

Revolutionary Reports: French News Coverage in the Bristol Press, c.1792–1848¹

Owen Jackson

I

Burke . . . sees his “world” threatened by a new linguistic revolution in which old words are torn from their historical context and emptied of their historical meaning. These words are then “filled” with the “new” revolutionary meaning. In Burke’s writings there is a correspondent connection between the new revolution in France and the new revolution in language.

Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language*.²

The linguistic contribution of the French revolution to British discourse has been ill served by political and cultural histories of the period. Studies of Britain’s reaction to 1789 remain almost defiantly untouched by the methodological and theoretical implications of the ‘linguistic turn’, focusing upon language only when illustrative of more ‘concrete’ concerns. The extensive literature on the ideological debate of the 1790s is a useful case in point. The ideological contours and impact of that debate have been exhaustively examined, as have the various material formats through which it was conducted.³ Yet comparatively little has been written on the constitutive force of the language in which those arguments were couched.

There are some notable exceptions. In *Burke and the Fall of Language* Steven Blakemore reconfigures the Burke-Paine debate as a struggle between rival theories of language over the very meaning of the eighteenth-century.⁴ Two later works by the same author explore the role of other participants in this revolutionary-inspired linguistic battle and the ways in which they sought, both ideologically and linguistically, to come to terms with the Terror of 1793–94.⁵ Meanwhile, in *The Politics of Language*⁶ Olivia Smith examines those radical writers who, recognising

the hegemonic nature of language, sought to develop a *written* vernacular appropriate to their democratic message. Once again the Revolution is portrayed as pivotal, providing both the stimulus to, and the audience for, this new participatory language.

Taken together, these studies make a persuasive case for the political importance of language, and for the centrality of the French revolution to contemporary debates on the subject. Blakemore and Smith are, however, stronger on the politics of language than they are on the language of politics. The linguistic battles of the 1790s are fascinating, yet the revolutionary contribution to the *content* of British political discourse in that decade has yet to be systematically explored.

The issue also receives only cursory attention in the historiography of the nineteenth-century. Recent years have witnessed a flurry of studies on the political culture of British radicalism which, to varying degrees, address the appropriation of revolutionary language and symbolism. Of these, Epstein's work on the cap of liberty and the dining rituals of Lancastrian radicals, and McCalman's exploration of the political underworld of metropolitan London are deservedly the best-known.⁷ At the risk of homogenising a rich and varied literature, most of these studies approach the British impact of the revolution from the same angle: the presence of revolutionary language and symbolism is acknowledged and explored yet placed very firmly in the context of a deep-rooted and far more pervasive tradition of British constitutionalism.⁸ Focusing very much upon this dominant discourse, what these studies have to say about the 'vanquished' French paradigm is tantalisingly fragmentary.

This preoccupation with constitutional discourse is partly attributable to the fact that recent work on radicalism has been led not by the literature on Britain's reaction to revolution but by that on class formation in the early-nineteenth century. Stimulated by post-material critiques of Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* contributors to this broader debate have increasingly emphasised the constitutive function of political language over economic experience, and the importance of the idioms of a long eighteenth-century over those of a democratic, industrial, and post-revolutionary nineteenth-century.⁹ More interestingly, however, it also illustrates the uncertain way in which the historical discipline as a whole has met the challenges posed by structuralism and post-structuralism. Although the two approaches have produced some interesting and provocative theoretical discussions,¹⁰ their practical application has been hesitant and partial. Fearful of the implications of a synchronic, non-referential conception of language historians have adopted a relational approach, focusing on discursive conflicts between social and political groups. The direct result of

this, as noted above, is that the instability and development of political language has been neglected, and the processes of idiomatic interplay, assimilation, and synthesis left largely unexplored.

Paradoxically this emphasis upon inter-discursive conflict is based upon an over-reaction to a misportrayal of theoretical linguistics.¹¹ In arguing for the arbitrariness of the sign Saussure sought to highlight the referential nature of language rather than to deny it, and to critically analyse rather than blithely assume the relationship between the word, its meaning, and the external world.¹² 'Signifier', 'signified', and 'referent' should not be viewed with suspicion but, where appropriate, adopted as tools which enable historians to examine with analytical clarity the content and development of past discourses which were neither prefigurative nor reflective but rather a crucial element in the complex process of political mobilisation. As noted above, the absence of such an approach from recent studies has resulted in an overly confrontational interpretation of the French revolution's impact on British political discourse. In the last decade of the eighteenth century, and the first half of the nineteenth, those who immersed themselves wholeheartedly in the rhetoric of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*, or who addressed their peers as *citoyen* were clearly few in number. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that these idioms had a more subtle and lasting impact upon analogous British terms. To seize upon a specific example, to what extent were British definitions of 'liberty' informed, modified or reinforced by revolutionary *liberté*? How did that influence change as the Terror receded, and the revolutionary paradigm developed? What role did the democratic connotations of the French idiom play in describing and making sense of the emergence of a more participatory polity in early nineteenth century Britain?

These questions strike at the very heart of the linguistic construction of nineteenth-century politics. One way into this vast topic is through a comparison of the languages used by British newspapers in their coverage of the first and third French revolutions, the deposition of Louis XVI in 1792 and the overthrow of Louis Philippe in 1848. Concentrating on Bristol, a city with one of the most active newspaper cultures outside London, this article will explore differences in the content, tone and structure of reports on these two revolutionary upheavals.¹³ Whilst acknowledging the importance of repetition and familiarity in responses to the overthrow of Orleanism it will be suggested that such differences cannot be explained away by political, social, and philosophical developments in the fifty-six years between Robespierre and Lamartine. As past politics became history an accepted narrative of the French revolution developed which provided a conceptual framework for the discussion

and comprehension of later events. Yet that narrative was written in a political discourse whose own parameters were constantly shifting due to the ongoing interaction of French and British idioms over the period.

II

The broad contours of Britain's reaction to France in the 1790s are well-established. With the radicalisation of the revolution initial indifference gave way to a more hostile response fuelled at the popular level by a mixture of constitutional loyalism and crude gallophobia.¹⁴ Reports in the Bristol newspapers support this interpretation. From approximately 1792 onwards Bristolians were presented with an increasingly negative picture of the revolutionary French state. Interestingly these reports operated within a very specific discursive field which both reflected and reinforced the aggressive loyalism of the message. That field was founded upon the repetition of one simple, yet highly effective, rhetorical device. Throughout 1792 the city's five stamped titles¹⁵ contrasted the distracted state of France with the happy and prosperous condition of Britain in a bid to leave readers in no doubt as to the respective merits of the two polities. Readers of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, for instance, were repeatedly informed of the disastrous state of French affairs in reports of which the following example was typical:

Bordeaux is a scene of disorder, bread is sold there at five sous a pound; an astonishing price! the superior of the Irish seminary of that city, has received orders from the municipality not to keep his chapel open any longer.¹⁶

The inevitable social consequences of such economic dislocation were then reported in the following week's edition: 'several riots were occasioned in Paris during the last week, by the discontent of the populace upon the increasing price of sugar'.¹⁷ At the beginning of March the *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser* attempted to quantify that discontent:

French assignats now lose 70 per cent. It is expected that the loss will shortly be cent per cent. The monthly deficit has been, for a long time, rather more than 30,000,000 livres! The extraordinary bank has furnished the Treasury with nearly 2,000,000,000 livres since the Revolution, or 80,000,000 sterling!¹⁸

The magnitude of these figures would have overwhelmed the *Gazette's* readership. This, however, merely served to accentuate the underlying political point, following the revolutionary lead set by France would

result in national, and individual, poverty on an unimaginable scale. A report in an edition of *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal* for December put the case even more explicitly. It listed the starvation of 30,000 artisans at Lyons, and the scarcity of bread at Rouen as being 'among the . . . disasters which have arisen to the people of France, from the madness of their present Government'.¹⁹

Significantly, this repeated insistence upon the poverty of the revolutionary model was matched by equally frequent references to British prosperity. Again, these reports were common to all titles and appeared throughout 1792. For example, in its first edition of the year the *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser* remarked:

At a time too, when almost every Empire and State in Europe is convulsed with internal commotion, Britain happily enjoys the most profound domestic tranquillity, equally springing from and secured by our inimitable Constitution.²⁰

A later edition of the same title reiterated the point, noting that, 'the prosperity of Britain never was so great as at present. The increase of trade, of the revenue, and of the credit of the empire, fully evince the pleasing fact'.²¹

These reports obviously had some factual basis. The distracted and impoverished state of France under the Legislative Assembly, and the recovery of British finances under Pitt's administration were undeniable.²² Yet the repeated, formulaic contrasts drawn between the two suggest that these articles also operated within an overarching, polarised discursive framework. The structure of this discourse reinforced its content. Differences in the fortunes of Britain and France were accentuated, and in some instances created, by their respective association with its positive and negative poles. As a result it was extremely rare for a newspaper to post a report on the state of either nation without emphasising the other's relative poverty/prosperity somewhere else in the same edition. Each nation acted as the logical justification for the condition of the other. Britain was happy, tranquil and prosperous precisely because it had not succumbed to the principles of the French Revolution. By the same token the fearful, lawless, and poverty-stricken state of France followed axiomatically from the fact that it was not governed on the constitutional model of Britain.

