Synchronizing the World: Synchronism as Historiographical Practice, Then and Now

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It is a familiar sight: in most cities in the world there will be dark brown vans navigating the crowded streets, while they proudly announce their purpose, in yellow letters on both sides: “Synchronizing the world of commerce.” The owner of the vans is UPS, United Parcel Service, which is one of the world’s largest logistics companies, transporting all kinds of goods and materials to every corner of the globe. To promote its services, UPS has chosen a slogan, which instead of bringing to mind the vast distances its employees cover every day, points to something else: what they do with time.

The verb “synchronize” is composed of the Greek prefix syn, “together,” and the word chronos, “time.” In its transitive form, to synchronize refers to actions or activities that cause something to happen together, coincide, to occur or unfold at the same time, to be in sync. Literally, what UPS offers its customers is the opportunity to complete the commercial activities they are involved in—selling and buying goods—while ignoring any temporal differences caused by geographical distance or changing time zones. In other words, with its slogan, which has been a mainstay in the urban topography of major cities for many years, UPS flaunts a commercialized version of what the geographer and Marxist critic David Harvey called in his influential 1990 book, The Condition of Postmodernity, “the time-space compression.” Due to innovations in the transportation and communication sector, to which UPS obviously belongs, space is “annihilated” by time, in Harvey’s words. Put slightly less dramatically, to “synchronize the world of commerce” means that UPS grants its customers the freedom to act as if communication, and more precisely, the distribution of different kinds of goods across short or long distances, were instantaneous.

This can never completely succeed, of course; there will always be a time gap between when a parcel is sent and when it is received at the other end, at least as long as we are talking about actual physical parcels, traveling actual physical distances, and not digital ones.
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But then again, the UPS slogan was never primarily about mathematical, absolute time in the first place. Rather, it was meant to target another kind of time: one that is event-based, social, and historical. “Synchronizing the world of commerce” implies uniting people across the globe in a common market, and creating a space where the exchange of goods and money is not affected by or dependent on time zones, commute times, flight schedules, delays, or varying social rhythms such as holidays or working hours. In other words, instead of just synchronizing our watches, there are entire lives, and life cycles, sets of more or less ritualized practices and social rhythms, all of which UPS claims to be able to synchronize.

The gold-colored slogan displayed on the side of the UPS van does even more: it enacts in only a few words the gist of a certain form of philosophical and sociological analysis, transforming it from a critical instrument to a sales argument. In an essay from 1996 by the German political scientists Elmar Altvater and Birgit Mahnkopf, the idea of global synchronization is given a more analytical form, when the authors describe how “the plurality of times in the plurality of world regions are drawn together to one single standardized and standardizing world time.”

Employing a geometrically inspired language—a usage that I will return to later in this essay—the authors expand on their initial claim in the following way: “Events from different regions of the world and with different meanings are placed on one and the same temporal axis and no longer on a series of differing temporal axes.” The name for this common “temporal axis,” they conclude, of which “every non-simultaneous, perhaps only local or regional event becomes part,” and which anticipates the line of argument in this essay, is “world history”. In a more recent work, their compatriot, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in a move to describe die Innenwelt des Kapitals [the world interior of capital], calls our present global state a Synchronwelt [synchroworld] as if UPS had already successfully completed its work of synchronization: “its form is the manufactured simultaneity; its convergence can be found in breaking news.”

For Altvater and Mahnkopf, the result of synchronizing the world is “world history”; for Sloterdijk, it is “breaking news.” This essay investigates synchronization in order to understand the emergence of global time in parallel with the emergence of global history. However, both the field of investigation and the timeframe employed here will be of another kind. Synchronization, I will argue, is not necessarily linked to the introduction of Greenwich Mean Time or to the spread of the Gregorian calendar; it does not depend entirely on
the histories of time-keeping and transportation technologies; and, finally, it is not confined to the last 150 years of global history. Instead, in this essay I want to shift the gaze to another well-known field that traffics in the production of time, albeit by other means and practices than those listed above: to historiography, more specifically to the genre of world, global or, in an older idiom, universal history.\(^6\)

An unlikely trio, the logistics company UPS, political scientists Altvater and Mahnkopf, and philosopher Peter Sloterdijk remind us of two fundamental insights that for a long time have been more or less absent from historical scholarship: first, that we experience in the world at any one time a plurality, or even a multitude of times; and second, that world history imagined in singular comes about when these multiple times as well as the lives and events they encompass are synchronized and brought into the same temporal succession. Another aim of this essay, then, is to discuss these insights with the goal of exploring the extent to which the writing of global history is based on what I refer to as a “work of synchronization”—synchronizing a plurality of times in a plurality of world regions. I will argue that we should understand synchronization as a historiographical practice, a practice by which the idea of homogenous, linear, teleological time, that is, the idea of progress comes into existence.\(^7\)

**Synchronization in History: Concept and Practice**

The varied attempts at synchronizing the world that I discuss in this essay all have something in common: they are not governed by time-keeping, transportation, or communication technologies, but rather by a set of practices belonging to the Early Modern *res publica literaria*: writing, printing, publishing, and lecturing. Though synchronization as a historiographical and—in the widest sense—literary practice began in Greek and Roman antiquity, the particular textual forms or genres, in their particular configurations that I will discuss here, emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the same time the concept itself, instantiated by adding the prefix *syn*- to the word stem *chronos*, came into usage more or less in the same way it continues to be used today.

Instances of synchronization did not first appear in modern discourses on time technologies and communication practices, but rather in theological texts, more precisely in John Harvey’s *A Discoursiue Problem Concerning Prophesies, how far they are to be Valued and Credited* from 1588. In this work, the
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astrologer and physician Harvey compares the apocryphal prophecies of Esdras, which state that the world has twelve ages and we are halfway into the tenth, with the prophecies made by the biblical prophet Elias, about the years of catastrophic drought in Israel and what was to follow it, asking: “Is there any greater concordance, or Synchronisme, between the prophesie of Elias and this text, than is argued between the same, and the former? Or rather shall we not finde a greater discrepancy, & incongruence, if we search the matter to the quicke?” In Harvey’s treatise on prophecies, as well as in later treatises on various aspects of biblical exegesis by influential philologists and biblical scholars such as Joseph Mede and Richard Bentley, the word “synchronism” is used to refer to the concordance between different orders or narratives of time, based on biblical or apocryphal sources and dating from Creation to the Day of Judgment.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, synchronism is no longer reserved for biblical exegesis; it now refers to a particular temporal and historical phenomenon, one that can be observed in different areas of human life and world history. For example, Thomas Blount’s Glossographia; or A Dictionary Interpreting all such Hard Words of Whatsoever Language, now used in our refined English Tongues, published in 1656, defines synchronism as “the being and happening of two things at one, and the same time, contemporaneous, co-existence,” indicating Sir Walter Raleigh as the source for this definition. In Blount’s entry, synchronism refers to a purely temporal, formal coincidence or co-occurrence, one that is not tied to any particular historical meaning or teleology or to any particular chronological, historiographical, or chronological method. Nevertheless, the reference to Raleigh seems to imply that the broader context of the term as it was used by Blount points to the discovery and exploration of new and unknown worlds, not only geographically and culturally unfamiliar to Western civilization, but also temporally out of sync with it.

My aim here is less to trace a concept than a practice. However, one last terminological consideration is in order, taken from one of the most ambitious and comprehensive encyclopedic projects of the eighteenth century, Johann Heinrich Zedler’s Grosses Universallexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste, published between 1731 and 1754. By this time, the word “synchronism” had gained a productive connotation, and it had given rise to other closely related terms within historiographical terminology. According to Zedler, “synchroni” is a term used to describe “those who live at the same time,“
whereas “synchronisimi” refers to “different epochs, which are calculated [gerechnet] to the same year.” The first term describes a mere fact of human life, whereas the second evokes the scholarly practice of periodization as a means of synchronizing events that take place at the same time in different places. In Zedler, then, the idioms of synchronism, and even synchronization enter into the language of historiography in order to describe not just a temporal and historical phenomenon, but a specific historiographical practice, one that is linked to periodization.

