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## Examining the performance and political influence of far right vanguard leaders: the case of Jonathan Bowden

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the life, work, and influence of right-wing artist, writer, and orator Jonathan Bowden. During his life, Bowden was an obscure figure, holding a token position in the British National Party and speaking mostly in front of small gatherings. Since his death in 2012, however, he has become increasingly influential within far-right movements on both sides of the Atlantic. While he remains relatively obscure outside of the far-right, his work has been highly praised by leading voices of the American Alt-Right movement, as well as identitarian leaders throughout Europe. In this article, we not only discuss the importance of Bowden's ideas, such as those related to anti-liberalism, and how they have shaped and inspired the far right in many countries; but we also attend to the importance of the way in which he communicated those ideas through video, further bolstering his overall influence as a vanguard leader.

### Introduction

The West is experiencing a rise in discussion, if not debate, over the future of liberal-democracies – this is occurring with a rise, as well a concern, about whether a postliberal order may emerge and what its consequences may be. In this light, it is imperative that scholars gain an understanding of, and analyse the role and influence of, prominent intellectuals within the far-right that are contributing to this debate. Some far-right intellectuals remain relatively obscure or even forgotten within the far right movement while others appear to be gaining greater and greater influence within the far right and beyond; not only for their ideas as intellectuals, but perhaps also for something more – their further ability to motivate and inspire as leaders of a vanguard movement. This begs several questions, not the least being, what makes someone greater than just another generator of alternative ideas, and more of a leader of a socio-political vanguard? And how might we begin to determine such a particular leader's degree of influence in spreading their ideology?

This paper will put forward a number of propositions that will shed further light on how and why some far right intellectuals might loom larger (i.e. have greater

influence) than others in the marketplace of ideas. The paper begins with an introduction to Jonathan Bowden, a prominent far right activist. Drawing further examples from his career, this paper will then move on to an introduction to his role as a vanguard leader, as well as define some of the role's general objectives. In speaking to the questions above, the paper will then go on to further analyse the political and leadership impact of Bowden's oratorical performances, as well as investigate his lasting, and growing, influence in both European and US activist networks.

The methodology of the paper will be qualitative, focused on the analysis of primary data such as video recorded speeches, as well as interviews with prominent far right activists that were familiar with and, in many cases, influenced by Bowden. In further defining Bowden's influence, as well as broader issues within the far right movement, questions such as 'In what way do far right vanguard leaders contribute to our public understanding of the threats to liberal democracy?' and 'In what sense does their criticism of liberal democracy anticipate current trends on the far right?' will also be addressed throughout.

## **Jonathan Bowden**

Jonathan Bowden (1962–2012) was an illiberal English thinker and activist who became increasingly active in far right circles until his early death at 49 years of age. While he is the author of a number of novels, as well as an artist that worked in both painting and video, he is best known for the speeches that he gave at numerous far right functions. The topics that Bowden covered in his speeches were quite varied and idiosyncratic (especially for a far right activist); for example, a whole series of his speeches attempts to recoup important cultural figures of the past (figures such as Wyndham Lewis, H.P. Lovecraft, and Robert E. Howard) and reclaim them as far right icons. Bowden also often spoke at length about far left figures and, in particular, far left vanguard groups, such as the Situationists, typically mining them for strategies and tactics that could be used by the far right.

Since his passing, Bowden's influence has only grown within the far-right, investing him with an aura of a thought-leader for the new generations. Despite his influence within the far-right over the past decade, he remains somewhat obscure and his activities understudied within the mainstream press and academia; given how well he continues to be regarded by a number of prominent leaders in the far right (more will be said of this later in this article), this gap represents a notable lacuna in the research literature on the far right.

Although Bowden did not leave behind many influential political or ideological texts – most of what exists comes from posthumous compilations of talks organized by friends – his post-mortem celebrity status owes much to the role of technology and the dissemination of his video recorded speeches on the internet. This may be one of the reasons that Bowden has been somewhat overlooked outside of the far-right milieu; to fully understand Bowden and his growing influence in the far-right requires engagement with his speech-giving as performance art. Engaging and entertaining, Bowden's skill as an orator was notable, and he often conveyed strong emotion, as well as a sophisticated sense of humour.

