

J.G. Büsch, “Treatise on the Ruinous Economic Circumstances of Most Scholars in Our Time” (1774)

Abstract

Johann Georg Büsch (1728–1800), an economist and professor of mathematics at the Hamburg gymnasium, laments the regrettable tendency of scholars to incur debt. This, he feels, is attributable to the fact that scholars and professors had social lives (whereas in former times they were isolated from society, even from friends and family). The indebtedness of scholars and professors, Büsch argues, is primarily due to general inflation, the high price of university studies, and, above all, to the luxurious lifestyle that professors were expected to have. Thus, it did not take long for young academics to find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of consumption, luxury, and debt. Büsch urges academics to save money and renounce luxurious lifestyles. Here, he differed from those who called for greater sociability among university faculty and scholars in the age of Enlightenment.

Source

[...]

Am I saying too much when I assert that the customary lifestyle of scholars entices them, more than any other class, into incurring debts, and that the apparent effort that they make is more harmful than useful to cash flow? I will give reasons to those who should like to regard my assertion as hasty, some of these reasons will confirm my assertion, some of them will explain my opinion more clearly.

I am speaking mainly of the individuals who study not just as scholars in name in order to use up the inheritance from their fathers or the dowry from their wives, but of those who, in the hopes of earning a living in the future, dedicate themselves to the sciences until they are able to achieve their goal through work specific to scholars, freelance earnings, or in public service or clerical [religious] positions. Now it is undisputable [that:]

[...]

II. Previously scholars constituted a distinctly different part of middle-class society in their lifestyle and customs, and for the most part they lived in their own way, except for a particular relationship to their unlearned fellow citizens. They preferred their study rooms to paradise. There, they only allowed people to speak to them through sliding windows. There, [Franciscus] Vieta, when he sat in algebraic ecstasy, for days at a time, had his meals shoved in to him and then taken away again, as Thuanus [Jacques-Auguste Thou] relates, without looking to see the person who had done it. And this man lived in Paris, was not unknown to the court, was used for various dealings, and consequently was closely connected to the world at large. For his entire life, Budäus [Guillaume Budé] could not get over the fact that he had only been able to study for four hours on his wedding day. How anxious that man might have become if he had been expected to forfeit even an hour a day to social interaction. In short, previously, scholars were more diligent and did not want social interaction, and were also less accessible; or there were more pedants among them, and therefore people were not much interested in them. But now we have become quite different in this respect. We have too fully abandoned the official visage, the highly educated or

dignified mien with which the scholar used to announce himself to his sociable friends, signaling that he had appeared in order to instruct, and by no means to contribute the slightest to the cheer of the gathering. Not only do we now have a greater taste for the pleasures of sociable life with our equals, but we also tend to hurtle with excessive ambition toward the great luminaries of the world. Some of us find our heaven on earth in being granted proximity to them from time to time, and we acquire a wardrobe for just this purpose, even when our good wives have trouble acquiring a bit of clothing for themselves and the children on credit. All of this entangles us in what is often a very expensive approach to social life, more so than was customary for scholars in our fathers' time. To say nothing of the fact that the current tenor of academic life, about which I will have more to say shortly, has made the scholar into the most sociable creature under the sun, indulging himself early on in satisfying his inclination to sociability at the expense of his most essential needs. If he is later promoted, he will find at his first institution all the trappings of luxurious living that he learned about from his social friends and will deem them just as essential for himself as they do; he will gladly accept the invitations of those to whom he is connected through friendship and business. But we no longer live in times when a scholar appeared at social occasions because of his position, and when a gold piece was placed under his plate if he graced a wedding with his presence. Now we must be involved in reciprocal hosting and entertainment if we want to live with and among humans. We must give honorary gifts, just as others do, when our friend gets married, or when the wife of another friend goes into labor. I do not know whether it is our fault that we have lowered ourselves so far from our heights and have incautiously abdicated the prerogatives of a scholar out of a rash inclination to socialize. It is enough that our situation is different in many respects from our fathers' times, and that the costs of social life are more burdensome to us now than they were to them, without our income having increased to the same degree.

