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#### THE NUTTY PROFESSORS

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The history of academic charisma.

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Anyone who has ever taught at a college or university must have had this experience. You're in the middle of something that you do every day: standing at a lectern in a dusty room, for example, lecturing to a roomful of teen-agers above whom hang almost visible clouds of hormones; or running a seminar, hoping to find the question that will make people talk even though it's spring and no one has done the reading; or sitting in a department meeting as your colleagues act out their various professional identities, the Russian historians spreading gloom, the Germanists accidentally taking Poland, the Asianists grumbling about Western ignorance and lack of civility, and the Americanists expressing surprise at the idea that the world has other continents. Suddenly, you find yourself wondering, like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, how you can possibly be doing this. Why, in the age of the World Wide Web, do professors still stand at podiums and blather for fifty minutes at unruly mobs of students, their lowered baseball caps imperfectly concealing the sleep buds that rim their eyes? Why do professors and students put on polyester gowns and funny hats and march, once a year, in the uncertain glory of the late spring? Why, when most of our graduate students are going to work as teachers, do we make them spend years grinding out massive, specialized dissertations, which, when revised and published, may reach a readership that numbers in the high two figures? These activities seem both bizarre and disconnected, from one another and from modern life, and it's no wonder that they often provoke irritation, not only in professional pundits but also in parents, potential donors, and academic administrators.

Not that long ago, universities played a very different role in the public imagination, and top academics seemed to glitter as they walked. At a Berlin banquet in 1892, Mark Twain, himself a worldwide celebrity, stared in amazement as a crowd of a thousand young students "rose and shouted and stamped and clapped, and banged the beer-mugs" when the historian Theodor Mommsen entered the room:

This was one of those immense surprises that can happen only a few times in one's life. I was not dreaming of him; he was to me only a giant myth, a world-shadowing specter, not a reality. The surprise of it all can be only comparable to a man's suddenly coming upon Mont Blanc, with its awful form towering into the sky, when he didn't suspect he was in its neighborhood. I would have walked a great many miles to get a sight of him, and here he was, without trouble, or tramp, or cost of any kind. Here he was, clothed in a titanic deceptive modesty which made him look like other men. Here he was, carrying the Roman world and all the Caesars in his hospitable skull, and doing it as easily as that other luminous vault, the skull of the universe, carries the

Milky Way and the constellations.

Mommsen's fantastic energy and work ethic—he published more than fifteen hundred scholarly works—had made him a hero, not only among scholars but to the general public, a figure without real parallels today. The first three volumes of his “History of Rome,” published in the eighteen-fifties, were best-sellers for decades and won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902. Berlin tram conductors pointed him out as he stood in the street, leaning against a lamppost and reading: “That is the celebrated Professor Mommsen: *he loses no time.*” Mommsen was as passionately engaged with the noisy, industrializing present as with the ancient past. As a liberal member of the Prussian legislature, he fought racism, nationalism, and imperialism, and clashed with Bismarck. Yet Mommsen knew how to cooperate with the government on the things that really mattered. He favored reorganizing research in the humanities along the autocratic, entrepreneurial lines of the big businesses of his time—companies like Siemens and Zeiss, whose scientific work was establishing Germany as the leading industrial power in Europe. This approach essentially gave rise to the research team, a group of scholars headed by a distinguished figure which receives funding to achieve a particular goal. Mommsen's view was that “large-scale scholarship—not pursued, but directed, by a single man—is a necessary element in our cultural evolution.” He won public support for such enterprises as a vast collection, still being amassed, of the tens of thousands of inscriptions that show, more vividly than any work of literature, what Roman life was like. He also advised the Prussian government on academic appointments, and helped make the University of Berlin and the Prussian Academy of Sciences the widely envied scientific center of the West—the Harvard, you might say, of the nineteenth century.

The model that Mommsen represented was revered and imitated around the world. In the United States, the new universities founded after the Civil War—Clark, Johns Hopkins, and Chicago—set out to gain prominence as Berlin had: by becoming research institutions and competing to attract faculty stars. In 1892, the University of Chicago, then two years old, wooed the historian Hermann von Holst away from Freiburg by promising him more than five times his previous salary. New labs and libraries popped up in cities and college towns across the country—at least until the Depression and the Second World War created other priorities. The age of academic prosperity that has lasted, with interruptions, from the nineteen-eighties to the present, and that has inspired campus novels and provoked skirmishes in the culture wars, has arguably been little more than an ironic replay of that late-nineteenth-century zenith, with academic stars fighting as hard for their own preferment as Mommsen did for the young and gifted.