While vanguard leaders of the past were typically relegated to spreading their information to only those that might physically be in attendance at particular meetings, today's vanguard leaders are able to record and share their speeches on media platforms with potentially billions of people. As opposed to earlier forms of communication, such as those that were primarily text-based, these new forms of video communication can also carry with them additional, and often subtle, cues of behaviour related to the speaker themselves; cues that can further bolster charisma and other leadership-enhancing qualities. All this to say that if we are to more deeply understand Bowden's influence, and the influence of many other vanguard leaders today, we may need to look at not only what they are saying, but how they are saying it.

In a recent podcast, Frodi Midjord,<sup>1</sup> a prominent European far right activist,<sup>2</sup> noted that whenever he was feeling down, he listened to Jonathan Bowden's speech on Robert E. Howard.<sup>3</sup> A number of other European and North American far right activists (Illustrated Philosophy/Matthew Drake, Academic Agent, Morgoth),<sup>4</sup> to include many from the former Alt Right such as Greg Johnson,<sup>5</sup> continue to reference and be inspired by Bowden. What might account for this regard, this degree of admiration? How might Jonathan Bowden be different from other far right intellectuals that have espoused similar political ideas?

### **Jonathan Bowden as vanguard leader**

Jonathan Bowden's popularity amongst the far right might lie in factors beyond his political and cultural analysis. His example and ideas about leadership are similarly important. Leadership as a discipline is the study of influence – the motivating of other people to move towards a common goal. A key question that leadership scholars commonly ask is: what behaviours and skills might a person enact that can lead to greater interpersonal, organizational, and societal influence that are above and beyond just ideas alone? In beginning to account for Bowden's lasting and growing influence, it might be helpful to look more deeply at the various leadership-oriented approaches that he regularly employed in his work, approaches such as: displaying self-sacrifice; invoking emotional and aesthetic displays (with concomitant emotional contagion among followers); and, finally, exercising strategic thinking and vision creation. Perhaps the amount and degree to which Bowden displayed these leadership behaviours might explain why he is more revered than some other far right intellectuals who espoused very similar, right wing ideas (but did not display these behaviours as well).

Jonathan Bowden used his real name in his writing and artwork, and when giving speeches. He also allowed himself to be filmed, as the numerous videos of him giving speeches and doing performance art attest. Rejecting anonymity in today's political climate is a dangerous move for someone promoting far right views. Many of the more influential far right personalities that communicate with the public often use a pseudonym; they also tend to further protect their private identities, and personal safety, by refusing to share their image. Bowden did neither, clearly signalling his commitment to his political positions. This commitment, in the face of potential for great losses (financial, physical), can in some circumstances lead to a general perception of great self-sacrifice. It is generally acknowledged in the leadership research literature

that these displays of self-sacrifice have a strong relationship to greater influence and outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Further, Bowden often appealed in his speeches to subordination to causes greater than himself; before the formal beginning of his speech, *Credo*,<sup>7</sup> which he notes is special in that it will include some rare personal anecdotes having to do with recent political confrontations, Bowden remarks that these anecdotes will not contain any names or further details as he is only relating them because of their ‘broader importance – because that’s what matters’. In a time when many political actors today do not often flinch to elevate their own position when given the opportunity, this display of self-control and subordination to larger political issues is notable.

Bowden also took large artistic chances, particularly in his oratory and performance art – he did not play it safe and risked many times making a fool of himself through the creation of very abstract and provocative painting and film. While there are many reasons why a person might take artistic chances, it is clear that he was consciously risking – some would even say sacrificing – his reputation for being taken seriously by the public for the chance to make something that he thought might be artistically important [in interviews, Bowden has discussed exactly this process and intention].<sup>8</sup> This type of boldness and dismissiveness of the opinion of those outside of one’s community can be inspiring to those with underdog status, leading them in turn to greater self-sacrifice.<sup>9</sup>

This charisma gained through self-sacrifice was arguably given an even larger boost by Bowden’s relatively recent and untimely demise. It was widely known in far right circles that Bowden suffered a severe strain as a result of his political activities,<sup>10</sup> and it is generally understood that this helped lead to his early death (the ultimate sacrifice). Other scholars have commented before on the additional boost in charisma that comes with this kind of demise,<sup>11</sup> further lending to Bowden’s overall influence.

