



**HAL**  
open science

## Contesting the public sphere: ministry, metropolis, and province in France (1830-80)

Robert Fox

► **To cite this version:**

Robert Fox. Contesting the public sphere: ministry, metropolis, and province in France (1830-80). *Revue de la Maison Française d'Oxford*, 2003, Centre and periphery revisited. The structures of European science, 1750-1914, 1 (2), pp.159-174. hal-01896957

**HAL Id: hal-01896957**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01896957>**

Submitted on 19 Oct 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **CONTESTING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: MINISTRY, METROPOLIS, AND PROVINCE IN FRANCE (1830-80)**

---

**Robert Fox**

In making an obvious reference to Jürgen Habermas in my title, I do not want to signal either criticism or endorsement of Habermas's book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. I seek simply to establish one of that book's core notions as a starting-point for my paper. The core notion is that by the end of the eighteenth century a new public sphere of literate culture, what Habermas identifies as a bourgeois sphere, had come to exist throughout western Europe. This sphere was characterized by rational argument rather than the age-old passive acceptance of political and intellectual authority. It was a sphere of participatory culture, one that quickly acquired its institutional structures of learned societies, lectures, museums, and, since it was a public sphere of readers, libraries and other settings for the distribution and consumption of the printed word.

The meaning of "bourgeois" (*bürgerlich* in the original) in this context has been gnawed at relentlessly since Habermas's book first appeared in 1962, or at least since it was translated, tardily, into English in 1989.<sup>1</sup> From that chewing over, I want to retain just one thought. The thought, developed in Tim Blanning's *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, is that the supposedly bourgeois public sphere was anything but unified and that its denizens cannot be delimited by any single form of class identity.<sup>2</sup> It was a space invested not only by a modern-minded cosmopolitan bourgeoisie but also by political conservatives, proto-nationalists of a distinctly chauvinist stamp, and members of the nobility and of the Church. As Blanning puts it, the public sphere of late-eighteenth-century culture was more of a Noah's Ark than a merchantman.<sup>3</sup> It was an arena of contention as much as it was of consensus.

Whereupon I jump straight to the nineteenth century, specifically to the half century between 1830 and 1880 that I have flagged in my title. In

---

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen HABERMAS, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 1989; translated (by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence) from HABERMAS, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Neuwied, Berlin, Luchterhand, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> T.C.W. BLANNING, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture. Old Regime Europe 1660–1789*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

this period, the public sphere was fuller and more diverse than ever. In France as elsewhere, it was fuller of botanical gardens (usually under municipal control), fuller of public libraries, art galleries, and museums of natural history (most of them enriched with goods confiscated from *émigrés* and the clergy), and fuller of lectures and lecturers (sponsored, again for the most part, by municipal authorities). This was the world of Félix Pouchet, for more than forty years director of the Museum of Natural History in Rouen and the holder of a municipal chair of natural history, who was later to become far better known as the author of an immensely successful work of popular science, *L'Univers*, and as Pasteur's adversary on the question of spontaneous generation.

The context for this paper, therefore, is a sphere that by the beginning of the July Monarchy had become significantly more crowded than it had been in the late eighteenth century, more crowded too than it had been only a decade before under the Bourbon Restoration. The reasons for this change are many. The questioning of privilege, the move of wealth and cultural capital from private hands to public ownership, and the blows to an already fragile world of over-blown provincial academies all played their part. But even these powerful forces would have had less impact had it not been for the growth of reading, which was itself stimulated by rising rates of literacy (up to 95 per cent by the end of the nineteenth century), a slackening of censorship, and advances in the techniques of paper-making and printing. The touchstone of what had occurred was the dramatic increase in the production of books and periodicals that marked the period from about 1840 until the end of the century.<sup>4</sup>

In this increase, science was as much a beneficiary as were other forms of literate culture. Between the 1830s, when the austere weekly *Écho du monde savant* offered simple, deferential reports of the debates and publications of Parisian academicians and other leaders of French intellectual life, and the 1860s, when popular scientific journalists such as Victor Meunier, Louis Figuier, and the abbé Moigno wrote voluminously and often critically on the productions of *la science officielle*, there occurred

---

<sup>4</sup> The evidence of this increase appears in many of the contributions to Roger CHARTIER and Henri-Jean MARTIN (eds), *Histoire de l'édition française. III. Le temps des éditeurs. Du romantisme à la Belle Époque*, Paris, Promodis, 1985, especially those by Maurice Crubellier ("L'élargissement du public"), Frédéric Barbier ("Une production multipliée"), and Valérie Tesnière ("L'édition universitaire"), pp. 25–45, 103–21, and 217–27.

nothing less than a revolution.<sup>5</sup> Some revelled in this opening up of the public sphere. The astronomer François Arago, for example, lectured with panache and obvious satisfaction to huge audiences at the Paris Observatory and extended his appeal through the printed word: his four-volume *Astronomie populaire* (1854–7) enjoyed a success heightened by a bright style and a relatively low cost.<sup>6</sup> Others, however, were less happy with what was afoot. The ageing Jean-Baptiste Biot never reconciled himself to what he saw as the trivialization that followed, as he saw it, from the opening of the once closed meetings of the Académie Royale des Sciences to journalists and the publication of the proceedings in the weekly *Comptes rendus hebdomadaires des séances de l'Académie des Sciences*. Looking back in 1858 to the birth of these changes over twenty years earlier, Biot deplored the playing to the gallery of which some of his colleagues (not least among them Arago) had become past-masters.

