

Dynamic Equilibria

by Eve Rosenhaft

William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2006; 662 pp., £28.50; ISBN 0226109216.

William Clark's engrossing and illuminating study of the genealogy of the modern university bears on its dust-jacket lines of praise from other scholars. The reader who has perused Clark's anatomy of the centuries of institutional life that produced the routines academics now take for granted is likely to be acutely aware of what these words, in this position, on this object (a bound volume of extremely high quality) do. They tell us that the book has been judged worth reading and worthy of inclusion in a scholarly canon by people (in this case, as it happens, men) whose judgement we ought to respect (because even if we have never heard of them we have heard of the research institutions from which they come: Harvard, the University of Chicago, the French National Centre for Scientific Research, and the Swiss National Technical University). They tell us that this William Clark himself has been welcomed as a member of a (virtual) community of scholars, and more than that, has been certified by those already in possession of academic charisma as being himself charismatic (of this more later). By their location, they also betray something of the material conditions that underpin the circulation of charisma (or the construction of reputation) in this 'virtual' scholarly community; pre-publication comments bespeak a well-networked author and/or editor.

Beyond this, though, the thumbnail reviews on the dust-jacket are a neat indicator of where this book sits in a developing field of research. Clark's 'referees' are Adrian Johns, Christian Jacob, Michael Hagner and Peter Galison. All are scholars who have made important contributions to what is best described as the history of the production of knowledge. Their work exemplifies the way in which approaches originally developed by historians of the natural and physical sciences have been extended to other fields of human activity whose intended outcome is that people know (and/or believe) things that they didn't before. The key to the new approach, which originated in what is now called 'science studies', is a move away from the simple genealogy of ideas, with an emphasis on discoveries and 'breakthroughs' and the achievements of heroic individuals. Taking further the insights of Thomas Kuhn on the nature of scientific

revolutions, both sociologists and ethnographers interested in how science is being made now and historians of science have turned to analysing the social relations and material practices which constitute 'science' and define 'the scientist' in any given period. In science studies, this has meant among other things a close attention to the routines of laboratory life and laboratory culture, and Peter Galison has led in this field with his studies of the material culture of physics.¹ Johns, Jacob and Hagner have applied this approach beyond the laboratory, to the wider worlds of scholarship and knowledge production. Jacob has developed ways of rethinking the history of map-making. Johns's work re-examined the origins of print culture in Britain in terms of the material conditions for the production of knowledge, knowingly applying the term 'literary culture' to a detailed account of what got printed and how. And Hagner has contributed to a growing literature on how the scientific or scholarly personality has been constructed in the past, with studies of (among other things) the history of attention and the nineteenth-century fascination with the size and shape of scientists' brains.²

Historians writing in this mode must strike a convincing balance between exploring the minutiae of everyday social practice and untangling the issues of changing mentality that constitute the objects of History-with-a-capital-H, or what the Germans call Universal History (that is: the history that 'matters'). Undisguised fascination with artefacts, manuals, and other material components of social practice may provoke blank incomprehension or the accusation of antiquarianism. Anthony Grafton's history of the footnote, Markus Krajewski's study of the birth of the card catalogue, Béatrice Fraenkel's history of the signature, and even the volume *The Little Tools of Knowledge* which William Clark has co-edited, have yet to find a place on non-specialist reading lists – not just because they are not all available in English.³

Where the balance is maintained, as in *Academic Charisma* and the other studies cited here, it is clear that work of this kind not only enriches cultural history by drawing on the broadly ethnographic methods of science studies, but also reaches out to and provides new ways into understanding the histories of power with which readers of *History Workshop Journal* have always been concerned. Historicizing the Foucauldian hypothesis about the relationship between power and knowledge – or giving content to the notion of governmentality⁴ – requires nothing less than specifying the material means through which particular state apparatuses have generated information, exercised power and reproduced themselves. For example, studies of quantification as a means for surveying and controlling populations have moved very rapidly to consider not simply the quantifiers' 'trust in numbers', but the very forms (tabular or otherwise) in which statistical data have been represented.⁵ Understanding the ways in which the investment of modern states in controlling their subjects has worked to generate markers and categories of identity calls for the

study of the forms in which identity has been documented – for histories of the passport as well as of the signature.⁶ Similarly, close attention to what people were actually *doing* when they were making revolutions like the rise of print culture, the growth of the professions, the emergence of the modern state, or the invention of the corporation adds a new dimension to histories of labour and class formation. Or, conversely, we can begin to see these epochs of political and cultural history as the aggregate products of everyday labour in the same way as we have long understood (or thought we understood) the industrial revolution. Particularly fruitful in this context has been the new light thrown on the development of social and political self-consciousness among the middle classes in early modern Germany by a study of the triangular relationship between identity formation, the generating and recording of data for bureaucratic purposes, and the circulation of information.⁷

