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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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William Clark. *_Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University_*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 576 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography and index. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-226-10921-6.

Reviewed for H-German by Charles McClelland, Department of History, University of New Mexico

"This is an Odd Book"

As William Clark states in the first line, his "odd" book is "befitting the subject" (p. 3). In a time when universities are (judging by the titles published about them) being corporatized, McDonaldized, diabolized (by certain right-wing groups) or otherwise redefined in their purpose, a thorough look at the historical habitus of universities and their quaint practices may indeed seem to swim against the current. At a time when over half the "masters" in American universities (that is, the regularly-contracted professors) have been forced into the cringing role of part-time or "contingent" faculty, Clark's central thesis--that it was professorial charisma that drove the rise of the modern research university--may also appear quaint. It is, in any case, novel. And, despite the almost universal dead-earnestness with which the subject is taken (are our jobs not the most important in the world?), Clark brings a wry humor to his analysis, as well.

First the argument. Clark proposes that the modern "research university" (which he agrees, conventionally, arose in German-speaking Europe) developed as part of a response by professors to a challenge from outside (the "rationalizing" and "bureaucratizing" state, using Max Weber's categories, as well as new challenges to "marketing services" to students and others). A reputation for originality and discovery, aided by public celebrity through publications, increasingly became the ticket to professorial success after the end of the eighteenth century (ending what Peter Moraw has termed the "family university" based chiefly on nepotism). So far, the argument

is nothing new. Clark's contribution is to label this kind of innovation as "charismatic." Lest one wonder just how Weber's concept of primitive leadership based on special individual holiness or heroism could apply to professorial bookworms, Clark insouciantly advises readers not to worry about "the orthodoxy of my sketch and later use of 'charisma' relating to academics" (p. 15). The problem with such "unorthodoxy" is that the suggested (if unproven) link between charisma and the various innovations leading to the "research university" can also loosely apply to the countermodels cited by the author, such as Oxbridge. While the ancient British universities unquestionably lagged behind the best German counterparts in the nineteenth century in achieving what we now recognize as attributes of the "research university," their dons cannot universally be said to have lacked charisma. It was merely directed elsewhere. Another commonplace taken up and reworked by Clark is the supposed leadership of Protestant German universities (the counterfoil here is provided by the Jesuit influence emphasizing collective over individual/charismatic academic performance) on reformed Catholic institutions. He also applies an interesting argument regarding the shift from predominantly oral to written forms to spread knowledge, implying a significant shift of reach beyond the walls of the traditional medieval or Renaissance university to the wider bourgeois public of the Enlightenment and beyond. This is dubbed the "dominion of the author and the legible" (p. 29).

Leaving aside such interpretative speculations or assertions, the bulk (two thirds) of this lengthy book is devoted to a loving and often minute examination of various academic rituals and institutions, tracing their transformation over many centuries. Unfortunately this narrative does not include much of the last century and a half, precisely the era of the rising "research university." Here we can learn about (and even see reproductions or traces of) the early modern lecture catalogue and the lecture form itself; disputations, examinations, and the research seminar; the rise of the Dr. phil. degree and dissertation as well as the library catalog. Some of these chapters are further bolstered by a series of appendices that are (like the archives that provided them) somewhat hit-or-miss in their coverage, not to say eccentric or merely suggestive. (Many other books, especially over the last quarter century, deliver far more comprehensive statistical data, for example.) One quickly becomes accustomed to the style and approach of the author: a few thought-provoking assertions, followed by citations that provide a rich textural background but rarely sufficient convincing foreground evidence to back the assertion, then a shift to a new topic.

In discussing the innovation and later decline of the ritual of disputations, for example, Clark asserts that the form derived from the medieval mock combat of jousting (p. 74). There is no mention of the tradition of dialogue (for example, the Platonic method) thoroughly familiar to medieval professors of philosophy and theology, who derived much of their knowledge from classical antiquity. Before the "hero" jousting (here Abelard) nothing; after him, everything. One sometimes gains the impression that the

author is so enamored of his theme of scholarly "originality," starting with the search for student "applause" and later (with a shift from the oral to written/published transmission of knowledge, to good reviews and notices) as a motor dragging into being the modern research university that he tends to favor it in his own explanations. To do so, he often ignores or downplays both continuities and standard interpretations (as well as leaving out many important works in an otherwise vast--54-page--bibliography). The remaining third of this long book's principal text deals with "Narrative, Conversation, Reputation"--starting with a "crucial" microanalysis of only two records of formal "visitations" or inspections of two universities spaced some two centuries part. (The commentary duplicates material printed elsewhere.) The argument becomes so obscure here that only a determined effort can follow it, but it appears to be that government or church bureaucracies attempted to exploit the rumors and mutual denunciations by professors that they picked up but ultimately could do little with. A few lines, slightly edited to expose the basic syntax, will give a flavor of the conclusions: "Much of the bureaucratic distance imposed by [the visitor's] prose aimed at obscuring relations between hearsay and reputation. He [the visitor] nevertheless registered a tension between ocular-scribal versus oral-aural traces of academics.... The charismatic aspect of the academic voice, registered by local _applausum_ and circulating chatter, mattered much in ministerial ears. The ministry's procrustean plots foundered on the protean nature of academic babble" (p. 372).

The "oddness" continues into the footnotes, which could have benefited from a thorough editing. To take one random example, Notes 26 and 27 on page 556 contain respectively an apology for not being able to find a reference in the author's notes as well as the odd bilingual appellation "Friedrich [sic] the Great."

It is not easy to imagine what audience the publisher (which apparently did not edit the manuscript carefully enough to note that it is cited in bibliographical notes variously as "University of Chicago Press" as well as "Chicago University Press") had in mind for this work. The dissertation on which it is based (UCLA, 1986) has of course been updated, but most of the chapters have been already published in journals. As a reference work (with its voluminous if somewhat unsystematic appendices), particularly for those whose German is weak, it has some value, but serious students of university history will still need to consult the growing and much less "odd" corpus of secondary works coming out of Germany itself, not to mention the original archival sources to which this is a somewhat eccentric guide. For the sophisticated scholar versed in (or depressed by) the postmodern nonsense increasingly slipping into and even substituting for serious scholarship, the book may offer an occasional weary smile, but it should probably not be recommended to undergraduates or non-experts without a preliminary cautioning word. Despite a desperate search for originality, it deserves in the end the description "a very erudite oddity."

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