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978-0-521-10206-3 - State, Society, and University in Germany, 1700-1914

Charles E. McClelland

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STATE, SOCIETY, AND UNIVERSITY IN GERMANY  
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CHARLES E. MCCLELLAND

*University of New Mexico*

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## PREFACE

This book examines one of the most durable of institutions of medieval origin—the university—in the context of a society that has always been ambivalent about change, but has often had it imposed by political authority. The German university has had, in the minds of many, a semimythical quality. Its name has been invoked so many times that arguments about higher education from Harvard to Hong Kong still include ritual references to it. In a world in which universities and the values for which they have stood appear to be facing an uncertain future, the glories of the bygone German university may appear as a part of a golden age. Yet they, too, emerged in tempestuous confrontation or smooth cooperation with larger social and political forces.

The book is for scholars—historians, sociologists, political scientists, educational theorists, and many more. But it is also meant for that growing legion of people who must make hard decisions about educational policy; they may appreciate the historical dimension to problems that sometimes seem insoluble by the competing nostrums of our day. Finally, this book is for all people who care about the past and future of universities. For them especially, I have sought to write in a manner accessible to the general reader.

For all these readers, I hope to offer a step back, a chance to contemplate the fate of a variant of the institution “university”

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not in its mythical dimension, but as a living, growing force. For this is a critical history of the German university system. It may seem at times to minimize unduly the spectacular achievements of German scholarship and science or the idealism of students, professors, or government officials. The reason for this is that my analysis is realistic rather than idealistic. Idealizations of the German university system abound. Even the radical German students who pressed flyers into my hands a decade ago, when I began this study, appeared to accept the idealizations of their environment by calling for the alteration of circumstances that existed only in their minds. Very few works have examined the more mundane causes of university conditions, however.

This book has been written from the premise that no social institution, including universities, can in fact attain the level of autonomy and independence that many university professors hold up as their ideal. Tensions between the “republic of letters” and the broader society are at worst necessary and at best fruitful. Both “town” and “gown” understand their need for each other, even though that symbiosis is traditionally clouded by resentment. I have here explored the ways in which the German university of the period before 1914 was better able than most to establish an immunity to the “town”—the broader society—but at the expense of reliance on another authority, the state.

The future of the university as an institution depends not only on its inner forces of resilience, which have been enormous, but on its treatment by much more powerful forces outside it. I hope that this study will show how the German university system was affected by its growing interaction with state and society. In 1933, German academics themselves realized all too late how awesome the disproportionate power of these outside forces can become. As for the future, this book will have achieved its purpose if it stimulates thought about the increasingly disproportionate confrontation among state, society, and the institution called “university” in all modern societies.

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