An example of how synchronism is put into historiographical practice to help students understand the complexities of history can be found in a small printed book, published in 1783 in Bergen, Norway, by the mathematician and schoolmaster Frederich Ludwig Holberg Arentz. The book contains a table, twenty-four pages long, divided into columns that are filled with names and short fragments of texts that offer information about these names or that include them in a kind of narrative. At the top of the table there are names of people or nations; at the far left is a timeline that counts the anni mundi, the years gone by since the beginning of the world. The book has neither preface nor introduction, but on the first page there is a small passage printed in the bottom left corner. The title reads: “Tables of Universal History,” and underneath it the Norwegian schoolmaster gives the shortest possible explanation, in Norwegian of course, of how the table should be used and how it can help the students understand universal history. The table, Arentz writes, “helps the eyes in recognizing the coherence in the history of a particular people,” and also aids “in recognizing the synchronism with other kingdoms.” Furthermore, he continues, it “gives every event its proper place, so order and synchronism can be acknowledged”.

In his explanatory note, Arentz, like Zedler, uses synchronism as a name for a specific way of looking at the world and understanding world history. It is an orientation that is not limited to one tradition, one culture, or even one history, as represented by any of these vertical columns. Instead, such a point of view demands a horizontal perspective, one that extends across cultural and geographical borders alike and, hence, across boundaries between different histories and different historical times. In this way Arentz’s table can be said to perform the work of synchronization; it synchronizes the histories of different peoples at the same time that it offers a singular, linear chronology that runs from the beginning of the world to the present. Equally notable is the way that, due to the use of a table and the practice of
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synchronism itself, the histories of different peoples are concomitantly kept apart, and represented as separate and singular. If not, there would have been no synchronism to “acknowledge,” to stick with Arentz’s language.

This historiographical practice—the work of synchronization and especially the use of so-called “synchronistic tables”—shall be the topic of this essay. The problem of dealing with “the being and hapning of two things, at one and the same time,” which are not in themselves related in any spatially and geographically obvious way, and which thus cannot be said to belong to the same event, links the beginning and the end of the modern “regime of historicity,” to use François Hartog’s term.13 Thus, a better understanding of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historiography can inform ongoing struggles to establish new and more meaningful forms of global history.

Global History and the Problem of the Non-Synchronous

According to some of the most persistent and dominant narratives of Western historiography, the modern concept and experience of history emerged around the middle of the eighteenth century when diachronic, linear, and progressive time, along with the idea of history as a movement from the past, through the present, and into the future, eclipsed both the Aristotelian historia, the epistemology of particulars, and the Ciceronian historia magistra vitae, the pragmatics of exemplarity.14 This is the process that Reinhart Koselleck has famously labeled “the temporalization [Verzeitlichung] of history,” by which “collective singulars” like “progress,” “future,” and “revolution” gain their hold on the Western imagination.15 In his invaluable A Global History of Modern Historiography, Georg Iggers argues that “the shift to the modern conception of time is best illustrated by the transformations which the writing of universal history underwent in the course of the eighteenth century,”16 drawing a line from the multi-volume A Universal History, published between 1736 and 1765, to the origin of German historicism in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder and the rise of the “Eurocentric idea of progress.”17 I would suggest that even today universal history persists as the historiographical genre in which we can best observe shifts in conceptions of time, for example the much debated end of the “modern regime of historicity,” to return to Hartog’s phrase. Hartog is also among the many scholars to have pointed out the genre-historical continuity between universal history and
what today proliferates under the label “world history” or “global history.” In other words, reflections about how to write global history, engaging with a new “shift” in conceptions of time, due to globalization and what Harvey called the “time-space compression,” might offer a useful perspective for returning to the eighteenth century and investigating the last “shift,” if we are to believe Iggers, Hartog, and other theorists and historians of historiography like Koselleck and Aleida Assmann. As our signpost we might as well borrow the UPS-slogan: “Synchronizing the World.”

There is no doubt that the emergence of a globalized world has ushered in a variety of new complex and heterogeneous temporal experiences. There is the conflict between the global time of commerce, technology and media, on the one hand, and the different rhythms and dynamics in the variety of cultures and communities, on the other. At the same time, confidence in the ability of political, commercial, and technological protocols based on the idea of progress to integrate events and experiences from across the globe into a linear and teleological, self-evident process has been dwindling for some time. Such shifts in conceptions of time have had profound consequences for those who study and document the world. Timothy Brook calls it “an epistemological crisis” for historians: “No longer is it possible to write histories of one part of the world as though the rest of the world did not exist.” Understood in terms of changing temporalities, and, according to Brook, brought about by recent “massive globalization,” this crisis is above all a crisis of synchronicity, or rather of non-synchronicity. It is a reaction to the discovery that events and processes unfolding in different parts of the world at the same time, in parallel, do not follow the same rhythms or fit into the same narratives. An attempt to take account of the plurality of times by writing multi-temporal narratives risks generating “histories so dense as to be unmanageable,” Brook claims. As we will see shortly, this fear, and indeed, this experience that attempts to include the multiple times and narratives of global history in a singular representation, risks rendering history incomprehensible; it was a staple in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historiography as well.

If we were to attempt to understand this so-called “epistemological crisis” as a crisis of time, and more specifically as one that has been brought about and aggravated by globalization but which nevertheless cannot be fully comprehended by its terminology, the most useful approach is probably offered by the German trope die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen, which
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has been translated into English as both “the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” “the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous,” and, in the idiom I have selected for this discussion, “the synchronicity of the non-synchronous.” At any time in history there are elements, words, concepts, institutional structures, or social and political practices that are not “in sync” with each other, because they feature durations, narrative structures, visions of the future or dreams of the past, rhythms, continuities or discontinuities that structure the relationship between past, present, and future in radically different ways. For example, a conversation or a piece of writing in a particular cultural and geographical context might contain semantic elements that point back into antiquity, such as the Aristotelian roots of “democracy,” whereas others might have a more future-oriented, even utopian quality, such as the dream of global democracy and global peace. In historiography, the main theorist of non-synchronicity has been Reinhart Koselleck, who never lets a chance go by to expose the inherent non-synchronicities of concepts, paintings, or memorials, as evidenced, for example, in his analysis of Alexander Altdorfer’s *Alexanderschlacht.*

In anthropology, inspired by the same German thinkers as Koselleck, the seminal contributor has been Johannes Fabian, who translated the trope of the *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* into the “denial of coevalness.” Building on Fabian’s writing, I want to suggest that the *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* drives a wedge into the idea of a singular uniform time and opens it up to multiple synchronic spaces, both in a geographical and a topographical sense. These are the multiplicities with which historians of global or universal history need to reckon: “Rather than reproducing timeline narratives that confirm existing identities,” Brook writes, “historians access the multiplicity and indeterminacy of actual experience in the past by suspending the flow of time and examining the world through ‘keyholes.’” In a similar vein, global historian Bruce Mazlish has argued that the main task of what he has termed “The New Global History”—as different from traditional textbook world history based on nations—is to identify a “global epoch,” which is characterized by a certain kind of global “synergy and synchronicity of various factors,” and which he locates either in the 1950s or the 1970s, depending on which factors he considers more decisive. In both cases, however, time must come to a halt: the synchronicity of events across the globe can only reappear if history is brought to a standstill, frozen by the historian’s gaze through a keyhole or by the matrix of a historical period.
One of the most recent and path-breaking discussions of how to deal with the synchronicity of the non-synchronous in global history unfolds in the preface to the latest work by the German historian Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt* (2009), in which he compares his own work to that of Christopher A. Bayly, author of the magisterial *The Birth of The Modern World 1780–1914*. The idea of global history, Osterhammel argues, has led to a radical rethinking of the categories of time and space in historiography. However, this rethinking does not imply, as it is often claimed, a “temporal dedifferentiation” and a “turn to space”; on the contrary, it should lead historians to seriously reengage with their traditional methodological tools, both temporal and spatial, such as chronology, periodizations, continuities and discontinuities, spatial order, and borders. This reengagement with the methods and theories of history in a global perspective, Osterhammel claims, has led Bayly and him in opposite directions. According to Osterhammel, what Bayly practices is a “divergent-spatial” way of writing history, one that Bayly himself calls “lateral” and “[that] moves in the width of synchronicity and cross-section [die Breite der Gleichzeitigkeit und des Querschnitts], searches for parallels and analogies, makes comparisons and explores hidden causations.” It is a “decentering approach, which cannot easily be moved forward through the flow of time.”

