

**Commission of Enquiry established by the Research Integrity Team of the CNRS –
Mandate from the President of the CNRS, Professor Antoine Petit, of 16 November 2020**

**Report from the Commission of Enquiry on the accusations of plagiarism made against
14 articles in English and 3 articles in French by Magali Roques (*chargée de recherche* at
the CNRS)**

Magali Roques (MR) has been publicly accused of including numerous plagiarisms in her publications, and these accusations have been broadcast widely, in learned journals, in messages from all sides, and on websites. In consequence, the President of the CNRS, Professor Antoine Petit, on the advice of the Academic Integrity Team of the CNRS, charged the undersigned to form a Commission of Enquiry to examine the writings under accusation. The Commission's tasks were more precisely: -

- (1) 'To distinguish between plagiarisms properly so called, on the one hand, and, on the other, what might be considered borrowings of formulations concerning matters considered to be part of the knowledge shared widely by those who are expert in the area';
- (2) 'To give an impression of the seriousness of the faults committed by MR, quantitatively ... and qualitatively'.
- (3) 'To indicate, if appropriate, supposing that the borrowings had been correctly cited, if the articles under accusation contain enough original ideas of MR's own to justify their publication'.

(Mandate of 16 November 2020)

The Commission of Enquiry proceeded therefore to undertake a thorough analysis of all the articles under accusation (see Annexes 1 and 2). The present document sets out the general conclusions reached through its enquiries and discussions.

1 Preliminary comment

The Commission has adopted the definition of 'academic fraud' formulated by the European Office of Research Integrity (<<https://ori.hhs.gov/content/chapter-2-research-misconduct-federal-policies>>) and by the CNRS's Ethics Committee, according to which 'academic fraud is a serious and intentional breach in carrying out research and diffusing its results.' It has also born in mind that 'plagiarism consists in the appropriation of an idea or the complete or partial content <of another's work> without the author's consent or without citing the sources in a fitting way' (*Pratiquer une recherche intègre et responsable. Guide* March 2017, p. 24).

The relationship between one person's text and another's is a complex matter. With this in mind, the Commission decided, after extensive discussion, that it should make a clear distinction between academic fraud in the strict sense, which involves a deliberate intention to deceive, and undisclosed verbal borrowings (tacit citations), resulting from blameworthy procedural negligence, but not constituting plagiarism.

On this basis, the Commission is of the opinion that three sorts of borrowings incriminated as 'plagiarism' by the accusers cannot be considered as such: -

- (1) References to texts by medieval authors in the notes. It is entirely a matter of course that, when one scholar discusses a theme in a given author, they will refer to the same texts to which other studies on the same subject refer – for the simple reason that, for the main part, the texts discussed in the article in question will necessarily be the same as those discussed in the studies that have allegedly been ‘plagiarized’.
- (2) Published translations of medieval authors, which are thus in the public domain. Omitting the names of the translators is clearly negligent and goes against accepted standards of academic behaviour, but it cannot in any way be considered plagiarism in the sense specified above.
- (3) Bibliographical references in the notes. It is normal practice to refer to the same studies as are cited in other publications on the same subject: indeed, good scholarly practice requires that existing literature on the area under discussion is taken into consideration. This cannot and ought not to be treated as plagiarism.

II Documents used: -

The Commission has studied: -

- 1) All those articles by MR that have been accused of plagiarism;
- 2) All the documents relating to the accusation of plagiarism made against 14 of MR’s articles published in English between 2016 and 2017;
- 3) All the documents relating to the accusation of plagiarism made against 3 of MR’s articles published in French between 2018 and 2020;
- 4) The documents relating to MR’s defence, viz; her *Conclusions* (‘Note de synthèse’), her detailed replies to the accusations of plagiarism, along with letters from 15 internationally recognized specialists in her area, reacting to the accusers’ allegations.

III General Conclusions

After a careful examination of the whole dossier, the Commission has reached the following conclusions: -

- 1) The results of our qualitative analysis show that there is neither academic fraud nor plagiarism properly so called in MR’s English articles. Moreover, there is no sign to be found of a wish to appropriate anyone else’s ideas or of an intention to deceive the reader about the origin of the ideas put forward in the articles.
- 2) The results of our quantitative analysis have shown that the proportion of unacknowledged borrowings is relatively limited – sometimes even minimal – in comparison to the total size of each article. Admittedly, a brute calculation of the passages borrowed by MR from third-parties would tend, at first glance, to justify the accusations made against her. A more careful calculation, however – one which, in particular, takes into account the nature of the borrowings, has shown that in a number of cases it is not a matter of undeclared borrowings in the strict sense. Once the Commission had thus come to realize that many passages had been wrongly accused of being plagiarized, the proportion of borrowings open to accusation in the various articles became considerably smaller.
- 3) The qualitative and quantitative analysis of the publications under accusation has led the Commission to reach a dual conclusion. On the one hand, it is undeniable that MR has been the victim of an injustice, because her accusers have fashioned and diffused, wrongly, if not with ill intent, the shameful image of a ‘serial plagiarist’, who composed all her writings simply by

copying what others have written (see 'Philosopher Revealed as serial Plagiarist' [multiple updates], *Daily Nous*). On the other hand, it is also equally undeniable that the whole body of work in English published by MR is seriously flawed by the regular presence of bad scholarly practices, by what might be called a sort of active negligence, which, although not a matter of academic fraud, cannot be excused.