But what does the academic agenda of the modern research-based university have to do with the other side of college life as we know it—with fraternity pledges, the choruses of “*Gaudeamus igitur,*” the stone façades of Victorian Gothic buildings? The mixed inheritance of the modern university is the subject of a new book with the somewhat oxymoronic title “*Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University,*” by William Clark, a historian who has spent his academic career at both American and European universities. Clark thinks that the modern university, with its passion for research, prominent professors, and, yes, black crêpe, took shape in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And he makes his case with analytic shrewdness, an exuberant love of archival anecdote, and a wry sense of humor. It's hard

to resist a writer who begins by noting, “Befitting the subject, this is an odd book.”

Clark’s story starts in the Middle Ages. The organizations that became the first Western universities, schools that sprang up in Paris and Bologna, were in part an outgrowth of ecclesiastical institutions, and their teachers asserted their authority by sitting, like bishops, in thrones—which is why we still refer to professorships as chairs—and speaking in a prescribed way, about approved texts. “The lecture, like the sermon, had a liturgical cast and aura,” Clark writes. “One must be authorized to perform the rite, and must do it in an authorized manner. Only then does the chair convey genuine charisma to the lecturer.” Clark assumes his notion of charisma, loosely but clearly, from the work of Max Weber, who developed the idea that authority assumes three forms. Traditional authority, the stable possession of kings and priests, rested on custom, “piety for what actually, allegedly or presumably has always existed.” Charismatic authority, wild and disruptive, derived from “the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person.” Rational authority, the last of the three forms to emerge, represented the rise of bureaucratic procedure, dividing responsibilities and following precise rules.

As Weber pointed out, in real organizations these different forms of authority interact and collide. In the medieval classroom, for all its emphasis on tradition-bound hierarchy and order, a contrary force came into play, one that unleashed the charisma of talented individuals: the disputation, in which a respondent affirmed the thesis under discussion and an opponent attempted to refute it. (Unlike the lecture, the disputation hasn’t survived as an institution, but its modern legacy includes the oral defenses that Ph.D. candidates make of their theses, and the format of our legal trials.) Clark calls the disputation a “theater of warfare, combat, trial and joust,” and, indeed, early proponents likened it to the contests of athletic champions in ancient Rome.

One early academic champion was the Parisian master Abelard, who cunningly used the format of the disputation to point up the apparent inconsistencies in orthodox Christian doctrine. He lined up the discordant opinions of the Fathers of the Church under the deliberately provocative title “Sic et Non” (“Yes and No”) and invited all comers to debate how the conflicts might be resolved. His triumphs in these “combats” made him, arguably, the first glamorous Parisian intellectual. A female disciple, Héloïse, wrote to him, “Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence.” Their story has become a legend because of what followed: Héloïse, unwed, had a child by Abelard, her kin castrated him in revenge, and they both lived out their lives, for the most part, in cloisters. But even after Abelard’s writings were condemned and burned, pupils came from across Europe hoping to study with him. He had the enduring magnetism of the hotshot who can outargue anyone in the room.

Traditionalist plodders and charismatic firebrands shared the university from the beginning. The heart of Clark’s story, however, takes place not during the Middle Ages but from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, and not in France but in the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire. This complex assembly of tiny territorial states and half-timbered towns had no capital to rival Paris, but the little clockwork polities transformed the university through the

simple mechanism of competition. German officials understood that a university could make a profit by attaining international stature. Every well-off native who stayed home to study and every foreign noble who came from abroad with his tutor—as Shakespeare’s Hamlet left Denmark to study in Saxon Wittenberg—meant more income. And the way to attract customers was to modernize and rationalize what professors and students did.

These German polities called themselves “police states”—not in the sense of being oppressive but, as Clark explains, in the sense that they tried “to achieve the good policing, *die gute Policey*, of the land by monitoring and regulating the behavior of subjects by paperwork.” At first, what *Policey* meant for the universities was just finding out what the professors were up to.