Against this approach Osterhammel pits his own method, one that he terms “the return of the grand narratives,” those that were banned from historiography by postmodern critics such as Jean-François Lyotard. In place of the synchronic cross-section he insists on the diachronic longitudinal section [Längsschnitt] or, more precisely, a series of diachronic sections or grand narratives, each dealing with different “part systems” of social life. “Each part,” he concludes, “has its own temporal structure: its own beginning, its own end, specific tempi, rhythms, periodizations.” Reading both works, it is often hard to recognize the differences, as Bayly quite systematically traces what he calls “the rise of global uniformities” and explicitly defends the idea of the grand narratives against postmodern critics. Osterhammel, on the other hand, can also be seen to operate across the borders and spaces of the globe in the same synchronic moment. Both authors combine chronological and thematic organizations; even many of their themes are the same.

To give primacy either to the diachronic or the synchronic in the writing of history provides material for an interesting and illuminating discussion. Yet, in reading Osterhammel one is struck by the relative poverty of his arguments,
concepts, and tools for understanding and dealing with the global multiplicities of time in historiographical practice, especially in comparison to the discussions that took place in the eighteenth century. Practice here should be understood in the widest possible sense, and should include not just concepts and narratives, but also the uses of visual representation and the exploration of the possibilities of print. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the name for this way of displaying the connections and disconnections of multiple temporalities distributed across global space was synchronism. This can be understood, at least in part and for the sake of simplification, as a historiographical paradigm and practice that competed with the rise of the narrative and the idea of progress in the early days of historicism.

Synchronism in Practice: J.C. Gatterer and the Rules of Synchronicity

Among the classics in the rise of modern German historiography is the essay “Vom historischen Plan und der darauf sich gründenden Zusammenfügung von Erzählungen” [On the historical schema and the resulting merging of stories] by Johann Christoph Gatterer, professor at the University of Göttingen and one of the most prominent historians in the German-speaking world in the second half of the eighteenth century. Gatterer’s position at the university was only challenged by the now-more-famous August Ludwig Schlözer, professor of history and an influential politician. Both professors fought for the privilege to teach courses in universal, or world history and not least to be able to sell students their self-produced textbooks and other teaching materials, which represented a major source of income. In German historiography, Gatterer’s essay from 1767 has been recognized as a foundational text in “the prehistory of German historicism,” and as one of the first attempts to establish history as a science, in the modern sense.

To Gatterer, writing history in a “pragmatic” way meant “to seek out the preconditions and causes for a remarkable event, and represent the entire system of causes and effects, means and intentions, which at the beginning might seem completely confused, running through and alongside each other” in terms of a single story, even a linear plot outline. Looking more closely, however, this was only half of the picture. Earlier in the same essay, he summed up his plan for a new and “scientific” way of writing history in the following way:
The simplest, most natural schema for a universal history for beginners seems to be according to nations, that is, organized in such a way that the histories of nations are told one after the other, in succession, and that in every one of these national histories chronological order is respected. In this way, Puffendorf, Struv and others have written their universal histories. One realizes quickly that several objections can be made against the organizational model for these works. Even though they tell the story of every nation in one whole, they are completely ignoring the rules of synchronicity [die Regeln des Gleichzeitigeng]. With this remark I seem also to attack myself and my own books on universal history.

German historicism in its most full-fledged, mid- and late-nineteenth century form is undoubtedly “a history according to nations,” mostly according to one nation: Germany. The practitioners of the prolific new genre of Weltgeschichte [world history] put their faith in the succession of nations, their rivalry and expansion, and their imperialistic and colonial ambitions and ventures, in order to give order and meaning to the history of the world. To Gatterer, however, a historian still committed to Enlightenment historiography and ethnography in which the non-synchronicity of the world was a riddle yet to be solved, this strictly diachronic plan of nations in succession was not sufficient. At the brink of the breakthrough of historicism—in which diachronic temporality, the movement from the past through the present and into the future, was invested with a specific evolutionary, teleological content or “meaning in history,” as Karl Löwith famously put it —Gatterer himself insisted on also investigating synchronism across geographical and cultural borders. He terms his method for avoiding the complete dominance of diachronic succession and national history die Regeln des Gleichzeitigeng [the rules of synchronicity], and sets a concrete task for all historians: to comply with these rules in order to prevent national histories from becoming solipsistic and, worse, losing their connections with each other.

What became clear through even the brief early modern conceptual history presented above is that there is an ambiguity built into the idea of synchronism. Such ambiguity seems to involve both the acknowledgment of temporal multiplicity and the attempt to transform these multiple temporalities distributed across global space into a singular, linear, homogenous time. In Gatterer’s work, and later in the work of his contemporaries including Schlözer and Herder, these two versions of synchronism remain in productive tension. On the one hand, Gatterer understands himself to be performing a work of synchronization, in which the different strands
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of history, running alongside each other, are being aligned, conflated, and indeed synchronized by a system of cause and effect to the extent that all events can be located in the same narrative, as part of the same secular plot outline. But on the other hand, he chastises himself and his colleagues for reducing history to a diachronic, linear narrative “according to nations,” and thus ignoring the mere fact of Gleichzeitigkeit—the multitude of histories unfolding at the same time, in parallel.

Such difficulties in combining the diachronic and the synchronic, recognizable also in Osterhammel’s comparison of his work with Bayly’s, are further illustrated by Gatterer’s self-evaluation: Even “in his own books on universal history,” he admits that he has not been able to comply with “the rules of synchronicity.” The book that he is mainly criticizing here is his Abris der Universalhistorie nach ihrem gesamten Umfange von der Erschaffung der Erde bis auf unsere Zeit [Sketch of Universal History According to its Extension from the Creation of the World until Our Time] from 1765, published two years before his essay on the schema of history. Even though this work is not structured according to single nations but rather according to what Gatterer calls Völker systeme [systems of nations]—including the Assyrian, the Persian, the Macedonian, and the Roman with their Mitherrscher [co-rulers], Chinese, Arabs, and Turks—his ambition to combine chronologische and synchronistische perspectives, expressed in the preface to the work, is never really implemented in the actual writing.

