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**„Eine Ansicht, welche das wahre Wesen der Historie vernichtet?“
Criticizing the enlightenment's view of man and history**

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„Eine Ansicht, welche das wahre Wesen der Historie vernichtet?“ Criticizing the enlightenment’s view of man and history

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„An opinion that devastates the true essence of history“ – the deep conviction of telling history how it actually took place, was common among historians long before Leopold von Ranke coined his famous and still often quoted phrase: „wie es eigentlich gewesen“.¹ In fact, it wasn’t the towering historian of the Germanic and Romanic peoples, but a lowly school teacher from Augsburg who pleaded for a truthful history already in the beginning of the 19th century. Georg Heinrich Kayser is long forgotten and not much is known about his career and life. His only publication remains the *Geschichts-Tafeln zum Gebrauche der Gymnasial-Anstalten* from 1812, a short collection of historical tables for use in school classes, mostly for the lower grades.²

I chose the *Geschichts-Tafeln* by Kayser among many examples of the genre of Historical Tabular Works, which appeared all over the early modern period in great number – I counted well over 200 distinct titles which can be attributed to tabular historiography.³

¹ Leopold von Ranke: *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514. Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtschreiber*, Leipzig / Berlin 1824, VI.

² [Georg Heinrich] Kayser: *Geschichts-Tafeln zum Gebrauche der Gymnasial-Anstalten von Kayser, Professor am Gymnasio zu Augsburg*, Zweyte veränderte und verbesserte Auflage, 1. Heft, München / Burghausen: Ernst August Fleischmann, 1812; a second volume appeared only in 1814. Kayser’s *Geschichts-Tafeln* does not seem to have received large attention, only very few exemplars can be found in libraries today.

³ Cf. the online-database for early modern historical tabular works: *Historische Tabellenwerke*, <http://www.sfb-frueheneuzeit.uni-muenchen.de/projekte/zusatz/HistorischeTabellenwerke/Index.html>, 17.1.14; for extensive discussion cf. Benjamin Steiner: *Die Ordnung der Geschichte. Historische Tabellenwerke in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Köln / Wien / Weimar 2008; for a more general account on historical tables see

Kayser's œuvre signifies the end of a period in which the writing history achieved a high degree of differentiation and sophistication. The classic work of tabular historiography is the *Chronicon* by Eusebius of Caesarea written around the year 311.⁴ This patristic account compared Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Hebrew historical timelines in order to determine the greater anciennité of the biblical history against pagan claims to chronologies that reached beyond the crucial year of 4000 BC – the year of the creation of the world. Eusebius has been translated from Greek to Latin by Hieronymus in the 6th century and served to be the standard textbook for history during the Middle Ages well until the 16th century.⁵

After the invention of print, tabular historiography remained popular, in fact, came about to see its golden age. The 16th century has been for scholars, as Anthony Grafton pointed out, a century of chronological science. Not only Martin Luther devised his own tabular scheme to calculate the present point in time and in relation to the expected arrival of Judgement Day – supposedly 6000 years after the creation of the world.⁶ Others, especially the late 16th century scholar from Leiden, Johann Justus Scaliger, devoted his whole erudition and scholarly life to the study of chronology, which included a modern edition of the Eusebius-Chronicon that marked one of the greatest philological accomplishments of his time.⁷ Tabular historiography became somewhat less

Anthony Grafton / Daniel Rosenberg: *Cartographies of time. A History of the timeline*, New York 2010.

⁴ Cf. the modern edition of Eusebius von Caesarea: *Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, hg. und in zweiter Auflage bearbeitet im Auftrage der Kommission für spätantike Religionsgeschichte der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin von Rudolf Helm (Eusebius Werke, Bd. 7), Berlin 1956.

⁵ Cf. for detailed analysis of the editorial history of this book A. Alden Mosshammer: *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition*, Lewisburg 1979.

⁶ Martin Luther: *Supputatio Annorum Mundi D. M. Lutheri*, Wittenberg: Georgium Rhau, 1541.