Bureaucrats pressured universities to print catalogues of the courses they offered—the early modern ancestor of the bright brochures that spill from the crammed mailboxes of families with teen-age children. Gradually, the bureaucrats devised ways to insure that the academics were fulfilling their obligations. In Vienna, Clark notes, “a 1556 decree provided for paying two individuals to keep daily notes on lecturers and professors”; in Marburg, from 1564 on, the university beadle kept a list of skipped lectures and gave it, quarterly, to the rector, who imposed fines. Others demanded that professors fill in *Professorenzetteln*, slips of paper that gave a record of their teaching activities. Professorial responses to such bureaucratic intrusions seem to have varied as much then as they do now. Clark reproduces two *Professorenzetteln* from 1607 side by side. Michael Mästlin, an astronomer and mathematician who taught Kepler and was an early adopter of the Copernican view of the universe, gives an energetic full-page outline of his teaching. Meanwhile, Andreas Osiander, a theologian whose grandfather had been an important ally of Luther, writes one scornful sentence: “In explicating Luke I have reached chapter nine.”

Bureaucracy has its own logic, and officials pushed for results that looked rational: results that they could codify, sort, and explain to their masters. Glacially, the universities responded. The old disputations were discontinued. These had always placed greater emphasis on formal skill in argument than on truth of outcome, and during the Baroque period and the Enlightenment they came to seem sterile and farcical. (Rather like department meetings and creative-writing workshops today, they had begun to inspire biting satires.) Instead, the universities instituted formal examinations—exercises that were carefully graded and recorded by those who administered them. Doctoral candidates had to defend printed dissertations. Clark wonderfully describes these strenuous, scary exercises. When Dorothea Schlözer, the daughter of a professor, underwent her examination for a doctorate at Göttingen in 1787, she confronted a committee of seven examiners. In deference to her sex, she was seated not at the far end of the table, facing the professors, but between two of them. The examination—which was interrupted for tea—allowed for masterly displays of professorial snideness. One professor “pulled a rock out of his pocket and asked her to classify it. After a couple more questions, he said he was going to ask her one on the binomial theorem, but, as he reckoned most of his own colleagues knew nothing of it, he decided to skip it.” The student calmly outperformed her masters. When another professor asked about art history, she noted that she had not listed this topic on her résumé, and thus should not be asked about it—but then she answered anyway. After about two hours, a professor who had been silent until then interrupted a colleague to note that “it was 7:30 and time to quit.” Schlözer passed.

In an even more radical break with the past, professors began to be appointed on the basis of merit. In many universities, it had been routine for sons to succeed their fathers in chairs, and bright male students might hope to gain access to the privileged university caste by marrying a professor's daughter. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, reformers in Hanover and elsewhere tried to select and promote professors according to the quality of their published work, and an accepted hierarchy of positions emerged. The bureaucrats were upset when a gifted scholar like Immanuel Kant ignored this hierarchy and refused to leave the city of his choice to accept a desirable chair elsewhere. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, the pace of transformation reached a climax.

In these years, intellectuals inside and outside the university developed a new myth, one that Clark classes as Romantic. They argued that *Wissenschaft*—systematic, original research unencumbered by superstition or the authority of mere tradition—was the key to all academic achievement. If a university wanted to attract foreign students, it must appoint professors who could engage in such scholarship. At a great university like Göttingen or Berlin, students, too, would do original research, writing their own dissertations instead of paying the professors to do so, as their fathers probably had. Governments sought out famous professors and offered them high salaries and research funds, and stipends for their students. The fixation on *Wissenschaft* placed the long-standing competition among universities on an idealistic footing.

Between 1750 and 1825, the research enterprise established itself, along with institutions that now seem eternal and indispensable: the university library, with its acquisitions budget, large building, and elaborate catalogues; the laboratory; the academic department, with its fellowships and specialized training. So did a new form of teaching: the seminar, in which students learned by doing, presenting reports on their original research for the criticism of their teachers and colleagues. The new pedagogy prized novelty and discovery; it was stimulating, optimistic, and attractive to students around the world. Some ten thousand young Americans managed to study in Germany during the nineteenth century. There, they learned that research defined the university enterprise. And that is why we still make our graduate students write dissertations and our assistant professors write books. The multicultural, global faculty of the American university still inhabits the all-male, and virtually all-Christian, research universities of Mommsen's day.