In an earlier essay, written as an introduction to his 1761 Handbuch der Universalhistorie, Gatterer offers another version of the same argument. Here he argues that universal history should comply with two rules: according to the first rule, it shall present and teach “the remarkable events of every nation and every state in a precise chronological order, one after the other, to give a systematic impression of the whole machinery of changes in a state succeeding each other and causing each other.” According to the second rule, however, “all kingdoms and states that flourished at the same time shall be represented in a synchronistic whole.” At this point it becomes obvious that Gatterer’s project of synchronization was not limited to constructing one diachronic plot outline “according to nations,” but that it also involved the representation of multiple parallel narratives. In the introduction, Gatterer also makes a suggestion as to how such a “synchronistic whole” could be possible, without allowing one to completely eclipse...
the other. This second rule, “the rule of synchronicity,” he continues, can only be obeyed “by means of certain synchronistic tables,” and he even lists the ones in particular he has in mind and which I will return to shortly: “Schrader’s, Köhler’s and Berger’s [die Schraderischen, die Köhlerischen und die Bergerischen].”42

The solution to Gatterer’s predicament of how to combine the diachronic and the synchronic, or what he refers to as the chronologische and synchronistische orders of history, is found not in a specific mode of writing, but in a specific mode of visualization: in a set of tables, referred to as “synchronistic,” but also, especially in older editions, as “synoptic” or “chronographic.”43 In these tables historical facts that are symbolized by names and events from different parts of the world are entered into parallel columns, or in some cases into a grid, in order for them to be perceived and indeed studied both vertically and horizontally, as part of both diachronic succession and synchronic parallelism. The columns represent cultural or political units, such as China, Egypt or the Roman Empire, whereas the rows—in some cases more a sideways perspective than an actual set of graphical lines—represent moments or periods in history, according to a timeline, mostly located at the far left of the table.

The uses and functions of these synchronistic tables in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historiography offer an important key for understanding the historiographical practice referred to as synchronism. In her incisive discussion of the “visual forms of knowledge production” based on examples from the entire scope of Western history, Johanna Drucker draws a distinction between “representations of information” which display what is already known, and “knowledge generators” capable of creating new knowledge through their use. While representations are “static in relation to what they show and reference,” knowledge generators “have a dynamic, open-ended relation to what they can provoke.”44 To Drucker, knowledge generators are “graphical forms that support combinatoric calculation.”45 Among the timekeeping diagrams, which she discusses at some length, train tables are examples of generators, whereas calendars are representations.46 To use Drucker’s distinction to understand the function of “synchronistic tables” in eighteenth-century historiography, we would need to ask if these visual modes of organizing time created new knowledge or just displayed what was already known. Such a distinction between representations and generators also enables us to conceptualize the moment in the history of
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historiography of which Gatterer, alongside other more famous colleagues like August Ludwig Schlözer and Johann Gottfried Herder, is a part.

J.C. Gatterer’s Moment and the History of the Synchronistic Tables

The moment in the history of historiography when Gatterer produced his works has been described by Catherine Colliot-Thélène as a “brief instant,” when the “chronological order of traditional Christian historiography” had lost much of its dominance but “the profane teleology of progress” was not yet in place. There was, however, “hardly any time to develop an alternative,” hence “the possibility of a pluralist interpretation and a distributive presentation of history as a whole,” including an “interest in the diversity of cultures,” was never realized. 47 Although Colliot-Thélène might be correct in her claim that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries never saw the development of a full-fledged theory of history in a plural and distributive mode, the period nonetheless features a complex interplay of different presentation modes, media, didactic strategies, texts and tables, all of which deserve a closer look, especially if we want to grasp which of the practices and genres of synchronization gained purchase in the writing of history.

In the chronological works of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, going back to Venerable Bede’s “On Time,” from 703, and the more comprehensive “On the Reckoning of Time,” from 723, the dogmatic power and function of synchronization was still quite obvious. The chronologists in the tradition of the Christian computus, a method used for setting the date for Easter, had two main dogmatic goals: the first was to synchronize all other chronologies, traditions, and narratives with the chronology of Biblical history and Christian eschatology, which was itself a product of an enormous effort to synchronize the different chronologies found in the Bible as well as in Christian rituals. 48 The second goal was to prove that no other culture was older than Christianity, and, further, that the histories of pagan nations began much later than the histories of the nations of the Bible. From these efforts a few conclusions followed: that the history narrated in the Bible was a history of mankind and not just a history of the Jews, and that Christ would return at the same time in every part of the world, according to one and the same synchronized linear chronology.

The shift in the understanding of the plurality of times resulting from both the loosening of the grip of Christian chronology as well as the discovery of
the New World can be observed materially in the synchronistic tables that were introduced into the teaching of history around this time. The path-breaking work in this regard was the *Theatrum historicum*, produced by the grammarian and chronologist Christoph Martin Hellwig at the University of Gießen, and published for the first time in 1609. Hellwig’s work became extremely controversial, due to his inclusion of the lists of Egyptian kings which challenged the claim of Jewish history to be the origin of all human history. But his tables were also extremely popular, demonstrated by the fact that they were still in print and in use at the end of the century.

In addition to inventing a new practice of teaching, in which the students would consult synchronistic tables while listening to lectures by their professors or reading historiographical works, Hellwig was one of the first, and undoubtedly one of the most influential scholars to combine formal chronologies, comprising columns of numbers alongside each other, with a wealth of historical information mostly encompassing biographies and events (see fig. 1). Linking years and decades to people and events was an essential contribution; it was the precondition for the late eighteenth century ideas about the synchronic and the diachronic, since every event and every life contained possibilities of both kinds of temporal order. Not least, Hellwig created the geometrical structure, the form to which most later tables will adhere, among them the tables by Christoph Schrader and Johann Joachim Köhler, which were among those mentioned by Gatterer, and which can be understood as revisions and re- editions of Hellwig’s *Theatrum*. For many people in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Grafton and Rosenberg recently argued, “time looked like a table—preferably one subdivided into squares by horizontal axes.”

Hellwig’s tables, published in several new editions, underwent a significant transformation from the accessible and neatly arranged versions produced for his students in Gießen in 1609. By 1687, they had been revised again and again in order to accommodate new chronological information and new principles of periodization to the extent that they became almost impossible to use. Hellwig’s first challenge, which had been the challenge of the entire *computus* tradition from Bede onwards, was to better specify the multiplicity of times: he included an increasing number of periods, eras, and epochs, such as *Aera Mundi Conditi* (after Creation), *Periodus Judaica* (Jewish world eras), *Ab exitu ex Egypto* (after the Exodus), and *A Trojano Excidio* (after the fall of Troy). In the end they were all synchronized according to the
so-called “Julian period,” suggested in 1583 by one of the most famous and most controversial authorities on Christian chronology in Early Modern Europe: Joseph Justus Scaliger. The second task was to augment these chronologies with the names of historical events and individuals. Due to the pluralities of chronologies and periodizations, however, as well as the cumbersome amount of new historical information, highlighted by different fonts and layouts, the tables threatened to become inaccessible, not least for pupils and students. Thus, it is not surprising that even though Hellwig's
By the 1640s, Hellwig’s *Theatrum* had been replaced as the most widely used synchronistic table at pedagogical institutions by Christoph Schrader’s *Tabulae chronologicae. A Prima rerum origine ad C. Iulii Cesaris Monarchiam*, first published in 1642, and expanded three years later with the addition of a second volume, *Tabulae chronologicae a nato Christi ad Annum MDC*. The tables composed by Schrader, professor of rhetoric and librarian at the University of Helmstedt, were the most widely used tables in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This work was issued in 24 editions, the last one in 1765. Compared to Hellwig’s *Theatrum*, Schrader’s tables represented a significant simplification. On the first pages of the table Schrader only entered two columns, for sacred and political history; on later pages other columns were added, containing different national histories as well as lists of famous men. Deviating from Hellwig, Schrader also added a column for *Varia*, in which facts and events that do not fit in other columns are placed (see fig. 2). Even with this addition, however, there were never more than seven columns, thus presenting the students with a rather simple and accessible structure. But in spite of its commercial success, there are indications that Schrader’s tables were not always used according to their intended goal. According to Steiner, who has gone through several of the existing copies, hand-written notes indicate that the students used the tables to compile lists of historical facts, organized vertically and by key words, and they took notes solely relating to single events. It seems then that it was the possibility of creating a list of diachronically organized facts more than the parallelism and synchronicity of multiple chronologies, periods, events or lives that appealed to the students using the tables to learn history.

