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Plagiarism policing serves democracy, not white, Western supremacy

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Claudine Gay case, proper referencing should be insisted on to encourage critical, original thinking, says Ian Pace

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Do allegations of plagiarism constitute a sufficiently serious offence as to warrant the resignation as Harvard president of Claudine Gay? Or have "minor-to-inconsequential" allegations been exploited in a campaign to force out a black female leader, following on from last month's congressional hearings about antisemitism on campus?

Unlike fellow congressional witness Liz Magill, who was forced to resign as University of Pennsylvania president after equivocating over whether calls for Jewish genocide would breach her university's code of conduct, Gay – who made similar statements – initially received support from Harvard. But that evidently changed after almost 50 allegations of plagiarism were made against her, dating right back to her PhD.

The similarities between the allegations against Gay and those I have regularly encountered on academic misconduct panels are readily apparent. However, Gay made no mention of them in her resignation letter, insisting that "upholding scholarly rigor" was one of her "bedrock values" and implying that the campaign against her was driven by "racial animus". In a follow-up *New York Times* editorial, she mentioned but minimised the allegations.

Many articles, including one for the BBC, have attributed Gay's resignation primarily to "campus culture wars", and many observers have gone further. Critical race theorist Ibram X. Kendi tweeted about the use of "a seemingly legitimate reason" for "a racist mob" to attack "a Black person".

Harvard has its own publicly accessible policies on plagiarism, emphasising that students must endeavour to distinguish their own ideas and findings from those derived from other sources and use appropriation indications for quotations and referencing, including for paraphrased material. These are relatively standard across the humanities and social sciences (even if other sciences may be less fastidious about direct quotations and care more about

ideas than text), and it would be absurd if academics – including university presidents – were not held to the same standards as students.

The internet has significantly increased the possibilities for plagiarism, and the advent of contract cheating and AI only further exacerbates the problem. Yet how often are plagiarism policies reinforced? Do most journal and book editors regularly run submissions through plagiarism checks or interrogate them by other means (especially relating to ideas and knowledge, rather than just literal text)? It can be difficult to find people willing to commit time to peer review (which is, at best, poorly paid), and it can be unrealistic for a reviewer to spend more than a few hours on a paper. Similarly, exam markers, who sometimes have no more than 30 minutes to assess a 2,000-plus-word essay, might be unable to conduct scrupulous checks beyond what software such as Turnitin can provide.

Nor is time the only factor informing the policing of referencing standards. Responding to a Conservative activist's likening of Gay's resignation to a scalping, a candidate for Mayor of Denver compared the accusations of plagiarism to genocide. "Using violent trophy imagery against a Black woman tells you this was never about plagiarism but reestablishing white supremacy in academia," she tweeted. And social media is currently full of claims that plagiarism is a Western construct or even a tool of white supremacy. Some of this is just a knee-jerk response to a bitter case, but I anticipate hearing such arguments regularly recur.

They reflect a recognition that attitudes towards plagiarism differ across the globe. One survey of existing literature found much greater incidence or acceptance of plagiarism in Eastern Europe, Asia (especially China) and Africa (where there can be limited awareness of the concept) than in Western Europe and the US. Even in France it has been observed that the need to avoid plagiarism is not emphasised in teaching, and the practice can even sometimes be encouraged.

It would not be difficult to relativise plagiarism and academic misconduct practically out of existence on the grounds that stringently enforcing existing standards amounts to an imposition of Western values. But this would make into a cultural phenomenon what could just as plausibly be seen as a clash between the values of democratic and authoritarian societies.

In a powerful article, Catherine Owen, an ethnographer of Eurasian governance processes, has argued that taking a "decolonial" approach to academic standards risks relegating scholarship below government-mandated agendas of social harmony and economic development, such as are found in China, narrowing the space for pluralist global knowledge production.

It is true that fetishising certain types of "originality" (as promoted by the UK's Research Excellence Framework, for instance) can privilege iconoclastic rather than integrative work. It is also true that critical and other skills can be very limited if not built upon a body of knowledge. But an emphasis on avoiding plagiarism and undertaking critical thinking serves as a corrective to academic cultures based upon rote learning, imitation and deference. It liberates students and academics to explore beyond existing orthodoxies.

And while those students and academics might not always welcome the responsibility to construct their own arguments and conclusions, requiring them to demonstrably do so, through proper citation practice, is surely preferable to pandering to academic cultures where the simplest and safest approach is simply to ape the work of those with power.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Gay's own behaviour and treatment, enhancing everyone's ability to think for themselves about such issues is surely a primary task of higher education.

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