*The Académie [he wrote] has become a kind of free clearing-house for announcements, open indiscriminately to anyone and attended by a captive audience. As a result of this invasion by outsiders, scientific discussions among the members of the Académie have become rare and hard to conduct since all too often they are fired by feelings of personal animosity or by a desire to gain the attention of the crowd of onlookers, rather than by a true love of science or by any feeling of a need to exchange information.*<sup>7</sup>

Deplorable it may have been for someone of Biot's conservative disposition, but, for better or worse, the genie was out of the bottle. The *savants* of the Académie, the Sorbonne, and the great research institutions of the capital remained a powerful seat of authority, but they were no longer immune to outside comment.

The lowering of the walls that had separated the highest reaches of science from the public gaze had its parallels in the more modest world of the *sociétés savantes*, the majority of them in the provinces, that proliferated

---

<sup>5</sup> For a good survey of popular science writing in nineteenth-century France, see Bruno BÉGUET (ed.), *La science pour tous. Sur la vulgarisation scientifique en France de 1850 à 1914*, Paris, Bibliothèque du Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, 1990. More detailed studies are to be found in Yves COHEN and Jean-Marc DROUIN (eds), *Les Amateurs de sciences et de techniques*, Paris, Centre de Recherche en Histoire des Sciences et des Techniques (CSI-CNRS) [Cahiers d'histoire & de philosophie des sciences, new series, n° 27], 1989, and Bernadette BENSAUDE-VINCENT (ed.), *Science pour tous*, Special issue of *Romantisme. Revue du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, n° 65, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Dominique-François-Jean ARAGO, *Astronomie populaire*, ed. J.-A. Barral, 4 vols., Paris and Leipzig, 1854–1857.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Baptiste BIOT, *Mélanges scientifiques et littéraires*, 3 vols., Paris, vol. 2, p. 292.

from the 1830s. These societies were very different from the 35 provincial academies that existed on the eve of the Revolution or the ten or so that had struggled back into existence (following their closure during the Terror) by 1820. The academies were closed, on the model of the national academies, with memberships of 30 or 40 made up of a cross-section of local *notables*: senior government officials, noblemen with cultural interests, senior clergy, and socially well integrated doctors and teachers.<sup>8</sup> The new societies, on the other hand, were open to anyone willing to pay the annual subscription of, typically, between 10 and 40 francs. This does not mean that the societies were open to *all*; far from it. 20 francs corresponded to £1, roughly the weekly wage of a skilled workman (or, for comparison, the daily income of a senior university professor). The point I want to underline, however, concerns not the impediments to entry into the burgeoning public sphere of new societies and cheaper, more accessible forms of cultural engagement and consumption but rather the growing permeability of that sphere. It was a permeability that gave Flaubert's pompous pharmacist, Homais, the opportunity of sporting the tag of "membre de plusieurs sociétés savantes", a mark of distinction to which a man of such parochial eminence could not have aspired before 1830.<sup>9</sup>

The trends I have outlined reflect changes that, over a period of no more than half a century, beginning in the 1820s, brought an engagement with science and learned culture within the grasp of an unprecedentedly large proportion of the population. As one indicator, my estimate is that the 655 *sociétés savantes* (about 80 per cent of them in the provinces) that were listed in an exhaustive official survey in 1886 had, between them, almost

---

<sup>8</sup> For a classic study of the academies and other *sociétés savantes* of the Ancien Régime, see Daniel ROCHE, *Le siècle des lumières en province. Académies et académiciens en province, 1680–1789*, 2 vols., Paris, Mouton, 1978. The nineteenth-century societies are treated in Jean-Pierre CHALINE, *Socialibilité et érudition. Les sociétés savantes en France, XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Éditions du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 1995, and in numerous contributions to two volumes of papers, one subtitled *Colloque interdisciplinaire sur les sociétés savantes*, the other *Les sociétés savantes. Leur histoire*, published as parts of *Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques. Actes du 100<sup>e</sup> Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes (Paris, 1975)*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 1976. See also Robert FOX, "The savant confronts his peers: scientific societies in France, 1815–1914", in Robert FOX and George WEISZ (eds), *The Organization of Science and Technology in France, 1808–1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, and Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1980, 241–82, and Robert FOX, "Learning, politics, and polite culture in provincial France: the sociétés savantes in the nineteenth century", *Historical reflections/Réflexions historiques*, vol. 7, 1980, pp. 543–64.