- 4) In her publications in English, MR has quite clearly lacked rigour in her way of making references and has not respected the academic standards accepted in the area. These publications suffer from serious, persistent negligence in the manner of referring to the secondary literature and sometimes also in references to the sources. In these articles, MR has therefore failed to keep to the requirement for a scrupulous and irreproachable method of work, which every researcher should observe.
- 5) In her defence, MR cites various reasons to explain the deficiencies noted in her articles in English. Some of them (such as 'youthful errors' and a lack of awareness about plagiarism) did not do much to convince the Commission. The Commission did, however, accept her lack of assurance in writing English as a credible reason for MR's frequent borrowings of technical terms and formulations from authoritative studies published in the Anglophone world. Moreover, trying to forge an academic career in an ever more competitive world, MR seems to have engaged in a race to publish, writing many articles in English at breakneck speed, but cutting corners in a number of her publications, in the method, quality and rigorousness of her research. The Commission accepts that MR's explanations are sincere and in good faith, yet it wishes to emphasize strongly that unacknowledged borrowings, even if they are accidental, involuntary or incidental, are unacceptable according to the academic standards recognized in the area.
- 6) The accusations of plagiarism concern the publications which were written in a limited period, during which MR was trying to make a place for herself in the Anglophone academic world. It is exactly in this specific context that there occurred the failings that mark the articles in English. It is fitting to observe here that, before they could be published, all these articles were subject to peer review and that, in most cases, the reviewers came to very positive judgements both about the contents of the articles and the originality of MR's contribution to the subject: judgements which convinced the editors of the academic journals in question who, although they are specialists in the area, did not notice the slightest indication of failings in these works.
- 7) The Commission notes that, in the great majority of cases, the unacknowledged borrowings discovered in the various articles occur in the parts which introduce the general area being studied, which put the questions treated into context and in syntheses about authors who are introduced by way of comparison. These borrowings do not have anything to do with either the general interpretation or the main arguments developed by MR in her works. Each of the articles examined thus presents an individual contribution of her own by MR, with her own original ideas, based on which she presents distinctive views, which she offers to specialist readers in order to engage in academic discussion among equals.
- 8) The Commission did not discover any academic fraud or any sign of plagiarism in the three French publications. The accusations regarding these publications turned out to be to a large extent unfounded. There is, indeed, the borrowing of a phrase from an article by Irène Rosier-Catach, but the passage in question merely states a commonplace. That said, the Commission notes that MR's negligence over giving references is also found to some degree in these articles.
- 9) The Commission observes that the idea of plagiarism goes far beyond tacit citation: it signifies above all the theft of another author's whole argument or the structure of their work or their fundamental ideas. Nothing of this sort can be attributed to MR.

10) Finally, the Commission wishes to give an explicit reply to the question of whether ‘supposing that the borrowings had been correctly cited ... the articles under accusation contain enough original ideas of MR’s own to justify their publication.’ It can indeed confirm that if MR had cited all her borrowings correctly, this would not have lessened the number of original ideas that she proposes in the articles under accusation. The publication of these articles would therefore be entirely justifiable if MR put her borrowings into inverted commas and attributed them correctly to their authors.

IV Observations on the Documents Putting Forward the Accusations

The Commission of Enquiry notes that: -

- 1) The accusers limited themselves to providing quantitative observations, drawing attention to similarities of terms and expressions and comparing them, out of context, with the publications allegedly plagiarized. Their analyses are based on too exclusively quantitative evidence and lack rigour: they fail properly to demonstrate that their accusations are well-founded. Furthermore, taking into account the benefit of doubt, the Commission judges that the accusers have not provided adequate and unequivocal proof of their allegations.
- 2) In a way many might challenge, the accusers have amplified certain facts and used them to develop a narrative that disproportionately undermines MR’s academic contribution and integrity.
- 3) The procedures used by the accusers – the anonymous denunciations at the start, and especially the worldwide publicity given to their accusations on the internet and social media – fall short in professional ethics. In particular, they do not comply with the standards of COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics: publicationethics.org), which recommends greater caution in the way cases of suspected plagiarism are treated.

V Observations on MR’s Dossier in her Defence

- 1) The Committee of Enquiry was given letters from 15 specialists in medieval philosophy, written in reaction to the accusations of plagiarism. They indicate high academic regard for MR. Among their authors are a number of internationally recognized authorities in MR’s field of research, who recognize the contribution she has made to it. The Committee took special notice of one of these letters, because it was written by a specialist who, although among those who have allegedly been plagiarized, gives strong arguments against the accusers’ interpretation of the facts.
- 2) In the Commission’s view, MR’s self-defence (‘Conclusions on the Campaign of Accusations of Plagiarism Mounted against my Publications in English during the Summer of 2020’) provides important information for understanding the situation and the facts which gave rise to the accusations of plagiarism against her publications. Some of the explanations it provides are, however, unnecessarily wordy and unconvincing (see General Conclusions (5)).
- 3) The Commission recognizes the fact that MR has acknowledged her errors and that she has undertaken to correct them by revising the articles under accusation; that she has apologized to the specialists whom she allegedly plagiarized; and that she has manifested a firm and sincere resolve that, from now onwards, she will make references in a way that meets scholarly standards in the field.

It is not for the Commission to express a view about what course of action the CNRS should take in response to this affair. None the less, its three members would like to express a feeling which they

all share: that the vast damage done to MR's academic standing by the accusations of plagiarism seems already to outweigh in severity any sanction proportionate to the deficiencies and mistakes considered during our enquiry.

The commission concludes, therefore, that MR is not guilty of academic fraud in the sense specified above, and it hopes that this report will help to clarify the decisions which the management of the CNRS will be led to take in this matter.