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 20th 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:


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