<sup>9</sup> Gustave FLAUBERT, *Madame Bovary* (1856). Homais's claim to membership of several societies, punctured by Flaubert's comment that he was in reality a member of only one, appears in the final chapter of the book (troisième partie, ch. 11).

200,000 members.<sup>10</sup> At a time when the country's population stood at 38 million, the proportion was small. But I still advance it as evidence of the boom in the production and consumption of learned culture that had come to pervade French bourgeois life by the early years of the Third Republic. Much remains to be said, of course, about the intellectual profile of the boom, which was extremely broad. Regional history, antiquities, and agriculture, in fact, were the most prominent interests, with literature and music reasonably well represented and geography coming in strongly from about 1880, in the age of colonial expansion. In the sciences, local interests always predominated over cutting-edge theorizing; inventories of flora and insect-life were both typical and often well done, and, much as in Britain at the time, field clubs enjoyed a growing popularity in the later part of the century.

As an indicator of the extent of both the demand for literate culture and the competence of men throughout France able to feed the demand, no evidence speaks more eloquently than the accumulation of 15,000 volumes of society memoirs and other publications that are recorded in the 1886 survey, a number that was said to be growing at the rate of 500 a year.<sup>11</sup> This was certainly not a country in which the breath of intellectual life in the provinces had been stifled by the incubus of Paris. Mid-nineteenth-century France, in fact, looks not so very different from Britain in the same period. When the British Association for the Advancement of Science moved from provincial town to provincial town, it could draw everywhere on a hard core of local devotees and organizers. But so too in France, any sizeable town would have its authority on local natural history. Epinal could boast the doctor Jean-Baptiste Mougeot, the greatest of all experts on the flora of the Vosges; Auxerre had Gustave Cotteau, a lawyer recognized as a national authority on echinoids; and in Clermont-Ferrand, there was the naturalist and pharmacist Henri Lecoq, the guide to many visitors to the Auvergne, among them Charles Lyell and Roderick Murchison in 1828 and Hugh Strickland in 1835.<sup>12</sup>

On the significance of these provincial devotees, it must be stressed that at least some of the most competent of them had national reputations, not least among disciplinary leaders in Paris, as Dorinda Outram has shown

---

<sup>10</sup> Eugène LEFÈVRE-PONTALIS, *Bibliographie générale des sociétés savantes de la France*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1887. The survey was conducted by Lefèvre-Pontalis under the auspices of the Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>12</sup> Antoine VERNIÈRE, "Les voyageurs et les naturalistes dans l'Auvergne et le Velay", *Revue d'Auvergne*, vol. 17, 1900, pp. 270–92.

with regard to Georges Cuvier;<sup>13</sup> in this respect, they can be seen as conduits in the passage of local knowledge from periphery to centre. For my present purpose, however, the devotees and those who consumed their work or fed them with the respect they enjoyed in and sometimes beyond their various regions had a different significance. The periphery of Mougéot, Cotteau, and Lecoq, as I shall argue, can be read for more than its contribution to the stock of scientific knowledge. The perspectives I explore here touch rather on its relations with a particular facet of the centre, one defined not by the Académie des Sciences and the other national academies that composed the Institut de France but by the quite different and often competing centre located in the Ministry of Public Instruction.

The Ministry was a new foundation, created as an independent entity in 1832 to administer the state's provision for secondary and higher education (primary education being largely opened to independent initiative in 1833 in what conservative clerical interests regarded as a triumph). Throughout the period I discuss, the first half-century of its existence, ministers kept a watchful eye on areas of provincial intellectual life that impinged or risked impinging on their domain. The watchfulness was part and parcel of an overriding concern to promote the interests of their own institutions, including the network of faculties of science, letters, law, and medicine and lower-level 'preparatory' schools for medicine and pharmacy and for science and letters that by 1870 delivered higher education in almost thirty towns throughout France and provided the examiners for the all-important sanction of secondary education, the *baccalauréat*. It is easy, too easy, to suppose that the consolidation and expansion of the faculties, with their panoply of professors (60 of them in the ten provincial faculties of science in 1848), would quickly and quite straightforwardly have reduced the indigenous communities of provincial *savants* and *érudits* to the status of minor adjuncts of the nation's provision of professional academic expertise. That, in fact, is how Ministers of Public Instruction during the July Monarchy and on through the Second Empire perceived, or idealized, their relations with the periphery. But the reality, as I should wish to argue, was more complex. By the 1880s, the Ministry had indeed imposed its authority, at least at the institutional level. But the *modus vivendi* by which the *sociétés savantes* of the Third Republic accepted a measure of accountability to the Ministry in return for a modest level of recognition and

---

<sup>13</sup> Dorinda OUTRAM, *Georges Cuvier. Vocation, Science and Authority in Post-Revolutionary France*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984. The point is reinforced by the profile of Cuvier's correspondence, as inventoried in Dorinda OUTRAM (ed.), *The Letters of Georges Cuvier. A Summary Calendar of Manuscript and Printed Materials preserved in Europe, the United States of America, and Australia*, Chalfont St Giles, British Society for the History of Science, 1980; see especially Outram's comment on p. 5.

central support was not easily achieved. It came only after several decades of tension between ministerial interventionism and the ideals of a provincial culture of learning wedded to a degree of independence that repeatedly spilled over into suspicion, even hostility, towards the centre.