⁷ Cf. Anthony Grafton: *Joseph Scaliger. A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 Bde., Oxford 1983/93; esp. II, Part 4 on the *Thesaurus temporum* (1606).

sophisticated in regards to the erudition involved in its making during the 17th and 18th century. It can be seen, however, as an indication of how methodologically history was treated, especially in school class rooms.⁸ Mnemonically, in a classical sense, pedagogically, in a rather baroque sense, tables served as widely diffused means to convey historical facts, timelines, and a basis for narrative accounts.⁹

Also, historical tables contributed to the process of scientification – my translation of *Verwissenschaftlichung* – of historiography in the 18th century. Martin Gierl elaborated on this development in this volume, as can be studied in detail in his admirable book *Geschichte als präzisierte Wissenschaft. Johann Christoph Gatterer und die Historiographie des 18. Jahrhunderts im ganzen Umfang* (2012).¹⁰

Following, I want to extend on a point which seems to express not only a specific problem of the history of historiography, but also of the general view of historians on the nature of human being as historical agents. First, I will turn to Kayser's *Geschichts-Tafeln* and to his short introductory text, which gives an insight into a historiographical-philosophical debate that arose in Germany around 1800. Kayser's account is not one that equals other contribution discourse on history as philosophy by the intellectual

⁸ Cf. one of the major historical tabular works in the 17th century: Christoph Helwig: *Theatrum historicum Sive chronologiae systema novum: aequalibus Centuriarum & Decadum intervallis; cum assignatione Imperiorum, Regnorum, Dynastiarum, Regum, Aliorumque Virorum Celebrium, Prohetarum, Theologorum, Iureconsultorum, Medicorum, Philosophorum, Historicorum, Poetarum, Haereticorum, Rabbimorum, Conciliorum, Synodorum, Academiarum, &c. itemque istatarum Epocharum, ita digestum, ut Universa Temporum & Historiarum series à Mundi originie ad hunc praesentem annum 1609. animo facilime comprehendi & perpetuo circumferri possit*, Gießen: Nicolaus Hampelius, 1609.

⁹ Cf. for the use of tables in history class rooms Benjamin Steiner: Orte der Instruktion. Diffusion historischen Wissens im Geschichtsunterricht der Frühen Neuzeit, in: *Geschichte schreiben. Ein Quellen- und Studienhandbuch zur Historiografie (ca. 1350-1750)*, hg. v. Susanne Rau / Birgit Studt [u. a.]. Berlin 2010, 97-110.

¹⁰ Cf. Martin Gierl: *Geschichte als präzisierte Wissenschaft. Johann Christoph Gatterer und die Historiographie des 18. Jahrhunderts im ganzen Umfang*, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt 2012.

Kayser's *Geschichts-Tafeln*, of which I show here the first leaflet, appeared in their second edition in 1812 – a second leaflet was obviously published a few months later, but no exemplar is conserved as well as there is not a first edition to be found. The presented digitalized example above is from the University Library in Munich. The first table shows the beginning of history. Kayser dates it on the year 2000 BC – clearly framed in opposition to the formerly commonly expected eschatological origin. Kayser's *Geschichts-Tafeln* represent a secularized version of the categories according to Scripture and other ancient texts. Typically, the nations that remain here are Egypt, Assyria, Syria, Juda (the secularized Hebrew tradition), Phoenicia, Greece, and Italy; only Asia Minor – *Vorder-Asien* – is a modern denomination (interestingly subdivided in Troy, Lydia, Phrygia and Greek coastal cities).

Jahr vor Christo.	Aegypten.
2000	<p>Die gesellschaftliche Ordnung frühe gebildet. Einfluß der Religion auf den Ursprung derselben. Priesterkaste, als Stamm der schon anfänglich vorzugsweise Gebildeten. Nomen: Eintheilung. Hieroglyphe oder allegorische Bilderschrift. Theben.</p> <p>Membis. Theb.</p>

Kayser does not mention sources, which is typical for authors of such historical tabular accounts. What is, however, untypical for the early modern tradition is the rather extensive and elaborate narrative on the different entries. Especially the first chronological entries are revealing for the lacking brevity which was seen essential for the facticity of the historical information in tables. For Egypt he notes for the year 2000: „The social order established early. Influence of religion on the former. Priest caste, as a tribe of the originally privileged educated. Distinction of nouns. Hieroglyphs or allegorical pictorial script. Thebes.“ For Italy he states: „Uncertainty about the

indigenous population“, as he continues enumerating Umbrians, Etruscans, and Ligurians etc.

