ON AN ACADEMIC PLAGUE

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It didn't require an inflation for most of us to come to the realization that hardly anything is truly free. And so the popular expressions, "Look a gift horse in the mouth," and "There isn't any free lunch", are more than mere words. Most academics rarely find the need to look into gift horses' mouths, and while we're not usually mistaken for oil sheiks or other members of affluent class, professors usually expect to pay for their lunches (except at conventions) or other nourishment (except when their publishers come to town). But the point remains: One must pay for what he gets and, conversely, one must be paid for what he gives. That idea is not only the foundation of the academic system, but also of the American system, and indeed of virtually every other system which Man has devised to govern his conduct.

An "academic crime" is something quite different from a crime elsewhere in society. Indeed, it hardly bears any resemblance to crime elsewhere. Possibly, one can make a case for the idea that academic crimes--e.g. cheating on examinations, not doing one's homework, plagiarism--are not even thought about as criminal in the larger society. And, at least to a degree, there are quite serious crimes committed in the general society which, while not necessarily condoned in the University, are not particular worries of those of us who inhabit the University. It's sometimes interesting to consciously "listen" at one of those familiar academic-community mixers, the cocktail party. On the other hand, the industrialist expresses astonishment that the University administration harbors (even tenures!) confessed Maoists and assorted other revolutionaries. On the other hand, the professor of American History is enraged because the "outsiders" at the party don't comprehend the seriousness of the student's dereliction in failing to annotate the material included in the "Review of Literature" chapter of her dissertation. And so the dissonance between town and gown continues unabated and unresolved. It's probably that the local citizens have completely given up trying to understand mentalities and motivations of a group of otherwise mature, sometimes even distinguished, adults who spend most of their lives worrying about childlike activities--reading, writing, copying, test-taking. It's also probable that academics have been driven to despair (when drink was not available) because the prissy "real world" is too dogmatic and rigid for our tastes.

People who keep track of such things say that hard times always bring an increase in certain kinds of crime--the reason being that when people can't buy what they need, they will take it. Here in the academic world, we are relatively isolated

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This paper is adapted from a letter we sent to faculty of our School of Education. We believe it can speak to a much broader audience concerning a much broader problem, of which only one aspect is addressed here.
from the realm of such statistics. We complain strenuously that we are unable
to get what we need, and our complaints are often well founded. But our definition
of "need" is quite clearly very different from the need to convert a hot wrist­
watch into meat and potatoes. So, we may worry a bit more about our wristwatches,
but mostly we worry about our research projects and funding agencies and federal
policy. We worry about academic concerns.

To most people, calling a concern academic means that it is not a concern at all.
There seems to be a general agreement that academics and the rest of humanity
live in two different worlds. There is some disagreement on how to regard the
difference between them (i.e. which is "real", which is foolish) but the difference
itself is always granted. Thus, while the theft of watches and toasters concerns
us little, we have "academic crimes" which concern no one else. What's a crime
in the University is often a childish misadventure on the outside. And what's a
crime on the outside is often irrelevant or no more than human variation on the
inside. And so we have academics banished from our otherwise safe cloisters for
not marking down who wrote what; while we have other colleagues return to campus
after well publicized misadventures--embarrassed by the notoriety but comforted
by the fact that their tenure remains secure and their colleagues remain ever
loyal. The above commentary is by way of introducing a very serious problem which
is either becoming much more prevalent or is simply being discovered with ever­
increasing frequency.

It was once a popular slogan that "you are what you eat." In the academic world,
it is more than a slogan that "you are what you write." Sometimes, we complain
that this is too much the case: the demand to "publish or perish" can be pressed
too far, too literally. But when this happens, it is because a mistake has been
made in interpreting the dictum. Properly understood, "publish or perish" is not
a demand but a prediction. Those who follow the scholarly vocation and make their
lives in the academic community simply cannot thrive unless they participate in the
interchange of ideas that is the essence of scholarly life. And the prevalent
medium of that interchange is the publication of the written word. One who has
the most penetrating insights or has made the most illuminating discoveries,
but without making them public to the academic community, has no secure life in
the community. What we write and make public becomes what we stand for, who we
are. It represents our scholarly existence. We are what we write and, thus, our
words are of enormous importance to us.

But, there is a paradox to it. While we identify our words as ours, secure them
by copyrights, and insist on rigorous rules of bibliographic reference, the
object of the enterprise is to give our ideas away. Our fondest hope is that
everyone will take our ideas: yet no one must take our words. Our stature as
scholars is increased when others take our ideas: but our very existence is dim­
ished if the expression of those ideas--our words--is taken by others as their
own. Thus, the capital offense of the academic world is plagiarism. Virtually
anything else is permitted--to attack or discredit another's ideas, to use them
for one's own purposes, even to misinterpret or distort them. But the words must
always be presented as belonging to their original author.
It is disturbing that a cluster of instances of this capital offense has recently been in the news. Of course, it may be just a coincidence, but it may also be that today's students are not sufficiently aware of the gravity of plagiarism. It may be that their teachers and professors have not made it clear that this isn't "just another rule", but one of the foundations of the whole scholarly enterprise. If so, perhaps those of us who are professors should all take the risk of being repetitious or "preachy", and we should clarify the issue of plagiarism to all our students. And those of us who are editors should do likewise with our writers. It might preclude what may be the most distressing case of all--the person (or writer, of whatever status) whose life is terribly disrupted by being detected in an offense, the seriousness of which he or she honestly didn't understand. It must be made clear that, while we can make full use of every idea in all recorded history, we must respect the rights of the men and women who recorded them.

We are asking you to consider the possibility that when plagiarism occurs in the student body there is not only the guilty criminal to be reckoned with but the failed institution to be worried about (Journals have responsibilities too, but the beginning context here is the student-teacher relationship). And we are asking you to communicate these concerns to your students and colleagues, possibly as an important item on the agenda of your first class meetings each semester. It would also be appropriate for you to bring this matter up from time to time with your graduate advisees.