

**John Bowles: a Political Commentator in the age of the
French Wars**

by

Esra Sahtiyanci

**A thesis submitted to the Institute for
Graduate Studies in Economics and Social
Sciences, in Bilkent University, in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in History.**

December, 1999

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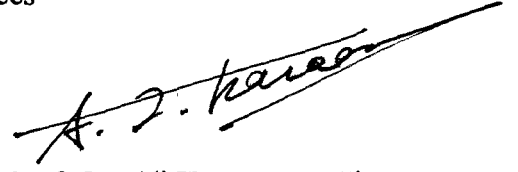
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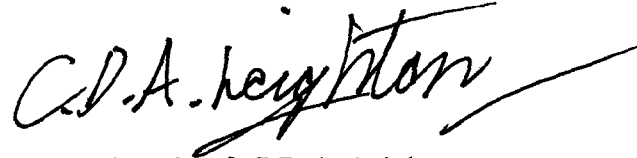
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ÖZET

Bu tezin amacı, Fransız Devrim ve Napolyon savaşları sırasında siyasi broşürler yazan İngiliz siyaset yazarı John Bowles'un eserlerini incelemektir. Çalışmanın giriş bölümü dönemin genel tarihi ışığında Bowles'un broşürlerini kronolojik olarak sunmaktadır. Sonraki iki bölüm, Bowles'un İngiliz siyasi düşüncesi içinde, tutucuların bir temsilcisi olarak yerini göstermeye çalışmaktadır. Bu da Bowles'un Fransız Devrimi ve onun getirdiği düşünceyi reddetmesi, ve sonuç olarak Devrim öncesi statükoya dönmek dışında başka bir çözüm önermemesiyle belirtilmektedir. Dördüncü bölümün konusu John Bowles tarafından bu görüşlerin, dini inanışlara nasıl uyarlandığını göstermektedir. Son bölüm de John Bowles'un bir siyasi düşünür olarak analizini içermektedir.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the writings of John Bowles, an English political writer, active as a pamphleteer during the era of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. After a general historical introduction (Chapter I), there is a chronological account of Bowles' writings, placing them in their historical context (Chapters II-IV). The first two of these chapters makes it clear that Bowles should be considered as a representative of an intransigent strand of English political thought, which wholly rejected the French Revolution and the thought which it reflected — and consequently rejected any settlement on terms other than a return to the pre-Revolutionary *status quo*. Chapter IV seeks to explain the extent to which this position was grounded in religious belief. The later part of the study attempts an analysis of Bowles as a political thinker.

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INTRODUCTION

It is sometimes asked how Britain managed to avoid revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.¹ In a way, the question is foolish. The Revolution which came to France may well not have been inevitable and that it was not appears to be the opinion of most modern historians. If the French Revolution was the product of chance circumstances, there is no great puzzle about why Britain did not experience such a series of events. Still, the Revolution did come to France and did threaten Britain and other neighbouring and distant states. Britain fought and in the end won. In this sense, Britain avoided Revolution, i.e. the external threat of the French Revolution, which Revolutionary governments attempted to export. Those who ask about how Britain avoided revolution usually ask about British society and politics in the late eighteenth century. It would be better to ask about the British army and navy. However, behind the military force was the social and political strength of the established order in Britain. This was supported by a powerful and coherent ideology.²

This study looks at one British ideologue who upheld the established order in Britain in the period, the lawyer and pamphleteer, John Bowles. He was not a great,

¹ Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British avoidance of revolution*. The Ford Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford, 1983-84 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

² *Ibid.*, chap. 6. See also T.P. Schofield, "Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution," *Historical Journal* 29 (1986): 601-22; and H.T. Dickinson, "Popular Loyalism in Britain in the 1790s," in E. Hellmuth, ed., *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the late eighteenth century* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 503-33.

original conservative political thinker like his fellow countryman, Edmund Burke, or like the Piedmontese, Joseph de Maistre. Perhaps, though, just because he did not have an exceptional mind with exceptional ideas, he is more interesting. He may be taken as more representative of the period, though not, of course, of the whole society. When we think of the great political thinkers and their influence on society and politics, we must remember that their ideas would not have been accepted unless they were greeted with a good deal of agreement and similar thinking. The lesser thinkers, writers and, as we should say nowadays, opinion formers, were important. The use of the phrase, "opinion formers" brings to mind such people as journalists. Perhaps that is the best way to think of a pamphleteer like Bowles. Political pamphleteers have largely gone now. They have been replaced by the political commentators in newspapers and on television and radio. Bowles was not a great political thinker; but he was not any worse at his job than our modern journalists who offer their political views. And such people deserve the attention of the historian, since they do generally reflect the views of at least sections of society.

The present study is divided into two parts. The first part, made up of chapters II, III and IV, contains a survey of Bowles' writings. The object of this part is to indicate the content of his work; place the writings in their immediate historical context; and, in the fourth chapter, offer a preliminary guide to their interpretation, by singling out one work judged to be more fundamental than the others. Chapter I also serves the purpose of providing a context, but in this case without explicit reference to Bowles and his writings. This chapter is to serve as a general historical introduction. This extensive contextualization has been thought necessary because Bowles is a pamphleteer: and a pamphleteer is something other than a political theorist. The

essential difference between these two figures is the degree to which their writings are bound to the issues of the day.

Of course, it is not always easy to draw this distinction. The great contemporary figure of Edmund Burke makes this point clearly. Burke consistently addressed the issues of the day. His works, in one sense, are about these issues. Yet, down through the years, Burke's works have also been found to be about political theory and thus, to a considerable degree, not bound to these issues. Burke may be accurately described as pamphleteer; but it is certainly better to call him a political theorist. With Bowles, the reverse is true. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that there is no political theory to be found in his writings. Therefore the second part of this thesis, chapter V, seeks to approach Bowles' writings analytically. Here he is considered in relationship to the political theory of his day. Chapter IV, by virtue of its dealing solely with that work of Bowles' which gives an account of his most basic beliefs, might be regarded as a prologue to this.

CHAPTER I

The 1790s: the Triumph of Conservatism

Eighteenth-century English politics can and has been depicted as a war between radicals and conservatives. Most political activity was not ideological; but ideological conflict did exist. This was not a new battle: the Tory-Whig conflict emerged during the seventeenth century. The nineteenth century would see even greater ideological conflict. However, there is justification for designating the eighteenth century as a period of ideological warfare. During the last part of the century, this conflict was manifested in the hostility between two prominent figures: Charles James Fox and William Pitt. Pitt had triumphed over Whigs and Radicals in the 1784 election. He was the favourite of the king and his victory seemed to be a victory for the crown and of course the conservative side. The background to this is the growing strength of conservative ideology — and, correspondingly, a decline in the influence of radical ideology.

The impact and strength of conservatism in the late eighteenth century can be explained in a number of ways. According to Dickinson, one of the chief explanations lies in its deeply rooted character.³ It fed on historical memory. For example, throughout the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century, Britain lived with the memory of the disorder of the Civil War period. A religious conflict, which had been manageable in the reign of James I and most of the reign of Charles I, exploded in a civil war and produced, to use Christopher Hill's 'world turned upside down' — symbolised by the act of regicide. The example of the events in that 1640s and 1650s

³ H.T Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political ideology in eighteenth-century Britain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977).

showed the danger of giving too much power and independence to the House of Commons. The words of one conservative, Soame Jenyns, illustrate the views of them all:

This an independent House of Commons actually performed in the last century, murdered a king, annihilated the peers, and established the worst kind of democracy that ever existed; and the same confusion would infallibly be repeated, should we ever be so unfortunate as to see another.⁴

The tradition of opposing reform and defending the existing social and political system in Britain had its origins long before the eighteenth century.⁵ It was mainly build on the Tory theory of order, clear already in the Restoration period, in which five elements have been identified: absolutism, divine ordination, hereditary succession, passive obedience, and non-resistance.⁶

On top of these historical foundations, more recent events, of the late eighteenth century, contributed much. There were the domestic developments of George III's reign. By 1760's Jacobitism was no longer a threat, with the death of James III and the defeat of France in the Seven Years War. George III's reign witnessed a big change in politics, the reconciliation of the Tories, previously excluded on suspicion of Jacobitism. Then there was the American Rebellion. Firstly, of course, it increased patriotic feelings across society.⁷ For the conservatives, the sacred monarchy was in danger. The danger came not only from the other side of the Atlantic,

⁴ Ibid., 276.

⁵ H.T Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 25.

⁶ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 14-16.

