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Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University

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Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University.
By William Clark (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 2006; pp. 662 .
£28.50).

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‘THIS is an odd book’, says William Clark in his first sentence. ‘It traces the development of the academic from medieval forms up to modern incarnations.’ Although there is no subtitle to indicate it, Clark's book is at heart a study of German universities, mainly in Protestant states, in the early modern period, and it does not fully live up to its author's ambitious claim. Many of the chapters have already appeared in earlier versions, usually in a history of science context. Clark has linked them together, and added a long final chapter which claims continuity with today's research-dominated university ideal, especially as exemplified in the United States of America. The joins show, as does the chronological gap in the nineteenth century, yet the core of Clark's work is original and stimulating. He starts from a comprehensive knowledge of the archives of the early modern German universities and states, and has found some remarkable documents, including Leibniz's job reference for Christian Wolff in 1706 (pp. 270–1). One of Clark's strengths is his fascination with the practical detail of how institutions worked, and he abundantly illustrates the close interest of rulers and their bureaucrats in the welfare of the universities, in everyday teaching, and in professorial appointments.

The forces driving change, according to Clark, were ‘ministries and markets’, and his framework of interpretation is an essentially Weberian one, focusing on the growth of bureaucratic rationality. Professors, from being embedded in ‘the juridical-ecclesiastical order’ of an estate-bound regime, tied by kinship and patronage to the networks of local society, became members of an academic profession judged objectively by their contributions to scholarship, as knowledge itself became commodified. Merit replaced rank or seniority as the criterion for advancement, but this in turn created a new form of charisma and personal fame, fuelled by the Romantic cult of the creative individual, and expressed in the idea of original scholarship, the prestige of publication, and the veneration given to ‘big names’, a phenomenon today perhaps more pronounced in America than in Britain—as Clark implies when he cites David Lodge's Morris Zapp as a model of the academic entrepreneur. The book is, among other things, a study of academic mores and rituals, and there are constantly stimulating chapters on the shift from an oral to a written academic culture and on the evolution of appointment procedures, lecture lists, examinations and grading, the seminar and the doctorate, the latter with its elaborate ceremonials. Influenced by Foucault and Hayden White as well as Weber, Clark is adept at teasing deeper structures of meaning out of formal documents, tracing the move from old to new paradigms in the structure and visual form of documents as well as in what they say. There are some brilliant readings of visual evidence, including the depiction of a BA examination at Oxford in 1842 (p. 135). Sometimes documents become grids from which the binary opposites inherent in Clark's structural approach can be read off—very literally in his treatment of a tabular visitation report of 1789 (pp. 360–70).

Clark's work suggests strongly that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (even earlier in some cases) universities achieved a central position in German life, and laid the foundation of their later

scientific dominance. More than in other countries, knowledge was produced and transmitted in an academic framework. Clark has a certain amount of comparative material, on the Jesuits in France as early exponents of academic rationality, and on the origin of modern written examinations in the Cambridge tripos—although the Cambridge case does raise doubts about his explanatory framework, for few universities were less exposed than eighteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge to ministries or markets. The book would have benefited from a more sustained comparison with Laurence Brockliss's work on the French universities of the *ancien régime*; their legacy, through Napoleon, was an academic culture which separated teaching from research and retained a strong emphasis on oral performance, a culture which rivalled the German model in influence. This point is briefly acknowledged, but played down, by Clark (p. 440). It is a general weakness of Clark's approach that he is reluctant to engage with other scholars. He has little to say about the emergence of the 'public sphere', or about the very large body of work which now exists on the German Enlightenment and on the early development of the German research university—by Charles E. McClelland and Steven Turner, for example, to mention only work in English.

One chapter, backed up by a useful factual appendix, traces the development of the philological seminar in Germany down to the middle of the nineteenth century. Otherwise Clark's detailed work tends to finish around 1790, and this creates problems for the attempt to project his findings forward. He shows very clearly that most German academic practices of the nineteenth century had their roots in the preceding period. But their crystallisation into the modern research university with its cult of *Wissenschaft* was far from complete by 1800. The significance of Wilhelm von Humboldt and the foundation of Berlin University in 1810 may have been exaggerated in traditional accounts, but they hardly appear here at all. Moreover, Clark's stress on the growing interventionism of eighteenth-century absolute rulers does not explain why the German universities came to be admired later for their autonomy, compared with those in more centralised states; the growth of the concept of academic freedom deserved closer examination. Another significant omission is experimental science: the combination of research and training in the university laboratory which is associated with Justus Liebig from the 1830s probably did more than anything else to publicise the German model in other European countries and in America. In particular, science encouraged the master-disciple relationship; but the early modern doctorates which Clark describes were really an achievement by individual scholars, and there was little sign of the later *Doktorvater* phenomenon. Clark's attempt to show the contemporary relevance of his work scores some definite and often entertaining hits, but at times the argument is strained, and the account of nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments is simply too compressed to be satisfactory. Perhaps he was under pressure from his publishers, who claim on the cover that the book will be 'required reading' for 'all academics curious about their origins'. Many of them would find the book hard going, but for early modern cultural and intellectual historians, as well as specialists in university history, it will make fruitful reading.

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