Bowden’s artwork further reflects some of the aesthetic choices he made in his speeches; namely, the import of feeling and emotion. Unlike many far right intellectuals that restrict themselves to just coolly relating facts about immigration, etc., Bowden did not hesitate to employ individual anecdotes that suggested what might be the results of these policies for the everyday person. Further, he did not shy away from telling these anecdotes with strong feeling. Bowden also had a commanding voice, and he often modulated it in meeting a particular emotion (such as amplifying it to convey indignancy and anger, or lowering it to convey intimacy and comradery). The effective use of emotion in leadership communication is no small matter of influence. These types of emotional displays are not only important in conveying the seriousness of issues to followers. They are also responsible for helping leadership messages to effectively spread, with emotional contagion between followers helping to transmit leadership vision.<sup>12</sup>

Bowden also often situated these emotional displays within a larger, aesthetic framework. Similar to other vanguard leaders, Bowden was an artist himself and was very knowledgeable about art and the important role of aesthetics in socio-political movements.<sup>13</sup> Unlike some far right intellectuals, Bowden could speak with depth on various artistic trends throughout history, particularly those art movements that later morphed into socio-political vanguards. He was also well aware of the particular strategies and tactics that these political fringe groups used to punch above their political weight and greatly influence the masses.<sup>14</sup> Given the outsized influence these groups have had (the Situationists are often credited with

being the theoretical underpinning to the May 68' revolts in Paris), a solid understanding of how they might have gone from small players to instigators of mass revolt is worth knowing as the leader of a vanguard.<sup>15</sup> This understanding is particularly crucial as attempting to gain greater political influence as a vanguard is rife with challenges.<sup>16</sup>

Bowden spoke frequently about the Situationists, a far left vanguard, and their leader, Guy Debord. Bowden once dedicated an entire talk to a discussion of a far left theoretician (Stewart Home) and his book that covered the evolution of far left vanguards such as the Lettrists and the Situationists (see *Assault on Culture* for more).<sup>17</sup> Drawing from this book, Bowden referred to important intellectuals on the left (such as Gramsci and Paul de Man) and distilled some key tactics (such as deconstruction and detournement) for use on the far right.<sup>18</sup> It is clear from his comments that he not only understood the importance of aesthetics in the promotion of particular political stances, but further understood the tools, tactics, and strategies that some of these artistic vanguards successfully employed to accomplish other socio-political objectives as well, such as provocation and subversion. Given his deep knowledge of these past strategies and approaches, it's not surprising that he would infuse the creation and delivery of his own ideas with these same tools and tactics. As suggested earlier, Bowden's greater influence seems to have come not only from his ideas, but the unique way in which his ideas were transmitted and further leveraged.

This speaks to a very nuanced leadership competency that Bowden also seemed to exercise in his public performances: namely, his ability to think and act strategically – not only as an analyst theorizing about the tenor and direction of the far right as a movement, but also of his own particular position in that movement, to include the moves he should make to be most effective as a far right activist. Bowden well understood his role as a vanguard leader; he gave numerous speeches on far right strategy and once gave an entire talk on the general importance of the far right engaging in specifically vanguard actions.<sup>19</sup> Unlike many in the far right movement that often confine themselves to cool analysis and concrete problem identification (typically of those actions taken by the Left, but sometimes even the mainstream Right), Bowden also hazarded suggestions that were just as often aspirational and emotion-laden, and thus more related to a vision of the future, as they were concrete solutions to everyday problems.

Bowden's strategic navigation of this theory-practice divide – through not only theorizing and commenting on the far right movement's direction and goals, but also by putting these ideas into practice in his speeches and other political activity – is no small task. Vanguard leadership is typically comprised of multiple roles that contribute to helping shift the public's consciousness in the direction of the vanguard's goals.<sup>20</sup> In effect, vanguard leaders need to think and act in an overarching sensemaking function, helping the public to see and accept new political realities. Two key roles of an effective vanguard leader – that of sensebreaker and sensegiver – are particularly important; respectively, one that breaks older causal and/or arguably no longer socio-politically viable links within the public's consciousness, and one that then provides new connections. While each of these roles is interdependent, and thus ideally are all employed by every vanguard leader, the task and dispositional requirements of these different roles varies enough to make it difficult for any one vanguard leader to successfully execute all of them.

