

BOOK REVIEWS

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Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University.

By William Clark. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2006.

Pp. 662. Bibliography, index. Cloth \$45.00. ISBN 0-226-10921-6.

Upon completing this study of the origins of the modern research university many readers will be inclined to agree with William Clark's claim that his is "an odd book" (p. 3)—but many will also recognize it as fascinating, consistently thought-provoking, and occasionally frustrating. The book focuses on the material culture and practices at German universities from roughly the 1770s to the 1830s and argues that it was the modernizing bureaucratic order of the late Enlightenment and Romantic periods that shaped the modern research university, producing a remarkably durable institutionalized culture in which individual charisma nonetheless came to play an important supporting role.

By "charisma," Clark, drawing on Max Weber, means a source of authority based (in the case of German university professors) on "genius" and originality. The charismatic individual becomes a source of authority when he or she attracts acolytes and imitators. But a process of bureaucratic rationalization tamed and routinized what would otherwise be a source of instability, revolution, or anarchy. The result was "dynamic equilibrium": the containment of academic charisma within the confines of a modern bureaucratic order. In the early modern era this containment was carried out by "bureaucratic and capitalist precision machines" (p. 10) by which the author means German state ministries, Cameralists, and the "market."

It was in the Protestant German states that the most influential model of the modern research university emerged. Clark makes frequent comparisons to Austrian and British universities, where the Jesuit tradition produced "arch rationalizers" (p. 26) in the case of the former and defenders of tradition in the latter. The crucial factor distinguishing the Protestant German from the Austrian and British models was the power of the professors and their collective bodies—faculties and academic senates. The bulk of the text takes the reader on a series of voyages through the paper and practices and even the furniture and physical spaces of the early modern German university. Most of these features remain instantly recognizable to contemporary academics outside Great Britain.

Clark begins with the lecture catalog, which served to give the university a rational, epistemic order in place of older rituals and hierarchies. Through

lecture catalogs a large step was taken toward creating the “rationalized academic persona” (p. 58). Such systematizing also lent itself well to state supervision. Lectures and disputations, two foundations of medieval university life, also fell victim in this period to state rationalization, discipline, and policing. Lectures, of course, did not disappear as disputations did, but became systematized and routinized. As did the examination, in which writing overcame (though not completely) the oral tradition and grading came to occupy its central position in the modern meritocratic order. Those seeking advanced degrees would also have to endure the research seminar, which also maintained older oral practices while emphasizing the importance of writing. The original writing that came to be expected of students in research seminars “symbolize[d] the transformation of the seminarist’s persona, . . . seal[ing] his passage as original creation into the new world of academic labor” (p. 179). The demand that students produce original works of research became the gateway to another invention, the doctor of philosophy, and also to professorial appointments, though in the latter instance the state’s hand—guided by dossiers—became an ever-present factor in the appointment process and source of conflict between university and state ministries.

From bureaucratic routinization, titles, documents, and library catalogs, Clark turns to the “resistances and oddities” of human academic voices and vices that came to coexist with the rationalizing of the modern research university: rumors, gossip, “babble,” and ministerial visitations in which the visiting minister’s personal interpretations of “academic noise” could become part of his “objective review” (p. 390). Clark ranges to the present in the epilogue. He is clearly uncomfortable with the contemporary American mega-research university, with its ties to government and the corporate world. As for the individual professor and his or her place in this world, the author seems to long for what one might call charisma unbound—for the heroic individual whose great leaps of imagination and creativity break the confines of the modern research university. He goes so far as to suggest that Nietzsche, who dared to break the boundaries of academic culture with the publication of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* and incurred the wrath of his colleagues, may have gone mad because he tried, as Nietzsche himself put it, “to see academic knowledge through the optics of the artist” (p. 401). Whatever the reason, do these kinds of “restraints”—in this case the opprobrium of one’s peers—not serve a purpose? Reliable knowledge is produced block by block and must always be subject to testing, criticism, refutation, and even derision. This production is carried out by a group of individuals who have agreed to respect a basic set of methodological principles, thus imposing epistemological constraints on themselves and their colleagues. Looked at this way, Nietzsche comes off less as the genius unjustly repressed by a narrow-minded rationalized academic machine and more as an insufferable megalomaniac who could not countenance critical evaluation of his provocative but opaque and shoddy written work.

This brief summary does not do justice to the richness of Clark's research and analysis. The book is filled with illuminating stories and rich analyses of drawings, early grade books, title pages, floor plans, and letters of reference. Contemporary students and scholars alike will find a rather nauseating familiarity in many of Clark's examples, such as the likening of the early Prussian *Abitur* and Oxbridge exams to "torture" (p. 140), the often pointless and exhausting interference in academic affairs by administrators, hallway and conference gossiping among professors, the terrors of publish or perish, and so forth.

The author's occasional lapses into postmodern jargon are distracting and—like the postmodern critique of historical analysis and narration itself—add nothing of substance to the analysis. Indeed, the lack of substance in postmodern jargon lends itself too easily to an ironic posture, and Clark's ironic distance from his subject can be discomfiting. One cannot help feeling that the author sees the entire modern academic project as a kind of put-on, a "construction" that serves the machine of modernizing rationalization. It may be true that reputations, to cite a typical characterization, are "fabricated" (p. 4) but they can also be earned by achievement and that these achievements are both deserving of acclaim and vulnerable to challenge and refutation. The substantive scientific and philosophical achievements and failures of the modern research university are very real. They had and continue to have real-world consequences. The frustrations of modern academic life notwithstanding, there remains a realm of insatiable curiosity, love of knowledge and debate, and the dogged pursuit of truth that have survived bureaucratic routinization and the postmodern sneer.

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Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany, 1800–1870.

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While numerous studies have been published on nineteenth-century German-Jewish theology and religion, relatively little has been written on the role of gender in the theology and religious practice of Judaism during the same era. In his innovative study, *Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany, 1800–1870*, Benjamin Maria Baader investigates changes in religious practice in the synagogue and home; in liturgies and worship practices; in sermons