# Anonymous, About a Reading Society in Lüneburg (18th Century)


## Abstract

Although the "discussing public" [*diskutierende Öffentlichkeit*] was a European phenomenon, reading societies were more common in the German states than elsewhere. The "reading revolution" revolved around the right to public speech and transcended class boundaries. This report about a reading society in Lüneburg suggests, with pride, that greater knowledge led to a "refinement" of social mores. In typical fashion, however, the report warns against "false" reading materials and describes attendant dangers to which women and non-elites were especially susceptible.


## Source

### About a Reading Society in Lüneburg

The society generally consists of 90 to 100 people. Every year we count on about 3 to 400 newly acquired books. Not only those that are considered good are selected, but also bad ones if they are only odd or curious from a certain point of view. The three so-called *Brodstudien* ("bread-and-butter studies") are completely excluded, and related books are only allowed if their subjects and the treatment of them are still included within the bounds of philosophy (as generally understood). *Belles lettres*, history, statistics, and natural history are the fields from which most of the books are taken. In the first category, unfortunately, novels have attracted such an overwhelming preponderance of interest that everything belonging to that category, including more than half of all the books, consists of novels, and yet the novel-hungry public still does not have enough.

The grubby appearance of the most sordid among them attests to their extensive travels on the grand tour from the gracious lady to the cook and to their wanderings through the guard house. In contrast, the most interesting and entertaining books often remain all but untouched after a long period of circulation.

Overall, however, this institution, which has already existed for fourteen years, has very much promoted the circulation of knowledge, for it is not really only the interested people who take part, but, because the books are for the most part sold after circulation, and because they are rather soiled, at a very inexpensive price, they also get to the lower classes. Many a craftsman's wife now speaks of [Gottfried August] Bürger and [Friedrich Heinrich] Jacobi with the same familiarity as her mother previously did of [Benjamin] Schmolken and [August Gottlieb] Spangenberg. Perhaps a certain tendency to conviviality and the very free-minded, yet decent behavior of the local middle class has its basis in such refinement, a characteristic trait of our public, which now becomes apparent because of the presence of Prince Eduard, and which is admired by all the foreigners, for example, among others at the local redoubts (which can be counted among the best and most entertaining). But perhaps that is also the basis for an all too great inclination to luxury, amusements, and sentimentality, whose affected grimaces can still be seen daily (even if it brings enlightenment and fashionable tones to mock these fine words and the noble characteristics of the soul described by them), and finally even nervous illnesses in women, which are then blamed one moment on our calcareous water—which, however, [does not affect] the common man, [who] remains splendidly healthy—then on this or on that.

I doubt whether a reading society such as ours would be suitable in many cities. Lüneburg is just large enough and

small enough, and the relationship of the various cities to one another creates precisely the situation that is called for.

Only one more thing! The society was originally formed at the instigation of a forlorn lending library that a book dealer here had created. Because it was found to be much too poor, a few friends joined forces to establish a reading society. In order to expand it, a real push had to be made, and I still remember very well that I myself went out on such a pressgang. People for whom the society is now very valuable had to be tremulously persuaded back then, especially the "bread-and-butter scholars," who had taken no notice at all of literature.

I am bringing this to a close so that, if someone wants to start something similar in his town, he will not let himself be immediately frightened away by the thought that "it is not possible in our town; our population is not made for that."

Source: Anonymous, "Über eine Lesegesellschaft zu Lüneburg," in *Einladung ins 18. Jahrhundert. Ein Almanach aus dem Verlag C.H. Beck im 225. Jahr seines Bestehens*, edited by Ernst-Peter Wieckenberg. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1988, pp. 253–54.

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