⁷ Ibid., 270.

but also from the radicals at home, who welcomed this action against authority with enthusiasm. The new American republic constituted an example of a government built by the people's will for the British radicals. The American rebellion was important for radical ideology. America acted as an 'ideological mid-wife' for radicals in Britain, both in an ideological sense and in terms of methods.⁸ They now demanded more. However, they were less likely to obtain it: for the major political consequence of the American revolution was a strengthening of conservative opinion.⁹

Another event which further raised the fears of the conservatives was the Gordon Riots of 1780s. These were anti-Catholic demonstrations, staged in response to parliament's Catholic relief measures. Protestant mobs in London, numbering perhaps 50,000 in all, attacked and destroyed many buildings, including jails. Several hundred people were killed. Eighteenth-century Britain was used to rioting but this time, things had come close to getting completely out of control. This anarchy and disorder became an example of what could happen if order was destroyed. Law and order became a real concern.

Undoubtedly the most important event to influence eighteenth-century ideology and politics was the French Revolution. The events that followed it and the ideas it brought were perceived and received very differently among different groups in Britain. The overthrow of the monarchy and the ecclesiastical and noble estates aroused differing reactions. For some, the primary significance of the revolution was religious. English Dissenters looked for a following of the French example of

⁸ Keith Perry, *British Politics and the American Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 123.

⁹ Dickinson, *British Radicalism*, 6.

disestablishing religion or, at least, for more religious toleration.¹⁰ To a considerable extent, religious Dissenters and political radicals were the same people.¹¹ For them the Revolution was the opportunity for all the dissatisfied subjects of the British crown, even, or perhaps more especially, after Britain went to war with it. In any case, the Revolution represented their ideals — the society they sought to establish in Britain. As Fox put it: "How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world, and how much the best."¹²

This enthusiasm of the radicals and the consequent impact of the Revolution's developing ideas on them created a substantial conservative reaction. It is true that the events taking place across the Channel were alarming in themselves. It was not just that the Revolution's principles were wrong. Burke stated this most plainly:

...if the French should perfectly succeed in what the purpose, as they are likely enough to do, and establish a democracy, or a mob of democracies ... they will establish a very bad government — a very bad species of tyranny.¹³

As the Revolution progressed, all could see how wrong its principles were. The execution of the king especially and the Terror served as an example of what would happen if the authority were overthrown. This was the overthrowing of monarchy and

¹⁰ Philip Anthony Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 29.

¹¹ Ceri Crossley and Ian Small, *The French Revolution and British Culture, 1770-1800* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 10.

¹² Brown, *French Revolution*, 38.

¹³ Quoted in Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783 – 1867* (London: Longman, 1959), 130.

aristocracy, and thus the whole sacred system, by the licentious mob. When the French went to war, they resolved to export their Revolution and so it constituted a threat to the British government and, indeed, the whole of Christian Europe. All this was alarming enough, but it was the presence of Jacobins at home that was more immediately frightening. Moreover, such people were, from the conservative viewpoint, readily identifiable — chiefly as the adherents of rational Dissent — and yet such men walked the streets. They were openly proclaiming, to use the words of Price, the radical Arian who provoked Burke's *Reflections*, 'the right to choose our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves.'¹⁴

When considering the conservative triumph of the 1790s in British politics — most clearly signalled by Pitt's parliamentary triumph over the Whigs and his easy judicial crushing of the radicals — one should not look only to external circumstances, but also to the inherent strengths and weaknesses of ideological positions. Conservative ideology was deeply rooted and had consequently been intellectually elaborated in every conceivable field — theology, legal writings, historiography, etc — and in every conceivable form. In contrast to the case put forward by the conservatives, that of the radical was weak. Radicals were possessed of no real power in government. Further, they were much divided among themselves. The political crisis of later eighteenth century did not produce a single radical ideology or an agreed program of reform.¹⁵ There were different criticisms and different solutions. They were

¹⁴ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 233.

¹⁵ H.T Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 226.

divided on ideology, aims and methods.¹⁶ So ill-armed and ranged against an establishment made hostile by fear, possessed of wealth and property and with the law under its control, radicals were never likely to achieve much — certainly without a foreign invasion.¹⁷

The external threat from France and the internal threats from those designated as Jacobins, constantly increased anti-Jacobin sentiment in the country. Thus, the 1790s came to mark the climax of what had been an increasingly conservative reign.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁷ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 271.

CHAPTER II

The Writings of John Bowles in the Age of the Revolutionary Wars

John Bowles (1751 – 1819) was a barrister and a prominent conservative pamphleteer. He can hardly be described as an important or original thinker. Some pamphleteers — and here Bowles' contemporaries, Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, at once come to mind — have risen above their medium to produce political thought of enduring importance. However, this was unusual. The pamphlet seeks to influence contemporary opinion and perhaps the course of current events. It is a piece of ephemera. However, in attempting to answer its objectives, it may well display political thought, even if only the commonplaces of the period. So it is with Bowles' works. This does not, however, make them uninteresting. The historian is usually more interested in the ordinary phenomena of the period studied. The extraordinary, untypical figure, because he or she is extraordinary and untypical, reveals less about the reality of the period. Bowles displays the political thought which he had made his own, the conservative ideology of the period. However, he also displayed the thought of those whose views he opposed, doubtless in a distorted form. Even if this perception is indeed distorted, it is worthy of attention; for it forms a part of conservative ideology. This was certainly not all reaction; but at least part of it was formed by reaction to the threats they perceived.

Since Bowles was a pamphleteer, responding to the issues of the day, it will be advantageous first to advert to these in a chronological order and note Bowles' responses. The year of Bowles' first anti-radical pamphlet, 1791, saw a considerable polarisation of political thought in Britain. This was taking institutional form. There was Major Cartwright's 'Society for Constitutional Information' and the more

moderate 'Society of the Friends of the People', propagating Foxite Whiggery and calling for a diminution of the influence of the Crown. Famously, Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke clashed in May of that year. For Fox, the demand for popular rights constituted less of a threat than the Crown's influence.¹⁸ For Burke, who explained his sentiments in the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* of July 1791, was more concerned with the threat of democratic anarchy. The polarisation showed itself on a popular level — very unpleasantly for Joseph Priestley, the Unitarian divine, whose Birmingham home, along with Dissenters' meeting houses, was sacked in rioting for 'Church and King'.

Bowles' only pamphlet of 1791 seems, from its title, *Considerations on the Respective Rights of Judge and Jury*, somewhat peripheral to all this. Bowles was actually answering Fox, but only on a minor point, appropriate to his character as a lawyer. The radicals' complaints against the judicial system which threatened them — and was indeed to become an effective instrument of their destruction — were answered by a eulogy of that system and particularly trial by jury. This first pamphlet at once shows the dual character of Bowles' work. On the one hand, it is indeed occasioned by and directed against the radical challenge. On the other, it is a positive statement, which draws, in its earlier part, on long traditions of English legal thought.

Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* appeared in 1792. Its enormous success ensured that it became the chief target for those opposing the radical ideology. Bowles was among the many who took part in the famous Burke-Paine conflict — of course, on the Burkean side. He produced *A Protest against T. Paine's 'Rights of Man'*. Bowles

¹⁸ Ian Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 213.

was, on this occasion, sponsored by the ‘Society for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers’. Bowles was on its committee. It was established by John Reeves, with support from government in 1792. Such loyalist societies acted as vigilantes in many parts of the country, disclosing radical activity and threats to the government.¹⁹ They greatly increased the public mood of suspicion against the reformers. The radicals’ political societies were not alone in showing that the ideological conflict of the 1790s provoked a new level of popular participation. Again, Bowles’ writing was provoked by radicalism; but again too, its eulogistic form shows it to have been positive. Bowles praised every idea and institution which Paine had attacked. Thus Paine’s views appeared as merely destructive — of the constitution, the government and existing society as a whole — while Bowles could offer a picture of a political and social order, the features of which were well provided with intellectual justification.

1792 saw Bowles getting into his stride as a pamphleteer. He was no doubt feeling encouraged by signs from government, such as the royal proclamation against seditious practices, that it was prepared to act. Thus, there also came from his pen in 1792 a follow-up to his pamphlet of the previous year on the question of seditious libels. This pamphlet of 1792, *A Letter to the Right Honourable Charles James Fox*, made frequent reference to the previous one, but showed an increasing hostility to the radical societies and included practical measures to combat them. It was an encouragement for the emerging loyalist organisations, particularly Reeves’ society, to

¹⁹ Carl B. Cone, *The English Jacobins: Reformers in late eighteenth century England* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1968), 147-50.

make use of law in their attacks on their radical opponents, as indeed they were doing with a degree of success.²⁰

These organisations were aware of the need for genuinely popular propaganda. The dialogue form, always popular in the eighteenth-century, seemed to provide this and it was not uncommon in the anti-Revolutionary tracts of the period. Such pieces were not merely aimed at the lower orders, but also at those in the middling ranks of society, who were also in danger of being corrupted by seditious notions. Thus the manufacturer, in danger from his workers' corruption by Paineite views or even himself influenced by them, was a frequent character in the dialogue.²¹ Bowles' anti-Paineite *Dialogues on the Rights of Britons* were between a manufacturer, who has been influenced by Paine's ideas, a farmer and a sailor, who represent sane and patriotic Britons. The sailor, who draws his political imagery from the sea-faring life, makes the dialogue considerably more attractive. The choice of characters is interesting, in that it seems to hark back to a Tory-Whig conflict of a century before. It is noteworthy that it is the moneyed interest, the manufacturer, traditionally Whig, who has been infected with the new ideas. The landed interest, the farmer, traditionally a Tory figure, bears the weight of the conservative argument. It is perhaps interesting too that it is a sailor — the navy was always the favoured arm among eighteenth-century Tories — who assists him.

