

## ESSAY REVIEW

# Tables, Manners, Erudition, and Confession

By *Richard L. Kremer\**

**William Clark.** *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University.* 662 pp., figs., apps., bibls., index. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. \$45 (cloth).

“Befitting its subject, this is an odd book.” One might expect a review to open with these words; in this case, it is the book under review that so begins (p. 3). A reader familiar with earlier historiography of universities might indeed find this account of the “origins of the research university” to be rather odd. Although taking up the story in the fifteenth century, William Clark focuses his attention primarily on the 1770s through the 1830s and on the German states. Yet the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the classic *Denkschriften* about the purpose of the university by the German Idealist philosophers, the exploits of the modern discipline builders (e.g., the philologist F. A. Wolf or the physicist Franz Neumann) or government ministers (e.g., Altenstein in Prussia or Münchhausen in Hanover), and the emergence of a “research ethos” barely appear in this massive tome, which offers nothing new on these points. Clark does not give us a history of the university as idea, program, or institution; rather, he offers an “erudite” account of the changing habitus and manners of the German professors and of the transformation of their world from orality to writing. The well-studied rise of the public sphere, cameralism, the bureaucratic state, and notions of Romantic genius provide not merely the backdrop, but the *deus ex machina*, in Clark’s story.

Richly exploiting visual images of university life in contemporaneous prints and drawings, Clark in the first part of his book asks who sat and who stood where in university classrooms. He examines the shape of the tables (both wooden and paper—i.e., record keeping) found there. He considers academic regalia and the order of marchers in university parades. He discusses changing formats of lecture and library catalogues, the move from disputations to examinations and grades, the rise of the seminar and assigned student writing, the shift in authorship of the doctoral dissertation from professor to student, the form of archival dossiers kept by governmental ministries running the

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universities, changing procedures for hiring professors, and many more quotidian details of the professorial life. Although Oxbridge and the Jesuit universities occasionally enter the narrative, Clark (as have most historians) places the origins of the modern professorial role in the faculties of the German Protestant universities. He locates the significant benchmarks of change in professorial behavior—from erudition to research, from status based on seniority to meritocracy, from orality to writing, from disputation to original lecturing, from collegial to individual evaluation of colleagues, from familial networks to the commodified theatrics of famous academic stars—well back in the eighteenth century, long before Napoleon’s defeat of Prussia in 1806. Already in 1749, for example, the Prussian ministry began requiring its professors to publish or perish.

If Clark pushes the “origins of the research university” earlier than have previous scholars, he disagrees even more strongly with them in his evaluation of the new professorial role. Clark finds the object of his study to be not merely odd but even tragicomic. In the second part of the book, in a voice alternating between ironic critique of the state-controlled research university and nostalgic longing for an earlier golden age of a faculty-controlled, nonmeritocratic, nonbureaucratic university life, Clark scorns the commodification of knowledge and the “academic market” that earlier historians lauded as the triumph of *Wissenschaft* and *Wissenschaftlichkeit*. Drawing on Max Weber and Michel Foucault, Clark tells us that the traditional university abhorred charismatic individuals; at that time, Weberian charisma resided in chairs, titles, offices, even the clothes worn by various ranks of professors. In the new research university, however, charisma resided in individual professors, in those who create new knowledge, trash earlier canons, attract disciples, and wow state officials with their fame. Yet, Clark shows, ministers relied on “academic gossip” to measure fame; the explosion of new journals around 1800, communicating fruits of professorial originality, contained little of lasting value; and professors sacrificed their agency and moral authority to the idol of “I-less” objectivity and the state who was paying the piper. In Clark’s view, the modern professorial world—ours as well as that of the early nineteenth century—is one of narcissism, nihilism, and sophistry, as well as of persisting premodern elements (such as the orality of academic gossip). Not surprisingly, the novelist David Lodge becomes an oft-cited source in the second part of the book.

*Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* will charm or infuriate readers, depending perhaps on their own judgments of the virtues and vices of today’s professorial manners. Some of Clark’s macro conclusions are not especially new. Joseph Ben-David and Awraham Zloczower taught us long ago about academic markets and the commodification of knowledge at universities in the decentralized German states, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison about the fetishization of objectivity, Thomas Broman about the rise of academic journals and the public sphere, Pierre Bourdieu about the *Homo academicus*. Readers wanting to understand the growth of disciplinary knowledge in nineteenth-century universities may wonder why Clark did not push his analysis of commodification further. Did German professors or the new research universities offer their states anything other than “fame”? Yet, in an important sense, Clark’s book is less a work of history, concerned with how professorial manners or bureaucratic states “influenced” the production of knowledge, than it is a work of “erudition” (his category; see Ch. 6). Always displaying prodigious archival and linguistic skills, sometimes ignoring the conclusions of other historians, and occasionally writing unabashedly personal prose, Clark has crafted many erudite and ironic snapshots of evolving professorial

manners and mannerisms. These micro conclusions add up not merely to an odd book, but to an erudite book that is well worth reading, especially for those of us who live amidst the contradictions of today's research universities. Clark has written an "academic confessional," as he calls it (p. 475), in an ironic voice.