For example, while there are obvious exceptions, the sensebreaker is a role more often emphasized by those vanguard leaders taking an activist position of direct, physical contestation with the public, while the latter – the sensegiver role – is more often emphasized by those positioning themselves as a public intellectual in reasonably civil, typically written, discourse with the public. These roles each come with their own requirements as well as their own attendant strengths and weaknesses, making the dual execution of these roles very difficult.<sup>21</sup>

The difficulty in not only bringing these two important roles together, but also in positioning them in such a way as to inform and be further helpful to each other, may be another clue as to why Bowden's influence and appeal has continued to grow on the far right. While no one would argue that Bowden was the most rigorous of public intellectuals, or even that he was the most accomplished of right wing activists, it is clear from his body of work that his theory and practice often informed each other in a synergistic way. As noted earlier, in some of his writings and speeches, Bowden would go on at length as to the importance of leveraging popular cultural forms in political struggle with the far left, often drawing on well-developed theory from academics across the political spectrum; and yet in other venues, he would devote entire, impassioned speeches to the heroic arcs and visceral entertainment of Conan the Barbarian, Beowulf, and TinTin.<sup>22</sup>

Another one of his strengths then, and perhaps a final key to his lasting influence, seems to lie in his ability to bridge his art and activism with high theory in a way that conveyed greater expertise, and widened his audience and influence to include both intellectuals and the greater public. As there are few forms of power available to status quo challengers, the ability to convince others that they are worth following through a display of expertise is an essential task on the road towards greater influence as a vanguard leader.

Moving forward, what might be some empirical support for these sensebreaking and sensegiving propositions related to Bowden's leadership and its potential impact? What might be some evidence that Bowden has had some degree of success in influencing others, particularly important others, as both an intellectual and vanguard leader? And what role might factors such as invoking emotion, employing effective oratorical skills, and displaying self-sacrifice further play in his continued and growing influence?

One way to determine his influence might be to investigate what other influential figures on the far right might have said, and continue to say, about him. In the following sections, we draw from prominent far right activists in both Europe and North America, using both primary and secondary data, to determine what Jonathan Bowden's influence might continue to be, as well as what might be some of the underpinning reasons for this lasting influence above and beyond ideas alone.

### **Jonathan Bowden's influence – the European context**

To fully understand the political influence of Jonathan Bowden on right-wing radical politics in Europe, one has to embed the English intellectual's activism in the basic context of a politics of resistance. Against the paradigm of globalism – as the contemporary expression of universalism – and its driving ideology of liberalism, Bowden stood up as a forceful voice of the counter-Zeitgeist for particularism, rootedness, and ethnic and racial belonging. Bowden was active as a thinker and writer in the wider British

conservative movement since the 1980s (in its more right-wing, ethnocentric dimension). Yet particularly since the turn of the century and his involvement in both the British National Party (BNP; 2003–2007) and the New Right meetings from 2005 to 2012, and also as a speaker in events of the London Forum (in 2011/2012), Bowden's status as a radical-right intellectual has grown exponentially. This growth has been expedited by the spread of his speeches on online video platforms.

For a period, Bowden was also a prominent figure of the BNP, and involved in its daily battles, but such everyday party politics was apparently not congenial to him. The BNP's leader Nick Griffin remembers 'having a meeting with him, sometime after he had joined and become a popular speaker at major meetings. He wanted some sort of position, in order to promote positive awareness of British culture within the party. We agreed that he should become the BNP's "Culture Officer".' As recalled by Griffin, 'He asked for a budget and I suggested an initial £1,000 which would be allocated for him to spend in any way he saw fit. He agreed, although in the event, while he used the title, he never spent any of the money.'<sup>23</sup>