Given its discursive role, this binary opposition of Britain and France took little account of the ongoing development of the revolutionary paradigm. The revolution's more violent episodes intensified rather than modified its use, and as a result the content and form of revolutionary news coverage remained substantially unchanged throughout the 1790s.

Time after time the downtrodden citizens of France were juxtaposed against the happy subjects of Britain, property was pitted against poverty, and licentiousness against freedoms. Naturally, there were strong echoes in these reports of several older discourses. Most obviously, these critiques of republican France drew upon the well established, and inter-related, vocabularies of British constitutionalism, and gallophobia.²³ Notwithstanding this point, the binary framework outlined above should not be dismissed as being simply the form which gallophobic discourse took in the 1790s. Such an explanation fails to convey the intensity and scope of what was a specifically *anti-revolutionary* discursive field. Discontent as opposed to prosperity, an unrelenting rabble against a nation of loyal subjects; agitation, tranquillity; violence, peace; disorder, order – these dualisms were not crude assertions of national superiority so much as tools in a Manichaean struggle between right and wrong. Revolutionary reports dealt in ideological absolutes. National debt, starvation, and food riots were not transient difficulties. A healthy revenue, low taxation, and individual affluence were not enjoyed cyclically by all nations. They were synonyms for different ideologies in a discursive field which brooked no middle ground between its French and British poles.

The hegemony of this anti-revolutionary discourse within the Bristol newspapers must be stressed. Far from being confined to news reports, it dictated the content and structure of poems,²⁴ letters, and literary miscellanies in each of the city's five titles.²⁵ More importantly, it transcended context and time to provide an overarching framework for a wide variety of stories which were often only tangentially connected with revolutionary France. For example, it was a common ploy amongst the Bristol newspapers to trawl through history linking often disparate events into a linear, anti-revolutionary narrative. All subtlety was obliterated as even relatively minor details were rewritten in the stark, schematic language of the 1790s. This was particularly true of the early years of revolutionary figures. *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal*, for instance, reported that during the American war Paine had been court-martialled for '*peculation and embezzlement*'. It then led readers to the inevitably partisan conclusion that, 'such is the moral character of a man who arrogantly sets up as Legislator of the world! No wonder *he* should labour for the overthrow of *law*, to whom *law* has been such an enemy'.²⁶ The *Bristol Mercury* and *Universal Advertiser* added a similarly teleological gloss to the pre-revolutionary career of Marat, with a dash of local colour for good measure:

It is more than probable that the celebrated *Marat*, now so famous among the National Assembly in Paris, is one and the same person

with F.C.M.G. Maratt Amyatt, M.D. alias Dr. Francis Maratt, who followed his business some time in Bristol as a Quack Doctor and was a prisoner in Bristol Newgate for a debt of 32 l.²⁷

The range of reports which, although unconnected with France, operated within this discursive framework is equally striking. Articles on Fox's Libel Bill, constitutional reform, and the abolition of the slave trade were all located within this wider debate on the French Revolution. So pervasive was the French paradigm that it provided the horizons of what was politically thinkable in 1792. Domestic political debate and reportage followed an agenda set by revolutionary France.

Of course, a binary, anti-revolutionary discursive framework was not peculiar to the Bristol newspapers.²⁸ Indeed, the secondary literature on Britain in the 1790s is littered with a seemingly endless number of dichotomies: loyalist, revolutionary; precedent, innovation; history, philosophy; Burke, Paine; comic, picturesque; sublime, beautiful. Yet crucially, a close reading of the Bristol newspapers also reveals a higher, previously unexplored, plane of linguistic loyalism. Whilst news coverage operated within an essentially binary framework, in 1792 the language in which individual reports were constructed was similarly two-dimensional. Although political terminology appeared frequently in the city's titles, it gained meaning only by association with one of the two discursive poles. 'Democracy' was axiomatically 'bad', whilst 'aristocracy' was intrinsically 'good'. On their own, references to 'liberty', 'equality', 'citizenship', 'hierarchy', and 'civil liberties' were curiously anaemic, their definitions typically undeveloped. In semiotic terms, the boundary between the 'signified' and the 'referent' was often indistinct, thereby reducing the 'signifier' to little more than a vacuous label. The point is lent clarity by a brief consideration of the treatment of 'liberty' within *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*. In the edition for 30 June, for example, the term appeared in a political context on five separate occasions. Yet a closer reading reveals the actual *concept* of 'liberty' to be at once everywhere and yet nowhere, as illustrated by the following passage:

ENGLAND – what a happy contrast, opposed to France, is to be found in the felicitous state of this country, where Liberty, instead of being a savage and destructive monster, inspiring terror throughout the land, and making itself known only by its excesses, is a real universal, mild, and permanent blessing – founded in law – the equal and inviolable birth-right of every individual – giving a manliness and energy to the national character; and being the source as well as the security of our greatness, prosperity and happiness as a people!

Who is there of the most clamorous for *Rights*, that will point out an instance in which the liberty of a single individual can be, with impunity, invaded in this country? Where is the power that can deprive the British subject of the protection of the laws? Shall we listen, then, with complacency, or without execration to those, who counsel us to exchange the state of mild and rational freedom of tranquil happiness, for savage ferociousness, intestine dissensions, outrageous violence, and external warfare?²⁹

The framework of the report is by now familiar. Two interpretations of 'liberty' are identified, each tied firmly to the diametrically opposing poles provided by Britain and France. Interestingly, the semiotic components of those terms are similarly polarised, an effect achieved by the conflation of the 'signified' with the 'referent'. For example, the terms used to describe both the consequences and properties of British liberty are strikingly similar. On the British model liberty is 'universal' and 'mild' and results in a polity which is in turn 'mild', 'rational' and 'tranquil'. In marked contrast French *liberté* is 'a savage and destructive monster' which produces 'savage ferociousness, intestine dissensions . . . [and] outrageous violence'.³⁰ At both poles the signified and the referent are interchangeable, a discursive device which was repeated throughout the year in each of Bristol's five titles. The effect is a consciously circular argument in which the British polity is championed and the revolutionary paradigm discredited without subjecting either to close examination. The British nation is a happy and prosperous one because of the liberty provided by its constitution. That this liberty exists is then proven by the evident prosperity and tranquillity of the British state.

The component parts of other key political terms were similarly manipulated within the Bristol press. In the following passage, for example, a typical instance of French savagery was attributed to 'the levelling system'. The political details of that system are not examined, nor is it ever explained what in that system inherently led to the reported incident on the streets of Paris. Instead the article displays the logical circularity which characterised the majority of revolutionary reports. The inherent evil of the doctrine of *égalité* is illustrated by the 'fate of the English gentleman' in Paris, whilst that individual's misfortune is in turn proof of the folly of revolutionary abstractions. Again there is an inexorable progression from signifier to referent, from the word to its effect.

The following may be depended upon as a fact: – Such great advocates are the French for the levelling system, that they cannot, nor will suffer any one to appear in the nation above a common man; an

English gentleman, well known in this country, being one day at Paris with his usual attendant servants, he attempted to ride in his phaeton through the streets, but was, by the populace, pulled from his carriage, and a halter put round his neck, and actually had the other end thrown over the lamp iron in order to be drawn up, at which instant his banker happening to be coming by, and fortunately recognizing his friend in that dreadful situation, he stepped to the spot and harangued the parties, declaring, he knew the person well, and assured them he was a man intirely of their own sentiments and had spent part of his fortune to support their cause, on which he was immediately released.³¹

Whether the signified was omitted, suppressed, or conflated with the referent, depended on the specific term and the context in which it was being used. It was relatively easy, for example, to portray *égalité* in a relentlessly negative light, given that in Britain this political sense of the term had neither historical precedent nor contemporary analogue. However, liberty's long political lineage meant that it was an altogether different proposition, and its revolutionary equivalent was accordingly subject to more complex and varied treatment.³² The important point to note here, however, is the importance of these linguistic sleights of hand to Britain's broader reaction to revolution.³³ The reduction of key political terms to little more than vacuous labels meant that readers were not provided with the conceptual information to challenge the broader polarisation between the British and French polities. The loyalist case rested on a binary interpretative framework which in turn was founded upon the manipulation of the triadic relationship between signifier, signified and referent.