Clark leads the reader through these transformations, year by year and document by document. He also uses the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge as a traditionalist foil to the innovations of Germany. Well into the nineteenth century, these were the only two universities in England, and dons—who were not allowed to marry—lived side by side with undergraduates, in an environment that had about it more of the monastery than of modernity. The tutorial method, too, had changed little, and colleges were concerned less with producing great scholars than with cultivating a serviceable crop of civil servants, barristers, and clergymen. The eighteenth century, which saw the flowering of modern German academe, marked a nadir recorded by Edward Gibbon, the Magdalen College dropout who became the greatest historian of imperial Rome, in memorable (and slightly exaggerated) terms:

The fellows or monks of my time were decent easy men, who supinely enjoyed the gifts of the founder. Their days were filled by a series of uniform employments; the chapel and the hall, the coffee-house and the common room, till they retired, weary and well-satisfied, to a long slumber. From the toil of reading or thinking or writing they had absolved their conscience, and the first shoots of learning and ingenuity withered on the ground.

Yet, even at Oxford, some scientists and scholars offered innovative lecture courses, and, conversely, the innovative German universities did not abandon all the old ways of doing things. Professors continued to give lectures as well as to hold seminars. Academic ceremonies continued to take place, and continued to do a great deal for the reputations of universities—especially once the giving of honorary degrees began to attract the attention of newspapers. Invented traditions, moreover, proved as attractive as ancient ones—particularly at universities that drew young men of high birth and others with social pretensions. Nineteenth-century German students were even more dedicated to duelling with sabres and attending formal banquets (such as the one at which Twain saw Mommsen) than they were to original research. Twain himself was as charmed by the picturesque duelling corps and taverns of Heidelberg as he was by the avatars of modern *Wissenschaft* in Berlin.

Similarly, although the hiring of professors became more meritocratic, administrators faced the enduring problem of how to assess merit systematically. Clark demonstrates this by inviting us to accompany Friedrich Gedike, a Prussian minister, on the visits he made to fourteen universities in June and July, 1789, just as the French Revolution was breaking out. Where his sixteenth- and seventeenth-century predecessors would have asked about the character and teaching abilities of local professors—did they have an audience, were they punctual, were they too friendly with the students?—Gedike undertook a ruthless talent search in an academic world where states competed for researchers. At the University of Göttingen, for instance, a hub of innovation only half a century old, he found an interesting anomaly. Professors tended to remain frozen at their acquisition salaries unless they could extract more money with the leverage of an outside offer. And, because universities mostly wanted to hire professors whose greatest works were still ahead of them, junior professors were often paid more than senior ones. Hence, academics at Göttingen found the whole subject of salaries too embarrassing to discuss, and Gedike had to collect information from “sensible and well-informed students, rather than professors.”

Gedike asked sharp, precise questions, but his judgments were, necessarily, reliant on the words of the specialists he spoke to. His report offered a long and precise evaluation of Christian Gottlob Heyne, the classicist who had done more than any other professor to make Göttingen a world-class center of learning. But often he could do little more than offer character assessments—“timid,” “hypochondriac,” “very sinister and misanthropic”—of the eccentrics who dominated the various faculties. In essence, Gedike and his colleagues gathered academic gossip and passed it on. The opinions were compiled, the decisions were made, and the jobs were handed out, not solely on the basis of rational, informed scrutiny of candidates’ merits but also on the basis of what people who might know something had to say about who was hot and who was not. These procedures are all too familiar to anyone who has taken part in academic hiring decisions today. A committee sits in a room, discussing folders full of organized gossip—and, nowadays, densely

technical reports—about professors at other universities. Then it does its best to decide which of them to hire and what it will take to attract them—even though no one in the room may be competent to sum up, much less assess, the work of the candidates in question. We apply our best hermeneutics to the C.V. and letters of recommendation, discount known feuds, add points for this and that—and then, somehow, arrive at a decision.

As Clark shows, the assessment of professors is only one incidence of a much larger phenomenon. Universities are strange and discordant places because they are palimpsests of the ancient and the modern. Their history follows a Weberian narrative of rationalization, but it also reveals the limits of that rationalization. Mommsen, for all his modernity, spoke and wrote elegant, lucid Latin, like the humanists of the Renaissance, and enjoyed traditional academic ceremonies. Modern universities sincerely try to find the best scholars and scientists, those who work on the cutting edge of their fields, but they are also keen to preserve the traditional aspects of their culture and like their professors to wear their gowns with an air. They hope that some undefined combination of these qualities will attract the best crop of seventeen-year-olds available.