The most deeply rooted explanation for the attention that ministers paid to provincial science and learning lies in the precariousness of the social compact that had raised the bourgeoisie and bourgeois values to the status they enjoyed after 1830. It remained an open question in the 1830s whether *la France bourgeoise* (in Charles Morazé's phrase<sup>14</sup>) was to assimilate to the old hierarchies, by allying itself with the remnants of the nobility or the Church, or whether it was to identify, in its allegiances and ambitions, with the resolutely secular national authorities of which the new Ministry of Public Instruction was an exemplar. The question remained most glaringly open with regard to the Church, as present as ever in the public sphere of culture and still battling to extend its control, especially over education. The conflict between Church and state was conducted on a national scale, but it was in the provinces that battle was joined most fiercely. Here, on what the Ministry saw as the periphery of the nation's intellectual life, the clergy and their overwhelmingly conservative lay sympathizers could speak more directly and more persuasively to local audiences than ministerial officials were able to do through the heavy mechanism of their administrative circulars and centrally appointed representatives, especially the departmental prefects and the rectors of the regional academies through whom the Ministry's provision for education was delivered to the remotest parts of the country.

In pursuit of its ideal of control and centralization, the Ministry of Public Instruction between 1830 and 1880 adopted a consistent policy of seeking to demonstrate that a secular administration was as sound a guardian of morals and good order as the union of clerical and aristocratic dignitaries and other traditionally minded elements who had been the dominant force in the national Université Royale during the Bourbon Restoration. To bourgeois families mindful of the excesses to which secularism had led in the days of revolutionary license and anxious to preserve the status that the July Revolution of 1830 had won for them, the point was by no means self-evident. When challenged, as it was, relentlessly, by champions of provincial cultural autonomy who portrayed ministerial aspirations as the fruits of something approaching Jacobin tyranny, it could be made to appear positively weak.

---

<sup>14</sup> Charles MORAZÉ, *La France bourgeoise. XVIII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, A. Colin, 1946.

Of all those who articulated the provincial cause, none did so more vehemently than Arcisse de Caumont, an opinionated offspring of a minor aristocratic family who remained a thorn in the flesh of Ministers of Public Instruction of every political stripe from Guizot in the 1830s to Emile Segrès at the very end of the Second Empire. Caumont and the movement for intellectual decentralization that he led for over forty years could not have flourished but for the broadening of the public sphere to which I referred earlier. To a degree unmatched by any contemporary critic of the cultural tyranny of Paris, Caumont sustained the sphere as an arena of conflict in which professors of the Université de France, senior ministerial functionaries, and other representatives of “official” learned culture would have their place but only on condition that the sphere was open too to the complementary elite of independent *savants* and *érudits*.

Born in Bayeux in 1801, Caumont grew to maturity in one of the many families whose material hardship and loss of status during the Revolution had instilled a loathing of Jacobin rule.<sup>15</sup> His grandparents and father were all imprisoned during the Terror, and his grandfather died within months of his release, broken by the ordeal. While Caumont’s early years provided the emotional foundation of Catholic piety, local pride, and a profoundly conservative disposition, it was a move to Caen to study law in 1820 that fixed his vocation as a spokesman for the world of independent learning. The catalyst in what quickly crystallized as an abandonment of his plans for a legal career was Félix Lamouroux, a product no less characteristic than Caumont of a style of cultural engagement that was broad in its disciplinary range but firmly rooted in a prescribed regional context.<sup>16</sup> As director of Caen’s botanic garden, a captivating lecturer on natural history (from 1812 in the town’s faculty of science), and a marine biologist who had achieved the distinction of election as a corresponding member of the Académie des Sciences, Lamouroux drew Caumont into the sciences. He also eased Caumont’s passage into the cultural elite of

---

<sup>15</sup> On Caumont’s life, see Charles RICHELET, *Notice sur M. de Caumont*, Paris, 1853, reprinted with supplementary material on Caumont’s later years in *Annuaire de l’Institut des Provinces, des sociétés savantes et des congrès scientifiques*, 1869, pp. 358–400; RENAULT, “Notice biographique sur M. de Caumont”, *Annuaire des cinq départements de l’ancienne Normandie [Annuaire normand]*, 40<sup>e</sup> année, 1874, pp. 465–499; E. de ROBILLARD DE BEAUREPAIRE, “M. de Caumont. Sa vie et ses œuvres”, *Mémoires de l’Académie Nationale des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Caen*, 1874, pp. 324–401; Marcel BAUDOT, “Trente ans de coordination des sociétés savantes (1831–1861)”, in *Colloque interdisciplinaire sur les sociétés savantes*, cited in note 8, above, pp. 7–28.