III

Almost sixty years later the downfall of Louis Philippe reignited British interest in the revolutionary paradigm. From late February through to early April 1848 the pages of the Bristol newspapers were once again full of news from France and endless editorial speculation over the intentions of the new regime and the fate of the deposed king. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this editorial interest was shared, and arguably even fuelled, by the readership. Observing the arrival of the latest editions at the city's commercial rooms, the *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate* commented:

If you have ever seen a woman go into a farmyard, and scatter a handful of corn, the flying and running of a flock of hungry barn-door

fowls towards her would give you something like an idea of the rush that takes place on this occasion; and as there are not enough of copies for all, he that is fortunate enough to get possession of one is followed by some twenty others, as he runs off to devour its contents, just as a duck or hen that had picked up a potato would be run after by the rest of the flock.³⁴

Developments in the regional press since the 1790s meant that these highly-prized papers were, of course, vastly different from the sheets which had carried news of the execution of Louis XVI. Commercial pressures and the growing autonomy of the regional press from its metropolitan counterpart combined to produce a medium that by 1848 was wilfully and calculatedly heterogeneous.³⁵ Collectively the Bristol titles covered the full range of the parliamentary political spectrum from the unapologetic Toryism of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* to the enthusiastic Liberalism of the *Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser*. In between these two political extremes stood the broadly conservative *Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser* and *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate*, and the mildly Whiggish *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*. Notwithstanding such partisanship, in March 1848 the renewed spectre of a revolutionary France united the city's newspapers once again in an explicit and sustained rejection of the French example. Crucially, however, that anti-revolutionary message was sited within a significantly more complex and sophisticated discourse than it had been in the 1790s.

The point is usefully illustrated by the *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate's* coverage of French events in its edition for 18 March 1848. The opening passage of its editorial section presages a rather formulaic critique of developments based upon the interpretative framework of the 1790s:

"LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY"

The intelligence received daily during the week from France, presents a most deplorable commentary on these three talismanic words. All business in abeyance – alarm throughout the country – private banks breaking – the National Bank of France suspending, for the present, all payments in specie – capitalists trying to get clear out of the country with their capital – those who have substance there vainly endeavouring to realize – foreigners flying home – the wealthy living in momentary dread that general confiscation will follow general bankruptcy – the middle classes afraid of the *sans culottes*, and the "bettermost" members of the National Guard remaining under arms in order to protect themselves and their substance from a Socialist mob. A feverish unrest – racking anxiety – a nightly and daily looking

forward to something worse – doubt, distrust, embarrassment, want, on all sides – comfort and security nowhere. Such are the results of a victory in which the national virtues of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity have triumphed.³⁶

With crushing inevitability, just two columns later the situation in France was then contrasted with that in England:

The best place for Englishmen at this moment is England: talk as they like about Italian skies and Parisian gaiety, England, with all her atmospheric faults and social dullness, is the safest place to be in Europe at the present moment – they cannot have carnivals, but they can have comfort – balls do not abound here, nor barricades either; and when a storm is brooding over the Continent, it is a consolation to know that the barometer of the British Funds has not sunk below eighty-one and three-quarters. We do not pity the returned exiles, then, under their foreign privations; if they do not find their way back to their country residences, where they had better have been all this time than abroad, even Bond-street and Regent-street will be found more legitimate channels for their money than the Rue de la Paix and the Boulevard des Italiens.³⁷

The structural similarities with reports from 1792 are clear. The extracts operated within a discursive field dominated by the opposing poles of “good” British practice and “bad” French practice. This is not, however, to deny their factual basis. On the contrary, Robert Tombs produces a remarkably similar list of difficulties to support his contention that the new regime’s most intractable problems was ‘to survive an economic crisis that the revolution had both inherited and aggravated’.³⁸ Yet in blithely attributing these ills to the revolutionary trinity of ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’, the *Bristol Times* crossed the line between commentary and critique, reportage and polemic. France undoubtedly was reeling from an economic crisis which saw share values fall by fifty-six percent, and, in the space of just three months, Bank of France reserves decline by seventy percent, and Lille’s industrial output fall by some sixty-six per cent. Yet with their pointed references to liberty, equality and fraternity, the ‘mob’, and the ‘sans culottes’, the passages read less like reports of actual events than an extended list of synonyms for the evils of the revolutionary paradigm. As in 1792 no attempt was made to define these revolutionary concepts/features, or to explain exactly how they resulted in such violence and lawlessness. The movement from signifier to referent was instantaneous, whilst the signified was omitted altogether. ‘Alarm,’ ‘dread,’ ‘fear,’ poverty, bankruptcy and

'confiscation' were the inexorable results of revolution, both in theory and in practice. For all the truth of its observations, the *Bristol Times* drew upon a polarised interpretative framework founded upon the manipulation of signifier, signified and referent. Once again form reinforced, and exaggerated, content.

However, reading further down the editorial it is soon apparent that a rather more complex variant of anti-revolutionary discourse is in operation here. In 1792 revolutionary agency was attributed either to all Frenchmen indiscriminately, or to a rather nebulously defined 'mob'. A combination of gallophobia, monarchism, and anti-democratic sentiment dictated that the only Frenchmen absolved from all guilt were the royal family and the aristocracy. Yet by March 1848 the situation had changed dramatically with the finger of blame pointed firmly at the exiled Louis Philippe. For example, having attacked the revolutionary state and its doctrines the *Bristol Times* then opined:

Had he the courage to remain twenty-four hours longer at his post, France would have been saved from the trouble, distress, depression and danger into which it is now thrown. It was the people of substance who, for their own sakes, and to save the nation from anarchy, placed the sceptre in his hands; and the people of substance, if he had not so pitifully relaxed his grip, would have kept it there; but . . . he has basely betrayed them, and sacrificed France to save the remnant of a life more eventful than honest.³⁹

The prominence of Louis-Philippe in the anti-revolutionary critiques of 1848 varied with the political persuasion of individual titles. Nonetheless, the vilification of the former King was a discursive ploy which featured in all the Bristol newspapers at some stage. The *Bristol Mirror* insistently and repeatedly argued that Louis-Philippe had provoked the insurgents by reneging on the guarantees of the Charter. Moreover, though it did so infrequently, even the staunchly monarchist *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* participated in the general condemnation with its jocular announcement that, 'The King of the French has shown himself to be such a perfect humbug, that the phrase "not worth a filip" is by common consent to be changed to "not worth a Louis-Philippe."' ⁴⁰

Condemnation of Louis Philippe was soon overtaken by subsequent events. The June days, for example, occasioned a return to centre-stage for the Parisian 'mob'. Nonetheless, his treatment in March 1848 articulated a fundamental truth about the development of anti-revolutionary discourse over the period from 1792. Whilst operating within broadly the same parameters in 1848 critiques of French affairs were markedly less stark and schematic than similar reports written fifty-six years earl-

ier. To seize on one specific area of comparison, reports on the activities of Parisian crowds were no longer axiomatically bloody affairs. That is not to say that expressions of fear and contempt for the 'mob' were absent from the pages of the city's papers – the massacre in the *Rue St. Honoré*, for instance, was roundly condemned as 'lamentable'.⁴¹ Yet these types of reports were routinely interspersed with conflicting accounts which signified a more nuanced appreciation of French affairs. Of particular interest are a series of articles supposedly written by Jean Boeuf (père) for *Felix Farley* under the heading 'A FEW NOTES ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION BY ONE ON THE SPOT'. In the first of these Boeuf remembered a London journalist who had made up a story about a murder at Footscray in Kent thereby fooling all his colleagues/peers who promptly wasted much time searching for sensational new leads. He continued:

I am satisfied in my own mind, Friend Felix, that this same Foot's cray man must have been hard at work in Paris during the past week. I cannot bring myself to doubt that it was he who measured so accurately that standing pool of blood fifty yards in length – or that he alone turned up that modern *oubliette* – a lump of mortar – wherein was found a member of the Chamber of Deputies entombed with an *ouvrier*. He must have been the man who fought side by side with Achmet in his fez – his ubiquitous and vigilant eyes could have alone discovered the "*mort à Guizot*" traced with sanguinary finger on the hotel wall:– to say nothing of the statuesque national guards and sentimental *gamins* with which the more severe narratives have been plentifully relieved.⁴²

Boeuf's sarcastic asides on 'the standing pool of blood fifty yards in length', and 'the member of the Chamber of Deputies entombed with an *ouvrier*,' clearly mocked the caricatured view of the "poor French example" which had been so dominant in 1792. The underlying message of these reports was nonetheless overtly anti-revolutionary. As such these articles reinforce the earlier point. Although the overarching framework was essentially unchanged, *within* that framework political coverage was more ambiguous and heterogeneous in 1848 than it had been in 1792.

