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The Origins of the Modern University: *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* - William Clark

Posted by Jeremy Black

Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University

by William Clark

Pp. 662. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006

Hardback, £28.50

This is wide-ranging and riveting book that offers much to those interested in post-medieval European history, particularly, but not only in the German-speaking lands, and which will be particularly compelling to those concerned with educational history, specifically that of universities.

The subject is the origins of the modern university, to wit the research university. This is traced not to intellectual developments, which indeed tend to receive relatively short shrift in the book, but rather to the processes of bureaucratisation and commodification. These were long-term and widely-flung trends, but Clark focuses on a particular area and period, Protestant German lands from the 1770s to 1830s. In short, the modern university is an

aspect of what has been termed the "well-ordered police state".

This certainly captures the relationship between policy and applied knowledge in the multitude of German states, and, more generally, the sense of education as an aspect of competitive advantage, a theme that has recurred powerfully in the modern world, but was also seen for example in Britain where the regius chairs of modern history were founded under George I, a Protestant German, in order to help in the training of diplomats.

Clark is at pains to demonstrate that this was not simply a top-down process but also one that was actively moulded by academics in pursuit of their individual and collective goals, to whitt a definition of academic merit that gave them status in a dynamically-changing world in which the public definition of merit helped provide valuable protection. His willingness to see both aspects of the process and his skilful discussion of their interaction helps make this a perceptive study.

Indeed, Clark sees a very interesting interaction of the process he discusses with Romanticism. There was the cult of celebrity that Romantic example offered, but also a dangerous individualism that academic culture, processes and hierarchies could contain and shape. Thus, in the German Protestant system, as Clark points out, seminar directors came to police the system by assessing merit and setting the standards accordingly. Originality was to be praised, but not what was defined as idiosyncrasy, a pattern policed within a system of hierarchy and conformism, and one that can still be seen today. I can recall being told by a Cambridge professor in 1986 that:

history is like shaving. You mustn't do too little. You mustn't do too much.

To Clark, the doctorate of philosophy and the new doctoral dissertation served to reconcile Romanticism with the rationality of the bureaucratic state. The latter helped drive academic structures. As Clark points out, ministries, seeking advice, looked for the sort of rational authority that they saw themselves as being and needed a hierarchy for the advice to be clear.

The consequences of this are traced through academic processes and life. One example is

the change in examination practice, from a disputational to a more bureaucratic form. Prior to the eighteenth century, exams may have had a written component, but they were essentially oral. This changed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a process that Clark links to the expansion of bureaucratic mentalities.

As part of this shift, there were major changes in the grading system, with an attempt to normalise and standardise intelligence or ability replacing a focus on social status and seniority. This is related to the ideology of objective evaluation, with again little room for doubt or speculation as they challenged both this apparent objectivity and the role of hierarchy.

In turn, economic growth, political changes, and associated requirements helped drive a major expansion in the nineteenth century (p. 450):

as long as German academia enjoyed an expanding market, which lasted from about the 1830s to 1900s, each cohort of young academics could move up and elsewhere in the system (and oppress the next cohort), as long as the seller's market existed. The market forces that early modern Protestant universities had injected into academia contributed the dynamic element, namely the competitive lecturers and junior professors, to the stable structure set by the ministerial bureaucracy and professorial oligarchy.

A key element, for Clark, is the Romantic cult of personality which survived into the new world of industrialism and materialism. He carefully looks at how this development in Protestant Germany affected other academic cultures, especially that of Britain.

Furthermore, the German account is brought up to date in a fashion that is relevant to those interested in modern education. This is a wide-ranging and amusing, albeit brief, sequel that includes a discussion of David Lodge's *Small World*, as well as the interplay between the Masked Philosopher and Weber. The thesis of the book is arresting and the scholarship impressive. Given the scale of the book, Clark fits a mass in, but, throughout, does so with deft organisation and considerable humour. Hopefully this work will receive the attention it deserves.

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