<sup>16</sup> J.P. LAMOUREUX, “Notice biographique sur J.V.F. Lamouroux”, in J.V.F. Lamouroux, *Résumé d’un cours élémentaire de géographie physique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris, 1829, pp. vii–xxxii, and Jacques-Amand EUDES-DESLONGCHAMPS, “Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de M. J.F.V. Lamouroux”, *Mémoires de l’Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Caen*, 1828, pp. 357–83.

Normandy by securing his appointment as the first secretary of the Société Linnéenne du Calvados in 1823.

Inspired by his early contact with Lamouroux and still not yet thirty, Caumont could preen himself, by 1830, on being a proven polymath: a geologist, botanist, musician, antiquarian, and passionate advocate of Gothic architecture. A profitable marriage in 1832 to Aglaé-Louise Rioult de Villaunay, the daughter of an old Norman family, completed his armoury, and, with no need to work again for money, he began his crusade. His first steps were tentative. His legitimist sympathies made the bourgeois July Monarchy of 1830–48 less naturally congenial to him than the sixteen years of Bourbon rule under Louis XVIII and Charles X had been. But, as a realist, he adjusted easily enough to the new order, as he was later to do under the Second Empire. Above all, he had to adjust to dealing with a succession of Ministers of Public Instruction and ambitious educational administrators dedicated to the cause of order and efficiency. Initially, he achieved working relations, if never a complete meeting of minds, with ministerial authority. Viewed from Paris, Caumont's vituperation against revolutionary vandalism and Napoleonic neglect of France's medieval heritage appeared at first harmless enough. And even his assertion of the natural organic character of the political units of the Ancien Régime, as encapsulated in the Société des Antiquaires de Normandie and the Association Normande, both of which he was instrumental in founding (in 1824 and 1831 respectively), could be condoned as eccentric nostalgia. Under the July Monarchy and the Second Empire, almost as much as during the Bourbon Restoration, it did no harm, in governmental eyes, for French families to be reminded of the nation's pre-revolutionary past and the destruction that had stemmed from unbridled ignorance and the overturning of stabilizing traditional values.

So when Caumont launched his two most visible initiatives, the annual Congrès Scientifiques and Congrès Archéologiques, in 1833 and 1834 respectively (the latter under the auspices of the newly founded Société française pour la conservation des monuments historiques), the signs were favourable. At the first scientific congress, in Caen, the Minister of Public Instruction, François Guizot, even accepted the honorary presidency,<sup>17</sup> and for some years the meetings, lasting for a period of between a week and ten days, made their tranquil progress from provincial

---

<sup>17</sup> *Congrès scientifiques de France. Première session, tenue à Caen en juillet 1833*, Rouen, 1833, pp. 6–7. Guizot, who was a deputy for the department of the Calvados, did not attend, but he expressed his pleasure at being associated with the work of the congress.

town to provincial town without incurring ministerial displeasure.<sup>18</sup> The models for the congresses were the *Deutscher Naturforscher Versammlung* (founded in 1822) and the British Association for the Advancement of Science (founded in 1831). But Caumont's gatherings had an intellectual focus that extended significantly beyond science to embrace his other interests, in particular agriculture, local antiquities, and (at the risk of overlap with the *Congrès Archéologiques*) archaeology, as well as literature and the arts. His thumbprint was also evident in the sciences that were most prominent in the proceedings of the congresses: locally based and essentially descriptive work in botany, geology, and other areas of natural history, for example, was far more in evidence than mathematics and the physical sciences, on which papers were rare and became more so as the years passed. This orientation was of a piece with the profile of those who spoke in the various scientific sections, most of whom were men (never women) of independent means or engaged in professional careers, having no connexion with the *Université*. Where professors from a local faculty of science did attend a visiting congress, they would typically be those who had set down local roots rather than the birds of passage who saw a provincial posting as an unavoidable preliminary to a longed-for call to Paris. The case of Jacques-Amand Eudes-Deslongchamps, the "Cuvier normand", who remained a central figure in the scientific work of the congresses from 1833 until his death in 1867, illustrates the point well.<sup>19</sup> A close friend of Caumont, Eudes-Deslongchamps's loyalties were unswervingly to his native Normandy rather than to his ministerial paymasters, despite his appointments as professor of natural history and, later, zoology in the faculty of science of Caen.

It was some years before the tone of the *Congrès Scientifiques* and the gathering evidence of Caumont's aspirations to leadership of the periphery of French culture began to cause disquiet at the centre. One milestone in the change of heart within the Ministry was the establishment of the *Institut des Provinces* in 1839. Conceived by Caumont as an independent counterpart to the *Institut de France*, the *Institut des Provinces de France* was a body of 200 drawn from the elite of provincial intellectual life. The tone of the *Institut* was reflected in Eudes-Deslongchamps's many years of service as secretary and, even more revealingly, in the high proportion of senior clergy and the remnants of aristocracy who were elected to membership. An institution that gave prominence to such well-known enemies of the state's monopoly in education as Félix Dupanloup,

---

<sup>18</sup> The proceedings of the *Congrès Scientifiques* were published, like those of the *Congrès Archéologiques*, in substantial annual volumes, the last of them appearing in 1878.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandre BIGOT, "Jacques-Amand Eudes-Deslongchamps", *Bulletin de la Société Linnéenne de Normandie*, 9<sup>th</sup> ser., vol. 5, 1947.