Such interpretative subtlety was also present in editorial considerations of the prospect of revolutionary upheaval in Britain. Commenting upon the riots in Glasgow and Manchester, for example, the *Bristol Times and Bath Advertiser* calmly stated, 'Any kind of political change or struggle in France is sure to create a slight ruffle on the surface of society in this country, and draw forth from their obscurity into

momentary and mischievous activity, characters that at any other time would be unable to create the most partial excitement.' It then continued:

However, nothing that has as yet taken place is sufficient to shake our confidence in the good sense and good conduct of the populations generally of the towns throughout England. Wherever there is any distress, and a demagogue to take advantage of that distress, by fomenting mischief and inflaming discontent, it will not be difficult in any large place to get a sufficient number foolish or infatuated enough to interrupt local tranquillity, at a time when recent events in France have naturally caused some excitement. But, on the whole, we believe the people are indisposed for and feel convinced of the inutility, folly, and wantonness of outbreaks, for which there is no political pretext, and which every person, of every politics, with an ounce of property, have an interest in suppressing, and will eventually and effectually suppress, to what height soever riot may for a moment run.⁴³

There is a significant difference in tone here from that used in analogous articles in 1792. Granted, the argument of the piece is unchanged: events in France are still portrayed as providing a poor example to the happy and prosperous people of England. Yet though the poles of the discursive framework remained the same, the ideological ground between them was shortened and redrawn under a series of more subtle and complex contours. By 1848, appeals to the British constitution on the one hand, and stereotypically negative images of the French on the other, had lost much of their former stridency and hysteria. Predictions of the apocalyptic consequences of British radicalism were also less hegemonic than they had previously been. Where the debate of 1792 was dominated by theatrical references to 'tumult and disorder', 'criminal and wicked purposes', 'alarming and dangerous consequences', and the 'subversion of all regular government',⁴⁴ fifty-six years later there was the rather nonchalant acknowledgment of 'a slight ruffle on the surface of society in this country'. In May 1792 the proclamation against seditious writings urged all British subjects 'to avoid and discourage all proceedings, tending to produce riots and tumults',⁴⁵ while the Bristol press was full of reports on the prosecutions of Dr. Priestley and various publishers of Paine for seditious libel. By 1848, however, the *Bristol Mirror* was typical in its more considered and realistic assessment of the impact of France upon the British polity:

It is an old story that, whenever France is in commotion, the English

must either be in a state of attraction or repulsion to their active neighbours. French revolutions excite our people. French Wars have generally called us into the field as their most formidable adversaries. . . To get up a great revolution in England, which should throw the Paris one into the shade, was an impossibility; so, not to be altogether eclipsed and out of fashion JOHN BULL must needs have two or three on a smaller scale.⁴⁶

Even the immediate threat of a pro-revolutionary gathering in nearby Bath did not occasion a uniform return to the histrionic, ideological polarisation of 1792. With admirable restraint the *Bristol Times* reasoned: 'A meeting, it is announced, is to be held at Bath on Monday next, for the purpose of congratulating the French people, and we dare say a similar demonstration will be thought of elsewhere. And let them by all means congratulate as long as they like; but let them also conduct themselves in a manner that when the meeting is over, we can congratulate them on having kept the peace. A political right to meet is not a personal right to plunder.'⁴⁷

By 1848 political coverage in the Bristol papers, though anti-revolutionary, was markedly more considered and complex than it had been in the 1790s. Significantly, these differences in content and tone were accompanied by a parallel development in the linguistic construction of the reports. Put simply, over the period to 1848 there was a discernible change in the triadic relationship between the signifier, the signified and the referent. The point is illustrated by a brief consideration of the differing treatment of 'liberty' and *liberté* in editions of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* for 1848 and 1792. For example, under the heading of 'THE NEW FRENCH REVOLUTION,' the paper's editorial for 26 February 1848 argued:

We indeed may instruct other countries in the principles of civil and religious liberty; they must however be transfused into action elsewhere before they exert immediate and practical influence on the destinies of mankind. . . France has not been slow to follow us in the career, but the people of that country are too impulsive, too quick in their resolves, for anything like the steady and continuous progress which has characterised the advance of liberty in Great Britain. Freedom there runs into anarchy at one moment, and sinks into despotism the next; but still, despite of these oscillations, every year something is gained. The Revolution of 1830 was an advance upon that of 1789. The Revolution of 1848, again, will no doubt be an improvement upon that of 1830. It is a question whether Louis Philippe will be King of the French this day next month. He would be a bold man

who would venture a prediction one way or the other. The structure of corruption which he had reared with such painful art has crumbled about his ears. The people declare they will be no more deceived with the mere shows and semblances of constitutional government.⁴⁸

Once again, the basic framework of the extract is clearly organised around the two poles of 'good' British practice and 'poor' French practice and thus recalls the anti-revolutionary discourse of 1792. Within that framework the criticism of Louis-Philippe and the differentiation between the revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848 confirm many of the observations made above on the increasing sophistication of anti-revolutionary debate. Of greater significance, however, is the evidence that this report provides of the increasing complexity not only in the content of the debate but also in its linguistic construction. In 1792, for example, the interchangeability of the 'signified' and the 'referent' was a conscious discursive device. British liberty was thus invariably portrayed as being 'universal' and 'mild' and resulting in a polity which, tautologically, was 'mild,' 'rational,' and 'tranquil'. Admittedly, *British* liberty is little better defined here. It is pluralized and split into its 'civil' and 'religious' components which, it is argued, developed slowly and steadily over a number of centuries of British history. French *liberté* and its relationship to the British model, however, attracts more specific discussion and definition. Its heterogeneity is also recognised with implicit distinctions drawn between the versions of 1789, 1830 and 1848. The properties of the Orleanist variant are essentially ephemeral, dismissed as 'mere shows and semblances' and associated with such terms as 'quick,' 'impulsive,' 'oscillating,' and 'deception.' Having specified the flaws in the French model of liberty its results are then portrayed as alternating uncontrollably between anarchy and despotism.

Granted this is hardly a detailed deconstruction of the French notion of *liberté*, either in practice or theory. Yet there is greater depth here to what is *signified* by French *liberté* than in the discursive circularity of 1792 which depicted it as 'a savage and destructive monster,' causing 'savage ferociousness'. Moreover, there is a greater sense of internal fluidity to the discourse of 1848 than its predecessor of 1792. In the anti-revolutionary debate of 1792 two sets of signifiers and referents were clearly discernible reflecting the diametrically opposing poles of "good" British practice and "bad" French practice. The signified, meanwhile, was either omitted, suppressed, or conflated with the referent. Though still operating within a bipolar framework the discourse of 1848 displayed a greater sense of ambiguity and even convergence between those poles as the manipulation of signified declined. In 1792, for instance,

there was great semantic distance between the 'mild' nature of the British model and the 'violence' of the French. By 1848, however, the juxtaposition of 'impulsive' with 'steadiness,' and 'quick' with 'continuous' indicates that that distance had lessened considerably.

