**Georg von MAYR**
b. 12 February 1841 - d. 6 September 1925

**Summary**. G. von Mayr was the foremost representative of German administrative and bureaucratic statistics. He was hostile to the use of the probability calculus and mathematics generally in the resolution of statistical questions.

Georg von Mayr was born at Würzburg in Franconia, Germany, where his father Aloys (1807-1890) was a Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy. However, Georg pursued his studies in law and political science in Munich.

In 1864, he was appointed to the Bavarian Statistical Bureau where he acted as assistant to his professor and future father-in-law Friedrich B.W. von Hermann (1795-1868), and worked on a thesis in criminal statistics which he defended in 1865. Von Mayr received his Habilitation from the Faculty of Statistics of the University of Munich in 1866, and was appointed Privatdozent before being named Professor Extraordinarius in 1868. After Hermann's death, von Mayr directed the Statistical Bureau from 1869 to 1879. This was the decade in which the constitution and structure of Bismarck's Imperial State (Reich) took shape. Statistics was an essential instrument in this structure, and von Mayr found himself at the forefront of its developments. He became known as the advocate of reforms both in the organization and the scientific activity of the Statistical Bureau, first in Bavaria and later in the Reich. He undertook the centralization of statistical services, and in 1869 founded a journal (*Zeitschrift des Königlich Bayerischen Statistischen Büros*) which enabled census material to be published, as well describing activities of the Bureau itself. A very active member of the Commission for the Preparation of Imperial Statistics (Reichskommission zur Vorbereitung der Reichsstatistik), he refused the attractive offer of the directorship of the Imperial Statistical Service (Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt), preferring to remain in Bavaria.

Nevertheless, in 1872, as counsellor to the Ministry of the Interior and again in 1879 as Commissioner for the Bundesrat, he was consulted on some thorny questions of customs policy. Ennobled in 1879, he left Munich (München) for the duties of under-secretary of Finances in Strasbourg (Strasburg), where he vigorously defended the economic policy of Bismarck. Following the Reichstag elections of 1887, which resulted in his finding himself in a minority, he resigned his ministerial duties and once again devoted

himself to academic scientific activity.

After a brief stay at the University of Strasburg, he returned to Munich in 1898 to the Chair of Political Economy, Financial Sciences and Statistics. In 1913-14 he acceded to the position of Rector.

In 1890, while still in Alsace, he had founded the journal *Allgemeines statistisches Archiv*, which he edited until 1907. The journal was then suspended for a time, and resumed publication only in 1914, when von Mayr handed over the editorship to Friedrich Zahn (1869-1944) while continuing to support the journal with his articles. In addition, he became the head of the German Statistical Society (Deutsche statistische Gesellschaft) created in Dresden in 1911, of which the *Allgemeines statistisches Archiv* became the organ. G. von Mayr thus took part in the foundation and the activities of the great statistical institutions: he was a member of the International Statistical Institute (ISI) from the time of its creation in 1885, becoming its Vice-president from 1911 to 1923. He was President of the German section, and also Vice-President of the Comité permanent international des Congrès des Assurances sociales.

In 1911, he added an actuarial component to the Seminar in Statistics which he had founded at the University of Munich. This new Seminar fulfilled the role of providing an actuarial diploma for candidates having either a mathematical or administrative background.

After becoming Emeritus in 1920, von Mayr remained very active within the University of Munich. He died at his home in Tutzing, near the Starnberger See.

G. von Mayr's career, which followed the archetype of the German professor-bureaucrat, testifies to the importance of the role he played in the history of administrative statistics, both nationally and internationally. As a result of his experience as Head of Bavarian statistics, von Mayr was able to extend and impose a rigorous reforming and centralizing methodology on the other statistical bureaux which had arisen in the different German provinces during the 19th century. All the ideas involved were debated in the early congresses of the ISI, where problems of the unification of statistical methodology and practice were raised.

Research on statistical methods was logically underpinned by von Mayr's conception of statistics as an autonomous discipline, with its own methods and objectives. He made an active contribution to disentangling descriptive statistics from the confused environment where political economy, geography, sociology and other disciplines were all mixed in together, and was one of the

most enthusiastic promoters of extended descriptive statistics forming "an exact science of mass social phenomena". Thus at the ISI Congress of 1889 in Paris, von Mayr elaborated his point of view on the monographic method which had first appeared in 1829, and was later codified in 1856 by the French polytechnician F. Le Play. Von Mayr was above all critical of the status given to "type" in social phenomena. Under his guidance, long descriptive studies were carried out in economic, criminal, social, professional and demographic statistics; such studies, he maintained, essential for disengaging "typical" phenomenona from any "law of social life".

It is therefore not surprising that von Mayr remained a tireless opponent of Quetelet's (q.v.) views throughout his life. His aversion to "the average man" extended to a more general distrust of statistical methods based on a priori mathematical arguments. He thus argued against the use of "representative methods" (sample surveys) invented by the Norwegian N.A. Kiaer (q.v.) and discussed in the ISI Congresses towards the end of the century. In the same way, he always expressed the greatest reservations about the use of mathematical methods in statistics, as well as about Lexis' (q.v.) concept of basing mathematical statistics (which Lexis referred to as "analytical statistics" by analogy with mechanics) on the calculus of probabilities. Nevertheless, he counted among his students and assistants in the Seminar at the University of Munich, Friedrich Böhm and Emil Julius Gumbel (q.v.), whose works in actuarial science and statistics were of a very mathematical nature.

One cannot deny that his scepticism about mathematical statistics had ill effects on the development of statistics in Germany up to the middle of the twentieth century. His heirs, proud holders of the German tradition of administrative statistics, which was gradually ossified by a conservatism tinged with imperial nostalgia (a widespread characteristic of the German administrative apparatus after 1918), contributed to cutting German science off from the striking development of mathematical statistics in English-speaking countries at the same time. This was the essence of Paul Flaskämper's judgment of 1944 on von Mayr, even though he was called the "Altmeister der deutschen Statistik" .

It should however be noted that von Mayr's renown lasted until World War 2 in those parts of Europe influenced by German culture. This was the case of Hungary and Italy, and more surprisingly the USSR. The Russian translation of his treatise of 1877, carried out in 1887 by Romanov under the direction of the great statistician A.V. Chuprov (the father of A.A.Chuprov,

q.v.), recorded his fierce opposition to Quetelet. This work was read by Soviet scientists as that of a capitalist statistician par excellence, and made the Bismarckian von Mayr one of the main methodological references of statisticians in the Soviet administration. This is not the least of history's jokes!

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