Bishop of Orléans, and the leading Catholic layman, Charles, comte de Montalembert, represented a flagrant provocation to a resolutely secular Ministry, and gradually through the 1840s Caumont's campaign came to be seen for the challenge to central authority that it was.

By 1848, relations between Caumont and the Minister of Public Instruction, the comte de Salvandy, had deteriorated to a state of virtual warfare. The chief bone of contention now and on until the end of the Second Empire was the allegiance of the nation's *sociétés savantes*, which Caumont and successive Ministers each thought to be their own preserve. Whereas Caumont saw the societies as the local manifestations of the dispersed tide of independent cultural activity that he sought to encourage through his congresses and the Institut des Provinces, the consistent priorities within the Ministry of Public Instruction were the imposition of order and the integration of provincial intellectual endeavour as a sector within the broader national provision for education and research. Two Ministers under the Empire, Hippolyte Rouland (1851–6) and Gustave Rouland (1856–63), fought their corner with particular vigour. In 1854, a ministerially sponsored publication, soon transformed into the imposing *Revue des sociétés savantes*, killed the modest bibliographical bulletin that Caumont had launched three years earlier and overshadowed Caumont's *Annuaire de l'Institut des Provinces*, although the latter did manage to survive without interruption until 1880.

An even more powerful weapon in the ministerial struggle for control was the annual Congrès des Sociétés Savantes, which Rouland inaugurated in 1861 in the shrine of the academic "centre" of France, the Sorbonne. The congresses, held in Paris in the presence of the top brass of the Ministry and a hefty sprinkling of the leaders of scientific and scholarly life, offered the delegates of the nation's several hundred societies the gratification of material rewards for those whose outstanding publications merited prizes, while, for those who were not so honoured, there were the more meagre satisfactions of a mention in a report on the doings of their particular society or the simple glow that came with proximity to the great minds of the day. The occasions engendered a heady mix of social and intellectual well-being that contrasted, as the Minister fully intended, with the ostensibly similar but in reality far more humdrum gatherings of representatives of the provincial societies that Caumont inaugurated in 1848. What Caumont planned as annual Parisian complements to his provincial congresses continued to be held, usually in the premises of the

Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale, as late as 1880.<sup>20</sup> But they were sad affairs, unsupported by public funds, virtually unnoticed by any but the most committed devotees of provincial independence, and with only the occasional minor academic celebrity on display.

Caumont, of course, would have no significance as a spokesman for the periphery of French intellectual life if he had remained without an audience and support. But his tirelessness as a traveller and correspondent drew on and in turn fired networks of active devotees and sympathizers both in his native Normandy, which remained the bed-rock of his campaign, and throughout the country. His local constituency was distinguished by a remarkable flock of Norman naturalists and antiquarians who made up the early power-house of the movement: among the older generation Charles Duhérissier de Gerville in Valognes, Auguste Le Prévost in Rouen, and the abbé Gervais de la Rue in Caen, and among Caumont's contemporaries René Lenormand in Vire and Alphonse de Brébisson in Falaise. But the Normandy network was the tip of a movement that had its counterparts in virtually every region. Le Mans, with Charles Richelet, Caumont's closest ally in the cause of decentralization, and Thomas Cauvin, a former Oratorian and doyen of heraldic scholars, was especially fertile ground. But in Bordeaux (with the independent naturalist Charles Des Moulins), Marseille (with the doctor Pierre-Martin Roux), and Metz (with the lawyer Victor Simon), he found allies who were his match in ideological and intellectual commitment, if not in charisma or in the material resources they could muster. It was on such men that Caumont could count for the marshalling of the succession of local elites whose support was essential if a Congrès Scientifique was to be successful. The combination that Caumont achieved for the Grenoble congress in 1857 – of the Bishop of Grenoble as the president of the congress and celebrant of the customary inaugural mass, the president of the Académie delphinale as general secretary, and the mayor as the spokesman for a town flattered by the “insigne faveur” of being chosen for such a gathering – represented an ideal, though one that was by no means unusual.<sup>21</sup>

So it is the extent of Caumont's network, allied to the local *sociétés savantes* on whose vigour he depended, rather than the man himself that makes him an important focus for any study of the intellectual periphery of nineteenth-century France. That periphery was by no means thinly populated, as the ascending flow of published proceedings of academies and

---

<sup>20</sup> The proceedings of the Parisian congresses were reported each year in the *Annuaire de l'Institut des Provinces*.