This basic discursive difference between the idioms of 1792 and 1848 is further reinforced by the following week's editorial in *Felix Farley*. Again a relatively nuanced understanding of French events is conveyed:

Let us give the Republican Government credit for the highest tact and the most consummate prudence and it will require a period of at least four years to restore to the country that feeling of security which is the life and soul of all commercial operations. These are the chances on one side, on the other we cannot but look with alarm upon the present position of the Provisional Government, with regard to the population of Paris. We cannot but fear that a *régime* which has risen up like a shadow may depart in the same manner. We do not see yonder the oak of five centuries' growth, with its roots cast deep into the soil; but the creature of a night, a mere mushroom thing, without hold or stay. We look on, with a feeling of doubt and insecurity, when we have read Proclamations in which half-a-dozen literary and scientific men agree to discard all the rules of economic science, and by their own proper exertions to feed the population of a capital, and, for aught we know, of a country as well. We have read about and talked of this Fourierism and Communism, and we know not what, as of shadowy unreal things, which had no immediate bearing upon the practical affairs of men. If the Canons of Fourier are to be the Bill of Rights of the People of France, we must frankly confess we cannot estimate consequences, nor rightly appreciate their present situation.⁴⁹

Many of the themes of the earlier passage are echoed here. Though the message of the piece was broadly anti-revolutionary, the Orleanist regime was criticised and the linguistic distance between the British and French paradigms shortened. What is particularly interesting, however, are the references to Fourierism and Communism, 'and we know not what, as of shadowy and unreal things, which have no immediate bearing upon the practical affairs of men'. Such ambiguity would not have been possible within the discursive framework of 1792, the signifiers 'Fourierism' and 'Communism' would have been reductively drawn to the 'poor French' pole and dismissed accordingly. Here, however, the absence of the 'signified' produces the confession that, 'we cannot estimate consequences, nor rightly appreciate their present situation,' thus indicating its centrality to the discourse. Of course in 1792 it was the

very *absence* of the 'signified' that was central to the maintenance of a consciously circular and non-participatory anti-revolutionary discourse. By 1848 the anti-revolutionary message of the discourse breaks down without the 'signified,' it now matters that the 'signifiers' are little more than meaningless labels and the author is forced to admit his incomprehension.

IV

Q.—What is a Revolution?

A.—The turning of a State or Nation upside down.

Q.—What is object of a Revolution?

A.—The destruction of things that are.

Q.—What is the pretence of a Revolution?

A.—The substitution of things that can never be.

Q.—What are the qualifications of a Revolutionist?

A.—In morals, envy, hatred, revenge, and falsehood; in affairs, bankruptcy.

Q.—What are the operations of a Revolutionist?

A.—Assassination and plunder.

Q.—What are the weapons of a Revolutionist?

A.—Pikes and pistols for the mob; for himself, his tongue and his heels.

Q.—Who are the gainers by a Revolution?

A.—Vagabonds, adventurers, and rogues of all sorts.

Q.—Who are the victims in a Revolution?

A.—Every body who had anything to loose.

Q.—What is the glory of a Revolution?

A.—Confusion, and the more confused the better: no law, no order; no capital, no credit; every man's hand against his neighbour, and every man's heart only on getting all he can from the general scramble.

From 'The Revolutionary Catechism:
A Hint Taken from the French'⁵⁰

Written in the aftermath of the June days this mock catechism from the *Bristol Mirror* was one of the more explicit pieces of anti-revolutionary polemic to appear in the Bristol titles during 1848. Drawing heavily on the charged language and imagery of the 1790s it made absolutely no provision for the political developments of the intervening fifty years. The insurgents of 1848 were tarred with the same brush as the *Septembrists* of 1792, their aims and activities associated with the same chilling

terms – violence, lawlessness, poverty, and plunder. The catechism's portrayal of Britain was similarly atavistic. The best antidote to such revolutionary madness, it argued, was Protestant godliness and loyalty to the British sovereign and constitutional system of government. Governed on these principles Britain could not be anything other than peaceful and prosperous.

This piece was of course far from unique in mobilising the prejudices and invective of the 1790s to make sense of the horrific news from the Pantheon, the Barrière d'Italie and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Throughout the nineteenth century French political debate was similarly impoverished when faced with the spectre of renewed revolutionary violence.⁵¹ Significantly, however, even in the bloody summer of 1848 anti-revolutionary discourse in the Bristol press failed to match the hysteria and stridency of the original debate of the 1790s. The point is neatly illustrated once again by the *Bristol Mirror's* satirical catechism. For all its bluster, there was a degree of nonchalance in its penultimate homily which revealed not only the heightened sophistication of anti-revolutionary discourse by 1848 but also one of the main reasons behind this development; over a sixty-year period, British comprehension of the revolutionary paradigm had been repeatedly refined under the force of no fewer than three French uprisings:

Q.—How does a Revolution end?

A.—After the loss of all things the people come again to their senses, and the Constitution is restored as it was before, only with the laws a little more severe, to prevent similar disasters for the future.⁵²

The link between increasing exposure to, and more sophisticated comprehension of, the revolutionary paradigm was a close one. By the early years of the nineteenth-century reports on French events displayed a more informed understanding of revolution as a transient, reversible state of affairs. Ideological hysteria had been replaced by drier references to the 'enemy' and the aggrandising ambitions of the 'French tyrant'. Similarly, the nuances of the majority of revolutionary reports in 1848 owed much to the fact that Louis-Philippe was not a despot but a king with a charter, whilst Lamartine was obviously no Robespierre. Yet, on their own, political developments in nineteenth century France offer an inadequate explanation of the increasing linguistic complexity in the content and structure of revolutionary news reports. To suggest otherwise would be not only to adopt a passive, reflective view of language, but also to miss the complexity of Britain's linguistic reaction to revolution. Burke's notion of a brutal logomachy, a war between the idioms of

Hanoverian Britain and revolutionary France is too sudden and violent to be of much explanatory value here. Despite the oppositional framework of the 1790s, the two were not inherently incompatible. In practice, neither side managed to land a decisive blow. As the violence of the Terror receded, and past politics became history, revolutionary idioms gradually became better defined within the Bristol papers, whilst analogous British terms regained many of their pre-revolutionary ambiguities and nuances. The Bristol newspapers suggest that the linguistic impact of the revolution upon Britain may be more usefully thought of as a complex, and sometimes contradictory, *process* of idiomatic interplay.

That process was further complicated by the fluidity of revolutionary language in nineteenth-century France. By the standards of the *ancien régime*, the political rhythm of post-revolutionary France moved at a bewildering pace. The second republic followed hot on the heels of the provisional government, Orleanism, the restored Bourbon monarchy, the Empire, and the first Republic. At each and every turn, French political discourse was reconfigured and its key concepts redefined. *Liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* carried markedly different connotations in 1848 than they had done some sixty years earlier. Yet although the interplay between French and British idioms undoubtedly developed over the period, it was not an uncomplicatedly linear process. In 1848, as in 1792, the Bristol newspapers dealt in images and interpretations of revolutionary France as much as in its facts. Titles approached the revolutionary past in a pragmatic manner, referencing different episodes according to the immediate political point they wished to make. Little regard was paid to either the chronological accuracy or the prevailing French usage of individual idioms. Later interpretations of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* supplemented rather than supplanted older definitions. The aristocratic 'liberties' of the *ancien régime* were not neatly superseded by the revolutionary *liberté* of 1792, neither was this understanding of the idiom subsequently displaced by the interpretations of 1812, 1832 and 1848. Over time each revolutionary signifier accumulated multiple signifieds, providing those who sought to explain, report, and influence developments in nineteenth-century Britain with an extremely rich idiomatic canon.

The point is usefully illustrated by the treatment of the revolutionary concept of *égalité* in the Bristol newspapers between 1792 and 1848. Of all the revolutionary idioms, *égalité* was most frequently singled out as the specific focus of editorial hostility to developments in France. Across the period the concept was attacked with a consistency and vigour which identified it as the central, irreducible element of anti-revolutionary discourse.

Anti-egalitarian to the end, the Bristol newspapers nonetheless became progressively more sophisticated in their critiques of the idiom over the period 1792 to 1848. As the signified became more explicitly defined, editorial objections to *égalité* acquired greater subtlety and precision. Titles from the 1830s and 1840s are interesting for the way in which they differentiated between *égalité*'s economic, political, and social components, and graded their hostility accordingly. At the risk of over-generalisation, the Bristol newspapers moved from an indiscriminate rejection of any form of *égalité* in 1792, to a more focused hostility to the term's material connotations in 1848. Again, this owed much to ongoing exposure to the revolutionary paradigm as it developed over the first half of the nineteenth century. References to *égalité* by successive French regimes had proved, in practice, to mean little more than a quite limited commitment to some form of political and social *equity*. Increasingly the true egalitarian threat was perceived to be a material one, posed not by the post-revolutionary administrations but by those outside the corridors of power, specifically the socialists and the communists.