Michael Woodbridge – a close friend who tried to set up a Jonathan Bowden Society and the executor of his estate ('He left his entire estate to me so I have most of his paintings in my possession . . . He had no real wealth, even his mobile home was without value and had to be destroyed') – says that Bowden was 'was much more concerned with the meta-political than with practical day to day politics. That was both his strength and his weakness.'<sup>24</sup> Griffin concurs, explaining Bowden's abandonment of the party with his incapacity to withstand low-level politics. 'Unfortunately, JB's very real intellectualism and passion were not accompanied by the thick-skinned and stubborn bloody-mindedness of a political street fighter,' Griffin says, and after being subjected to 'scurrilous [sexual] rumours,' Bowden resigned from the party, only to informally return briefly to give speeches at meetings and become a strident critic of Griffin, defending the need for a 'cleaned up new branded British National Party.' Looking back, Griffin blames Bowden's hostility on the influence of others who 'used' him to promote a leadership challenge: 'Here too, Jonathan Bowden was on an intellectual plane that often left him oblivious to the realities of the gutter in which all politics lie.'<sup>25</sup>

In fact, as he did in a 2011 speech on Western civilization, Bowden distinguished between 'politics in a more narrow way' and metapolitics, 'the ideas, the philosophy, the culture and history' that gradually have an impact on 'lower-level, more intermediate, more street-political sorts of formulations.'<sup>26</sup> Instead of a fighter for petty politics, dedicated to please or follow the masses, Bowden saw himself as part of an elite, a cultural combatant in the realm of ideas dedicated to transforming the culture and overturning the social and political order. As a metapolitical strategist, Bowden believed that it was in such a battle of ideas that the truly radical and emancipatory possibility for the English and the people of European descent lied – the path to liberation from a ruinous liberal civilization. His broader purpose was the creation of a sort of alternative or dissident school of thought – he stated as much in a New Right meeting in 2009 that 'if [university] seminars existed that manifested the views that are expressed here this group [the New Right] would have no real purpose.'<sup>27</sup> In this aspect, and also in its vanguardism, Bowden's strategy does resemble that of the French Nouvelle Droite's, even if the latter was both better grounded and more consistent and productive. Moreover, although the Nouvelle Droite and the New Right shared the same critique of liberal globalization

and leftist cultural hegemony, the latter was more ethno-nationalist and even racist than its French counterpart – which for the most part had abandoned its early biologicistic frames of analyses. Moreover, the New Right was more inclined to esotericism, constituting perhaps more accurately an expression, in Graham Macklin's words, of an 'extreme-right cultic milieu.'<sup>28</sup>

Speaking about Bowden's influence, Mark Collett, a former BNP youth leader and official and the founder and leader of Patriotic Alternative, says that 'the most important thing we can learn from [Bowden's] work, is that there is a distinct intellectual framework outside of the mainstream and that we should seek to pursue that, rather than attempting to do any deals with the mainstream.'<sup>29</sup> Bowden's metapolitical focus both sustained and facilitated his radicalism, making it easier to be less concerned with the compromise of daily politics, with concessions or adjustment to differences. From this stance derives the axiom that forms the basis of his radical belief system. On issues that traditionally had put the right, in all its variants, on the defensive, pertaining for example to race, colonialism, or the Holocaust, Bowden advocated as an established rule the need to 'step over' - to overcome the reflex response of self-flagellation and not wallow in confessional and repentant ways that only served to weaken it, demoralize it, and surrender its legitimacy and moral authority to its adversaries. This is why Bowden defended as a prerequisite for a new self-assertive right – and the key for a subsequent ideological and political success – a moral U-turn. 'I personally think it's a moral revolution, not anything political, that will save the West ... You only have to change what's in people's minds,' he said in an interview, clearly adopting a sensebreaking frame with the intention of promoting a new mental model of political understanding.'<sup>30</sup>

As a follower of Friedrich Nietzsche, Bowden saw the roots of evil in the hegemonic Christian 'slave morality,' developed by the weak, obsessed with love and sympathy, and enmeshed in feelings of bad conscience and guilt, that should be surpassed by a 'master morality' of the strong, not conditioned by notions of good and evil, but attuned to the realities of life, biology, and nature. Only by pulling back from an inferior and unnatural morality will it be possible to dynamite the foundations of liberalism. 'Liberalism is moral syphilis. And I'm stepping over it'<sup>31</sup> he said in a New Right meeting in 2007 in a speech immortalized by his followers with the title *Credo: A Nietzschean Testament*. Particularly deserving of being stepped over is liberalism's proposition of equality, according to which all people are naturally equal.