III. For most scholars, the years of preparation cost more than the relevant preparation for other middle-class professions. I am not speaking of soldiers, who earn with their muskets. I do not wish to compare the craftsman to the scholar. But the craftsman's apprentice already gets his bread at the expense of his master. A young person who seeks to make his mark with his pen soon gets to the point where he can earn his food and clothing. At least his father will never have to deal with long and expensive years of study. The majority of people who devote themselves to the merchant profession are no longer a burden to their fathers after they are twenty or twenty-two. And if a father of means spends a great deal on his son who is destined to be a merchant, if he even supports him for two or three years at the Hamburg Trade Academy, which is decried by many as so expensive, then what is all that compared to the normal costs facing a young person destined to study? Two or three years at the university, when a tutor is no longer adequate, three to four years at the academy, and then a number of years when he must live from his own pocket or his father's, until he attains a somewhat adequate subsistence; these are all money-devouring hardships with which no other middle-class profession has to contend. Many thought that they could get by on their own means until the years of adequate provisions but were deceived by their calculations. Others did not completely count on their means, but insufficient knowledge of the world, and overly ardent youthful hopes suggested to them that good fortune was close at hand, and they ended up being completely at a loss when their keep was too long in coming. And how many start out with monetary advances that seem easily repayable from their perspective but whose effects they can never overcome. In short, it is no wonder that the great majority of scholars go into debt before they actually begin to earn their living, even though they practice thrift.

[...]

V. But now I come to a main cause of disordered economic circumstances, into which the great number of scholars will sooner or later fall. That is our **academic way of life**. Here, I do not mean just the increased costs arising from natural causes, which I already spoke of earlier, and which even the thriftiest young man or his father must necessarily take into account. I speaking rather of the peculiar character bent that so many students assume in this

way of life; the situation is such that only overwhelming riches or luck beyond all expectations can reasonably ensure the prosperity of a person who has acquired a taste for this lifestyle. Without regard to this academic life, I ask in general: What hope can a father have for the future happiness of his son if he sends him into the company of young people without prospects in precisely those years in which blood and desires rage in full force? According to the way of thinking of such young people, he who spends the most money has the most honor, and incurring debts is never considered a disgrace, nor is deception on account of a debt. If I were to recommend some other educational institution to a sensible father, and had to confess to him that, despite all the advantages it might have, the institution also had the shortcomings just noted, he would consider the situation as dangerous as sending his son into the open abyss. But in the eyes of the father to whom his son has become mature enough for the academy, this difficulty disappears. He usually counts on the morality of his son and the eager desire to study that he demonstrated at home; on the admonitions he gave him along the way; on the strictness of the academic authorities; and in any case, on a letter of recommendation to some professor or other. He believes that he is completely sure of his son when he settles on an income for him with which the son can, according to the father's calculations, get by decently. Then, if need be, he makes his calculations carefully in order to save the money from his own income, or if it is not possible for him to do so, to borrow it in a timely manner from a friend. The young man goes there full of good intentions but finds completely different morals and examples from what he was accustomed to at home. He sees the wanton squanderer valued above all, the poor man despised, and the thrifty ridiculed. At every step, he finds leaders for high living and spending. The professor to whom he was recommended is too busy and is satisfied if he perceives the student to be not too inattentive in his lectures; and the academic authorities do not have a reason to constrain him until offenses and debts pitch him into their hands. Now misfortune has erupted, but everything around him still sings joyfully. No one speaks to him of disgrace; instead, his misfortune, about which his father at home bitterly sighs, is portrayed to him as an academic joke, and even the first stirrings of regret about the beginning of his downfall are suppressed.

The continuation follows in the days to come.

Source: "Abhandlung über die verfallene Haushaltung der meisten Gelehrten unserer Zeit," by Prof. J.G. Büsch in Hamburg, *Hannoversches Magazin*, 31st issue. Monday, April 18, 1774, pp. 483–89, 494–96. Available online at: http://ds.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/viewer/resolver?urn=urn:nbn:de:0070-disa-2105263_012_18

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: J.G. Büsch, "Treatise on the Ruinous Economic Circumstances of Most Scholars in Our Time" (1774), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-178>> [April 26, 2024].