

Clark, William, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 662 pp., \$45.00, ISBN 0 226 10921 6 (hardcover).

The great Neapolitan genius Giambattista Vico might have been so candid. Instead of defusing the reader's likely impression that his 1744 *New Science* was strange and unwieldy—almost hopelessly so—Vico only heightened this impression by designing a complex, thematic frontispiece for the work and opening his magnum opus with a detailed exegesis of its constitutive elements. When the work and its earnest author quickly faded into (temporary) obscurity and then languished, they became, in time, the stuff of academic legend and grist for later Romantic mills. Unfortunately, Vico, by then, was long gone.

William Clark's new book has a distinctly Viconian feel. It features a compelling thesis that is adorned unevenly by myriad researches and pieces of erudition. Unlike Vico, though, Clark opens his massive new tome with the promise, in the very first line, that the book is 'odd'. In the six hundred plus pages of text, notes, figures, charts, appendices, and anecdotes that follow, Clark makes good on his promise. Yet the book is odd in a good way, in a way that is, according to Clark, 'befitting the subject'. (3) For the contents and organization of the book itself mirror the early history of the modern university. The work does not merely aspire to tell the history: it seems rather to contain it in microcosm.

Clark takes Max Weber's influential analysis of authority as his guide through the dense, overgrown thicket of materials on which a history of universities must necessarily be based. Assuming the validity of Weber's typology, namely the notion that authority can be understood as charismatic, traditional, or rational (8), Clark proposes a clear narrative for the history of the university between, as he puts it, Renaissance and Romanticism. What makes the modern university modern is precisely the shift in how authority was understood and exercised. Where traditional authority, vested in Church and State, gave the medieval university its religious and juridical cast, the modern university was created largely by statesmen-reformers who, in endeavoring to bring the university in line with newer political and economic conditions, emplaced bureaucracies and bureaucratic rationality. The most interesting aspect of the book, however, is the suggestion that the triumph of rational over traditional authority at the university was, in a sense, incomplete:

charisma, which had inhered in traditional forms of authority, remained essential even to so-called rational forms of authority, such that one may discern a 'charismatic transfiguration of reason' in Romantic cults of genius and in the modern university as a whole. (16)

To think of the history of the university in this way is to understand why universities reflect such an odd mix of the traditional and the progressive, the meritocratic and the nepotistic, the moralistic and the antinomian (and so on). A cynic might be tempted to suggest that it inherited the worst of all worlds: instead of cultivating a rational environment in which innovative but historically sensitive scholars could produce useful knowledge, the university became a bureaucratic but strangely archaic social institution preoccupied with modish, market-driven research and animated by discrete cults of personality. Though Clark does not make *this* point explicitly, he provides a rich panoply of material and conceptual tools for drawing this and other, similar conclusions.

One of the book's great paradoxes is structural. The book, taken as a whole, is eminently rational. It features chapters that treat of distinct mini-institutions within the history of the university: the lecture catalogue (ch 2); the lecture and the disputation (ch 3); the examination (ch 4); the research seminar (ch 5); the doctor of philosophy (ch 6); the appointment of a professor (ch 7); and the library catalogue (ch 8). Each chapter exemplifies a general pattern with respect to the particular institutions described therein: '[m]ost chapters of this book will exhibit the traditions or manners of early modern academics, and then show how ministries and markets worked to rationalize such practices—how bureaucratic and entrepreneurial interests worked to alter or subvert the traditional authority of faculties and colleges'. (9) Though the point is intimated throughout Part One of the book, the next three chapters, or 'Part Two' (chs 9, 10, and 11), show the paradoxical persistence and power of 'academic charisma' as an operating force within the new bureaucratic regimes.

Within each chapter, though, Clark takes the reader on convoluted tours through isolated bits of university history, lore, and material culture. This has much to do with one of Clark's principles of organization. In the larger analysis, he takes Oxbridge and various medieval universities to stand for the traditional order even as he takes the Jesuits, those great bureaucratizers, to stand for rationalistic impulses at the other end of his spectrum. German Protestant universities, which receive the most attention in the book, are said to have pursued a *via media* between these two, navigating between the aforementioned extremes.

(26) In each chapter, then, Clark moves across a large array of supporting evidence from various places in order to substantiate this larger analysis. The conglomeration of microanalyses within each chapter is no doubt part of what gives Clark's book its odd feel.

Another reason for the Baroque, internal organization of the chapters has to do with Clark's predilections. He brings an enormous amount of research and erudition to bear on his study. He is not shy about indulging an obvious affinity for the human texture of his subject. Clark includes some 47 figures (images of drawings, report cards, and pages from catalogues), dozens of anecdotes, and numerous poetic and prose excerpts. In each case, he subjects the figure or passage to extensive analysis, carefully and lovingly handling the minutest details. The result, overall, is positive, with favorite subjects (Göttingen and the universities of Brandenburg-Prussia, for example) receiving illuminating treatment. When other materials receive briefer treatment, the resulting unevenness distracts, but not fatally.

If the book offers a larger, overarching story, it also presents many ancillary themes and ideas that some readers will want to consider further: the triumph of visual, written culture over oral culture and its implications for academic history; the moralistic legacy of the Enlightenment 'police-state' for the modern university; the careful and ironic insinuation of meritocratic policies in Prussia; the relation of Nietzschean anti-philology to larger critiques of late-modern academic discourse; the profound effects of Enlightenment library science and the shift from physical, microcosmic libraries to virtual, pragmatic collections of specialized knowledge; the need to reevaluate the nature and origin of Humboldtian reforms; and (methodologically) the incorporation of micro-analytic studies of material culture into thematic intellectual histories. This list is by no means exhaustive and is intended merely to illustrate the keen and suggestive quality of Clark's weighty contribution to what must be regarded as a growing field.

Note: Interested readers may also want to visit the book's website [www.academiccharisma.net](http://www.academiccharisma.net). Here the author has helpfully provided links to earlier reviews of the book, as well as a list of errata and a forum for discussion.

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