Yet outside reports on revolutionary France, egalitarian language played more varied and ambiguous roles in a range of economic, political, and social contexts. These may be divided into three main groups. Firstly, *égalité* was used as a tool of impoverishment, of silencing an opponent by accusing them of extreme democratic or redistributive sentiments, and generally associating them with the violence of the revolutionary paradigm. This particular use of the idiom was in one sense firmly rooted in the 1790s in that it drew heavily upon a caricatured understanding of Jacobin egalitarianism. However, whereas previously *égalité* had been of the revolutionary 'other' it was now used to identify and attack 'others' in a wide variety of domestic settings. Secondly, there is evidence to suggest that older, British debates on equality and equity were transvalued by the revolutionary idiom. Articles on the slave trade, of particularly pertinence to Bristol, often distinguished either implicitly or explicitly between a pre-revolutionary, Christian understanding of equality as an equality of all humans in the face of God and a revolutionary *égalité*. Faced with an analogous revolutionary signifier the nuances of the British idiom were simultaneously defined and redefined.

In the absence of fresh violence on the other side of the Channel these negative readings of *égalité* played best with a politically conservative audience. In Bristol's more liberal titles an emphasis upon the political, legal, and meritocratic aspects of *égalité* enabled the idiom to play a more positive role in political reports and commentaries. This was particularly evident during the reform bill crisis when under editorial by-lines championing the example set by Orleanist France favourable

references to and uses of a politically democratic *égalité* met, challenged, and refined some of the cornerstones of eighteenth-century discourse, specifically the insistence upon the superiority of the British constitution and the popular benefits of virtual representation.

The interplay between equality (in its pre-revolutionary British sense), *égalité* and equity was a complex mixture of impoverishment, rejection, assimilation, and reconfiguration, and enjoyed only a loose relationship with developments on the ground in France. This was also true of other key revolutionary concepts such as *liberté*, *fraternité*, and *citoyenneté*. Collectively these idioms played a constitutive role in British political debate, the complexity of which has not been addressed by current studies of the period. Within the Bristol newspapers that complexity was particularly evident in the coverage of the aftermath of the riots of October 1831, the worst outbreak of urban rioting in Britain since the Gordon riots of 1780.⁵³ Dedicated histories of Bristol have been keen to avoid a simplistic association between the events of October 1831 and the national reform movement. Latimer, for instance, whilst stressing local support for the Bill also acknowledged that Bristolians had 'special reasons for their discontent'.⁵⁴ Several more recent studies have tended to shift the emphasis more firmly towards those 'special reasons', specifically the inert and oligarchic nature of the city's corporation.⁵⁵ Support for both interpretations may be found within the pages of the Bristol newspapers, though not within the pages of individual titles. Contemporary newspaper interpretations of the riots were clear, consistent, and dependent upon a title's party political affiliation. Interestingly, these readings were supported by an intriguing combination of pre-, post-, and anti-revolutionary idioms.

Rather predictably, a hostile portrayal of political equality was central to conservative condemnations of the riots. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* drew a direct link between democracy and mob violence in its assertion that, 'we have never concealed our opinion that the Bristol Riots arose out of the agitation of the Reform question, and that the intemperate speeches of the Rioters incited to violence'.⁵⁶ In the following week's edition, the paper returned to the theme, attributing the riots to 'this age of canting liberality and puling philanthropy'.⁵⁷ Such anti-democratic sentiments were bolstered by frequent and insistent references to the spectre of revolutionary France. *Felix Farley's* unfounded yet powerful accusation that 'agents', 'emissaries' and 'tall men in long cloaks and fur caps' from Orleanist France had been active in the riots was only the most blatant of a series of attempts to silence the reformist case by associating it with the violence and 'otherness' of the revolutionary paradigm.⁵⁸ On 28 January, the paper then catalogued the crimes of Grey's

reforming ministry and, in terms which in 1792 and 1848 were reserved for the condemnation of revolutionary France, argued:

Surely we have all had enough of them – they have ruled us a full year – a year for ever accursed and for ever memorable – memorable for diplomatic contempt abroad, and political agitation at home – memorable for commercial, public, and private distress – for military slaughter in our streets, and for judicial execution in our Gaols – memorable for Fire, Sacrilege, Spoliation, and Blood!!⁵⁹

Unsurprisingly, notions of political equality were portrayed more positively in those titles which were supportive of parliamentary reform. According to the *Bristol Mercury*, reformers were not inherently violent or revolutionary; on the contrary, the riots had resulted from a lack of reform. The true 'revolutionists' were thus the anti-reformers:

The favourers of revolution are those who, opposing every alteration which the increased intelligence of the age may demand, neglecting every warning which the spirit of the time may give them, and defying the hourly accumulating force of public opinion, seek to stem an irresistible torrent by twining rushes in its path, until the feeble check is swept away by the rolling tide, and Reason herself is drowned amid the hubbub, unheeded and unheard. If Reason had been consulted in time, she would have said, "If you desire the waters to enrich your pastures instead of inundating them, give a course to the stream which must flow on for ever; if you stay it, it will overflow its banks, and the influence which, if exercised legitimately, would have produced a richer fertility, will thus be changed into an instrument of destruction."⁶⁰

The *Bristol Mercury* went on to state quite openly that anti-reformist obduracy had been responsible for the successive upheavals in France. The French had repeatedly fought for a change of system, only to be presented with a change of masters. Their revolution had thus 'yet to be consummated'.⁶¹ In an extract from the *True Sun* which appeared in the same edition of the *Mercury* interesting use was then made of the *bonnet de la liberté* in order to warn reformers against being satisfied with similarly partial victories in their own struggle:

Are we to imagine that the hour of agitation has passed, that the storm has done its work, that the waters of Reform will of themselves purify the temple into which they have burst, that the reign of peace has begun upon earth, that having struggled long we may sleep

soundly, and (to use a handy metaphor) make a night-cap of the emblem of liberty.⁶²

In the more heated atmosphere of February 1832,⁶³ the less radical *Bristol Liberal* prudently avoided positive appeals to French precedent. Its preferred revolutionary analogy was between Sir Charles Wetherell, the detested Recorder of Bristol and vocal anti-reformer, and Napoleon, on account of the former's hasty flight from the city.⁶⁴ Taken from the *Monthly Magazine* the closing lines of this ode made less explicit, and far more ambiguous, use of the revolutionary paradigm:

Patrons of habits loose – and looser reasons;
 So loose that even Tories fear to trust 'em;
 Denouncer of high treasons
 Against the hoary majesty of custom;
 An ex-pounder of the libel laws,
 Levelling the tree of freedom with "old saws";
 The fabled nibbler, the illustrious Mouse,
 Burning to set the British lion free
 (As Castlereagh
 Was wont to say)
 From the vile net of Liberty.⁶⁵

The newspaper's pro-reform, anti-Tory, anti-Wetherell stance was conveyed through an interesting combination of idioms and imagery. The 'liberty' referred to here was clearly not the eighteenth-century, aristocratic variant.⁶⁶ Its mere association with the reform movement suggested a more participatory definition. That said, through the juxtaposition of nationalist sentiment and popular fable, 'liberty' was once again portrayed as a quintessentially *British* concept. In this respect the passage recalled the polarised discourse of 1792. At the same time, however, the reference to 'the tree of freedom' carried obviously revolutionary implications, and at the very least betrayed an empathy with the French paradigm. As in the eighteenth century then, 'liberty' conjured up a wide range of sometimes conflicting connotations. The crucial development to note here is the addition of *liberté* to those signifieds by 1832.

V

'We know that English practice is good – we know that French theory is bad'.

Arthur Young.⁶⁷

The idiomatic complexities of the reports from 1832 demonstrate the need for the binary interpretative approach which dominates current studies of Britain's reaction to revolution to be substantially revised. The range of pre-, post-, and anti- revolutionary idioms evident in the Bristol newspapers suggests that the key issue is not the well-established dominance of a British constitutionalist over a French revolutionary tradition but rather the way in which the idioms of the latter interacted with analogous British terms, simultaneously extending and revising the range of idiomatic choices available to political actors and commentators, and thereby pushing back the linguistic parameters of nineteenth century debate. The revolutionary paradigm was ever-present in the Bristol newspapers between 1792 and 1848, not so much as the subject of reports, but more importantly in the idioms and discursive practices in which those reports were framed. The obvious structural parallels between the anti-revolutionary discourse of 1848 and that of 1792 should not be allowed to obscure more subtle differences – the more nuanced appreciation of French events, the rise of the signified, and the diminishing distance between the discursive poles. These were the result of a long process of idiomatic interplay between the two polities which has not been fully appreciated by previous histories of Britain's reaction to revolution.