The second set of tables mentioned by Gatterer—*die Kohlerschen*—is not very different. Johann David Köhler’s *Chronologia historia universalis*, published in 1719, is more or less a replica of Schrader’s, with only few additions and changes, such as a new column for literary history. The fact that Köhler’s work figured among the tables that Gatterer considered using for teaching his students about synchronicity in history can be taken as an indication that the tables on Gatterer’s list were the ones actually in use among his own students, including those made by his colleague Köhler in Göttingen.

Among the tables listed by Gatterer, the most interesting ones in order to understand how he actually conceptualized his “rules of synchronicity”
are the tables produced by Theodor Berger, who was a history teacher in Leipzig and Halle and later became a professor in Coburg. Berger was the author of two works of synchronistic tables, one in Latin, *Historiam universalem per synchronismum* in 1728, and one in German, *Synchronistische*.
Universal-Historie der vornehmsten europäischen Reiche und Staaten, in 1729. Gatterer’s problem with Berger’s tables, even though he still considered them to be the best, was that they were “overloaded with narratives [Erzählungen], very cumbersome and hard to use.” Gatterer’s problem with Berger’s tables, even though he still considered them to be the best, was that they were “overloaded with narratives [Erzählungen], very cumbersome and hard to use.” In the tables compiled by Schrader and Köhler, we already saw how the logic of the list, and thus of diachronic vertical succession of historical facts, came to dominate the logic of the table, of synchronic horizontal parallelism. In Berger’s work, another temporal logic—the narrative—came to challenge, and even to eclipse the diagrammatic logic of the table, in terms of the parallelism of columns and the verticality of rows, as was already exemplified in Hellwig’s tables. This narrative logic emerged during the eighteenth century, and would inform modern historiography’s main mode of temporal representation in the century to come.

No other historiographical work published in the eighteenth century illustrates better than Berger’s Synchronistische Universal-Historie how the logic of the narrative—a diachronic succession of events connected by causality and thus sustaining a specific temporal organization of facts—suppressed the synchronic, and thus how synchronism as a historiographical practice disappeared from Western history writing. In Berger’s tables, the space of the column becomes the space of narrative; more precisely, the narrative is represented or “told” vertically, within a narrow framework of the absolute linear borders of the column. The upper part is filled with the narrative itself, the lower part with the footnotes. The columns themselves are familiar, handed down in the tradition of chronological works from Hellwig to Schrader and Köhler, but the contents of the columns are no longer names or keywords that represent, in tabular short-hand, the most important persons and events. Instead, they are full-fledged, absolutely diachronic historiographical narratives, complete with a set of scholarly footnotes (see fig. 3). The linear narrative, the genre that would become the paradigmatic form of modern historiography, has made its way into the table and is about to dissolve it from within.

A table full of parallel narratives does not “help the eyes to recognize the synchronism with other kingdoms,” to use Arentz’s phrase; on the contrary, any attempt to look horizontally into another column would only create confusion, as the reader must then jump from one narrative to another, as if they were two moving trains in one of Einstein’s theoretical experiments. History, as represented by Berger, was not only strictly diachronic;
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at the same time, and due to the same diagrammatic framework, it was also strictly national. Readers are only asked to recognize and learn national narratives, remaining well within the boundaries of the nation-states, represented by columns. This shift rendered synchronism, an experience that had invited horizontal movement across the vertical lines of the table as well as across geographical national borders, more or less impossible and thus obsolete.

Berger’s tables are a striking example of how, due to the process of temporization as described, for instance, by Koselleck, each element of history, which is to say in this case each nation, is endowed with its own inherent temporal structure and narrative temporality, a practice that challenges and eventually displaces the idea of synchronism. The attempts to establish a balance between the synchronic and the diachronic by means of a grid have reached a dead end. Now faced with the advent of national narratives and their acceptance, Gatterer must reinvent the practice of synchronism to

Fig. 3: Berger’s Synchronistische Universal-Historie, Leipzig 1729. Courtesy of Gunnerus Library, NTNU.
make it include the entire world. He must, therefore, produce another kind of table, one where the times of different nations are freed from the temporal logic of the narrative, of the events and causalities specific to one nation.61

**Making Synchronistic Universal History: Tables as Knowledge Generators**

Gatterer’s optimism about the synchronistic tables produced by his colleagues and predecessors Schrader, Köhler, and Berger were soon to fade. In the essay on the “historical schema,” Gatterer has come to the realization that his attempts to comply with “the rules of synchronicity” by referring his students and readers to these tables, have been insufficient, because none of these tables were really good enough, not even Berger’s, which he considered the best of the lot.62 There would be only one way to remedy this obvious didactic shortcoming: he would have to make his own.

In 1772, Gatterer published his most comprehensive work in universal history, his two-volume, almost thirteen-hundred-pages-long *Einleitung in die synchronistische Universalgeschichte* [Introduction to Synchronistic Universal History]. He had already used the term “synchronistic” in the introduction to *Abriss der Universalhistorie*, which offered a “synchronistic outline [synchronistische Übersicht] of the whole of history,” but here in his second work in the genre of universal history, the term appears in the title. 63 Gatterer’s most important tool for achieving this synchronistic view of history does not appear in the book itself, except in the subtitle: *zur Erläuterung seiner synchronistischen Tabellen*, “in explanation of” or “as commentary on his synchronistic tables.” In accordance with the practice of his predecessors, however, Gatterer did not include the tables in *Einleitung*. They had already been published as a separate book six years earlier, just as his predecessors had done it: the twelve-page *Synopsis Historia Universalis, sex tabulis* was published in 1766. Apparently then, Gatterer had made good on his claim from “Vom historischen Plan”: that the only way to present, teach, and understand the *synchronisms* of global history is by means of tables, but owing to his dissatisfaction with the existing tables made by others, these tables had to be of his own making.

As indicated in the title, the book contains six tables, each covering two pages. Four of these tables offer more or less the same kind of visualization as Köhler’s tables, featuring three columns that serve to divide history into *Historia politica*, *Historia ecclesiastica*, and *Historia litteraria*, or, political history, church history, and history of scholarship. Based on only these four tables,
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with their structural similarity to his colleagues’ earlier versions, it is hard to understand why he rejected the tables made by his colleagues and felt obliged to make his own. The two last tables, however, are visually and structurally very different, to the extent that the change in visual form might also imply a change in the function of the table, from a representation of knowledge to a knowledge generator, using Drucker’s terms.