<sup>21</sup> See the report on the opening session in *Congrès Scientifique de France. Vingt-quatrième session tenue à Grenoble au mois de septembre 1857*, 2 vols., Paris and Grenoble, 1858, vol. 1, pp. 41–88.

societies demonstrates. But the centre too was growing in size and vigour as existing faculties across France expanded and new ones were created, notably five in the sciences – at Clermont-Ferrand, Lille, Marseille, Nancy, and Poitiers – in 1854. In these circumstances, with the centre (in the form of energetic new professors, usually with primary allegiances to the Ministry) coming into ever closer contact with the periphery (of independent *savants*), the relations between the two realms had to be rethought; they could not remain those of straightforward, distant coexistence and mutual respect. When those who were appointed to chairs had existing local roots, such as Lecoq in Clermont-Ferrand, they merged easily enough with the independent world of learning and polite culture.<sup>22</sup> Inexorably, though, the tide of academic professionalization was running against the established local elites and edging formally qualified chairholders (almost invariably holding the doctorate by the 1850s) into positions of cultural authority.

A relentless stream of decrees and official circulars only sharpened the gathering sense of competition. Ministers of Public Instruction throughout the Second Empire (Fortoul, Rouland, and then, from 1863 to 1869, Victor Duruy) urged their professorial employees to integrate with their localities by supporting societies, lecturing to lay audiences, and, where appropriate, involving themselves in regional economic activities. The strategy of integration created a dilemma for Caumont and his fellow-champions of decentralization. They could hardly allow themselves to be seen to reject the overtures emerging from the faculties. Yet every overture came with its price of another small step towards assimilation to a dominant centre.

Fully conscious of the danger, Caumont sustained his campaign with undimmed commitment until a combination of the disruption of the Franco-Prussian war, the advent of the Third Republic, and his own illness in the early 1870s left his cause fatally weakened. Already, however, support was seeping away. Members of the provincial *sociétés savantes* who did not share the full force of Caumont's religious and political commitments were not necessarily deaf to the siren-calls of ministerial interest in their doings. And, crucially, those who did remain loyal to his ideals were ageing. After Caumont's death in 1873, a rump of sympathizers maintained the Congrès Scientifiques and the flagship *Annuaire de l'Institut des Provinces*. But by 1880, with the Republic firmly established and research and publication in

---

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Marc DROUIN and Robert FOX, "Corolles et crinolines : le mélange des genres dans l'œuvre d'Henri Lecoq (1802–1871)", in *Revue de synthèse*, 4<sup>th</sup> ser. n° 4 (1999), 581–99.

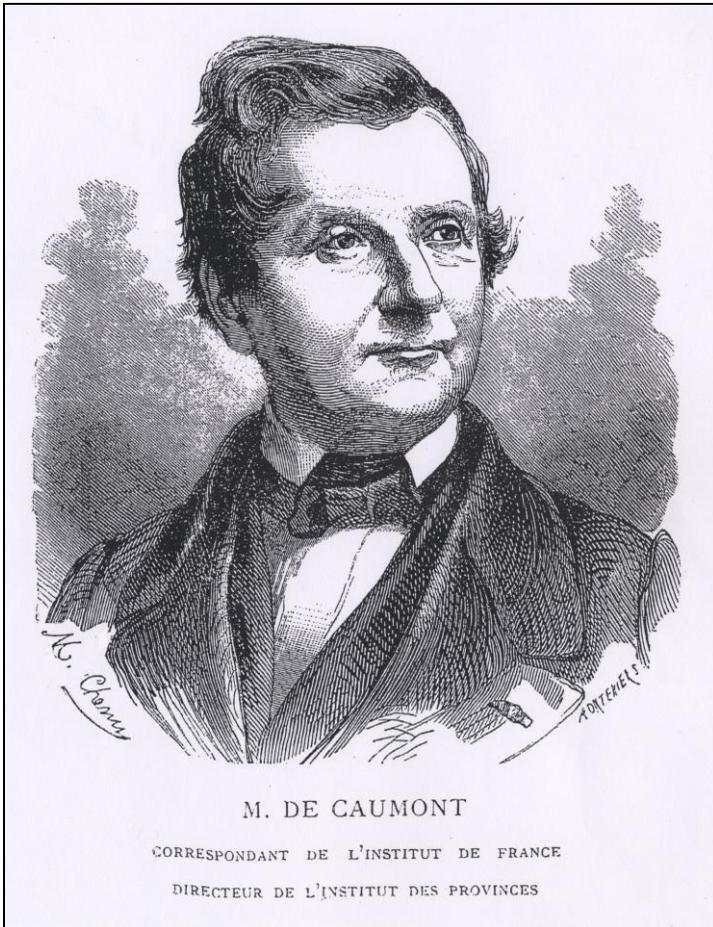
science, as in other university disciplines, receiving unprecedented levels of encouragement and material support in the faculties, the struggle was over.