Turning away from sweeping over the tableau, Kayser gives – as it is also common with accounts of this genre – detailed instructions on how to use the tables properly. Also, he justifies the tabular historiography as a means that he elaborates in a rather broad manner and full of socio-philosophical programmatic ideas. History, in his opinion, has suffered from recent mistreatment and has to be reestablished as an instrument for reflecting on the inner depth of the human being („die innersten Tiefen seiner selbst“). It is history that connects the individual to the deceased ancient societies. Thus, the present time becomes clear to the individual as a result of all previous human endeavours. And all the individuals that have once existed become alive again and while being presented to the historian, Kayser writes in a rather Hegelian tone, he learns to reflect on himself by looking at the deed of others. Therefore, history serves as the earthly tribunal of the Last Judgement – *das Weltgericht*; and as such it is a principal means of education to humanity.

2.

History, in Kayser's understanding, educates students in schools towards humanity. Is this, then, the well known story of the German ideal of *Bildung*? This has been aptly expressed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1821: Historiography and history, Humboldt writes in *Ueber die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers*, is nothing else than an act of a subjective sensual construction.¹¹ Individuality, as Georg Iggers writes about Humboldt, „is only the concrete-historical expression of a metaphysical reality, of ethical ideas“.¹²

¹¹ Cf. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers* (1821), in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, hg. v. Albert Leitzmann, Berlin 1905 ND 1968, IV, 35-56,

¹² Georg G. Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft. Eine Kritik der traditionellen Geschichtsauffassung von Herder bis zur Gegenwart*, Wien / Köln / Weimar 1997, 80

Kayser strongly objects to this belief of the coinciding of subjective understanding and the objective narrative. Instead, he attacks the central premise of German Idealism and rather proposes a fact-based approach.¹³

Since Schelling, Kayser writes, the before mentioned „opinion that devastates the true essence of history“ has arisen to a worrying degree in the collective consciousness.¹⁴ He rejects the conception of the human being that constitutes history *a priori*. The Idealist treatment of history did not produce historical accounts as such, but rather a performance of „uninteresting subjectivity“. To avoid arbitrary judgement on historical matters one has no choice than to retreat on the material of history, the sources. As luminary example serves Thucydides who not only treated things, „how they are“, and expects tacit understanding for possible underlying ideas. He also gives individuals like the Athenian politician Alcibiades a particular role as historical agent who does more than constituting a higher principle than himself in history.

The down-to-earth criticism, that is put forward by Kayser, is not without parallel. The insistence on human agency, the scepticism towards overlying structures of history, be it reason (as Hegel wanted it) or ethical ideas (as Humboldt saw it), and the general distance towards a *Zeitgeist* of subjectivity have also led authors like Friedrich von Schiller to a very distinct understanding of history in its most practical sense.¹⁵ Both, Kayser and Schiller, saw it as their job to convey history, in the class room and on stage.

¹³ Cf. also Thomas Prüfer, Wilhelm von Humboldts „rhetorische Hermeneutik“. Historische Sinnbildung im Spannungsfeld von Empirie, Philosophie und Poesie, in: ders. and Daniel Fulda (ed.), *Faktenglaube und fiktionales Wissen. Zum Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Kunst in der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, 127-166, and Hans-Michael Baumgartner, Die subjektiven Voraussetzungen der Historie und der Sinn von Parteilichkeit, in: Reinhart Koselleck (ed.), *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, München 1977, 425-440.

¹⁴ Kayser 1812, Preface.

¹⁵ Cf. Friedrich von Schiller: Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte? Eine akademische Antrittsrede, in: *Der deutsche Merkur*, 4 (1789), 105-135.

History, therefore, had to stand aside philosophical conceptions and ideal constructions. While Schiller devised narrative strategies to overcome this philosophical bias, Kayser turned to the sources (*Quellen*) and to facts (*Thatsachen*) – the material for his historical tables.

3.

There recurs the old 18th century struggle between the Göttingen historians Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig Schlözer of how to write universal history.¹⁶ Gatterer claims to study historical facts in detail, with all „precision“ that can be attained by using all the auxiliary sciences like chronology, heraldy or meteorology.¹⁷ Schlözer, by contrast, prefers to see history „as a whole“; no racial and cultural distinction, like the enlightenment historians of France and Scotland would have it, but a history of man, where everyone is equal „Negros, Japanese, Europeans“.¹⁸ Kayser’s *Geschichts-Tafeln* and his insistence on sources and facts have to be situated in this debate, can be interpreted, as I would claim, as an attempt to solve the disagreement between Schlözer and Gatterer.

