paper (LaFollette, 1992: 91–107). For some academic textbooks, the official authors are chosen for their market value, but do relatively little work. The actual writers of such "managed texts" may receive little or no credit (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell, 1982; Fischer and Lazerson, 1977). This is not to mention all the books—fiction and nonfiction—that are virtually rewritten by in-house editors before reaching the public.

Another type of ghostwriting is political speechwriting. A few politicians write their own speeches, but most rely on speechwriters, who are seldom acknowledged in an appropriate way. The same situation applies to big-name comedians, few of whom write the bulk of their routines. An even more common misrepresentation of authorship occurs in government, corporate, church and trade union bureaucracies. Work that is done by junior workers is commonly signed by higher officials. The official justification is that the person whose name goes on a document is organizationally responsible for that work, but he or she also is commonly considered to be "responsible" in terms of gaining credit for doing the work, especially by outsiders.

This phenomenon is so commonplace that it is seldom mentioned in discussions of either plagiarism or bureaucracy. (For a forthright discussion of cases in university administrations, see Moodie [1993].) It is not difficult to confirm the widespread occurrence of this misattribution of authorship by simply talking to junior bureaucrats. Typically, they may not worry very much about the formalities of authorship but are likely to be aggrieved if they do not receive aknowledgment within the organization for work done. Needless to say, a system that officially misattributes formal authorship makes it extremely easy for superiors to appropriate credit for the work of subordinates.

From the point of view of outsiders, there is widespread misunderstanding of the operation of the system. Many people treat the official structures as reflecting the underlying reality. For example, in parliamentary systems a minister is an elected parliamentarian in charge of a government department. When someone writes a letter to a minister, he or she receives in reply a letter from the minister that is almost always written by someone in the department and seldom seen by the minister at all. The letter writer seldom thinks of the interaction as having been one with a junior bureaucrat. This type of plagiarism of authorship is built into the structures and operations of bureaucracies and is hardly ever categorized as plagiary. Yet it undoubtedly satisfies the usual formal definitions of plagiarism.

The widespread plagiary in bureaucracies and the ghostwriting prevalent

in many fields may be called "institutionalized plagiarism," which is to be distinguished from the "competitive plagiarism" found in academic and intellectual circles. In the latter situation, claiming credit for ideas is the basis for status and advancement in a system conceived to be based on autonomous and individual intellectual production. In this context, plagiarism is breaking the rules of the game, gaining undue credit in a competitive intellectual endeavor. Institutionalized plagiarism is a feature of systems of formal hierarchy, in which credit for intellectual work is more a consequence than a cause of unequal power and position. In bureaucracies, workers are conceived of as cogs in a formal system rather than independent intellectual producers: their work contributes to products of the bureaucracy; putting it in the name of bureaucratic elites is the formal procedure by which this occurs. Institutionalized plagiarism can also be categorized as an aspect of the systematic misrepresentation that is a feature of mass institutions, especially the mass media (Mitroff and Bennis, 1988).

These two types of plagiary, competitive and institutionalized, can also be called retail and wholesale plagiarism, respectively, by analogy with Chomsky and Herman's (1979) distinction between retail and wholesale terrorism, namely small-scale killing by limited groups and large-scale killing by major governments. Retail plagiarism typically exploits the intellectual labor of a few people at a time; wholesale plagiarism involves the systematic exploitation of large numbers of workers as a matter of standard procedure.

Most studies of terrorism focus on the retail form and ignore or downplay the wholesale. Similarly, most studies of plagiarism focus exclusively on the competitive variety and ignore its institutionalized forms. The example of Joseph R. Biden, Jr. illustrates this. Biden was a U.S. presidential aspirant who in 1987 was exposed for having plagiarized the speeches of some other politicians, such as British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock. This caused much moralizing in the media (some of it ghostwritten) and contributed to Biden dropping out of the race. Yet the dependence of almost all leading politicians on speechwriters was little remarked. Biden was caught out in the sin of plagiarizing from other politicians (a type of competitive plagiarism), whereas plagiarizing from speechwriters was treated as acceptable because it was plagiary of workers in a subordinate position (institutionalized plagiarism). Indeed, when Biden copied from Robert Kennedy's speeches, it was actually the words of Kennedy's speechwriter Adam Walinsky that both used (Posner, 1988:19).

A closer examination of the competitive and institutionalized types of plagiary would show many overlaps and inconsistencies rather than a uniformly clear distinction. For example, some heads of university laboratories demand their name on every publication (institutionalized plagiarism in a competitive setting) and some corporate and government bureaucracies allow or even foster conventional individual authorship. Nonetheless, the generalization that most studies of plagiarism focus on violations of competitive etiquette and downplay misattributions in hierarchical organizational settings still applies.

