



Research Project

**Positivist Worldmaking.**

**Universal Science and Global Society in the Age of Empire**

**Dr. Franz L. Fillafer**

Abstract:

My study seeks to recover the global epistemic culture positivism spawned in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Auguste Comte founded positivism to grasp and mould the world the French Revolution had produced. To Comte the Revolution had proved the futility of metaphysics that blunted scientific enquiry, while creating society as a power that made history. Departing from this premise, Comte designed positivism as a panacea, as a self-enlightenment of science that would permit its practitioners to understand society while recognising the social foundations of science. Comte, who lived hermit-like in his Parisian apartment on the Rue-Monsieur-le Prince, has been described as a self-proclaimed, realmless king and spendthrift system-builder who dreamt of positivism's fortunes far afield, but cut little ice with the world he desired to reform. Instead my book demonstrates the global formative power of Comte's positivism whose devotees jostled in Ottoman mosques, Brazilian salons, in the London India office, as well as in the Tokyo braintrusts of the Meiji reformers. Comte's adherents chastised imperialism and colonialism; they appreciated the cultural and religious diversity of the planet, even privileged non-European cultures as they had avoided the fallacies of the West, making them a fertile soil for positivism. Positivists admired Islam and devised a far-flung Religion of Humanity that combined Jacobin social techniques like calendars, rites, and rituals with a secular, intercultural eschatology. My book compares Comte's worldmaking venture with the parallel efforts of his rivals, namely of John Stuart's Mill adherents, as well as of Marxists and historicists. It demonstrates that Comtean positivists' conceptualizing of humanity as a collective subject was not only unique in this setup, but that it entailed a slew of crucial consequences: Humanity came to supplant "nature" as the chief source of the laws

scientists unravelled. By unravelling the human production of these laws as local, milieu-based contrivances, the positivist epistemology became grist to the mill of anticolonial emancipators and it also prepared the ground for 20<sup>th</sup> century French sociology of knowledge (Bachelard, Canguilhem). Comte's post-Revolutionary cult of theory replaced Europe-centred world culture with a variegated humanity, while serving as the germ of a scientific practice that creatively questioned its knowledge claims and evidence-production. By interweaving these strands of enquiry, my book rediscovers positivism as one of modernity's cardinal modes of self-reflection.

#### Biographical Note:

Franz L. Fillafer is a historian of Europe in its global entanglements whose research has chiefly focused on the Enlightenment and its posterities, as well as on the Habsburg Empire and its successor states. His most recent work is devoted to nineteenth-century forms of worldmaking like positivism and historicism that unfolded at the apogee of empire as well as to political Jansenism in its global settings. After having held positions at the University of Cambridge, UCL London, the University of Konstanz and the European University Institute in Florence, he joined the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 2018 as a researcher at the Institute of Culture Studies.

#### Selected Recent Publications:

Aufklärung habsburgisch. Staatsbildung, Wissenskultur und Geschichtspolitik in Zentraleuropa 1750-1850, 2. Aufl., Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022.

Positivismus – Evergreen oder Ladenhüter? Zur Theoriepolitik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, in: *Einheit oder Vielheit? Über Methode und Gegenstand in der Geschichte und Philosophie der Wissenschaft* (Forschung und Gesellschaft 23) (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2023), 93–110.

Wozu noch österreichische Geschichte? *Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur* 66:4 (413) (2022), 306–314.

Böhmen interimperial. Die böhmische Jurisprudenz als Drehscheibe der zentraleuropäischen Wissenszirkulation (17. bis 20. Jhdt.), *Beiträge zur Rechtsgeschichte Österreichs* 12:2 (2022), 163–180.

Interactive Antiquities: A Relational History, in: Ines Peper, Thomas Wallnig (Hg.), *Central European Pasts: Old and New in the Intellectual Culture of Habsburg Europe, 1700–1750*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2022, 565–606.

Imperial Diversity, Fractured Sovereignty, and Legal Universals: Hans Kelsen and Eugen Ehrlich in their Habsburg Context, in: *Modern Intellectual History* 19:2 (2022), 421–443.

The Grotesque and the French Revolution, in: Stefan Hulfeld, Rudi Risatti, Andrea Sommer-Mathis (Hg.), *Grotesk! Ungeheure Künste und ihre Wiederkehr*, Wien: Hollitzer 2022, 215–237.

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