By late 1792, England was clearly heading for war with the Revolution. There was the overthrow of the French monarchy. Further, the evil was spreading. France, with the Fraternity Act, declared its anxiety to spread it — and this was given reality

²⁰ Ibid., 222.

²¹ Ibid., 149-50.

with military force.²² In November, the revolutionary armies invaded the Austrian Netherlands and that constituted a definite threat to British interests.²³ Historians have frequently argued that the war against France was not conducted as a crusade against the Revolution. However true this may be, propagandists such as Bowles certainly saw it as such a crusade. In any case, whatever really moved the actions of those who had the governance of Britain, they were certainly willing to identify with the views put forward by such as Bowles. In this sense, there is good reason to connect Bowles' commitment of the war as a crusade with government policy. In 1793, Pitt warned the Commons:

...a system, the principles of which, if not opposed, threaten the most fatal consequences to the tranquillity of this country, the security of its allies, the good order of every European Government, and the happiness of the whole of the human race.²⁴

Bowles stated the view first in the *Real Grounds of the Present War with France* in early 1793. However, he also argued that the war was defensive. The Fraternity Act provoked revolt in Britain and throughout Europe. The chief British war aim was to prevent the destruction of the existing political order in Europe.

The union of threats from internal and external sources led to an expansion of government's repressive policies. There were government proclamations against seditious publications and there were many prosecutions for seditious libel. The trials held in Scotland were particularly notable. Government success in these ensured that

²² Ibid., 142.

²³ Christie, *Wars and Revolutions*, 216.

²⁴ Quoted in, Glyn Williams and John Ramsden, *Ruling Britannia: a political history of Britain, 1688-1988* (London: Longman, 1990), 152.

they were violently criticised by radicals as manifesting judicial misconduct.²⁵ Bowles was constantly to the fore in defending these legal processes — a task for which he was particularly well suited as a barrister. This period, between 1793 and 1794, when government pressure and control increased has been called, with deliberate absurdity, “Pitt’s Reign of Terror”.²⁶ There was, for example, the Treasonable Practices Act, extending and clarifying the notion of a treasonable practice. Again, the Seditious Meetings Act required the licensing of meetings of more than fifty persons. The king, the realm, Parliament and the constitution were, it was said in justification, in serious danger.²⁷ Such government activity had much popular support. The burning of Paine’s works or the organisation of boycotts against radicals were popular pastimes.²⁸ In 1794, Habeas Corpus was suspended, and prosecution of sedition became easier. In the same year many radicals like Thomas Hardy, John Thelwell and John Horne Tooke were prosecuted for high treason. However, they were defended by a Whig lawyer, Erskine, and were all acquitted. Those of radical inclination regarded this as a great victory for English civil liberties against the forces of conservatism.²⁹ Erskine thus earned the enmity of Bowles who was later, in 1797, to direct a pamphlet against him: *French Aggression Proved from Mr. Erskine’s ‘View of the Causes of the War’*.

²⁵ J. Steven Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 360.

²⁶ R.K. Webb, *Modern England: From the eighteenth century to the present* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980), 134 .

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139-41. See also Williams and Ramsden, *Ruling Britannia*, 148

²⁸ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, chap. 8.

²⁹ Briggs, *Age of Improvement*, 136.

The increasing alarm of the government and the spreading public fear of the radical societies were reflected in Bowles' pamphlet of 1793, *A Short Answer to the Friends of the Liberty of the Press*, which opposed the loyalist associations.³⁰ In part, he takes up previous themes, defending the methods by which radicals were prosecuted. His work was specific enough about the objectives and methods of the societies. He divides them into those which sought to prevent the working of the constitution and those which sought to overthrow it. He criticises the use they made of the press. However, the pamphlet is marked chiefly by an increased theoretical content, in which the nature of the threat which they pose to the British constitution and political system is discussed.

Bowles' pamphlet of 1794, *Farther Reflections submitted to the Consideration of the Combined Powers*, continued the theme of the war as a crusade. However, as the title indicates, Bowles broadened his geographical horizon. His appeal was for union among the allies on an ideological basis. The struggle was not against France or its armies, but against the Revolution, upon the evils of which he elaborated throughout the pamphlet. Thus no conclusion to the war which did not see the complete overthrow of the Revolution could be acceptable. The French showed no sign, he held, of becoming people with whom one could deal. Five years had passed since the Revolution had begun and the growth of extremism was continuous. Thus, the proponents of peace could be denounced as purveyors of seditious nonsense. Nothing would do but to return France, internally, to the *status quo ante bellum* and the priority in the conduct of the war was that of the French émigrés. To the theme of crusade Bowles added, as he had in pamphlets addressing peculiarly British concerns,

³⁰ Cone, *English Jacobins*, 143.

an insistence on the defensive character of this war. The topic of France's desire to spread her disease and subvert all government and social order was constantly mentioned.

The pamphlet reveals Bowles' adoption of Burkean political theory, as well as Burke's view of the war. The Revolution constituted a universal danger; but the answer to it was not a uniform one. The monarchies of Europe needed a common military front; but when they had triumphed militarily, the answer each gave to the Revolution was to be its own. The traditional constitution, sanctioned by each state's history, was the proper antidote to the false ideas of the Revolution. Bowles repeatedly refuses to speak in universal terms. True, the Revolution threatened all rights; but it was, he constantly made clear, the rights of Britons that concerned him. All constitutions were threatened; but his concern was for the best of these — that of Britain.

Objections to the Continuance of the War Examined and Refuted was a complementary pamphlet to the one just mentioned and published in the same year. However, it too had as its *point de départ* the arguments of his radical opponents against the war. In reality these arose from sympathy for the Revolution and a fear of the domestic consequences of British victory,³¹ though these things could hardly be stated very plainly. Bowles' first argument that negotiations could not be conducted with France, since that country did not have a legitimate government, may seem rather weak: it did have an effective *de facto* government. This, however, is a repetition of the argument that the Revolution, not France, is the enemy. No peace can be made with the Revolution. The point was driven home with a description of society in

³¹ Christie, *Wars and Revolutions*, 218.

Revolutionary France. It is depicted as a chaos in which all social relations and morality have been destroyed. Further, this Revolution was aggressive. As long as such aggression continued, peace was morally impossible. Indeed, it would be until the danger was wholly removed. This, he went on, could only be achieved by a united front among the monarchies of Europe, and no peace could be accepted which did not have the approval of all. Bowles concluded with a patriotic appeal. Quoting French war propaganda, he emphasised how humiliating a peace negotiated at that time would be for Britain.

In 1795, Bowles' *Thoughts on the Origin and Formation of Political Constitutions* was published. This was a more systematic exposition of Bowles' political thought than had hitherto appeared, though it was addressed to a topic of the moment — the new constitution which emerged from the Thermidorean reaction. He could not but commend the change, with its rejection of radical egalitarianism, its defence of property rights and its attempts to avoid radical change coming with a change in the composition of the legislature. However, Bowles was inclined to read all of this as a partial rejection of the Revolution, which really had to be rejected root and branch. The arguments were Burkean and Filmerian. This constitution might have been an improvement, but it was still wrong to attempt to create any new constitution. Only a return to the constitution before the Revolution could work. The French were bound to accept their monarch, as a child was bound to accept his father. The negation of these Burkean and Filmerian ideas was the political thought of Locke, with its acceptance of a right of resistance. Bowles, in other words, displays that the patriarchalism, divine right monarchism and non-resistance of the late seventeenth century were still alive and well in the late eighteenth century. This discussion of the Revolution in a more moderate form gave Bowles the opportunity to comment on

American affairs. The emergence of more conservative views in the early American republic could be taken, like the Thermidorean reaction, as a sign of repentance. For Bowles, as for some modern historians, there was indeed an Atlantic Revolution. The French had caught their disease from America.

The withdrawal of Prussia from the anti-French coalition gave Bowles, in 1795, another opportunity, in *The Dangers of Premature Peace (with cursory Strictures on the Declaration of the King of Prussia)* to protest against any peace with a France which clung to Revolutionary principles. For much of the pamphlet he repeated the sentiments he had already expressed on the subject. However, he shows an inclination to use political as well as ideological argument in this pamphlet, by speaking of the European balance of power. Revolutionary France was, of its nature, a perennial threat to the balance of power. This had now achieved the status of a pan-European constitution in Bowles' eyes. It existed by Burkean prescription and was no more to be challenged than the monarchical constitutions of individual states.