Every study, writes Kayser, that leads to a thorough knowledge of history, has to start with the sober collection of facts. This can only be achieved by looking directly at the historical sources. Through second-hand knowledge one only enters the realm of speculation. Facts and source material, however, should facilitate the free discourse of

¹⁶ Cf. Gierl 2012, bes. 366 ff.

¹⁷ Johann Christoph Gatterer, *Vom historischen Plan, und der darauf sich gründenden Zusammenfügung der Erzählungen*, edited by H. Blanke / D. Fleischer, Frommann-Holzboog ed, Theoretiker der deutschen Aufklärungshistorie. Band 2: Elemente der Aufklärungshistorik (=Fundamenta Historica 1.2), Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt 1990, 621-662; Johann Christoph Gatterer: *Einleitung in die synchronistische Universalhistorie zur Erläuterung seiner synchronistischen Tabellen*, 1. Aufl., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1771.

¹⁸ August Ludwig Schlözer: *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie*, Göttingen, Gotha: Johann Christian Dieterich, 1772, 5 f.

history in the class room: „Der frey gehaltvolle Vortrag“ – the freely held, wholesome lecture, captivates the youthful mind. To speak freely, without constraints, Kayser continues, cannot be learned, that quality can only be acquired by birth, through God.¹⁹

No matter how one sees it, history has to be understood by its framework, its *Gerüst*, that includes dates, names of places and persons. Kayser is aware of the usual criticism and ridicule that has been uttered by his contemporaries about this „earlier“ form of historical education. The mnemonic technics like historical tables were seen as tiresome, boring and even falsifying a correct understanding of history. Schlözer called it memory torture („Folter des Gedächtnisses“). Nonetheless, Kayser continues to insist on the necessity of tables, and gives three reasons: 1) Tables denote what everybody has to know by heart; 2) they serve for preparation, in the sense that they elude to numbers, names and places in fashion that they seem to be familiar during the lecture; 3) they provide a synchronistical-ethnographical synopsis of events. The main use, however, consists that the table compels the viewer to become active and attentive in forming the raw material to organic life and to history with a „soul“. Tables, therefore, facilitate the task to grasp history from its factual material state as a whole, as it has been wished by Schlözer.

Tabular historiography elevate facts to a reconstruction of the inner cohesion („innerer Zusammenhang“), the causalities of events, in short: history as it has actually took place. Surprisingly, the tables in Kayser’s view do not serve precise historiography. On the contrary, they are means to derive the essence of history from a mere collection of facts. Usage of synoptic overviews, sweeping over the synchronic and diachronic relations, immersing in the study of details constitutes the necessary activity of the student to *understand* history as a form of communicating with the past. Kayser’s position is not very far from the one of the speculative historians he criticizes in the beginning of his

¹⁹ Cf. Kayser 1812, Vorwort

preface. Only, he sees no disadvantage in studying the facts and sources beforehand very closely, before he introduces via free discourse the element of life to the tabular framework.

4.

To conclude I would like to compare Kayser's treatment of history to that of August Ludwig Schlözer. Schlözer believed in human agency in history. He did not see men as mere willing executioners of a general course of history. His position, I would say, could be described as being in the middle of the positivist approach of the historians connected to the French and Scottish enlightenment (as well as his rival Gatterer) and the speculative approach by Idealist philosopher-historians like Humboldt, Hegel or Herder. Like Kayser, Schlözer seems to have been a teacher, a popular one, if one compares him to his Göttingen colleague Gatterer, who had not as many listeners in his lecture on universal history. This was no coincidence: Historians of this sort, emphasized history as a story that everybody should understand – they saw the universality of universal history not so much in its quantity and precision of encyclopedic knowledge, but more in the general sentiment that history could convey concerning the general human condition.