One explanation for the preoccupation with competitive plagiarism is that those who write about plagiary work in the competitive sector themselves. Another explanation is that this preocuption serves the interests of those elites—bureaucrats, politicians and others—who benefit from institutionalized plagiarism. As in the case of crime (Collins, 1982: 86–118), the definition of an offense is a form of politics that serves particular interest groups. Stigmatizing petty thieves serves to protect the big criminals from scrutiny. Occasionally the double standard becomes apparent and a preoccupation with plagiarism becomes a threat to elites. For example, the implications for university administrations are suggested by the following: "From a broader philosophical perspective, 'ghostwriting'—a long accepted practice in the political arena—raises some rather thorny questions. As one student in the present study commented, 'If the [university] President can use a ghostwriter, why can't I?' Indeed, the problem of using one standard for college students and another standard for public officials at the very least imposes a rather perverse situational ethics on the whole idea of literary honesty" (Hawley, 1984:35). Generally, though, university presidents can plagiarize from speechwriters with impunity. Only when they plagiarize from scholars (e.g., Piliawsky, 1982: 13–15)—competitive plagiarism—are they likely to be called to task.

Does It Matter?

In correspondence with sociologist Deena Weinstein, I once asked about other scholars who seemed to cover similar ideas to her own but who never cited her work. She replied (personal communication, 7 October 1982) by saying "Unless I am hiding something from myself, I believe that I don't give a hoot about priority. Ideas are not property so they cannot be stolen. But..." (her ellipsis). She went on to describe how other scholars had had early access to her ideas. This seems to be a standard dilemma. From the point of view of the abstract "advancement of knowledge," plagiarism is not a particular problem, since the knowledge is disseminated whoever gets credit for it. But from the point of view of individual scholars, credit for ideas is vital in career terms and, typically, even more so in terms of self-image.

Kroll, in a study of college freshmen, found that the arguments against plagiarism considered most important were "fairness to authors and other students, the responsibility of students to do independent work, and respect for ownership rights" (Kroll, 1988: 203). Fairness to authors and responsibility to do independent work are moral arguments. So too is respect for ownership rights since, for students and most academics, the economic advantages of plagiarism, in terms of gaining financially from copyright violation, are negligible. None of these arguments show that plagiarism is a significant hindrance to the "quest for truth."

A pragmatic argument against plagiarism is that it enables second-rate intellectuals to get ahead (Cranberg, 1992). With greater access to status and

funds, they can thus hinder intellectual advancement by doing less well than the presumably superior intellects for whose work they may have stolen credit. This argument sounds plausible, but it has some flaws. In many cases, plagiarism is carried out by undoubtedly talented and experienced people, as in the case of D. H. Lawrence plagiarizing from various women (Spender, 1989: 151–160) or, more prosaically, in the case of academics who plagiarize from their students. Furthermore, there is no evidence that plagiarizers are less able as administrators or intellectual leaders than those from whom they copy. Indeed, there is little evidence at all relevant to this argument. It may simply be an attractive view because plagiarism is considered to be a bad thing: therefore it *must* have bad effects.

A resolution to this problem—the apparent lack of any pragmatic reason to be concerned about plagiarism—begins by observing that the arguments discussed so far in this context all concern competitive plagiarism, which is relatively rare and highly stigmatized. Very different considerations apply to institutionalized plagiarism, which is standard procedure. At least two important arguments can be leveled against institutionalized plagiarism. First, it reinforces the power and position of elites. By gaining official credit for the work of others, the status and authority of elites is enhanced, while giving relatively little status and authority to subordinates whose work has been given less than its fair share of credit. If a president were to introduce a speech by saying, "I'm now going to read a speech written by . . . ," this would undoubtedly reduce the president's aura and the status of the office. Similarly, if an important institutional policy were openly acknowledged to be the work of junior employees, it might be asked why they were not the ones launching and explaining the policy. Second, institutionalized plagiarism reduces the accountability of subordinates, who do not have to take formal blame for inadequacies in their work. They are less likely to take extreme care with their work when they know that others will be officially responsible. Of course, those at the top have greater formal responsibility and officially are accountable for inadequacies. But this accountability has limited scope: bureaucratic elites are typically only held accountable by others at a similar level.

In structures of unequal power, subordinates and clients seldom have the resources to challenge the elites. Weinstein (1979) characterizes bureaucracies as authoritarian political systems, in which dissent or opposition is stamped out. In essence, the system is responsive only at the top to pressures of similarly powerful elites; the workers in the bureaucracy are expected to respond only to bureaucratic elites, not to a wider array of concerns.

There are other arguments that could be made against institutionalized plagiarism, such as that it reduces innovation, causes alienation and represents inefficient use of the talents of the workers. For the purposes here, the arguments that institutionalized plagiarism reinforces hierarchies and reduces accountability are sufficient.

