i. Positivism as creed: diversions from the legacy

In this chapter I shall identify some pervasive aspects of modern thought that, I argue, ultimately derive from positivism as Comte enunciated it and from the developments in positivism that Littré set down. These are what I define collectively as the legacy of positivism. I do not claim that the aspects of thought that I identify are the only long-term influences of positivism on modern thought, but I draw attention to those influences that are crucial to present-day philosophical and political debates. This will be the subject of the next and subsequent sections.

In the present section I consider some viewpoints that have become associated with positivism, but that I do not include within the legacy of positivism. It is nonetheless important to consider them, because they have come to define the attitudes of many people towards positivism, and as a result can divert attention from its legacy in modern thought. These viewpoints largely arise from conscious attempts to evaluate Comte’s works as he in fact intended them to be evaluated: as a creed or manifesto for organizing ideas about society and for social reorganization itself. A few of these attempts have concluded in trying to adopt some adapted version of Comte’s scheme for social reorganization. Others have concluded in rejecting his scheme in favour of some other scheme or no particular scheme at all. However, the outcome in every case has been to establish a particular view of positivism in some socio-political context.

The attempts to adopt a variant of Comte’s scheme are of historical interest, and of course they may have significant present-day consequences – as may any notable historical events or processes. Although
I briefly discuss the most widely influential of these attempts below, the inevitable consequences of these and other such historical events are not my main subject. They do not fall within what I define as the legacy of positivism in modern thought. This legacy is not a consequence, direct or indirect, of consciously adopting positivism as a way of organizing thoughts or life. Rather, it is the substance of certain positivist ideas as they have become pervasively woven into modern thought, whether we are mindful of them or not.

As I have indicated, the attitudes towards positivism that I review in this section are generally concerned exclusively with Comte’s work, although in some cases they have referred also to Mill. They largely reject positivism as they perceive it, and indeed generally express antipathy against it. Admittedly, once one fully comprehends Comte’s scheme for social reorganization, as I discussed it in Chapter 3, there is certainly good reason for antipathy against many aspects of it. Mill’s concern to maintain a ‘conspiracy of silence’ regarding Comte’s socio-political scheme in order to protect positivism as a philosophy was, as I discussed in Chapter 5, politically astute in this regard. But ironically, as I discuss below, in some cases antipathy against Comte’s scheme has in fact stemmed from failure to comprehend it fully.

However, it will in any event become clear that there is only a limited intersection between the aspects of Comte’s scheme that have evoked antipathy and what I shall define as the legacy of positivism. Consequently, existing critiques of Comte’s scheme and established attitudes towards positivism largely turn out to be irrelevant to the legacy of positivism in modern thought.

Moreover, some of the most important facets of the legacy of positivism derive not directly from Comte’s work but through the ideas that Littré set down. I am not aware that any attention has been focused on the influence of these ideas. Consequently, the modes of thought to which they have given rise have largely remained unexamined. As I discuss in later sections, these modes of thought and some associated views on social organization are problematic in a number of ways, and call for further critique.

Adverse attitudes to Comte’s positivism have a long history. Recall Mill’s observation that many people whose mode of thought could fairly be described as positivist preferred not to be so described.¹ In Mill’s time and through to around the end of the nineteenth century, we can roughly distinguish three kinds of reasons for this attitude: philosophical, political and religious. The philosophical reasons largely focused on Comte’s obsession with systematization, which, as I discussed in