Epstein's work on the symbolic repertoire of British radicalism is tantalisingly suggestive of the benefits of this sort of synthesised approach to the period. Concentrating on visual symbolism he demonstrates that, although British radicalism was essentially constitutionalist, its imagery was irrevocably transvalued by the French revolutionary example. This lent traditional symbols, such as the cap of liberty, an ambiguity which was exploited in a wide variety of contexts.⁶⁸ Paradoxically, however, his later work on radical language lacks a similarly integrated approach.⁶⁹ Despite opening with an emphasis upon 'the density, the richness, of the political repertoire available to popular radicals',⁷⁰ it soon revisits the familiar binary ground of the debate over the relative importance of constitutionalist as opposed to revolutionary discourse. Given that the article is essentially a riposte to Thompson's emphasis upon the pre-eminence of Paineite radicalism this is admittedly unavoidable. Nonetheless, as a close reading of the Bristol newspapers demonstrates, this preoccupation with the discursive dominance of one tradition over another is something of *une question mal posée*. From a linguistic perspective the dominance of overt constitutionalist reasoning over overt revolutionary reasoning is of less importance than the processes of idiomatic interaction, assimilation, and rejection which occurred between them. It is here that the Saussurian concepts of the signifier and the

signified come into their own, their pragmatic use concentrating attention on the interface between words and their meanings and thus enabling the contribution of revolutionary France to the multivalency of British political discourse to be examined in depth.

In offering some snapshots of that contribution this article represents something of a historiographical call to arms. On its own discourse offers as unsatisfactory an explanation of the formation of the nineteenth-century polity as the actions of 'great men', economic developments, and the formation of social classes. Nonetheless, it is only by exploring the idiomatic building blocks of nineteenth-century discourse that the economic, political, and social ends to which they were put can be properly understood. Overlooked by current historiography this line of inquiry is not merely corrective but also potentially transformative in that it challenges traditional periodisations of Britain's reaction to revolution. Previous studies have typically focused on a period loosely bounded by the publication of Burke's *Reflections* and the end of the Napoleonic wars.⁷¹ A linguistic approach undermines this periodisation and demands that British historians, like their French counterparts, view 1789, 1830 and 1848 as part of a revolutionary continuum. The interplay of French and British idioms was a complex, ongoing process which did not end with the cessation of hostilities with Napoleonic France. On the contrary, British political discourse was still coming to terms with the idioms of the first revolution when it received news of the second and third upheavals.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented to the long eighteenth-century seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, in December 1999. I am grateful to those who participated in the subsequent discussion for their comments and questions. I would like to express particular thanks to William Doyle, Chris Evans, Steve Poole, and Hannah Barker for their advice and guidance during the preparation of this article.
2. Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event* (Hanover, 1988), p.90.
3. Alfred Cobban, *The Debate on the French Revolution 1789-1800* (1950); Gayle Trusdel Pendleton, 'The English pamphlet literature of the French Revolution anatomized', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 1, 5 (1978), pp.29-37; Maurice J. Quinlan, 'Anti-Jacobin propaganda in England, 1792-1794', *Journalism Quarterly*, 16 (1939), pp.9-15; and Philip Schofield, 'British politicians and French arms: the ideological war of 1793-5', *History*, 77 (1992), pp.183-201, are all useful.

4. Blakemore, *op cit.* Chapter six offers a particularly provocative discussion of Burke's thoughts upon the linguistic significance of 1789.
5. Steven Blakemore, *Crisis in Representation: Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and the Rewriting of the French Revolution* (1997).
6. Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984). Free of the fashionable jargon which punctuates Blakemore's texts, this is essential reading for those interested in the linguistic developments in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain.
7. James Epstein, 'Radical dining, 'toasting and symbolic expression in early nineteenth-century Lancashire: rituals of solidarity', *Albion* 20, 2 (1988), pp.271-91, and 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: symbolic practice and social conflict in early nineteenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 122, (1989), pp.75-118; Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Oxford, 1991). See also H.T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1985) and Margot Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), particularly chapter two. I particularly grateful to John Belcham for giving me access to his unpublished paper 'Radical language, meaning and identity', presented to the *Past and Present Conference*, July 2000.
8. This position is most clearly expressed by Epstein in 'The Constitutional Idiom', chapter one of his volume *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford, 1994). 'The French Revolution made available a new political vocabulary, a new style, a new universalism, at once suggesting the extraordinary possibility of slipping the shadow of the past and reversing pre-existing arrangements of power in the act of beginning the world anew. Yet what is striking about early nineteenth-century British political reasoning, both elite and popular, is how rooted debate remained within a discourse about the "real" meaning of the English constitution and its history', p.9.
9. The key texts and stages of this debate are usefully summarised by Marc W. Steinberg in his introduction to *Fighting Words: Working-class Formation, Collective Action, and Discourse in early Nineteenth-century England* (Ithaca, 1999), pp.1-22.
10. See, for example, Penelope J Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), particularly pp.1-29; Martin Jay, 'Should intellectual history take a linguistic turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer debate', in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L Kaplan (eds.), *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), pp.86-110; Raphael Samuel, 'Reading the signs', *History Workshop Journal*, 32, 3 (1991), pp.88-109; *idem.*, 'Reading the Signs II', *History Workshop Journal*, 33, 1 (1992), pp.220-51.
11. The term 'misportrayal' is used advisedly because the suspicions of empirically-minded historians were initially aroused not by linguistic theory itself but by the extravagant totalizing claims made on its behalf by its proponents. For a discussion of this in the context of Gareth Stedman Jones' non-referential approach to the language of Chartism see David Mayfield

- and Susan Thorne, 'Social history and its discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the politics of language', *Social History*, 17, (1992), pp.165–88.
12. This point is explored in greater depth by Mayfield and Thorne, *op cit.*, pp.179–81.
 13. Madge Dresser and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996) is the best single volume history of the city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After this those seeking some sort of overview are forced to return to John Latimer's detailed but worthy volumes, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), and *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887). For a detailed history of the Bristol newspaper press in this period see D F Gallop, 'Chapters in the History of the Provincial Newspaper Press, 1700–1855' (University of Reading M.A. thesis, 1952).
 14. Useful introductory studies to Britain's reaction to the French revolution include: Cobban, *loc.cit.* H T Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution 1789–1815* (1989); Colin Jones (ed.), *Britain and Revolutionary France: Conflict, Subversion and Propaganda* (Exeter, 1983); and Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge, 1991).
 15. These were: Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal*, Bonner and Middleton's *Bristol Journal*, the *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, the *Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, and Sarah Farley's *Bristol Journal*.
 16. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 18 February 1792, p.2, column 1.
 17. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 25 February 1792, p.2, column 1.
 18. *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, 8 March 1792, p.3, column 1.
 19. *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal*, 1 December 1792, p.2, column 1.
 20. *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, 5 January 1792, p.4, column 3.
 21. *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, 6 February 1792, p.2, column 5.
 22. For France see William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1990), pp.181–96; and Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge, 1997), pp.64–92. For Britain see Eric J Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State – Early Industrial Britain, 1783–1870* (1993), pp.18–44.
 23. See, for example, Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740–1830* (1987), especially chapter 8. Although its focus is more specific, M.C. Rouyer's 'Images de la France dans la Presse Feminine Britannique au XVIIIè siècle', in *L'Angleterre et la France au XVIIIème Siècle et à la Veille de la Révolution: Premières Journées Bordeaux-Bristol, Colloque, les 14 et 15 Avril 1989* (Bordeaux, 1990), pp.53–71, is also useful.
 24. Poetry was a particularly popular format for the expression of political opinion in the Bristol press. See for example, 'The Democratic Barber' *Bonner and Middleton's Bristol Journal*, 14 July 1792, p.4, column 2, 'Epitaph, a la mode de Burke', *Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, 6 August 1792, p.4, column 3, and 'Sonnet to Real Liberty', *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 22 September 1792, p.4, column 3. The following example from *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal*, 22 December 1792, p.3, column 5, illustrates perfectly the polarity between the revolutionary and British examples:

FOR SARAH FARLEY'S BRISTOL JOURNAL

O'ER wretched Gallia's compassion mourns,
And seems to hear her bleeding victims groans.
Murder and rapine, Britain's sons disdain,
And turn with horror from the schemes of Paine.
Their gen'rous minds respect their country's laws,
Revere their King, and aid his rightful cause.
Their virtuous toils prosperity shall crown,
And honor, still maintain their high renown.