The next question is, does it matter that institutionalized plagiarism is linked to hierarchy and unaccountability? That of course depends on one's

assessment of major social institutions, especially state and corporate bureaucracies. If these are seen as functional for the best interests of society, then institutionalized plagiarism presumably must be considered valuable; on the other hand, if these institutions are seen as contrary to the best interests of society, then institutionalized plagiarism is undesirable.

Plagiarism in a Self-managed Society

Imagine a society in which formal hierarchy has been eliminated: a "self-managed" society (Benello and Roussopoulos, 1971; Burnheim, 1985; Herbst, 1976; Ward, 1982). The basis for social organization might include direct decision-making by consensus or voting in small groups. Decisions that affect people on the job or in local communities would be made collectively by those people. Higher-order coordination might be organized through delegates and federations or through random selection for functional groups. The details vary, but certainly in any self-managed society, the state and large corporate or government bureaucracies would be replaced by more democratic and re-sponsive social forms. In a self-managed society, power is dispersed and decen-tralized. Furthermore, a self-managed society would not have vast inequalities in wealth, since these are typically linked to inequalities of power. Would there be plagiarism in such a society, and what would be done about it?

It should be obvious that most institutionalized plagiarism would be eliminated along with the institutions that fostered it. Within a collective enter-prise, such as designing and building transport systems, what would be the ra-tionale for allocating credit? Would credit for ideas even matter? It seems reasonable to suppose that a key consideration would be to allocate credit for the purposes of future work or involvement. For example, it would be useful to know who developed or checked an idea or did some work in order to build on successes and learn from failures. This suggests a pragmatic, utilitarian allocation of credit. The aim would not be to glorify or advance the individual but to make best use of the skills of each person and achieve maximum benefit for society within the framework of self-management. Although self-management would reduce the problem of institutionalized plagiarism, the problem of competitive plagiarism could well persist. Recognition for con-tributions to society as well as concern about fairness are likely to remain im-portant to most people. Although it is possible to imagine a society in which no one cared about credit for ideas, it is also possible—and possibly easier—to imagine "free" societies in which there is recognition of creativeness, such as applause for a musical composition, even if this did not lead to special privileges.

So plagiarism might occur but, on the other hand, it would be less likely to be considered such a serious offence; it would probably be discussed on terms of etiquette (on the development of manners, see Elias, 1978). Since credit for ideas would not be important for career advancement and because

contributions to collective well-being would be considered highly, it is even possible that creative workers would decline to claim full credit for their work, allowing plagiarism to occur by default rather than by commission.

Supporters of self-management often point out the collective nature of social life. No single person can make a contribution without relying extensively on the prior and ongoing work of others. Producing goods in a factory depends on systems of education and transport, prior inventions, markets, etc. Similarly, intellectual creativity always relies and builds on upbringing, prior ideas, culture, communications media, audiences, and the like. Claims to exclusive credit for originality, as well as to ownership of intellectual property, are characteristic of the system of capitalist individualism. The myth of the autonomous creator would be much harder to sustain under self-management.

Today, even inadvertent plagiarism can be a matter of extreme embarrassment (Perrin, 1992). False allegations of plagiarism can cause severe trauma to the accused (Klass, 1987) and can be used to attack scholars who are opposed for some other reasons (St. Onge, 1988). On the other hand, plagiarism is such a serious charge that often the accusers may be attacked as a way of warding off valid concerns (Adnavourin, 1988; Mazur, 1989: 190). One benefit of reduced stigma for competitive plagiarism would be that these high stakes and damaging consequences of plagiary allegations would be reduced.

These comments about the role of plagiarism in a hypothetical self-managed society have relevance for the assessment of plagiarism today. They imply that plagiarism *is* an important issue, but not for the reasons usually put forward. By this analysis, competitive plagiarism is given too much attention and condemned in far too extreme terms. Given the pervasiveness of plagiarism, it should be treated as a common, often inadvertent problem, rather like speeding on the road or cheating on income taxes. Most cases should be dealt with as matters of etiquette rather than "theft." Otherwise, the danger is that plagiarism allegations can be a way of mounting unscrupulous attacks on individuals who are targeted for other reasons.

Contrary to the case of competitive plagiarism, the issue of institutionalized plagiarism deserves *more* attention. It serves as a focus on power inequality and intellectual exploitation. The term "plagiarism" needs to be brought into common use to describe ghostwriting and attribution of authorship to top bureaucrats and officials, as a way of challenging those practices. In situations of intellectual exploitation, the demand for proper acknowledgment of work can be a subversive one. Since hierarchical and bureaucratized work structures foster institutionalized plagiarism, demanding fair credit for work done exposes and challenges these structures. In summary, concern about plagiarism has been diverted from the most serious and pervasive problems and channelled into excessive concern about less serious problems. This process is clearly one that serves the interests of the biggest intellectual exploiters.

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