This returns us to William Clark's book, since the core of his work is an account of the production of a certain kind of middle-class man – the research academic – mainly in early modern Germany. His findings have a global relevance, however, since the model of academic life that was forged in German universities has become a universal norm. This is the image of the university as an institution whose principal purpose is to sustain continuous innovation in knowledge production by employing people skilled in finding and analysing data (research) and by identifying young people with the appropriate talents and qualities and training them to be research scholars. First elaborated in Germany between about 1800 and 1820 and instituted in the new University of Berlin founded 1808-10, the model was adopted in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century and came to dominate British higher education over the course of the twentieth. (The study is based very largely on German sources, but Clark also draws effectively on evidence from Oxford and Cambridge as a counterpoint to continental developments.) In what may seem a paradox, Clark argues convincingly that the model that has proved capable of being universalized to the point where we now take it for granted was developed within a very particular kind of institution whose emergence is explicable entirely in terms of the political structures that prevailed in Protestant Germany between the Reformation and the nineteenth century.

Clark develops his argument by way of a step-by-step account of the evolution of academic practices in Europe since the middle ages. In the first part of the book, he examines in turn, and in glorious detail, the development of lecture catalogues, the emergence of the lecture and the seminar from medieval forms of teaching and preaching, the history of examinations, the crystallization of the PhD as a set of qualifying practices, the selection and appointment of professors, and the growth of university libraries and cataloguing systems. Here a key process is the shift from oral to written communication of knowledge, as typified by the slow transition from the disputation as a formal contest sharing its cultural roots with

the joust, via written examinations, to the published dissertation which was a product of the early nineteenth century. Circulating in print, the dissertation could be detached from the person of its author and have a life of its own; it could inform, and be judged by, a much wider audience than could attend a public disputation. But in fact the authority of the modern dissertation (or monograph) lay (and lies) precisely in its association with a single individual, the author. And what makes the modern academic by definition an author is what makes him a different kind of individual from his medieval counterpart: he is (expected to be) singularly capable of originality (of discovery, recombination, interpretation or invention). The granting of the doctorate and the publication of the dissertation themselves certify precisely this. This is what Clark means by 'academic charisma'.

Charisma created, certified by and embedded in an institution is an odd idea – or, to use one of Clark's favourite terms, an ironic one. His aim is not simply to show what an innovation the modern research university was, or to trace its origins in formal practices designed to promote and foster the charismatic or heroic character of research (like the seminar in which students compete in the presentation of research papers – an invention of German philologists of the Romantic period). He is also interested in how reputations were made and sustained. This is where the wider irony as well as the relevance to broader historical processes comes in, because by Clark's account the story that ends with the uniquely charismatic scholar in a tenured post begins with an uneasy combination of a free market in tuition and the bureaucratic demands of public administration: '[L]ike modern capitalism, the research university achieved an amazing "dynamic equilibrium" ... by the cultivation of charismatic figures within a broad sphere of rationalization.' In the German Protestant lands, where educational institutions previously operated by the Church became subject to direct state administration, university teachers were called on from as early as the sixteenth century to reflect on their purposes, to account for their use of time, to confirm that they were meeting objectives set by external bodies, and (implicitly at least) to measure their own performance against that of others. They reported in response to personal visitations by inspectors and to written enquiries and questionnaires, and increasingly anticipated external review by maintaining their own lists and timetables. The pressure to live up to external norms, collectively and individually, was supplemented by market pressures as long as professors depended on cash fees paid by students attending their lectures. The particular balance of individuality and conformity represented by 'academic charisma', then, was long in the making. But Clark convinces us of the epochal relevance of that trajectory; the university which emerged to promote and foster charismatic scholarship remains a well-adapted machine for producing the knowledge that makes the world go round – as well as (on a good day) the tools to critique both knowledge and the world it has made.