25. Recent work has questioned the traditional portrayal of the eighteenth-century regional newspaper as an apolitical, 'scissors and paste' reproduction of stories from the leading London titles. See, for example, Hannah Barker's *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in late Eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1998). Acknowledging the metropolitan provenance of many articles Barker argues that a paper's selection of certain stories over others was a crucial means of establishing a political and commercial niche for itself within a competitive local market, p.127. The Bristol newspapers for 1792 suggest that this inter-titular rivalry was suspended in the heat of the ideological and military battle against France. All five were united in their rejection of the revolutionary paradigm and in their adoption of the binary discursive structure outlined above.
26. *Sarah Farley's Bristol Journal*, 29 December 1792, p.2, column 2.
27. *Bristol Mercury and Universal Advertiser*, 12 November 1792, p.4, column 1. The rather sketchy evidence for this is considered by Sidney L Phipson in *Jean Paul Marat: His Career in England and France before the Revolution* (1924), pp.117–35. Phipson broadly agrees with the report. The main point here, however, is the way the story was rewritten in light of subsequent events and anti-revolutionary discourse.
28. Part I of Dror Wahrman's *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995) offers an interesting study of the attempts of anti-war Whigs to break out of the political binarism of the age by encomiastically emphasising the social middle. David Womersley's work on Gibbon is equally interesting here in that it indicates that academic research operated within similar parameters, 'Gibbon's unfinished History: The French Revolution and English political vocabularies', *The Historical Journal*, (35, 1, 1992) pp.63–89.
29. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 30 June 1792, p.3, column 3.
30. By *liberté* I mean the revolutionary notion of liberty, whether or not the signifier appeared in its French translation. To avoid confusion between French and British usages this distinction is also extended to discussions of *égalité* and equality below.
31. *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, 4 October 1792, p.4, column 1.
32. The political currency and meaning of 'liberty' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has attracted much historical attention. Some of the more accessible introductions to this debate include: Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998); Tim Harris, '“Lives, Liberties and Estates”: rhetorics of liberty in the reign of Charles II', in Tim Harris, Paul Seward and Mark Goldie (eds.), *The Politics of Religion in Restoration*

- England (Oxford, 1990), pp.217-41; Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (1990), pp.58-125; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 'Definitions of Liberty on the eve of the civil war: Lord Saye and Sele, Lord Brooke, and the American Puritan Colonies', *Historical Journal*, 32, 1 (1989), pp.17-33. These typify the broader historiography in that they focus upon the political struggles over the history, meaning, and guardianship of the concept. It is, however, important to note that the dominant pre-revolutionary use of the term was far more imprecise, rarely going beyond a vague reference to the aristocratic notion of freedom from specified exactions which was famously celebrated by Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la révolution*. This point is made in greater depth by J A W Gunn in 'A Measure of Liberty', in J A W Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth Century Political Thought* (Kingston and Montreal, 1982), pp.229-59.
33. For a detailed examination of the treatment of the revolutionary idioms of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* within the anti-revolutionary discourse of the 1790s see Owen Jackson, 'Receiving Revolution: the Newspaper Press, Revolutionary Ideology and Politics in Britain, 1789-1848' (University of Bristol, Ph.D. thesis, 1999).
 34. *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate*, 11 March 1848, p.3, column 3.
 35. Barker's observations on the partisan nature of the eighteenth-century press are noted above. It is nevertheless true that the rigorous application of a party political stance to local, national and international affairs accelerated markedly in the first half of the nineteenth century; see, for example, Ivon Asquith, 'The structure, ownership and control of the press, 1780-1855', in George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate (eds.), *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (1978), pp.98-116.
 36. *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate*, 18 March 1848, p.3, column 1.
 37. *Ibid.*, column 3.
 38. Robert Tombs, *France 1814-1914* (1996), p.379.
 39. *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate*, 18 March 1848, p.3, column 3.
 40. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 4 March 1848, p.6, column 2.
 41. *Ibid.*, p.2, column 1.
 42. *Ibid.*, p.5, column 1.
 43. *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate*, 11 March 1848, p.3, column 2.
 44. See, for example, the various loyalist addresses of London, Bristol, Somerset and elsewhere, given in reply to the first proclamation against seditious publications. These were included in all titles in successive editions in June 1792.
 45. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 26 May 1792, p.2, column 1.
 46. *Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser*, 11 March 1848, p.5, column 6.
 47. *Bristol Times and Bath Advocate*, 11 March 1848, p.3, column 2.
 48. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 26 February 1848, p.4, column 6.
 49. *Ibid.*, 4 March 1848, p.4, column 6.
 50. *Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser*, 2 September 1848, p.6, column 2. Dated 'Bath, August 1, 1848,' this mock catechism was attributed only to 'P.H.'.

51. See Tombs, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-15.
52. *Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser*, 2 September 1848, p.6, column 2. The point was also explicitly made by 'The three births of France', a lengthy poem taken from *Punch* and reproduced in an earlier edition of the *Bristol Mirror* 4 March 1848, p.6, column 1.
53. Officially twelve rioters were declared dead, though the unofficial figure is thought to have been far higher. A large area of the city centre was destroyed, and the extent of the damage may be gauged from the fact that over £60,000 was paid out in compensation to private property owners alone. Susan Thomas' pamphlet, *The Bristol Riots*, (Bristol, 1974) provides a concise and useful account of these events. See also Geoffrey Amey, *City Under Fire: The Bristol Riots and Aftermath* (Guildford, 1979), and John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887).
54. *Ibid.*, p.148.
55. 'There can be no doubt that it was the fate of the city Corporation, and not that of the Reform Bill, which was really at issue in Bristol in 1831. In the atmosphere of urgency and excitement created by the Lords' rejection of the Reform Bill, Wetherell's arrival in the city was bound to bring people out onto the streets, but it was not any great passion for Parliamentary Reform which inspired respectable citizens to allow this demonstration to escalate into a dangerous riot', Thomas, *op.cit.*, p.26. Wetherell was the city's unpopular Recorder and a vocal anti-reformer. His visit to the city has traditionally been viewed as having precipitated the riots of October 1831. See also Amey, *op.cit.*, pp.14-5. Meanwhile, two excellent recent studies, Mark Harrison's, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790-1835* (Cambridge, 1988) and Jeremy Caple's, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain* (Lampeter, 1990), continue to emphasise the causal importance of the national reform movement.
56. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 14 January 1832, p.3, column 6.
57. *Ibid.*, 21 January 1832, p.3, column 2.
58. Poole, pp.82-5. Despite this discursive function, parallels between the revolutionary paradigm and the Bristol riots were privately drawn and sincerely believed. For example, the entry for 11 November 1831 in Charles Greville's diary read, 'the country was beginning to slumber after the fatigues of Reform, when it was rattled by the business of Bristol, which for brutal ferocity and wanton, unprovoked violence may vie with some of the worst scenes of the French Revolution, and may act as a damper to our national pride. The spirit which produced these atrocities was generated by Reform, but no pretext was afforded for their actual commission; it was a premature outbreaking of the thirst for plunder, and longing after havoc and destruction, which is the essence of Reform in the mind of the mob'; quoted in E A Smith (ed.), *Reform or Revolution? A Diary of Reform in England, 1830-2* (Stroud, 1992), p.101.
59. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 28 January 1832, p.3, column 3.
60. *Bristol Mercury, Monmouthshire, South Wales and West of England Advertiser*, 9 June 1832, p.3, column 3.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*, p.4, column 4.

63. Due to its proximity to the trial and execution of the rioters. There are no extant copies of the *Bristol Liberal* available after the edition for 3 March 1832.
64. Thou art the martyred knight who fled in fear,
A blazing city, to be roasted here –
The lawyer who, in common, somewhat thrifty
And long inured to smoke, behind him left
One Wig, to fall beneath the strokes of fifty.
What were Napoleon's retreats to thine ?
'Ode to Sir Charles Wetherell', taken from the *Monthly Magazine*, quoted in *Bristol Liberal OR West of England Commercial and General Advertiser*, 11 February 1832, p.4, column 1.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Neatly summarised by Norman Hampson as 'a matter of liberties rather than of liberty, of the exemption of some from the obligations imposed on others': Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime* (1988), p.xvii.
67. Quoted in David Eastwood, 'Patriotism and the English state in the 1790s' in Philp, *op.cit.*, p.149.
68. James Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty . . .', *passim*.
69. James Epstein, 'The constitutional idiom: radical reasoning, rhetoric and action in early nineteenth-century England', *Journal of Social History*, 23, 1 (1990), pp.553–74.
70. *Ibid.*, p.557.
71. This is not, of course, to deny the existence of studies focusing on specific parts of that period. The point is rather that the historiography has failed to move beyond 1815 to consider, as part of a *revolutionary continuum*, the revolutionary examples of 1830 and 1848.