While the war continued — without much British success — internal unrest in Britain increased. This was partly due to the economic difficulties caused by the war. From the beginning of the war Pitt's main task was to provide financial support for the allies' military effort, with guaranteed loans and gifts, though by 1796 it was clear that this policy did not buy Britain victories.³² To finance its own military operations, to provide subsidies to allies and to meet other demands, the government had increased the existing taxes and introduced new ones. It was obliged raise loans and, further, was forced to suspend payments in gold. The consequent financial crisis added to the

³² Briggs, *Age of Improvement*, 140.

economic hardships of the period and certainly generated discontent.³³ Although Britain was in a financial trouble, Pitt, as a policy, even in the war time, tried to increase trade, holding that the expansion of trade would ultimately increase military strength.³⁴

In his *Two Letters Addressed to a British Merchant*, published in 1796, Bowles took note of this social and economic situation. However, it still contained much of his usual rhetoric. The Revolutionaries' conduct since the beginning of the Revolution was rehearsed and denounced. This was a preliminary to a moral appeal for unity: all, whether peasant or a peer, in the face of a threat to all mankind. The political differences of the *ancien régime* era were no longer important. All politics was now reduced to a conflict between the friends and foes of the British constitution. Comment on the years of war which the Revolution had brought led him to the topic of the economic hardships which they had imposed on Britain. His arguments were, though, decidedly weak. He began by flattering British pride: however bad Britain's situation was, France's situation was worse. The French navy and French commerce had been ruined. Beyond this, Bowles could only make an appeal for national solidarity and, wholly unrealistically, call for voluntary and general contributions from the whole community.

By 1796 with the break-up of the first coalition Britain was in isolation — and there was now war with Spain and Holland too. With the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797, the last of Britain's allies, Austria, made peace with the enemy. French troops invaded the Low Countries. There was considerable domestic unrest — and no

³³ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁴ Watson, *Reign of George III*, 374.

victories abroad. However, as had happened in France in 1792-3, such adversity strengthened the political will and the period showed a marked increase in conservative, patriotic sentiment.³⁵ The following year saw Britain's situation improve. True, there was a rebellion in Ireland; but these disturbances were localised and fairly easily, if brutally, dealt with. Britain now had as allies. Napoleon's plan to conquer Egypt came to naught. Horatio Nelson defeated the French fleet in the Battle of Nile and the Ottoman forces defended the city of Acre successfully. Napoleon offered peace to George the Third in 1799, but the offer was refused. The stage was now set for the creation a new coalition of Austria, Turkey and Russia and Britain.

1797 saw the appearance of Bowles' *French Aggression proved from Mr. Erskine's "View of the Causes of the War"*. It contained little that Bowles had not already said about the war. Once again the radicals who regarded Britain as the aggressor and sought peace were attacked: they were simply betrayers of their country. The arguments were largely unchanged: France had been guilty of aggressive acts. However, more fundamentally, France was necessarily the aggressor because it was Revolutionary France and the Revolution was itself a declaration of war. Bowles' opponents, such as Erskine, had taken the line that the Revolution was to be distinguished from the war and their causes were distinct. For Bowles, who insisted on the inherently evil character of the Revolution and was disposed to see it, like Burke, John Robison, or Augustin Barruel,³⁶ as an Enlightenment, anti-Christian (or Antichristian) conspiracy, such a view was incredible. The promoters of the Revolution

³⁵ Briggs, *Age of Improvement*, 140.

³⁶ C.D.A. Leighton, "Antichrist's Revolution: Some Anglican apocalypticists in the age of the French Wars", forthcoming in the *Journal of Religious History*.

could not be satisfied by the overthrow only of the French monarchy. In any case, its inherently evil character would cause it to spread. It was the source of all disorder and violence in Europe. His argument on this topic had a historical character and had in it a good deal of historical truth. Modern historians would certainly look to foreign invasion and warfare as a source of consolidation for the Revolutionary regime, facing considerable domestic opposition — and a cause of the Terror. Bowles, of course stated this in a most tendentious way. The Revolution was the generator of anarchy and the Revolution would have proved instantly self-destructive, had an artificial mode of uniting the state not been found. This was foreign war. The mobilisation for war had the advantage of making troops available to fight the people of France in revolt against the Revolution. Bowles' divergence from the modern historian's analysis lies chiefly in his inability to distinguish differences among Revolutionaries and the change in circumstances in the course of the Revolution. The point is made plain by his attack in the pamphlet on British radicalism. Any disturbance of the balance of the constitution was likely to lead to chaos. It was not possible to engage in reform without setting out on the path to Revolution. France's recent history, he argued, illustrated precisely this.

In 1798, Bowles collected his previous pamphlets under the title, *Retrospect: or a collection of tracts published at various periods of the war*. The preface is instructive in showing Bowles' commitment not to mere British victory, or even to the total military and political overthrow of the Revolution, but to the obliteration of the thought which had given rise to it. The collection was dedicated to Louis XVIII. Nothing less than his restoration was acceptable — and with it the restoration of all legitimate sovereigns. However, the emphasis of the preface is ideological. Warfare, albeit necessary, was insufficient. The real threat came from the Revolutionary ideas, the true cause of the war. These literally Satanic ideas continued to gain ground.

Against these, armies were of no avail. The struggle was not, therefore, producing victory, though the fault lay mainly with peoples other than the British. Britain had waged a successful campaign against radicals at home. Such ideological warfare was required throughout Europe to destroy Revolutionary principles.

In 1800, Bowles wrote two successive pamphlets: *Reflections on the Political State of Society at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* and *Reflections on the Political State of Society at the Commencement of the Year 1800*. The former shows Bowles' usual tendency to extend the pamphlet dealing with current affairs to matters of principle. He took as his point of departure the French peace overtures of 1799, rejected by Britain. Bowles of course commended this rejection. Now was not the moment, when the destruction of the Revolution was possible, to agree to peace. In any case, French Revolutionary governments were not such as could be negotiated with: Revolutionary France had never respected the rights of other states. Now she had no true desire for peace. She had hidden behind a pacific mask before, only with the purpose of striking her enemies by surprise. Any peace agreement that had been made with her had brought only further instability. There was considerable evidence that now France was pursuing a divide-and-conquer policy among the Allies. Nor would France be inclined to excuse Britain as an enemy. Britain was the guardian of the balance of power in Europe, which France was resolved to upset. Further, she was France's successful rival in manufacturing, commerce and navigation and French jealousy would never abate. This protracted rejection of 'Jacobinical peace' was an opportunity to attack those who favoured it. They were depicted plainly as fifth columnists and traitors.

The second part of the pamphlet moves from immediate political concerns to matters of principle and displays the foundations of Bowles' political stances. In this

part, Bowles concentrates on the moral state of society. The sacred tie which kept society together was weakened; the moral and religious principles in the society had begun to dissolve. The politics of radicalism were merely a symptom. The disease was the Enlightenment, which Bowles, like many of his contemporaries named 'modern infidelity'. It was traceable to the English Deists and culminated in late Enlightenment, which was openly engaged in a struggle not against earthly monarchs alone, but against the monarchy of God. It aimed at nothing less than the destruction of civil society and every institution. In any case, among all it had doleful effects on morality and in good traditional eighteenth-century fashion Bowles fulminated against increasing luxury and even called for the introduction of sumptuary laws. The problem was universal — he elaborated at length on the moral misconduct of various kinds of foreigner — but patriotically added his belief that Britain was less corrupted owing to the strength of its traditional social structure. The evils, it is true, were gaining ground in some quarters. However, Britain had more religion and virtue than any other Christian state. It was for that reason that it was the present bulwark of social order against the forces of destruction. Nevertheless, vigilance and improvement were necessary. No pains should be spared to strengthen religion, morality and the social bonds. Indeed, a 'radical reformation' of principles and manners was needed. He drew attention particularly to the role of education in this and advocated more government involvement in this.

Having thus spoken of the remote origins of the war, in the spread of the Enlightenment, Bowles turned to its immediate causes, incidentally, of course, refuting the opinion of Fox and Talleyrand that Britain and her allies had been the aggressors. Bowles argues partly on historical grounds, pointing out obvious acts of French aggression, pointing out that each state opposing France had, on this basis, good

reason to go to war. However, Bowles was unwilling to leave matters on this, political level. He had explained that the true evil was 'modern infidelity', the Enlightenment, and its product, the Revolution. The war was necessary and morally justified as defensive, because the ideas of Jacobin France were in themselves a threat to other countries — a worse aggression than any other. So the allied powers aimed at the restoration of the Royalty in France and all Europe. This combination of powers against France were not only formed for the sake of defence but also it was compatible and justified by the Law of Nations. There were only two alternatives, to crush France and all its destructive forces, or be crushed by them.