Schlözer's premise was the universality of humanity in all cultures. One of his more famous phrases was: „Man is nothing by nature, he can become everything by conjunctures: the second part of his being is indetermination.“²⁰ In his *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie* from 1772 Schlözer elaborated (as Gierl has shown, in opposition to Gatterer's precise history) also on the necessity of collecting the material from specialized histories. It forms in its entirety the „aggregate“ of all histories, which

²⁰ Schlözer 1772, 6: „Der Mensch ist von Natur nichts, und kann durch Conjuncturen alles werden: die Unbestimmtheit macht den zweiten Theil seines Wesens aus.“

constitutes in a way whole.²¹ But the universal historian has to achieve a „system“, in which world and mankind are united, and are selected, ordered and formed from all parts of the aggregate in relation to each other. Only a general oversight that comprises the whole can form the aggregate to become a system. All states of the earth have to be united to the one human race.²²

How to achieve this universal unification? Schlözer proposes, very similar to Kayser, a new form of historical tabular synopsis. These tables have to combine synchronistic history and diachronic process. Furthermore, a synchronistic *Realzusammenhang* has to be shown in the tabular order contrary to a mere *Zeitzusammenhang* that does not relate events in a causal manner to each other. This cannot be attained by a collector of historical facts. But it cannot be achieved by mere artistry either, as would later be proposed by Schelling envisioning an aesthetic historiography.

In a later work, *Über die Geschichtsauffassung* from 1784, Schlözer ridicules both choices as impractical. A historial painter (*Geschichts-Maler*) has to master three skills: He has to have all pure *facta* always standing by for his use; he must know „all“ *facta* that lie in his subject; and he has to have all *facta* in a light order and comfortable register in front of himself, since all the facts have to be right available during a possible genial moment. This, Schlözer believes, is impossible. No painter can mix his colours all by himself.²³

The other alternative would be a collector of histories (*GeschichtSammler*). He has to fulfill five duties: He needs to know all *facta* without one exception, e.g. Charlemagne, in the whole historical world-archive, in all chronicles, documents, inscriptions, legends,

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

²² Cf., *ibid.*, 18 f.

²³ Cf. August Ludwig Schlözer, *Über die Geschichtsverfassung* (1784), edited by H. Blanke / D. Fleischer, *Theoretiker der deutschen Aufklärungshistorie. Band 2: Elemente der Aufklärungshistorik* (=Fundamenta Historica 1.2), Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt 1990, here 593.

homilis etc.; he needs to know all these *facta* in context – with diplomatic assiduousness – but also, Schlözer adds, with the mentioning of all sources and evidence, that support the *factum* or do not support it; he has to order the chaos of information chronologically, has to pile up everything that happened, for example, in the year 800, divide it up, add little numbers into the margins, apposite column titles, different colour codes etc.; finally, he has to promise that there is no knowledge on Charlemagne in any book, edition, not even a word about him, that cannot be found also at the proper place in his excerpts. Such a book, Schlözer closes sardonically, he would title „Materia historiae Caroli M.[agni]“.²⁴

The latter type of historian, whom Nietzsche would have called an archivalist historian, parodies the empiricist and positivist historian that usually was associated with the statistical treatment of history and man by enlightened philosophers. This polemic also was directed against a certain scientific treatment of man, as it was proposed by the Scottish Enlightenment.²⁵ Kayser and Schlözer tried to find a middle way, basically with a minimum of theoretical reflection and speculation, but also with a minimum of empirical information. Their view of universal history was rather directed to a performative aspect of making history come to life again. They called for active participation of a reader of tables, for example, or pointed out the necessity of oral persuasion during a lecture in the class room. History, therefore, could only be reenacted, like in a Schillerian play or a Rankean narrative.

The success of this approach to history became evident in the 19th century. Not so much because historical knowledge became more precise, better documented or less religiously biased, but because history meant something to people. History could serve as a human

²⁴ Ibid., 595 f.

²⁵ Cf. Annette Meyer: *Von der Wahrheit zur Wahrscheinlichkeit: Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen in der schottischen und deutschen Aufklärung* (Hallesche Beiträge zur europäischen Aufklärung), Tübingen 2008.

science in a sense that it did not need complex prerequisites to be properly understood. History was about human beings. It was written by them, written about them, and written for them. The purpose of history and historiography, that is how I understand the sentiment of the *Zeitgeist* that is expressed in works by Kayser or Schlözer, was to contribute to a certain understanding of humanity, not as it was seen by science, but rather tautologically: as human beings saw themselves in the past through history.