

The weaponization of plagiarism accusations in the era of anti-woke politics

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Abstract

Plagiarism accusations have become increasingly politicized over the last few years. In this article, we raise some of our concerns with how vacuous plagiarism accusations are now part of the arsenal of anti-woke politics. Revisiting the recent case of Claudine Gay, the former president of Harvard University, we identify the implications such accusations pose to our profession, including the undermining of academic freedom and the concomitant silencing of scholarly voices.

Keywords

academia, anti-woke, plagiarism, politicization

The politicization of Claudine Gay

On December 5, 2023, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce convened a hearing on antisemitism on college campuses. The Committee had subpoenaed the presidents of three elite US universities, including Claudine Gay of Harvard University (Herszenhorn et al., 2023). Gay's testimony at the hearing generated widespread backlash for what was perceived to be her equivocation on whether 'antisemitic speech' constituted a violation of the university's bullying and harassment policies (Herszenhorn and Yuan, 2023). Demands for her immediate resignation from politicians and conservative news media quickly followed.

A week after her testimony the Harvard Corporation 'reaffirm[ed] [its] support for President Gay's continued leadership of Harvard University' (Shaw, 2023). Discontent with the decision, critics leveled accusations of plagiarism against Gay. Contributing editors of the American Conservative, Christopher Russo and Christopher Brunet, accused Gay of plagiarizing parts of her doctoral dissertation. The timing of the accusation was not left to chance, with Russo admitting on X (formerly Twitter) that he and Brunet were 'waiting for the precise moment of maximum impact' (Nguyen, 2024). These accusations were only fueled by the likes of billionaire hedge fund manager and pro-Israel activist, Bill Ackman. Ackman used his considerable financial and social media influence to engage in a concerted effort to oust Gay on grounds that she plagiarized some of her past research (Farrell and Copeland, 2023). Acquiescing to mounting pressures against her, on January 2, 2024, Gay tendered her resignation as Harvard's president.

Plagiarism accusations and anti-woke politics

Academia has historically been an institution susceptible to political pressures. It represents a site where knowledge is preserved, developed and taught, and new thought is fostered and propagated, which, at times, are subversive to the existing social order by going against the interests of certain politicians and politically-driven causes. This tension between, on the one hand, the ethos of academia and its role in transforming societies and, on the other, the political interests present in a given context at a given time, has long been recognized. In many countries, legal and institutional measures have been in place to ensure the protection of academia from ideologically motivated political influences and attacks. In the US context, for instance, academic tenure was enshrined into the profession over a century ago with the intention to prevent ‘arbitrary dismissal of faculty members for holding unpopular views’ (Savage, 1998).

Tenure is the bedrock of academic freedom and it has been an effective, albeit imperfect, mechanism through which to protect faculty members from ideologically-motivated attempts to silence or punish them when they circulate socially disruptive, minority, or otherwise controversial opinions. As the American Association of University Professors (AUPP) aptly describe: ‘Academic freedom and tenure protects professors...from being disciplined, dismissed or silenced when their work risks offending powerful interests, including business and government interests’ (AUPP, n.d.).

A discussion of academic freedom and tenure is pertinent for understanding the reasons underlying recent plagiarism accusations against individual academics. Historically, the protections guaranteed by tenure allowed academic members of the profession to be largely impervious to external influence. Most importantly, perhaps, their livelihood was not dependent on acquiescing to the interests of powerful actors. In the last few years, we have witnessed an unsettling trend wherein plagiarism accusations have been mobilized to govern the proverbial

tongue of faculty members. These accusations have effectively undermined the academic freedoms that tenure was instituted to protect by silencing academic perspectives that flow against the current of hegemonic ideologies.