Reflections on the Political State of Society at the Commencement of the Year 1800 constitutes mostly an elaboration on one of the themes mentioned above. In this pamphlet Bowles exhaustively examined the French misdeeds which served as evidence that the Revolutionary government could not be trusted. The fair words of the Fraternity Act, promising a right to peoples to chose their own rulers, were a cover for violent aggression and rapine. Thus the deception and the other forms of moral depravity of the Revolution were displayed. He included descriptions of events in the Low Countries, Switzerland, the Italian peninsula and the Ottoman Empire. The Revolutionary offences were against religion, the person and property — by requisition, confiscation and plain theft. Such exhaustive documentation of the evil character brought Bowles back to the same immediate political points. No peace could ever be made with a regime which sprang from the Revolution, whatever constitutional changes were made: it would remain aggressive in its nature. Nothing short of complete restoration of the ancient institutions and social order would suffice. Europe must still be called to the unity necessary for the anti-Revolutionary crusade.

CHAPTER III

The Later Writings of John Bowles

Conveniently, the turn of the century can be taken as marking a change in Bowles' writings. Fundamentally, Bowles was less interested in the external threat. He concentrated now on internal British politics. Of course, this was still the matter of the struggle against the Revolution: that had not changed; it was only the scene of warfare had changed. Bowles can thus be seen as a very pure anti-Revolutionary writer. Napoleonic France alarmed him a great deal less, apparently, than Revolutionary France. Indeed, that was what he had always said: the real enemy was not France, but the Revolution and the ideas that had created it. The last point is important. Bowles' later pamphlets, seen together, are rather less concerned with immediate political questions. We learn more about Bowles' general principles — religious and moral — from them.

This moral emphasis is clear in his work of 1802: *Remarks on Modern Female Manners; as distinguished by indifference to character and indecency of dress*. Here Bowles' expresses a very rigorous moralism indeed. Again his attention was directed to the health of a society resting on a divine order. Modesty sprang from the role given to women in a divinely ordained division of labour. Abandonment of modesty, the sacrificing of decency for fashion, as he put it, was a symptom and cause of moral decay. Moral decay, in turn, would prove the destruction of society. "Female chastity has ever been and ever must be, the main source of all the virtues, which constitute the

strength and the security of human society.”³⁷ Moral decay, a social problem, required political action and Bowles went so far as to call for the imposition of legal penalties for adultery.

Bowles was undoubtedly becoming more moralistic. Another pamphlet of 1802, *Thoughts on the Late General Election as demonstrative of the Progress of Jacobinism*, did indeed deal with politics, but moved on to general moral complaint. He denounced the activities of radicals in a series of elections — in Middlesex, Nottingham and Westminster. There were precise complaints about electoral irregularities, indeed, electoral fraud. To what extent these can be believed is doubtful. However, in truth, such irregularities were unimportant to Bowles. His chief aim was to draw attention to what he perceived as a change in Jacobin tactics. They now turned to the electoral system to advance their aims. It may seem curious that Bowles conceives this to be a new departure. After all, historians have spent much time speaking of the campaigns for parliamentary reform in the late eighteenth century. Yet Bowles may well have been pointing to a significant change. The question of parliamentary reform was not as central to the radicalism of the late eighteenth century as it later became. Other issues, notably those affecting religious dissenters, were equally or more important.³⁸ After the 1790s they were ceasing to be. Together with

³⁷ John Bowles, *Remarks on Modern Female Manners as Distinguished by Indifference to Character and Indecency of Dress*, (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1802), 4.

³⁸ J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 277-78.

this particular warning about the Jacobins, Bowles produced others, speaking of their undiminished zeal for revolution. Clearly he considered that the Peace of Amiens had reduced Britain's vigilance. Of course, he pointed out, the Jacobins had not been slow to take advantage of this. Their publicists were hard at work, for example, making unreasonable complaints about the conditions in which seditious writers were being imprisoned. There was in this pamphlet, too, a considerable amount of criticism of radical political theory, which Bowles considered derived from Locke.

However, the pamphlet was not all politics: Bowles moved on easily to Britain's moral condition, dwelling particularly on social morality, the familiar theme of the weakening of social ties. He lamented too the diminution of religious influence. Not that this was in truth a move away from the discussion of politics. After all, Bowles regarded Jacobinism as itself a religious phenomenon, albeit a false and evil religion, which produced moral depravity. It could only be fought by religious and moral means. Of course, this involved action on the part of the state, for the British state too was a religious institution. Bowles may appear to be shallow in arguing that moral and religious decline was due simply to Jacobinism or that the situation could be remedied by coercive government action. What is really displayed is the religious constitution of Bowles' mind. He was, in truth, seeking to express deeper explanations of the problem which manifested itself in the French Revolution. He remained, too, optimistic about overcoming it: Britain possessed religious truth and a social order and constitution which embodied it — and with these it was capable of triumphing.

The short pamphlet of 1804 *The Salutary Effects of Vigour; exemplified in the operation of the Nottingham act passed in the last session of parliament* came as a sequel to the previous one, in that it took up the theme of radical behaviour during elections. Bowles' concern was here with Nottingham alone. The town was, with

certain others such as Norwich, known as a veritable hotbed of radicalism. The radical tradition was to continue there: in the period before the enactment of the Great Reform Act, Nottingham Castle was burnt down. As Bowles put it:

...a spirit of riot, outrage, disaffection, and impiety, has, for some years, and particularly since the French Revolution, displayed itself to the terror and annoyance of the peaceful and loyal part of the inhabitants...³⁹

The recent election in Nottingham had been an occasion of particularly outrageous behaviour on the part of the radicals — at least in Bowles' eyes. This Whig victory, obtained, he maintained, by means of gross irregularities, was followed by tumultuous scenes. Bowles exaggerated the extent of the disorder. His details are not corroborated in other contemporary sources. Nevertheless, the situation was thought sufficiently serious for government to take action and the end result was an act providing stricter measures against public disorder and, in particular, extending the jurisdiction of county magistrates.⁴⁰ Bowles not only rejoiced, but reflected on further measures which might be taken to deal with such situations. A police force, a concept associated in the minds of Englishmen of the period with foreign despotism, had already appeared in Ireland and there was talk of its need in England. To this Bowles now subscribed.

In 1807 Bowles published *A Letter addressed to Samuel Whitbread, Esq. M.P., in consequence of the unqualified approbation expressed by him in the House of Commons, of Mr. Lancaster's system of Education; the religious part of which is here shewn to be incompatible with the safety of the Established Church, and, in its tendency, subversive of Christianity itself. Including also some cursory observations*

³⁹ See Malcolm, I. Thomis, *Politics and Society in Nottingham, 1785-1835* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969), 184.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 144, 165.

on the claims of the Irish Romanists, as they affect the safety of the Established Church. In this letter to the well-known Whig politician and brewer, Bowles took up the old cry of 'The Church in Danger!' The issue of the day, at the back of Bowles' mind and spoken of towards the end of the pamphlet, was Catholic Emancipation. Bowles would not live long enough to see it; but the situation already looked alarming to many in 1807. Concrete proposals were being brought forward in Parliament, which seemed likely to win over waverers. The end of the Protestant constitution seemed to be imminent. Bowles views were probably not virulently anti-Catholic. Theologically, he held, as we shall see, High Church views and under normal circumstances might even have been well disposed to Catholicism. Other High Churchmen had been, especially in the 1790s when the Catholic Church was the victim of the Revolution. However, things had changed. Napoleon had made a concordat with the Papacy and England's mood was swinging in an anti-Catholic direction again,⁴¹ especially now that the politics of Catholicism had been put on the agenda by virtue of the Irish Act of Union.⁴² However, as the content of this pamphlet makes clear, there were people and ideas more worrying to Bowles than Catholics and Catholicism. Bowles opposed the Catholics in their political objectives less because they were Catholics, than because they were non-Anglicans. He was concerned to ensure that the state continued as an Anglican one, which had as its purpose the propagation of Anglicanism.

The immediate occasion of the pamphlet were the attempts to advance the system of education advocated by Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker. Bowles was not hostile to the

⁴¹ J.J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain, c. 1760-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 227-51.

⁴² Webb, *Modern England*, 142.

whole Lancastrian system, now best remembered as an attempt to extend education to more people by reducing the cost: senior pupils, the monitors, were to teach junior ones. What Bowles objected to was the religious aspects of the system. Lancaster proposed a non-denominational system of Christian education and was aggressive in his attitude to peculiarly Anglican education.⁴³ As he put it:

I desire to avoid making the education given to such a large number of children in my institution, a means of installing my own peculiar religious tenets into their minds, and prefer the more noble grounds which I have recommended.⁴⁴

Bowles did not think this 'more noble' at all. It was the religious indifference of the Enlightenment, founded on scepticism, and this implied a right to choose one's own religious beliefs. If one could choose one's own views about religion, one might do so also in the lesser, dependent matter of politics. In other words, the Lancastrian system was Jacobinical.