Such belief in inequality, in Bowden's view, is what distinguished the real right and the left: 'Right-wing ideas aren't just a bit of flag-waving and baiting a few Muslims. Right-wing ideas are spiritually about *inequality*.'<sup>32</sup> Mainstream conservatives have often been berated for being boring, uncreative, and lacking in radicalism, but Bowden always defined himself as a *revolutionary* conservative who was ready to adopt and promote vanguard positions; in typical Nietzschean way, and influenced by the inter-war German Conservative Revolution, he believed that what was needed was to rescue from the past the moral and spiritual sources to renew the present and push on to a post-liberal future. This is also why some close to him do not see him easily pigeonholed in terms of a left – right dimension. Troy Southgate, the man responsible for Bowden's collaboration with the New Right, had his first meeting with Bowden 'on 16th January, 2005, as I was setting up a bookstall at a meeting in central London ... I had recently established the New Right forum for political dissidents and outsiders of all stripes and Jonathan was our very first

speaker.’ According to Southgate, that ‘whilst Jonathan may be broadly defined as “right-wing”, at times I found him extremely anarchistic and even unclassifiable.’<sup>33</sup>

Asked if Bowden was an original thinker, Eddy Butler, who played a pivotal role in the history of the BNP as a political strategist and is now a member of the political party For Britain, answers, “No. He borrowed heavily from the European Nouvelle Droite, Nietzsche and other influences such as the [1950’s anti-system movement of novelists and playwrights] Angry Young Men, but he was one of the relatively few people in Britain to articulate this.”<sup>34</sup> An estimate of Bowden’s originality is ‘[d]ifficult to say,’ says Woodbridge, ‘because what he said was so obviously true, a bit like the Oscar Wilde quip, when someone answered Wilde by saying, “I wish I’d said that” [and] Wilde replied, “You will, you will”.’<sup>35</sup> And, likewise, Southgate argues that Bowden ‘was never original in his thinking and had no philosophy of his own.’ However, ‘[w]hilst that sounds like an insult,’ he adds, ‘I mean it as a complement in the highest possible sense. Jonathan was first and foremost a teacher, perhaps one of the greatest teachers and orators of our time.’<sup>36</sup>

And here the New Right founder touches upon the widespread vision – at least in nationalist and right-wing circles – of Bowden as first and foremost a leader whose great asset was to serve as an articulator, translator, and promoter of ideas and themes through unparalleled public speaking skills – making him a kind of guide and educator. Addressing the audiences without notes, and with a tendency to go off script, Bowden built fame as a mesmerizing speaker that captivated and motivated his attendees. ‘JB was one of the very few people with whom I shared a platform and found myself thinking “How do I follow that?”’<sup>37</sup> acknowledges Griffin. A combination of words and delivery are at the heart of his reputation as an orator. His live performances were operatic. The former BNP member Matthew Tait, who recorded Bowden’s speeches on a dictaphone (‘the audio recordings on YouTube are all by me’), says that Bowden ‘was very charismatic, loud voice, he often theatrically refused to use a microphone because he didn’t need it . . . He was very theatrical, spoke like a trained actor, sometimes doing the impressions and accents of the people he was talking about.’<sup>38</sup> His success as a speaker did not limit itself to New Right, more elitist audiences, but also to BNP gatherings. Butler says that he ‘was able to pepper his speech with intellectual cultural, historic or political references, which combined with his “posh” sounding voice, went down very well with a generally less well educated, and more working-class audience.’<sup>39</sup> Articulating his own performances from a leadership perspective, Bowden once called himself a ‘mediumistic speaker,’ explaining how ‘speeches are about energy, and are about power, and about how you utilize power and how you channel it.’<sup>40</sup> Southgate remembers that ‘on the podium, in full flow, [Bowden] could seem possessed and often spoke with his eyes closed, as though to retrieve every last detail from the cavernous recesses of his mind.’ The effects on the audience attest to the flow of emotional power, and Southgate noticed how ‘on several occasions that some members of the audience would immediately approach Jonathan as he left the stage, touching him on the arm or instinctively placing their hand on his shoulder. Jonathan acknowledged this, telling me there were people who almost wanted a part of him.’<sup>41</sup>

