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Princelings, plutocracy and peregrinations

by Anthony Smith

Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University

by William Clark

University of Chicago Press, 576pp, £ 28.50, ISBN 0 226 10921 6

William Clark opens his book by declaring that it is to be an "odd book". Its oddity allows him to put together what amounts to an anthropology of university life. The book's mission is to show how the research university emerged out of German Protestantism and German bureaucracy in the 19th and 20th centuries. From Gottingen and then Berlin, a combination of ministries and markets reshaped traditional academic practices and manners - from lectures to examinations, from seminars to assessment methods, from the appointment of professors to the cataloguing of libraries, from dining to tutorials. Why did the PhD emerge as rapidly and as recently as it did; how did the viva take the place of the medieval disputation as a pedagogic device; and why did professors get appointed by government but lecturers by their peers? And how has it all ended up in a globally competitive market of research universities with government subtly undermining their autonomy through "self-assessment" exercises? The tangle of issues is dissected and then re-entangled by Clark with wit and thoroughness.

The book follows the logic by which competition between the aspiring tiny territorial states of pre-Bismarck Germany encouraged their ministers to reform and modernise their academics, the German princelings all wanting to have the most effective teaching and research institution (universities enriched the treasury). State bureaucrats started to measure and compare the publishing productivity and diligence in teaching of potential professorial candidates and to consider their political views and record of social conformism.

Aspiring academics began to benefit from public fame and from holding "fashionable" views. The rational outlook of the late 18th century was giving way to the intellectual styles of the Romantic movement, and an emphasis on individual genius and originality was gaining ground. But academic charisma had been a factor since the first universities of the West sprang up in 12th-century Bologna and Paris, their teachers sitting like bishops on thrones ("cathedra"), and their lectures sounding very much like sermons, their examinations like

catechisms.

Governments understood the benefits of having universities and teachers with international prestige; to guarantee this, they discovered the need to monitor and regulate. Clark provides fascinating examples of university inspections in the 16th century and looks in detail at the peregrinations of Friedrich Gedike, the Prussian minister who inspected 14 universities in the summer of 1789, putting a series of sharp questions but having to wade through the tendentious reports of peers (some of them shafted as "hypochondriac", "very sinister and misanthropic", "lacks fineness and grace") as he tried to reach rational judgments as to whom to appoint and whom to overlook among aspiring candidates for the professoriate. The rational authority of the state had somehow to interact with the wild and often disruptive charismatic authority that had been unleashed in the medieval classroom and had broken through the tradition-based hierarchy.

In Prussia and in Hanover, the elements of the modern university were in place even before Gedike's peregrination. Tabular self-assessments were introduced as the new Romantic-era research ideology spread the emphasis on originality in a researcher's work. Where the Enlightenment had established economic criteria of excellence, it was now felt that academic charisma flowed from "genial originality". An instructor, according to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, had himself to be a kind of academic artist; academic life was to be his home and absorb his entire person. Over in Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt was to declare that the university united academic knowledge with personal formation; only through the pursuit of augmented knowledge, through research, was character cultivated - a rather different "take" from John Henry Newman's gentleman scholar.

The Prussian kings sought to shift academia from traditional aristocratic to modern meritocratic mode: rational and calculated criteria of success were established, based on fame and quantity of publication, on the applause of students and peers. Academics were to cease to be courtly hangers-on and to enter a regulated profession. The visible and the legible progressively replaced the oral and aural elements of academic practice.

The great tool of this transformation was the modern university library.

The courtly collectors' library, containing medals and curiosities alongside books, gave way to the catalogued book collection with its own acquisition budget. The systematic catalogue, based on the four main subjects, was set aside, giving way to the alphabetic catalogue of authors' names, backed by location marks, the systematic classification returning in a later day as academic publication multiplied exponentially.

What Clark has performed, in a book that seems at times to lose its way and then regain it, is an analysis of the academic self. He tells us how academics became who and what they are, and how academic authority over what we know arises from the formal personality and evolving practices of the people who impart the knowledge. But he leaves questions unanswered in our minds: whether we are seeing the rise of new buccaneering academic plutocracies and thus a reversion to neofeudal order within the academic community as a defence against bureaucratic oppression and in accommodation with it; and whether market pressures are leading professors and programmes to live at the mercy of saleable results; whether it is the potential employers of the young and the private backers of research who are shaping the academic practice of our century.

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