In describing the historical figure of the academic I have used the masculine pronoun up to now, since 'academic charisma' is a quality to which women were admitted notoriously late. Clark has some interesting things to say about this, as about most issues even marginally relevant to his theme. He has worked through an enormous mass of material, and proves an exceptionally acute analyst of text and image. Reading the book accordingly brings with it some of the pleasures of a busman's holiday for anyone who has had anything to do with a modern university. The journey is not a short one, and there are bumpy stretches. Parts of the book have already been published elsewhere, and in places the joins show; some poor copy editing means moments of repetition add to its very considerable length (though nearly 200 of the 662 pages are devoted to very useful illustrations and appendices which constitute tools of knowledge in themselves). Overall, however, it remains a good read. A mass of data and complex arguments are clearly set out and enlivened by moments of dramatic narrative, while an easy style characterized by a very personal voice rises to periods which are simultaneously succinct and colourful – as in Clark's observations on the academic bathrobe, or his assertion that the decline of the master's degree between 1450 and 1550 'was a result of the vicious work of poets, the treachery of jurists, and the betrayal of theologians'.

The tour allows academic readers to see their own work in a new light. The treadmill of preparation for inspections and evaluations that plagued seventeenth and eighteenth-century German academics is all too familiar. Many of us will not be surprised to learn that the system of examining and classifying undergraduates originated not as a pedagogical tool but as a means of establishing precedence when social origins ceased to be a reliable basis; the key thing was to know in what order to list students, and ordering them according to their performance in an examination of some kind was as good a principle as any. Nor will most of us be much comforted to learn that the examining process in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Oxbridge was even more haphazard and (as Andrew Warwick has already outlined in his study of Cambridge mathematics)⁸ more of a calculated ordeal for the examinees than it is today. Distinctly more unsettling is Clark's account of the eighteenth-century thesis defence or disputation, in which the candidate (student) normally defended not his own dissertation but that of the sponsoring professor, and often paid for its publication to boot. This account is rapidly followed by the evidence that for a generation or two in the late eighteenth century it was by no means obvious which party in the relationship between a professor and a doctoral candidate had written the doctoral dissertation. Stories like these unsettle us not only because they contradict our own practice, but because they are entirely counter-intuitive in terms of our understanding of the meanings and values of originality and intellectual authority, and the purposes of higher education. And this reminder that the

things we take for granted are historically contingent constitutes no small part of the purpose and the power of *Academic Charisma*.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: a Material Culture of Microphysics*, Chicago, 1997. Foundational for this approach is the work of Bruno Latour, for example *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Cambridge, MA, 1987.

2 See Christian Jacob, *L'empire des cartes. Approche théorique de la cartographie à travers l'histoire*, Paris, 1992; Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*, Chicago, 1998; Michael Hagner, 'Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science', *MLN* 118: 3, 2003, pp. 670–87; Michael Hagner, 'Skulls, Brains and Memorial Culture: On Cerebral Biographies of Scientists in the Nineteenth Century', *Science in Context* 16: 1–2, March 2003, pp. 195–218. This last item was part of a special number of the journal devoted to 'scientific personae and their histories'.

3 Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: a Curious History*, London, 1997; Markus Krajewski, *Zettelwirtschaft. Die Geburt der Kartei aus dem Geiste der Bibliothek*, Berlin, 2002; Béatrice Fraenkel, *La Signature. Genèse d'une signe*, Paris, 1992; *Little Tools of Knowledge. Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices*, ed. Peter Becker and William Clark, Ann Arbor, 2001.

4 See *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, Chicago, 1991.

5 For example: Andrea Rusnock, *Vital Accounts: Quantifying Health and Population in Eighteenth-Century England and France*, Cambridge, 2002; cf. Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Princeton, 1995.

6 John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*, Cambridge, 2000; *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. Jane Caplan and John Torpey, Princeton, 2001.

7 Ian F. McNeely, *The Emancipation of Writing: German Civil Society in the Making*, Berkeley, 2003. Cf. Eve Rosenhaft, 'Hands and Minds: Clerical Workloads in the First "Information Society"', in *Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions, 1750–2000*, ed. Aad Blok and Greg Downey, Cambridge and New York, 2003, pp.13–43.

8 Andrew Warwick, *Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathematical Physics*, Chicago, 2003.

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