

Throughout the long nineteenth century that separated the Revolution of 1789 from the cataclysm of the First World War, science occupied a central place in French society and culture. In this, France resembled many other countries of Western and Central Europe and North America. But science and ways of thinking inspired by science mattered there to a degree that was arguably unmatched elsewhere. Moreover, they mattered in ways that reflected a history, political and cultural, of rare turbulence. Nineteenth-century France was scarred not only by war and violent changes of regime but also by enduring tensions between tradition and modernity and between widely divergent conceptions of what constituted the nation's best interests both domestically and in the world. In many of these tensions, science became inextricably involved. Sometimes it was seen as the symbol of an enlightened postrevolutionary order, sometimes as a dangerous Trojan horse concealing the ever-lurking menace of philosophical materialism, sometimes as a source of material well-being or national pride, and sometimes as the focus for dispute about the legitimacy of the authority claimed either by the leading figures of the academic community or by the senior Parisian administrators who controlled, or sought to control, learned culture in all its forms. On all of these issues, there were debates of an intensity that kept science consistently at the forefront of public concern. It is these debates and the various public arenas in which they were pursued that provide the focus for this book.

—from the Introduction