Both of the two last tables carry the Latin title *Durationem populorum, regnorum, civitatum intens*, “the durations of nations, states, and cities.” In each of these tables there are a series of columns in different colors, and lengths and widths representing states, peoples, or nations (see fig. 4). Some of the columns are linked, forming what Gatterer in the companion *Einleitung* calls *Völkersysteme* [systems of peoples].64 In the middle there is a black column representing the timeline. At each hundred years mark a thin black line crosses the entire space of the table, dividing all the columns, including the timeline itself, into boxes in accordance with the visual conventions handed down from Hellwig. The first table represents an earlier historical period, from the beginning of the world until 4500 *Anno Mundi*, whereas the second represents more recent history, until 1800 *Anno Domini*. In the first table the horizontal succession of columns starts with China on the far left and ends with Denmark, Sweden and Norway in the bottom corner on the far right. In each column there are a few handwritten names of individuals, mostly rulers, along with mentions of important events: there is the birth of Abraham and the reign of Saul in the column representing Hebrew history, for example, and the reign of Alexander the Great appears in the Macedonian history column. In the column representing Japanese history between 1700 A.M. and 500 A.D. there is only one entry, *Dairi*, which marks the beginning of the Dairi-dynasty, around the year 5500 after the beginning of the world, or *Anno Mundi*. Broader columns represent “systems of rule,” or as Gatterer also calls them, “systems of subjection,” *Systeme der Unterwürfigkeit*;65 from left to right: the Babylonian-Assyrian, the Persian, the Macedonian, and the Roman. These logics of power are also reflected in the choice of colors: the powerful, ruling states are in red, the dependent in yellow.66

Both in the *Einleitung* and in a review he published in the journal *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* shortly after the publication of the *Synopsis*, Gatterer provided detailed instructions explaining how to decode and use the synchronistic tables.67 If we take our cue from Drucker, however, and ask to what extent Gatterer’s tables turned into knowledge generators as soon as they shed
Hellwig’s complex periodizations and Berger’s self-contained narratives, our focus should be less on the content of the tables and more on their function. The Synopsis itself contains no explanations or user’s manual, not even a small explanatory note like the one we found in Arentz’s set of tables. The separate publications of synchronic tables and narrative text, along with the glaring absence of instructions, indicate a specific historical and pragmatic usage. University students, for example, were supposed to bring their tables along to lectures, in order to better follow the grand nation-specific narratives of their professors. In this way, they were able to orient themselves to the multiple temporalities of world history, to notice the “synchroni” and to comprehend the construction of “synchronismi,” to return to Zedler’s terms.

In the interplay between narratives—both written and oral—and tables, synchronism emerges as a specific way of looking at the world and of understanding world history: it is an inclusive idea that is not limited to one tradition, one culture, or indeed, one history, as represented by the interaction...
of the vertical columns with the companion horizontal perspective—across cultural and indeed geographical borders and, hence, across borders between different historical times. Rather than as visual displays of historical facts, the synchronistic tables might be understood as representational devices for the students to use to generate a certain form of historical knowledge of the world. This knowledge is produced by means of what Drucker, quoting Herbert Simon and Jill Larkin’s path-breaking essay, refers to as “perceptual inferences,” which “could not be properly structured in linear expressions,” as in Berger’s narratives.69 In Gatterer’s table these inferences work to connect different temporalities, or “durations” as Gatterer calls them, distributed across a space that is at the same time geographical and typographical. In this way new knowledge is generated, not by means of combinatoric calculations like in time tables for trains or in Raymond Llull’s rotating wheels, but by making simultaneous connections between historical processes unfolding in different corners of the world.70

On the other hand, thinking about the tables as tools or aids might lure us into believing that the actual knowledge is found elsewhere and that the tables are primarily illustrations, produced to make the knowledge presented in narrative form seem more accessible. If we look more closely, however, the relationship between texts and tables seems to shift. In the introduction to his Einleitung, Gatterer encouraged his readers not to forget that the following pages—in other words, his almost thirteen-hundred-page book—contained only “a commentary, or, to be even more precise, a dictation”—as he puts it, a Dictata—“about my synchronistic tables.”71 In this context the term Dictata is interesting partly because it evokes the teaching situation along with the interplay of oral and written communication, and partly because it inverts the relationship between text and table, or rather, it confirms the inversion already indicated in the subtitle and in the German term Erläuterung.

In his universal history Gatterer makes the claim, at least implicitly, that his primary historiographical and thus scientific contribution is not located in the pages of the enormous volume he has written but rather in the six tables, thus relegating every narrative representation he offers, either in the form of lectures or in the form of a book, to either commentary or explication. Universal history, then, as Gatterer saw it, was best represented not as a diachronic narrative but as a synchronistic table. And, a further claim: synchronic parallelism and not diachronic succession was the most accurate shape, form or truthful image of this history, and also the most effective
generator of it, in relation to which any story, any narrative representation could only be commentary.

Finally, the shift from knowledge display to knowledge generator that occurs in Gatterer’s Synopsis also involved another striking shift. The traditional columns—empty rectangular spaces forming a grid waiting to be filled with historical information, either by the author or later by the students—transform into something more like pillars, with a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, or “upper tips” [oberen Spizen] and “lower tips” [untern Spizen], as Gatterer called them in his review of his own work. These spaces were filled not primarily by names or events but by colors. Thus, the pillars no longer function primarily as containers of history, historical lives or events, but instead become visualizations of time itself, or maybe of the passing of time, as indicated by Gatterer’s own preferred term durationem [durations].

As opposed to Newtonian time, which Newton himself described as “Absolute, True, and Mathematical,” and which proceeds “without regard to any thing external,” there is nothing “absolute,” homogenous or singular about the time that emerged in Gatterer’s table. On the contrary, time in the Synopsis remained plural, heterogeneous and absolutely dependent on external factors like geography, culture and politics. Indeed, we might see this as Gatterer’s response to the change in historical experience that Koselleck terms “temporalization.” Both Berger and Gatterer want to use the tables to represent history in motion, history as movement and process; but whereas Berger sticks to the contents of history—the events and lives—and transforms them into narrative, Gatterer turns his attention to the form of time itself, in the plural. Rather than Koselleck’s all-encompassing universal collective singular Geschichte, Gatterer imagines a multitude of durations, shaped into systems of rule and subjection.

To claim that Gatterer’s Synopsis performs the emergence of time itself, and in its plural form—a multiplicity of times, synchronized into a shared chronology—might seem a somewhat farfetched argument, yet only decades later and throughout much of the nineteenth century, this is what tables of history were explicitly doing. By then, however, Gatterer’s durationem were replaced by the more poetic and imaginative, yet also strangely more naturalistic and antiquated term “stream of times,” which was first coined some decades later by the historian Friedrich Strass. In Strass’s Der Strom der Zeiten oder bildliche Darstellung der Weltgeschichte von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Ende des achttzehnten Jahrhunderts, first published in German in 1804 and re-published in 1842 as
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Stream of Time, or Chart of Universal History, the columns of the synchronistic tables have morphed into a set of streams, flowing from the top of the page down to the bottom, branching out and coming together again.74

At the bottom of the English edition of Strass’s table, there is a brief comment which does not appear in the German original that reads: "Each nation is represented by a stream which is broken in upon or flows on undisturbed as it is influenced by the accession of Territory or the remaining at Peace."75 Even though the streams here appear to be equivalent to Gatterer’s durations, there is a crucial difference: Strass’s chart has one stream, as stated in the title, which branches out into several smaller streams. These smaller streams nonetheless can flow back together to become a homogenous, linear stream of time. Gatterer’s durations, in contrast, only existed as separate temporalities, with their own beginnings and endings, their own rhythms and speeds, set by the frequency of names or events within the different columns. This difference between the unified time of nineteenth-century historicism, represented either by collective singulars like History or Progress, or, in visual form, by the single stream of time, and the plurality of times in Gatterer’s tables, is emphasized diagrammatically by the fact that when any of Gatterer’s durationem comes to an end, a blank space is left on the page as if time, or at least this specific form of time, has ended, rather than having been assimilated into one of the other columns or streams running next to it.

In their Cartographies of Time, Rosenberg and Grafton link Strass’s Strom der Zeiten back to Joseph Priestley’s A New Chart of History (1769), and thus to the diagrammatic form, or rather the genre, of the timeline.76 Even though timelines and synchronistic tables are closely related, not least in their visual form, their functions and uses have historically been very different. Whereas the synchronistic table belongs to the historiographical paradigm of synchronism, the timeline—as indicated by the visual shift from table to line—prioritized the diachronic and the progressive. Although in the case of Priestley and his immediate successors time was understood as multilinear rather than as the unilinear time of emerging historicism. To Gatterer, as we have seen, the function of the table was to fulfill “the rules of synchronicity,” to avoid turning history as a universal category into a succession of national histories. In this way he was able to analyze the various historical systems of rule and subjection unfolding across global space.

