The Politics of New Knowledge: Oersted in London
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Oersted’s discovery of electro-magnetism was initially published in a short paper written in Latin. Its immediate translation into the main vernacular languages provoked during 1820 and 1821 a flurry of work in laboratories throughout Europe, resulting in so many publications that there was a fair degree of confusion about what the phenomena were and how they should be theorised. Thus, the editor of The Annals of Philosophy, Richard Phillips, asked his friend, the Superintendent of the Royal Institution, Michael Faraday to write a review article on the subject. The only way that Faraday could do this was by seeking to repeat the experiments that had been described, during which in early September 1821 he discovered what he called electro-magnetic rotations. This produced, for the first-time, mechanical motion from the interaction of electricity and magnetism. Faraday deployed his discovery to contradict André-Marie Ampère’s theory of electro-magnetism which had serious long-term consequences for Ampère’s experimental and theoretical understanding. But Faraday’s discovery also brought him into conflict with William Hyde Wollaston and Humphry Davy who believed that Faraday had used some of their results without any acknowledgement. Indeed, Davy declared this from the Presidential chair of the Royal Society of London and thereafter treated Faraday without any regard to his best interests. Thus, Faraday’s review paper, his discovery and its publication into a pretty hostile social and scientific environment profoundly affected his career for at least a decade.