There also appeared in 1807 Bowles' *Strictures on the Motions made in the last Parliament respecting the Pledge which his Majesty was under the necessity of demanding from his late ministers; and which in those motions, was most unconstitutionally made a subject of accusation, in a letter to the Right Hon. Lord Viscount Howick*. The piece was concerned, initially, to defend the personal involvement of the king in politics — his freedom to choose his ministers and regulate

⁴³ Michalina Vaughan and Margaret Scotford, *Social Conflict and Educational Change in England and France: 1789-1848* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), 27, 93.

⁴⁴ Joseph Lancaster, *Improvements in Education* (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1992, reprint of 1805 edition), xiii.

their political agenda. Bowles was the more keen on this in view of George III's inclination to defend English confessionism. The pamphlet included firm arguments against the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.

CHAPTER IV

A Key Work

In 1815 Bowles, using the pseudonym, A Layman, published *The Claims of the Established Church, Considered as an Apostolical Institution, and as an Authorized Interpreter of Holy Scripture*.⁴⁵ It was considered sufficiently important and well written to be republished by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1828 in the crisis leading up to Catholic Emancipation.⁴⁶ This properly theological work may be taken as a fundamental guide to Bowles' thought, a revelation of its underpinnings. In a way, it is an explanation of all the works of Bowles, spoken about above.

This work begins with a political purpose — of defending the Anglican establishment.

The constitution of this country is composed of two distinct establishments, the one civil, the other ecclesiastical, which are so closely interwoven together, that the destruction of either must prove alike fatal to both. The preservation of each is, therefore, the interest of all the members of the community, and the especial duty of those to whose superintending care the general welfare is entrusted.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Peter B. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ.Press, 1994), 64.

⁴⁶ It is this edition which is cited here.

⁴⁷ John Bowles, *The Claims of the Established Church: Considered as an Apostolical institution, and as an authorized interpreter of Holy Scripture* (London: C.J. Rivington, 1828),1.

However, Bowles does not devote much of the book to showing what harm could be done by a separation of church and state. Instead, he turns to the High Church argument, which asserted the fundamental independence of the church vis-à-vis the state. He desired to show the church's 'inherent Character, as a spiritual Society, formed under a Commission from Christ'.⁴⁸ This was certainly important to Bowles, as it was for many others in the period. The French Revolution had seen the overthrow of the state in France; but the church had survived. In Britain there were many influential people whose loyalty to the ecclesiastical establishment looked doubtful, especially to men like Bowles. If Bowles' first argument in this book, about the mutual need church and state had for each other, were to fail, this second argument would become important. The Tractarian movement was to become the defender of the view in the 1830s.

Yet neither of these arguments should be seen as the basic one of this work, which has the appearance of a piece of traditional Anglican polemic against both Catholicism and Protestant Dissent. The argument is about authority in matters of religion. With reference to Catholicism, Bowles stresses the authority of the Bible.

The Church of Rome, though truly Apostolical in point of derivation, has attempted to supersede the Authority of the Bible, by setting up her own authority as an infallible guide. This Church professes, indeed, to be an interpreter of Scripture, but she will not allow her interpretation to be brought to the test of Scripture.⁴⁹

A criticism of Catholicism was not out of place in 1815, as the Catholic Question rolled on in British political life. The Irish, at this point, were agitating a good deal

⁴⁸ Ibid., v.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 81.

about suggestions that their church might be subject to a degree of government control in return for Emancipation. However, Bowles made it plain that it was not Catholicism that was his chief concern: comments on that were rather tacked on to the end of the work and even then passed over quickly. He soon returned to his real subject of complaint.

But, in modern times, a large portion of professing Christians have gone into an opposite extreme [to that of Catholicism]. They have adopted and act upon a persuasion, that, under the Gospel dispensation, mankind are under no obligation whatever to avail themselves of any particular help in the interpretation of Scripture; but that every individual is left at full liberty, either to interpret for himself, or to confide in such interpreters as his fancy may prefer, or as may happen to come in his way.⁵⁰

In brief, Bowles was wholly hostile to the right of private judgement in matters of religion. What needs to be remembered is how central this discussion had been in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is a very diverse movement and difficult to speak about briefly. However, the history of philosophy has seen it as being, at its centre, concerned with asserting the individual's reason and placing it above religious authority.⁵¹ Eighteenth-century England was very religious — and Protestant. So the argument here mostly took the form of discussion about how to interpret the Bible. In this book then, Bowles is getting to the main argument of the Enlightenment (at least for Englishmen) and rejecting it.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁵¹ J.A.I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 8-10.

Of course, if Bowles was so hostile to the Enlightenment in this way, it is easy to understand why he held the other views that have been described above in discussing his pamphlets. This book shows Bowles to have been a very serious Christian and theologically knowledgeable. His hatred of the French Revolution, which made him reject with horror any compromise with it or with anyone in Britain who was sympathetic to its ideas, came from its hostility to Christianity. Burke and others, like the Frenchmen Barruel and the Scotsman Robison, had, no doubt satisfactorily for Bowles anyway, shown that it was an anti-Christian conspiracy by the French *philosophes*. Anyway, for Bowles, the Enlightenment automatically produced Jacobinism. If people were to be allowed freedom of opinion on religion, then they were allowed freedom of opinion in politics too. After all, for conservatives like Bowles, political beliefs were a part of theology. Religious freedom meant political freedom. By attacking the former, Bowles was getting to the root of the problem as he saw it. This book is piece of theology; but it can also be said to explain Bowles' political stances.

CHAPTER V

The Political Theory of John Bowles

We have now surveyed Bowles' writings and attempted to place them in an historical context. An interpretation of Bowles has also been offered: the primary place of a religious hostility to the Enlightenment and what Bowles at least held to be its political consequence, the French Revolution, has been pointed out. To continue this analysis, it is now necessary to try to locate Bowles' thought in relation to that of important eighteenth-century figures, chiefly Locke.

Locke remains a central figure in the history of eighteenth-century English political thought. In the past, he was regarded as its orthodoxy. More recent studies have shown that Locke was not so well accepted in the period, at least in England.⁵² In particular, his contract theory of government was by no means universally accepted. The Americans were more enthusiastic about his views — and in Britain his influence on the rebellious Americans was noted. Consequently his popularity fell. Apart from his adoption by the Americans, there was his adoption by the French. Then, in Britain, he had a following among radicals. The Lockean texts themselves were capable of conservative interpretation, not at all threatening to those who wished to preserve the hierarchical order of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century England. Locke was not the evil genius of democracy depicted by late eighteenth-century pamphleteers. However, by the late eighteenth century radicals, whose arguments were basically Lockean, had

⁵² Clark, *English Society*, 46.

considerably broadened (or distorted) his ideas.⁵³ Bowles thus found himself in conflict with Lockean ideas and it is this which justifies the selection of Locke as a pattern for comparison in trying to analyse his thought. Burke too could be considered. However, in view of Bowles' closeness to him, this choice would produce less clarity of exposition.

Bowles' most fundamental divergence from Locke no doubt lay in Locke's defence of liberty of conscience and toleration. All religious opinions, Locke held, might be tolerated unless they constituted a danger to civil society. Toleration did not, of course, extend to atheists or Catholics. The former endangered the state by removing the sanctions of morality and the latter by their allegiance to a foreign, and generally hostile prince, the pope.⁵⁴ During the eighteenth century, Catholic apologists had used Lockean arguments and sought to apply them to the case of their co-religionists. Catholics, they argued, were no danger to the state.⁵⁵ Bowles was a pure Lockean in this matter. He opposed, as we have noted above, the admission of Catholics to political power and did so on the Lockean grounds that they were a danger to the state. His most firmly anti-Catholic writing, in his pamphlet of 1807, was entirely Lockean. He offered no arguments against Catholicism, but only Catholics and only in

⁵³ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 71, 318. Also John Plamenatz, *Man and Society: Political and social theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, (London: Longman, 1992), i, Chapter 8.

⁵⁴ Dante Germino, *Machiavelli to Marx: Modern Western political thought* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), 133-5.