It is at once significant and unsurprising that the demise of Caumont's campaign passed virtually unnoticed. Much of the work on the periphery continued as if nothing had happened. The publications of provincial antiquarians and archaeologists, in particular, remained plentiful, and the Congrès Archéologiques that had once formed a powerful wing of the struggle for decentralization perpetuated their annual provincial pilgrimages until 1939, though now under the aegis of a ministerial body, the Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques. In the sciences, the effect of academic professionalization and the ever-more exclusive definition of what constituted "official" science was more marked. While field research, in botany, ornithology, and many areas of prehistoric excavation retained a large measure of autonomy, the experimental and mathematical sciences became confirmed as the almost exclusive preserve of those with posts in the Université, the national research institutions, and the *grandes écoles*. Moreover, in so far as those pursuing academic careers had contact with the world of independent devotees, they would now typically do so through the Association Française pour l'Avancement des Sciences.<sup>23</sup> Despite being peripatetic in the manner of the Congrès Scientifiques, the annual meetings of the AFAS were provincial manifestations that, by contrast, drew strength and legitimacy from the guiding role they accorded to *universitaires*. In this respect, they reflected a profoundly changed social and intellectual climate. For Adolphe Wurtz and the other leaders of the AFAS, especially those who belonged to the *réseau alsacien* of *savants* scarred by the annexation of their native land to the German Empire, the provinces mattered, as a source of the intellectual energy on which the rehabilitation of France depended. Although Caumont too would have subscribed to this vision, the differences between Wurtz, the protestant of republican centre-left political sympathies, and Caumont, the Catholic legitimist, were unbridgeable. Both cared keenly about the periphery and its relations with the centre. But there was little in common between a programme that saw salvation in the lowering of the barriers that had for so long set Paris apart from the provinces and one in which the provinces could only pull their weight if they retained their distinctiveness and independence. As I have argued, the divergence of vision had been a source of tension throughout the July Monarchy and the Second Empire. To

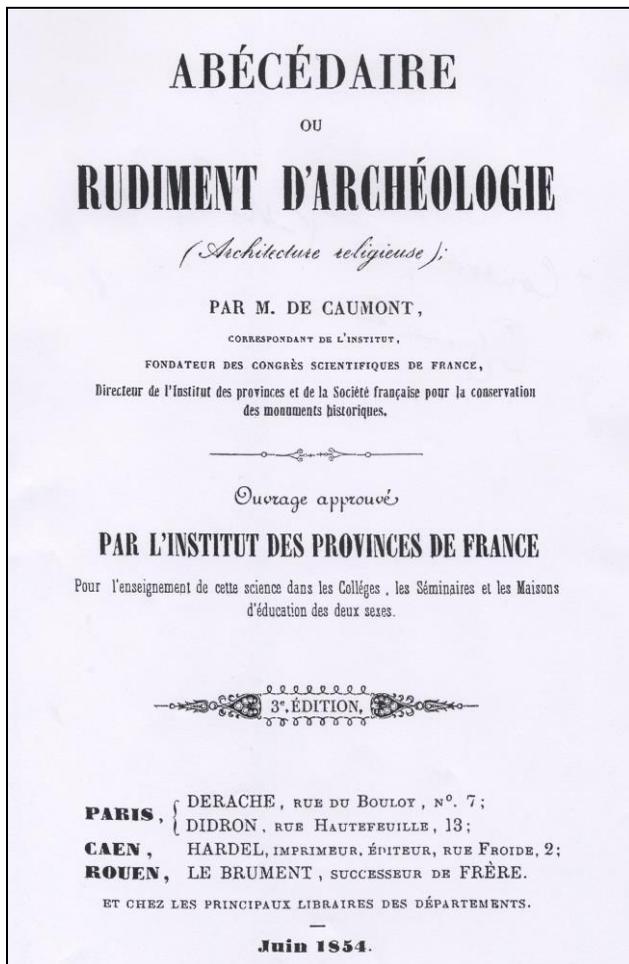
---

<sup>23</sup> See Héléne Gispert's contribution to this volume. Also the collective volume, edited by her: "*Par la science, pour la patrie*". *L'Association française pour l'avancement des sciences (1872-1914). Un projet politique pour une société savante*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002.

that tension, there could in the end be only the one resolution that duly occurred under the Republic in the advancing interests, amounting to a triumph, of the centre.



**Figure 1:** Arcisse de Caumont. Frontispiece from Arcisse de Caumont, *Abécédaire ou rudiment d'archéologie (Architecture religieuse)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Paris, Caen, and Rouen, 1854.



**Figure 2:** The title page of Arcisse de Caumont, *Abécédaire ou rudiment d'archéologie (Architecture religieuse)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Paris, Caen, and Rouen, 1854. The statement that the work had been “approved” by the Institut des Provinces was typical of Caumont’s provocative handling of his relations with the Ministry of Public Instruction. The *Abécédaire* was the most successful of Caumont’s publications. Its various parts, covering the Gallo-roman period, civil and military architecture, and ecclesiastical architecture, were reprinted in numerous editions until the end of the Second Empire. A fifth edition of the volume on ecclesiastical architecture appeared as late as 1886.