If we turn for a moment to the present-day debates on global history, the main difference, or even shortcoming of the discussions today when
compared to the eighteenth-century debates on universal history, seems to be centered on the lack of visualizations, including visual knowledge generators, representations, or even generally visual forms of knowledge production—visualizations that could help contemporary historians combine diachronic and synchronic perspectives in more innovative and imaginative ways. Ideally, these new visualizations would be digital knowledge generators with the ability to change Brook’s “key hole” into a multidimensional synchronistic table, in which the multiple temporalities of global space could move at their own speeds and with their own rhythms. My goal in this essay, however, has been to sketch a moment—or in Colliot-Thélène’s words, “a brief instant”—in German historiography when historians were actively experimenting with different ways of practicing synchronism.

At least in part, these practices challenge the assessments of Gatterer and his colleagues’ place in the “prehistory of historicism,” when a strongly diachronic linear, homogenous, and teleological time replaced the temporal multiplicity prominent in early modern historiography, from biblical chronologies to universal history. Although the representative figure for this moment has been Gatterer, he is by no means the only German historian in the late eighteenth century for whom synchronism remained a persistent challenge. I will end this essay by briefly drawing on two other authors, each of whom offered somewhat different answers to the challenge of temporalization as well as the non-synchronicity of historical processes. The first is Gatterer’s long-time colleague and fierce rival at the University of Göttingen, the historian and politician August Ludwig Schlözer. The second is the young aspiring theologian, philosopher, and literary critic Johann Gottfried Herder. Whereas Gatterer relied on his reinvention of the synchronistic table to perform the work of synchronism, Schlözer and Herder experimented with other solutions, with varying degree of success.

From Synchronistic to Synchronized History: Schlözer and Herder

In 1772, the same year that Gatterer published his massive Einleitung, Schlözer published a rather short text entitled Vorstellung seiner Universalhistorie [Idea of his universal history]. In the introduction Schlözer explained that this programmatic work was not in itself a universal history, but rather an attempt to lay out the principles for writing such a history. The aim, Schlözer argued, was to move from an “aggregate,” a plurality, a multitude of historical
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events, to a “system” in which these events are brought in connection with each other: “the general view, which encompasses everything […] returns all states within the earth’s circle back to a unity, the human race.” According to Schlözer the events of universal history were connected in two ways: by causal relationships, what he calls Realzusammenhänge [real connections]; and also by pure synchronism, or Zeitzusammenhänge [temporal connections]. The latter is the more difficult to recognize, Schlözer claimed, because it existed “among events that do not presuppose each other, but still are simultaneous [gleichzeitig]; that is, among facts that have taken place in completely different countries, or on different continents, but at the same time.” Such is the demand made by universal history upon students of history: “to combine all simultaneous facts, to imagine the situation of the world in every age and thus to think every event synchronically.”

What Schlözer shared with Gatterer was the conviction that synchronism should be brought about visually and diagrammatically, not in order to learn all the facts by heart but “to ensure that the soul, attentive to all these details, always returns to the general, locates the particularities in the whole, thinks of the simultaneous individuals and incidents listed in the table as simultaneous”. In contrast to Gatterer and his predecessors, however, Schlözer incorporated his visual representation—he refers to it as his Schema rather than his Tabelle—into the main text of the work (see fig. 5). And whereas Gatterer, in reaction to Berger’s tables that he felt were overloaded with narratives, removed most of the names from the columns and instead distinguished them by use of colors, Schlözer chose to keep the names but discard almost everything else, to the extent that without prior knowledge of the genre it would have been almost impossible at the time of publication to recognize that what he refers to as his synchronistische Anordnung [synchronistic arrangement] is indeed a synchronistic table, reduced to its most rudimentary form.

In accordance with the chronological tradition of writing history—to which abundant reference is made in the book—Schlözer divided the history of the world into periods, which are mostly between two and four hundred years long. He named these periods with the basic markers of historical figures or imperial regimes: “From Noah to Moses,” “From Troy to Rome,” “From Mohammed to Charles the Great,” and “From Dschingis Khan to Columbus.” In each period there is a continuously numbered list of groups of names, from two to seven, for example “Boniface III, Suintila, and
Muawiyah” or “Gutenberg, Mohammed II, Babur, Diaz, Ismael, and Luther,” all figures who lived around the same time. In a later text when explaining the table, Schlözer refers to them as “mere names, and nothing else, without any qualification.” Their function is to give human memory “a soft push” in order to grasp the entire system of simultaneities, which is world history.82

These lists of names can easily be associated with collections of exempla well-known from early modern historiography and reference books: these were individuals who represented certain virtues, ways of thinking or acting.83 Although the names in Schlözer’s tables also serve as exempla, their exemplarity does not evoke eternal virtues or models for action, but rather cultures or nations, as well as events, periods, or epochs in the history of these cultures and nations. Babur was the first Mughal emperor in India, for example, and Luther the key figure of the Reformation in Europe. In the three-hundred-year period in which they appear, their lives and actions represent parallel histories, unfolding at the same time but not as part of the same narrative. Though these exemplary lives were synchronized by the chronological order imposed on them by Schlözer, their separation persisted, not only with parallel lives but even in parallel times: on the one hand, the
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gradual rise of an empire in India, on the other, the sudden and dramatic end of Christian unity in Europe. Included in the chronological order of Schlözer’s synchronistische Anordnung, these lives unfolded in their own temporalities, interwoven with the historical and political moments of the nations or the geographical areas they represent, but also with the lives of other similarly exemplary or representative individuals from all over the globe—if not by causality, at least by synchronism.

Gatterer’s Synopsis and Schlözer’s Vorstellung are two different responses to the same challenge: the challenge to universal history posed by temporalization and by the introduction of linear, progressive time, unfolding in nations and cultures and thus producing the narrative overload in Berger’s tables. Faced with the threat of hegemonic narrative diachronic time, both Gatterer and Schlözer insisted on the importance of synchronism, produced visually and textually by stripping down the narratives to color-coded columns or exemplary names. Whereas Gatterer aimed to represent what would later be called the “stream of times” in a multiple and heterogeneous form, Schlözer, on the other hand, having no ambition to represent time or history itself, reproduced instead the names of famous persons as synecdochic representations of the history of an entire culture. In this way, both authors aimed to retain the synchronistic perspective, as the only possible way of writing the universal history of a world that is growing bigger and more complex by the day.

As it turns out, both Gatterer and Schlözer were fighting a losing battle. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the era of the synchronistic tables was coming to an end. The intellectual and graphic attempts to represent the multiplicity of cultures, narratives, and finally, historical times more generally, which is to say the paradigm of synchronism itself, was about to be replaced by a different set of philosophical ambitions: to synchronize this multiplicity of historical times. The entire aggregate of simultaneities and non-simultaneities were incorporated into one singular, linear, homogenous time of progress. Already in the 1770s, at the same time that Gatterer and Schlözer were producing their universal histories and synchronistic tables, Herder launched one of the most effective and long-lasting tropes of synchronization: the concept of Bildung, or in a less German idiom, “civilization” or “progress.”⁸⁴ In response to the Ungleichzeitigkeiten and the temporal and cultural multiplicities emerging in the eighteenth century, Herder came up with a way to reintegrate all mankind and to reunite all humans and all events in one single, homogenous and linear process, a process through which, in the end, all non-synchronicities would
be erased and transcended.\textsuperscript{85} By the middle of the 19th century this view of history would reach its completion in the philosophical works of G. W. F. Hegel as well as, at least in part, in the historical works of German historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen.\textsuperscript{86}