⁵⁵ C.D.A. Leighton, *Catholicism in a Protestant Kingdom: A study of the Irish ancien régime* (Basingstoke, Hants.: Macmillan, 1994), 45-48.

so far as they sought admission to power. He was for tolerating their religious practice, but:

... the moment they exceeded that line, and extended to the acquisition of office and power, they amounted to nothing less than a demand, that the general good should give way to private advantage, and that the personal interests of a part of the community should be consulted at the expense of the whole.⁵⁶

Again, he declared:

...that the Test was not to be considered as a penalty inflicted on the professors of any religion, but as a security provided for the established worship: That was no punishment on men to be excluded from public offices, and to live peaceably on their own revenues or industry.⁵⁷

The exclusion of Catholics was a purely political matter. Bowles held the Catholics to be a political danger in themselves; but the principle on which they made their claims was also politically dangerous. It suggested an equality of right in obtaining access to power:

...and that they affect only to wish for admission to the full benefits of the British constitution. But this proves, either that they do not understand the constitution, or that they disingenuously misinterpret it. In what code, my lord,

⁵⁶ John Bowles, *Strictures on the Motions Made in the Last Parliament: Respecting the pledge which His Majesty was under the necessity of demanding from his late ministers; and which, in those motions, was most unconstitutionally made a subject of accusation: In a letter to the Right Hon. Lord Viscount Howick* (London: John Joseph Stockdale, 1807), 44.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

does it appear, that the British Constitution bestows on all descriptions of persons an equal right of admissibility to power and office? ⁵⁸

If Bowles agreed with Locke about Catholics, he also went beyond Locke (though the argument was still Lockean in character) in declaring that all Dissenters constituted a danger to the state. Although Protestant Dissenters suffered some disadvantages in eighteenth-century Britain, they were not nearly as great as the disadvantages of those who could not be called Protestants, either because they were Catholics or disowned a belief in the Trinity, i.e. the Arians and Socinians. This was close to Locke's own view, though he would have gone further and was not unsympathetic to the non-Trinitarians, among whom he himself has sometimes been numbered. Bowles, in contrast, considered any Dissenter in the same category as a Catholic. The criterion for admission to the constitution was not Protestantism, but Anglican Protestantism. It was "the public and established religion" alone which granted "a share in the government or public employments". Others constituted a threat to it.⁵⁹ "[T]he government, in all its departments, [was] essentially Protestant and conformist and all who held office under an Anglican sovereign were to be of the religion established by law."⁶⁰

At the heart of Bowles' divergence from Locke was a matter of theology. In the first place, Locke held that religious truth was accessible to all reading the Scriptures with the aid of their reason. As we have seen above, Bowles insisted on the role of the church as an interpreter of Scripture. Locke moved from this view about how religious

⁵⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 26-7.

truth was reached to a doctrine about the nature of the church. He insisted that it was a free and voluntary society. It thus lacked any real authority to impose its views.⁶¹ Nor, of course, was the state to fulfil this role on the church's behalf.

I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other.⁶²

Bowles' *Claims of the Established Church*, throughout, was a substantial, but not complete rejection of these views. Since the church had

been instituted to be the expositor of Holy Writ...then it is our bounden duty, as well as our highest interest, to submit ourselves to this institution; to obey them that have the rule over us...⁶³

This high view of the church and its authority made its establishment very appropriate. The church was like the state. Just as the state was not a voluntary body formed by contract, so neither was the church. Both had inherent authority and the church's authority was a valuable aid to the state's authority. The state therefore had reason to uphold the ecclesiastical establishment, quite apart from the obligation to uphold Anglicanism because it was true. Bowles was therefore establishmentarian. If Locke himself did not oppose establishment (an unthinkable notion in the seventeenth century), yet disestablishment was a quite natural development of his thought — and, of course, it had been developed that way by Dissenters. All the same, Bowles did not

⁶¹ John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, 135.

⁶² Quote from Locke's "Letter Concerning Toleration" in Germino, *Machiavelli to Marx*, 133.

⁶³ Bowles, *Claims of the Established Church*, 42.

take his opposition to Lockean ideas to extremes. He did believe in toleration in the eighteenth-century sense, that the religious cults of Dissenters should be allowed.

It is his [the magistrate's] duty to support a religious establishment, in order to preserve his people from the fatal effects of irreligion; and, in so doing, he will, of course, give the preference to his own religious persuasion, which he considers as most consonant with the truth. But it is also his duty to remember, and in this country he does remember, that religion is a concern between God and the soul, in which he is not made an arbiter; and that it does not belong to *human* authority to judge for man in such matters, or to restrain him from worshipping God according to the dictates of his own conscience.⁶⁴

We may now summarise the relationship between Bowles and Locke in matters relating to religion. Bowles was willing to accept Locke himself (as opposed to his late eighteenth-century followers) in some respects. He agreed that Catholics were a danger to the state. He agreed that the practice of religious cults, provided that they were not a danger to society, should be allowed. However, in fundamentals, Bowles thought very differently from Locke about religion and this led him to a very strong establishmentarian position, which was by no means a natural outcome of Lockean thinking.

The influence of Locke on the radical strains of thought of the late eighteenth century was most conspicuous in the celebrated matter of contract theory. According to Locke, government was built by the consent and trust of the ruled, and could thus be said to have been created by them. The ruler and the ruled were tied by a contract, which required that rule would be for the good of people. From this contract arose the rights of the people, including a right to recall the power which they had given. Allegiance was conditional on the use of power for the common good and the absence

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2-3.

of a threat to the people's rights. If power was recalled by the people, this was no rebellion on their part, but a just reaction to a violation of the contract.⁶⁵ Upon this theory of Locke, in the course of the eighteenth century, the radicals developed their concept of the sovereignty of the people and the right of resistance. As Joseph Priestley, the most notable thinker among late eighteenth-century radicals, put it:

...if the abuse of government should at any time, be great and manifest; if the servants of the people, forgetting their masters, and their masters' interest, should pursue a separate one of their own; if instead of considering that they are made for the people...

then, he concluded, these servants should be discharged.⁶⁶ With Paine this became a plain defence of democracy.

This was the theory which Bowles rejected, root and branch. Bowles saw where this thinking had led and turned back to reject it at its origins. He rejected Locke, since he had seen the Jacobins.

It is an old Whig doctrine, and was in substance taught by Locke... Jacobins have only built upon this foundation; and thus the system which, in practice has shaken society to its foundation, is actually derived from the theory of Whiggism.⁶⁷

'Whig' had become a derogatory term for Bowles, a concomitant of the revival of the proud acceptance of the designation 'Tory' in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Again he declares:

⁶⁵ Germino, *Machiavelli to Marx*, 145.

⁶⁶ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 199.

⁶⁷ John Bowles, *Thoughts on the Late General Election: As demonstrative of the progress of Jacobinism* (London: F.C Rivington, 1802), 67.

There never was an instance in which Government derived its power from the people. And the Whig system, that Government so originates, and that the people have a right to choose or to change their governors, is the foundation of the Jacobinical system, that the sovereignty resides in them.⁶⁸

What alternative did Bowles offer to Lockean thought? Bowles was hardly an original thinker; but he was able to draw easily on a powerful tradition, better established than that of the radicals and, when made use of, therefore more likely to be persuasive. And, after all, persuasiveness, and not originality was what this pamphleteer sought. Bowles thus, firstly, rehearsed variations on the familiar eighteenth-century theme of 'balance'. Eighteenth-century Britain gloried in its balanced constitution, which permitted neither absolutism nor democracy.

It is this union which has caused the happiness and splendour of Great Britain and which affords a solid and permanent basis for the freedom of its inhabitants, it is this assemblage which has attracted the admiration of the world.⁶⁹

Of course, this was not an exclusively conservative view. Before the 1790s, those of radical inclination had held that what was needed was a corrective to imbalance in the constitution, to render King, Lords and Commons equal.⁷⁰ Bowles accepted the same basic view, but, confronted with the spectre of democracy, devoted his energies to

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁹ John Bowles, *A Protest Against "T. Paine's Rights of Men" addressed to the members of a book society, in consequence of the vote of their committee for including the above work in a list of new publications resolved to be purchased for the use of the society* (London: T. Longman and G. Nicol, 1792), 19.

⁷⁰ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 248.

defending the Crown and the aristocracy. It is noteworthy that in replying to Paine, Bowles began with a defence of the monarchy. It is not surprising, in view of the Revolutionary threat of disorder he perceived, that he emphasised the role of the Crown in the context of the need for a powerful executive arm of government. Since he preserved order, the monarch was the bulwark of English liberties.⁷¹ He emphasises the need for hereditary, rather than elective monarchy. This prevented any interruption of government, with the attendant danger of disorder. Hereditary succession further gave the king a natural authority. This he contrasted with the authority of the usurper.⁷² This fitted ill with his acceptance of the Glorious Revolution; but like the Tories of the late seventeenth century, he was content to abide by the arrangements of Divine Providence.

Bowles, in his attack on Paine, next in his pamphlet, moved on to a defence of the aristocracy and its role in government, arguing:

... that a mixed government and limited monarchy require not only a gradation of rank, but also an intermediate legislative order, interposed between the monarch and the popular representatives, which depending for its own preservation on that of the other, two branches, is rendered thereby the natural guardian of both, and an inseparable barrier against the encroachment of either.⁷³

⁷¹ Bowles, *Protest against Paine*, 14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 15-6. See also, Bowles, *French Aggression, proved from Mr. Erskine's "View of the Causes of the War": with reflections on the original character of the French Revolution, and on the supposed durability of the French Republic* (London: J. Wright, 1797), 145.

⁷³ Bowles, *Protest against Paine*, 18.