To animate this phenomenon, we can return to Bill Ackman's statements at the height of Gay's controversy. Less than a week after Ackman achieved his desired objective at Harvard—to see Gay no longer in the role of university president—he alluded to his intention to further weaponize plagiarism to achieve ideological ends. In a lengthy post on X, Ackman declared:

Now that we know that the academic body of work of every faculty member at every college and university in the country (and eventually the world) is going to be reviewed for plagiarism, it's important to ask what the implications are going to be.

If every faculty member is held to the current plagiarism standards of their own institutions, and universities enforce their own rules, they would likely have to terminate the substantial majority of their faculty members [...]

[W]ith AI, getting rid of tenured faculty is no longer as much of a challenge because it is much easier to fire faculty who have problems with their academic record. It is a near certainty that authors will miss some quotation marks and fail to properly cite or provide attribution for another author on at least a modest percentage of the pages of their papers. (Bill Ackman on X, January 6, 2024)

Disturbingly, the above quote presents AI as a 'solution' to the alleged 'challenge' posed by academic tenure; namely, the fact that so far, 'getting rid' of tenured faculty members is not easily accomplishable (on a broader discussion of AI's implication on academia, see Barros, 2023). Plagiarism accusations are openly spoken about here in a threatening manner, as a fail-proof pretext for potentially launching an AI-assisted action aimed at ending *any* academic's

tenure and career. Given the intimate nexus between academic tenure and academic freedom, plagiarism accusations are framed as an effectual ‘tool’ to end the former and undermine the latter.

Our overarching concern is that plagiarism accusations are increasingly becoming part of the ideological project to combat progressive initiatives and voices that have resulted, *inter alia*, in greater representation and inclusion of members of minoritized groups, such as women and people from ethnically minoritized backgrounds, in organizational decision-making—including leadership positions in academia. As we have argued elsewhere, over the last few years this ideological project has manifested in anti-woke efforts to undo anti-discrimination and equality legislation—along with the positive social change it engendered—and to legitimate populist discourse (see Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). As academia is often at the vanguard of ideas that aim to catalyze social change, it comes as little surprise that powerful actors have sought to utilize plagiarism accusations to undermine the integrity of the academic profession as a whole and silence the representation and voices of individual academics who are seen to disrupt—through their views and through embodying diversity and inclusion of minoritized groups—the status quo.

A cautionary tale

Claudine Gay’s case discussed at the onset of this article offers a cautionary tale for academia. Once the plagiarism accusation was leveled against her by influential (though non-academic) critics, it took on a life of its own. The actual merits (or the lack thereof) of the accusation did not appear to matter. Consequently, when University of Wisconsin political science professor David Canon, whose work Gay was accused of plagiarizing, publicly came to Gay’s defense by

saying that the cited case of plagiarism ‘isn’t even close to an example of academic plagiarism’ (Sibarium, 2024), it had little impact on the ongoing controversy. Critics of Gay were more invested in seeing her ousting than on the integrity of the plagiarism accusations. It does not require too great a leap in logic to conclude that plagiarism accusations were deployed against Gay as a roundabout way to punish her for her perceived position on anti-Semitism on campus. Ultimately, her (non-academic) critics succeeded in undermining Harvard’s ‘woke’ efforts to diversify its top-level administration.

The controversy surrounding Gay—as well as other similar cases—are reflective of a broader political attack on our profession, rather than on a single academic. This cautionary tale compels us to renew our earlier call for greater ontological empathy in academia (Prasad and Śliwa, 2022), and for fulfilling our responsibilities as academics and as editors who curate the content and direction of scholarly journals, especially in fields such as Management and Organization Studies (MOS), to which *Management Learning* plays an important part. As academics, when vacuous and ideologically-motivated accusations of plagiarism are cast against one of our colleagues, the onus is on us to defend them, not least because we can just as easily find ourselves in the same political crosshairs when critics do not like what we say, how we say it, or who we are to say it. As journal editors, we have the responsibility to continue to publish critical scholarship that challenges the status quo and works towards the creation of more inclusive and equitable organizations and societies.

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