The magnitude of what was at stake in this watershed moment in the Western historiographical tradition can be understood through the vehemence with which Herder attacked Schlözer in his review of \textit{Vorstellung seiner Universalgeschichte}, published in \textit{Frankfurter gelehrte Zeitung} in 1772, the same year as the book. To Herder, the synchronistic table, indispensable to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century universal history, was nothing but a “toy” and, even worse, “a show-off of unknown and merely conspicuous things,” completely without “the strong chain of what is naturally true.”\textsuperscript{87} He continues: “When one reads Semiramis and Dodona, Sicyon and the Kabirs, Abraham and Ninus, Jacob and Inachus, Cartaghe and Athalya, Boniface, Suintila and Moawiyah, Gutenberg, Babur, Iwan, Diaz, Ismael and Luther together—and then, at the same time, the many paragraphs of these combinations, one is led to believe that the author was more interested in playing than in aiding human memory.”\textsuperscript{88}

Herder scholars have explained the vehemence of this attack through biographical conjectures, arguing that the young theologian was encouraged to attack Schlözer by some of his friends or teachers.\textsuperscript{89} But there are at least a few indications that there is more to this text. First, Schlözer’s own reaction seemed already to point in this direction: he dedicated the entire second volume of his \textit{Vorstellung}, a book of another two hundred pages published the same year, to painstakingly refuting the young and still rather unknown theologian’s harsh criticism. Second, Herder penned the review of Schlözer at the same time that he began his first attempt to write a comprehensive philosophy of history, the long essay \textit{Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit}, which was completed and published in 1773, and in which he first launched his idea of \textit{Bildung} as a synchronizing trope for world history. For Herder, Schlözer was a prime example of the inability of contemporary historians to find what he referred to as “the One in history,” or “the one, big endpole,” and thus to answer the question of what “progress of mankind” really meant.\textsuperscript{90} Instead of aiding human memory, he loses himself in the synchronistic play of periods, names, events. In his response to Herder, Schlözer defended himself against the accusation that his \textit{Tabellier-Art}, “his way of producing tables,” was adapted from Johannes Buno’s much maligned emblematic method; he insisted that on the contrary his method is \textit{die Helwichsche, Schraderische, Köhlerische}, in other words,
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that it worked within the same canon of tables first listed, and then ultimately rejected by Gatterer.91

To the Herder scholar Robert Leventhal, the Schlözer-Herder debate constitutes “the springboard from which Herder would launch one of the most historically significant and enduring attacks on the unreflected linguistic and historical assumptions of historical theory” and thus give birth to historicism.92 In a similar vein, historian Daniel Fulda recognizes in Herder’s criticism of Schlözer examples of “epochal changes [Epochenubrüche] that eventually will lead to the emergence of modern German historiography.”93 In a less future-oriented and in this sense “modernist” view, however, according to which Herder’s work would be considered another attempt at synchronizing the world emerging out of the early modern genre of universal history and synchronistic tables, the most striking feature is the repudiation of synchronism, both as a historiographical practice and as a paradigm. In developing his Geschichtsphilosophie, Herder opted for a new strategy of synchronization, one in which the multiplicity of times distributed across the globe constituted a problem to be solved rather than a specific kind of knowledge, most accessible in the synchronistic table, its paradigmatic visual form.

Conclusion

Does the world have one time, or many? Does time pass according to one rhythm and one speed, accelerating or slowing down, but always in synchrony? Or, on the contrary, does the world contain a plurality and a multitude of times, distributed across global space—to the extent that not only different cultures, but also different parts of these cultures, from the most general to the most particular, from histories, memories, and identities, to practices and material objects, all have their own times? In the canon of Western modernity, the invention of absolute time, empty and mathematical, which has been attributed to Newton, was later deployed and diffused by increasingly more sophisticated chronological and political technologies, leading up to the establishment of a global temporal standard. Already in Newton’s time, however, the invention of absolute time was called into question by historians, philosophers, and naturalists who did not believe this was the answer to centuries of struggles with biblical, secular, and natural chronologies.

The challenge of understanding and working with multiple times is not, however, confined to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars in the humanities and social
The history of the present sciences, as well as economists, strategists, policy makers and others, still struggle to come up with viable models for analyzing, interpreting and intervening in a multi-temporal world. By no means only a theoretical problem, the irrepressible return of multiple times has wide-ranging political and social implications, made manifest in an entire vocabulary of delays, non-synchronicities, and accelerations. Consider phrases like “Europe at different speeds”; “more and less developed countries”; the now-obsolete “First, Second and Third World”; and “the time lags of climate change.” On the one hand, globalization has brought with it more complex and heterogeneous temporal relations, in which the global time of commerce, technology, and media constantly come into conflict with the different rhythms operating in diverse cultures and communities. On the other hand, the “deep times” of climate change, giving rise to the new chronological term “the Anthropocene,” challenges the limited temporal horizons of social relations and political decisions.94

In this essay I set out to identify and describe a perception shared by eighteenth- and twenty-first-century scholars alike: that historical events and processes do not take place in one time and one time only, but that they belong to different temporal frameworks, such as developments, processes, periods, plots, and narratives. In response to this perception historians in the eighteenth century found ways of conceptualizing, representing, and organizing multiple historical times, by means of visual forms of representation and knowledge production. Today, at a moment when globalization has created a need for writing history in new ways, with not one, but several points of view located across the globe, and hence, with not one, but multiple temporal frameworks, there are good reasons to revisit these eighteenth-century ambitions and practices of representing the world as synchronistic, without necessarily synchronizing it. In this way the commercial practice of synchronization, by which UPS and other global companies create increasingly larger markets for their products by unifying their temporal orders, can be countered by the historiographical practice of synchronism, by which these temporal orders are displayed in their plurality and heterogeneity, stretching backwards into the past and forwards into the future.

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**Notes**

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. This connection between the practices and technologies of measuring and ordering time and the writing of history is recently made by Lynn Hunt in her lucid work, *Measuring Time, Making History* (2008).
8. John Harvey, *A Discoursiae Problem Concerning Prophesies, how far they are to be Valued, or Credited, according to the surest rules, and directions in Diuinitie, Philosophie, Astrologie, and other learning* (1688), 22.
9. Thomas Blount, *Glossographia; or A Dictionary Interpreting all such Hard Words of Whatsoever Language, now used in our refined English Tongues*, 2nd ed. (1656; repr., 1661), 90–91.
3. Ibid., 29–32.
5. Timothy Brook, “Time and Global History”, Globalizations 6, no. 3 (2009), 379.
6. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 17.
22. Iggers et al., A Global History, 73–75.
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42. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 105.
46. Ibid., 72–76.
48. This gave rise to the discipline of _computus_, for example in the works of Bede _On the Nature of Things and On Times_, trans., notes, Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis (2010).
53. Grafton and Rosenberg, _Cartographies of Time_, 76.
54. Steiner, _Die Ordnung der Geschichte_. 152.
55. Ibid., 149–151.
56. Ibid., 154–155.
57. Ibid., 155.
60. Arentz, _Tabeller over Universal-historien_, table 1, 34.
61. For a discussion of how narrativity systematically fails to deal with temporal multiplicity, also in the practices of the natural sciences, see Geoffrey Bowker, “All Together Now: Synchronization, Speed, and the Failure of Narrativity,” _History & Theory_ 53 (December 2014).
63. Gatterer, _Ahrß der Universalhistorie_, 2.
64. Johann Christoph Gatterer, _Einleitung in die synchronistische Universalhistorie, zur Erläuterung seiner synchronistischen Tabellen_ (1771), part II, 13.
65. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 301–306.
70. Ibid., 107–109.
76. Grafton and Rosenberg, *Cartographies of Time*, 146.
79. Ibid., 97.
80. Ibid., for example 51–58.
81. Ibid., 88–95.
82. Ibid., 319.
90. Herder, Review of Schlözer, d.