Bowles also formulated the notion of balance in more theoretical terms, using classical models — ultimately Aristotelian. The British monarchical constitution represented a *via media* between despotism and anarchy. Neither, of course, was desirable. Despotism restrained men from becoming free; but anarchy rendered them unworthy and unfit to be free, and this was worse.⁷⁴ The two were not equally objectionable. Bowles, as he looked at France, had no doubt which was the "much greater evil." Thus, in repeating Burke's warning about the outcome of the Revolution, he said:

Anarchy, moreover, the evils of which are too great to be lasting, cannot fail to terminate in a despotism, far more severe and galling than would be endured, if it were not an exchange for a much greater evil. For nothing less than such a despotism can control the furious spirit of anarchy. So that one of the effects of anarchy is to render the mind of a people slavish, and to eradicate even a wish for liberty; of which a neighbouring country now exhibits a most awful proof.⁷⁵

Since despotism was the lesser evil, it should be endured. Bowles used this as a subsidiary argument for passive obedience.

Certain that anarchy was the greater evil, its contrast with the British *via media*, rather than despotism's, was the more frequent theme in Bowles' writings. This can be seen, for example, in his treatment of the concept of freedom. Bowles' concept of freedom was essentially that of Burke.

...the liberty I mean is social freedom. It is that state of things in which liberty is secured by equality of restraint, a constitution of things in which the liberty of no man, and no body of men and no number of men can find means to trespass on the liberty of any person or description of persons in a society. This kind of

⁷⁴ Bowles, *The Real Grounds of the Present War with France* (London: J. Debrett, 1793), 9.

⁷⁵ Bowles, *Progress of Jacobinism*, 30-1.

liberty is indeed but another name for justice, ascertained by wise laws, and secured by well constructed institutions.⁷⁶

Bowles rejected the definition of freedom offered by his radical opponents: individuals acting according to their wills. This was a "licentious freedom", which was, in truth, destructive of the constitution, law in general and true freedom, for example, of the press.⁷⁷ Under such licentious freedom the populace

...unavoidably become so wild, ungovernable, and vitiated, that nothing but the strong hand of Arbitrary Power can bring them into any kind of regular subjection, or restore their capacity for the enjoyment of orderly freedom.⁷⁸

Positively, Bowles' understanding of liberty was tied to order, law and government.⁷⁹

...liberty operating as a real, an universal, and a permanent blessing — founded in law, the equal and inviolable birthright of every individual — giving a manliness and an energy to the national character, and being the source as well as the security of our greatness, prosperity, and happiness as a people.⁸⁰

Just as conducive to anarchy as licentious liberty was the notion of equality promoted by the radicals. Lockean contract theory required that the individuals entering the original contract be free and equal, i.e. they were free in a state of nature. Bowles, like other conservatives, bluntly contradicted this. God clearly did not in fact create men equal. Their circumstances and abilities varied. Social organisation was required to reflect the Divine Will. It was nonsense to demand equality of political

⁷⁶ Quoted from Burke in Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 286.

⁷⁷ Bowles, *A Short Answer to the Declaration of the Persons Calling Themselves The Friends of the Liberty of the Press* (London: J. Downes, 1793), 14.

⁷⁸ Bowles, *Real Grounds*, 10.

⁷⁹ Bowles, *Progress of Jacobinism*, 30. See also Bowles, *Protest Against Paine*, 23.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

rights where there was no God-given equality. Equality being thus unnatural, its imposition could only produce injustice and disorder. In any case, inequality had further benefits. There was religious advantage for those on the lower rungs of society, in learning to submit to the divine will and acquire humility.⁸¹ Religious imagery came easily when Bowles discussed the matter of equality and inequality. Thus, adapting St. Paul's thought in the Christian scriptures, he described society as a body. The head was constituted by the higher orders of society, which directed the whole.⁸²

From his rejection of the radicals' concept of equality came Bowles' rejection of any proposal for an extensive parliamentary reform. True, Bowles opposed such reform, in part, because he saw it as a mere cover for the real design of the Jacobins. It was not reform, but Revolution that they sought.⁸³ However, there was also more principled opposition to parliamentary reform, albeit of a commonplace conservative kind. We find, for example, conventional defences of the notion of virtual representation and assertions of the impossibility of departing from a representation based on property.⁸⁴

Bowles' discussion of the balanced constitution gave him a good deal of common ground with the radicals — enough to allow apparently meaningful debate with them. In reality, his interpretation of the concept of balance rendered real contact with the radicals impossible. In any case, it was not they whom Bowles sought to influence. His desire was to harden opinion against them and thus he used the commonest of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁸³ Bowles, *Progress of Jacobinism*, 15.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

assumptions, those likely to appeal to the greatest number of readers. Bowles, in reality, was willing to pick up any argument against the evil of Jacobinism. Influences new and old can be detected in Bowles' writings.

We find him, for example, enthusiastic about the Burkean notion of prescription, endorsing heartily the belief that: "...people will not look forward to posterity who never look backwards to ancestors". The British constitution achieved its singular excellence only because it had developed over time and incorporated the nation's experience.⁸⁵ Again following Burke, he held that the constitution was an organic entity and would thus no doubt continue to incorporate the national experience and evolve towards a further degree of excellence.⁸⁶ Related to this belief in prescription was the rejection of constitutional innovation — constitution making, after the manner of the French Revolutionaries. The evolved, matured constitution, shaped to the needs of the nation could not be set aside by the thought of any individual or group of individuals, using abstract principles. This Burkean notion may be seen, more basically, as a rejection of the individualistic rationalism of the Enlightenment. A consequence was the rejection of the notion, at least as the Revolutionaries stated it, of natural or human rights. Rights came only from the real, existing laws of individual communities. Bowles makes the point constantly.

Our grand and constant object should be to preserve and enforce the true spirit of the Constitution, we should resort to that alone for an explanation of our rights, regarding it as our polar star, not only to direct and regulate in all cases

⁸⁵ Bowles, *Protest against Paine*, 6.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

of difficulty and danger, but to be our constant and invariable guide through every part of our political course.⁸⁷

However, older ideas than those of Burke are in evidence in Bowles' works. We can, for example, detect the influence of the important seventeenth-century political writer, against whom Locke wrote, Sir Robert Filmer. The basic assertion of Filmer's *Patriarchia*, that it was impossible to choose one's government, just as it was impossible for children to choose their fathers, occurs here and there in Bowles.⁸⁸ As in Filmer, this is presented as a monarchist doctrine.⁸⁹ Allegiance was thus not a matter of voluntary contract; rather it was natural. This acknowledged, Bowles was willing to allow 'natural rights,' though they were very different from those of the Revolutionaries. He held:

... that the Rights of Man which they [the Revolutionaries] sought to establish and to inculcate, were not those rational and salutary rights, both of Sovereign and subject, consisting in the right to protection on the one side, and to allegiance, respect, and submission on the other, and prescribing to each corresponding duties as the condition of its respective claims— no such rights were to be found in their code; but instead thereof the denial of all rights on the part of the Sovereign, and the assertion of the right of disobedience, insurrection, and rebellion, on the part of the People.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁸ See, for example, John Bowles, *Thoughts on the Origin and Formation of Political Constitutions: Suggested by the recent attempt to frame another new constitution for France* (London: T.N Longman et al., 1796), 14.

⁸⁹ Bowles, *Protest against Paine*, 17.

⁹⁰ John Bowles, *Farther Reflections Submitted to the Consideration of the Combined Powers* (London: T.N. Longman et al., 1794), 16-7.

Conclusion

John Bowles represents an interesting strand of the English religio-political thought of his era. He represents intransigence in the face of the Revolutionary changes which threatened Britain in the wake of the Revolution in France. That he adopted that position is not surprising: he was representative of his age. Britain had been, for a number of decades, moving in a more and more conservative direction. We know of others who shared his principled, moral hostility — and hence intransigent attitude — to the Revolution. There were, for example, those, often distinguished and senior Anglican churchmen who held that the Revolution was the work of the Antichrist. It is not possible to say how widespread acceptance of views like those of Bowles was. Within the ruling elite, some certainly regarded the war as a crusade against the forces of evil, as Bowles did; but those actually responsible for the conduct of the war seem to have taken a position that was less ideological and more political. Beyond this, we should note how widespread the support for the loyalist movement, with which Bowles was closely associated, was on the eve of the declaration of war. Bowles may be said to have held an extreme position; but it was not an uncommon one.

The period after the French Wars was, throughout Europe, a period of conscious reaction, though there was much pragmatic acceptance of change as well. The intellectual underpinnings of this are usually sought in the great conservative intellectual figures at work during the revolutionary period itself, such as Burke and de Maistre. Bowles reminds us that there was also much unoriginal, eclectic writing in support of their conservative or reactionary doctrines. Furthermore, behind this writing, we can see the network of popular beliefs to which it appealed and also an

intellectual tradition of political thought of very diverse origin, but much of it religious.

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