

[Lorenz Oken], “[Congress of German naturalists and physicians in Leipzig on 18 September 1822],” *Isis Encyclopädische Zeitung*, no. 6 (1823): 549–59 (abridged)

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It has often been asked why so many important works in France and England come to light through joint action of the top scholars: encyclopedias of the entire natural sciences, of medicine, of the arts and trades, nearly countless dictionaries of this sort, competent and continuously functioning societies, journals, and the like. Why then does virtually nothing of this sort arise in Germany, why can't even three men be brought together for joint editing of a work, and, even when such an coalition comes about somewhere, they quickly fall out again.

It has also been asked how such competent reviews and reports appear, preferably also of competent works, and why such a refined and educated tone prevails in the critical pages, so that even when people heap reproach on each other, the reader initiated in the matter scarcely notices it. Why then in Germany is it usually only the lighter fare that is reviewed, and when it comes to competent ones, they are either showered with bile and treated with a harshness which stands out most to those not versed in the matter.

This distinction must have its basis in the different position of scholars of the different nations [*Völker*]. In France most scholars live together in Paris, or there is no one in all of France who is so distracted as not to have come to Paris a few times in his life in order to linger for a while. In England the situation is the same with respect to London. You would now think that these scholars must have become best of friends through their general personal acquaintances. It is indeed often so, yet by no means in most cases. But if you are seeing and speaking with one another every eight days in the Academy, you learn either to value or to shun one another, and in any event to observe decorum. Just as little as you can speak rudely to a person to his face in the absence of prior insults, so little can you criticize him in harsh expressions if you know him personally, if you are treated by him with courtesy, if you have eaten with him at merry occasions and encountered him over a glass of wine. If you can't praise his works as well, then you will nonetheless choose the mildest expressions in reproof, and in no case treat him differently than you have personally been treated by him. Since the Parisian scholars very often have to read out reports of works whose authors are present, the social tone forces them to speak in a manner befitting respectable society. Thus they practice searching for polite expressions under which harsh reproof lies concealed; and this practice has finally become such a habit with them that they also hold to the same art and manners in other reviews, and toward writers they haven't seen.

How easy it is furthermore if you meet weekly with 80 scholars of your specialty to win another dozen to a joint enterprise. Someone who is addressed cannot so easily be turned down as someone who receives a little invitation letter from someone unseen. It is easy to reply to this: I regret that I am unable to accept your estimable proffer; or also without particular impoliteness not to reply at all, and on occasion to excuse oneself politely with forgetfulness. When you find yourself among 80 people whose characters and relations you know, it is then easy to surmise which ones can take part in a particular plan. You have it in your power to show the matter from all its most advantageous sides, to attend to the spare moments of the participants, to win the matadors so that they at least place their names at the top.

Hence the basis of these great advantages of the French and English publications lies in the personal acquaintance of the scholars.

Why should it not be like this in Germany, too, since it has to become like this if the natural sciences and medicine are to appear with **dignity**, something that is only possible in that they appear as the total expression of all German naturalists and all German physicians.

The Leipzig Congress felt this vigorously, and it consequently came to the conclusion that **the chief aim of the Congress of German Naturalists and Physicians should be personal acquaintance**, in that everything else that is actually aimed at then does it of its own accord.

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In Germany we have no Paris or London; we have no place where hundreds of naturalists and physicians live next to each other, where those otherwise scattered about the land would stream on their own in order to make the necessary acquaintances and to recommend themselves, to obtain counsel, to study the great collections and to use individual apparatuses. German scholars are also not so well-to-do that they can travel extensively on an annual basis. Hence a definite meeting site is not available, and it would also be unbecoming and inequitable to ordain such a site. Unbecoming, because the collections and the smaller associations of scholars are scattered in various places and one has what the other lacks; inequitable, because the scholars of the ordained site would have no expenses, and those far away would have to rack up expenses annually or even remain at home. The site of the congress must therefore alternate. One time it will be in the middle of Germany, so that all scholars can come, another time in the north, another time in the south, another time in the west, another time in the east, so that scholars of all regions will have occasion to see their comrades from time to time at the expense of a small journey. It is furthermore advisable that the congress site be a university or [court] residence, or otherwise at least an important site where many naturalists and physicians gather. Beyond easing access to the congresses and finding convenient accommodation for foreigners, these associations will also in a sense become matters of honor. The members of a university or a residence or any other academic town who are visited by others have to respond in suitable fashion.

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In Germany there are a host of physical, natural historical, and medical societies which frequently produce superb works; since there are so many of them, however, it is understandable that the society publications issue only in limited numbers and find publishers, if at all, only with great difficulty. Some societies thus decide to have their publications printed at their own expense. In this manner one or another volume freely appears; they are not distributed, however, and finally they stagnate entirely, and thus the most interesting discoveries often become obsolete and many facts do not become known at all. There is no doubt that an association of these society publications would fundamentally remedy this bane, if not entirely, then nonetheless with respect to vocations. Publishers would offer themselves; for the public would and must purchase a single society publication in which everything that Germany produces annually can be found...

The congress is also an appropriate place to share discoveries, to secure them, to confer about scientific doubt, to learn new teachings and opinions briefly and intensively, to present

important publications to direct view, as it were to announce prepared works and thus make them better known, to discourse with eyewitnesses to them there.

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These kinds of gatherings [in public places late into the evening] are the most beneficial for the actual aim of the congress, namely personal acquaintance. You talk heart to heart, you talk about various things, you talk in a happy mood, and thus you get to know one other, to value one another and to drive away adopted prejudices, perhaps aversions. You share your scientific opinions and discoveries among those with an intimate appreciation for the art, and you listen to the various objections. We all parted amicably, full of hope of prosperity and reunion.