In the end, Clark never fully anatomizes how individual academics—those strange creatures flapping about in their batlike gowns—came to possess inherent charisma, as opposed to the authority conferred on them by chairs, titles, and the other “material practices” that form the core of his study. After all, charisma is to some extent irreducible; in the classroom a scholar can inspire by sheer force of intellect and personality, an effect to which bureaucratic reports seldom do justice. But Clark is shrewd in charting one aspect of academic charisma—namely, the importance of asceticism in creating an aura of greatness. Mommsen, with his heroic self-control and self-abnegation, had many precursors. The roots of academic asceticism surely lie in the university’s monastic prehistory. Indeed, Gadi Algazi, an Israeli historian, has shown that although German scholars, unlike their English counterparts, were allowed to marry and set up households from the fifteenth century onward, they took endless pains to show that they demanded big houses only so that they could work uninterrupted and married only so that they could have orderly, well-run homes.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, professorial asceticism moved from the home to the workplace, where it took new forms, most notably that of productivity on an epic, and sometimes eccentric, scale. The new model professor wore himself out: greatness of mind and depth of learning, like beauty, could be attained only through suffering. Christian Gottlob Heyne, who integrated the visual arts into the formal study of antiquity, also ran Göttingen’s university library—one of the largest and best organized in Europe—and published reviews of some eight thousand of the books that he obtained and catalogued for the university’s collection. Heyne’s pupil Friedrich August Wolf became legendary by similar means. As a scholar, his importance rested on his 1795 “Prolegomena to Homer”—an enormously successful book, though only the first volume ever appeared and it was written in Latin—which argued that the Iliad and the Odyssey were collections of originally oral poems, assembled by the poet-scholars of Hellenistic Alexandria. But what really made him a celebrity was his combination of daring and self-denial. Wolf insisted on registering as a student not of theology but of philology, even

though the few available jobs for graduates were for ministers rather than scholars. Heyne showed him his desk, piled with letters from schoolteachers “who tell me that they would be glad to be hanged, from actual destitution,” but Wolf persevered. He replaced the student’s usual pigtail with a wig, so that he would not have to go to the barber; stayed away from the taverns where students caroused and the salons where they met young women; and even stopped attending lectures, since he thought that his time could be more productively spent reading the assigned books. He infuriated his teacher by reading ahead of the class and taking out all the library books that Heyne needed to prepare his lectures. And his reward came soon: a professorship at Halle, at the age of twenty-four. This brilliant, bitter nonconformist paradoxically became a model for later generations of students. No wonder observers praised Mommsen’s ceaseless industry so extravagantly half a century later: he was not only doing history at a superb level but also living an ascetic ideal that still mattered.

Today, academic charisma—and the ascetic life of scholarship that goes with it—retains a central place in the life of universities. Scholars in all fields continue to gain preferment because they are “productive” (the academic euphemism for obsessive), and students continue to emulate them. Future investment bankers pull all-nighters delving into subjects that they will never need to know about again, and years later, at reunions, they recall the intensity of the experience with something close to disbelief—and, often, passionate nostalgia. The university has never been a sleek, efficient corporation. It’s more like the military, an organization at once radically modern and steeped in color and tradition. And it’s not at all easy to say how much of the mystique could be stripped away without harming the whole institution. If you thoroughly rationalize charisma, can it remain charismatic?

If Clark helps us to understand why the contemporary university seems such an odd, unstable compound of novelty and conservatism, he also leaves us with some cause for unease. Mommsen may have liked to see himself as a buccaneering capitalist, but his money came from the state. Today, by contrast, dwindling public support has forced university administrators to look for other sources of funding, and to assess professors and programs through the paradigm of the efficient market. Outside backers tend to direct their support toward disciplines that offer practical, salable results—the biological sciences, for instance, and the quantitative social sciences—and universities themselves have an incentive to channel money into work that will generate patents for them. The new regime may be a good way to get results, but it’s hard to imagine that this style of management would have found much room for a pair of eccentrics like James Watson and Francis Crick, or for the kind of long-range research that they did. As for the humanities, once the core of the enterprise—well, humanists these days bring in less grant money than Mommsen, and their salaries and working conditions reflect that all too clearly. The inefficient and paradoxical ways of doing things that, for all their peculiarity, have made American universities the envy of the world are changing rapidly. What ironic story will William Clark have to tell a generation from now? ♦