In his treatise on the education of orators, Quintilian asked ‘if delivery can count for so much in themes which we know to be fictitious and devoid of reality, as to arouse our anger, our tears or our anxiety, how much greater must its effect be when we actually

believe what we hear?’<sup>42</sup> The success of Bowden’s oratory and his subsequent influence, then, cannot be separated from the views and aspirations of an understanding and sympathetic audience – which only enhanced the emotional effect for the people physically present at the time, and even now, virtually, via audio and video recordings often shared through social media. What’s more, Bowden saw this appeal to emotion as crucial in the cultural struggle over winning the people’s favour. In a 2010 interview for an Internet radio station, he vowed to fight the Descartes-ian ‘mind – body split’ saying that ‘the right is more powerful when it appeals as much to the subconscious as [to] the conscious mind.’<sup>43</sup> ‘People will be attracted in the future not by reason,’ he argued in a speech in a 2012 speech in California. ‘They will read up with their reason once they have decided to emotionally commit. The important thing is to get people emotionally.’ The winning formula for the right involved tapping into and releasing powerful, vital forces in issues such as those of identity, communitarianism, and belonging – *that* was the key to connecting at a primal level to the to the majority of people in Western societies.<sup>44</sup>

At the centre of Bowden’s appeal, however, there was more than just a role as an educator able to stir passions – his role as a transgressor (a sensebreaker) also played, and continues to play, a powerful function after his death. It is useful to think about it in terms of power relations and resistance; using James C. Scott’s distinction between the public transcript of the powerful and the hidden transcript of the powerless,<sup>45</sup> Bowden emerges as the voice of a subordinate community that helped to forge and popularize an alternative narrative to the official one in regard to universalism, egalitarianism, liberalism, multiculturalism, and race relations. By breaking taboos, speaking out loud, and articulating what was on many people’s minds, Bowden offered a psychological release against the hegemonic power of the dominant liberal elites. The events and speeches constitute, therefore, a safe space, a social site apart from domination, where a group that perceived itself as being oppressed in their daily lives could celebrate their resistance and defiance against the prevalent ideology, and against the perceived oppression.

Frodi Midjord, the founder of the Scandza Forum and other metapolitical projects that aim to provide similar ‘safe spaces’ to those seeking refuge from the socio-cultural spirit of the age, says that ‘Bowden himself is like one of those primordial creatures from an older world in Lovecraft’s stories, and listening to him is like taking a break from modern society for a moment.’<sup>46</sup> In his role as a sensegiver, Bowden guides his listeners through the past, the roots and many facets of Western civilization, its thinkers, philosophers, traditions and all sort of cultural creations, but at the same time he speaks to today’s society, explaining and alerting against contemporary trends that reveal, and will accelerate, its decadence. An issue that stood high in Bowden’s hierarchy of dangers was the impact of growing demographic diversity and concomitant decline of the White share of population in Britain in particular and the West in general. Bowden framed the combat against mass immigration in terms of securing the existence of native Europeans as whites. Although White extinction theories, particularly regarding the native working class, had been a feature in British nationalist circles since the 1970s, Bowden picked the idea up, and expanded it, putting the issue of White replacement beyond a specific social class and applying it to ordinary people in general; whom he cast as being at the centre of the narrative against the political order – before the term ‘Great Replacement’ was coined let alone gained traction, and at a time where it was not as

popular in right-wing circles as it would be several years after his passing. ‘When you’ve been a majority group in a society when it’s been yours forever, when you lose that, you’ll suddenly feel a very cold and bracing wind on the back of your neck . . . once a group gives up its finite and demographic character and becomes a minority in its own urban spaces the writing is on the wall for it,’ he said at a 2005 BNP meeting in Blackburn, warning about the irreversible impact of the ‘demographic and racial changes which have gone on’ and calling for the need to stand up for a ‘Whiter society, a more organic society.’<sup>47</sup> He said in a 2009 interview that ‘[i]n 40 years on present trends, if nothing is done at all to reverse things, we will be a tiny proportion, ethnically and racially, of this society.’<sup>48</sup> The theme of the transition to a majority-minority society, and the emphasis on the need to focus on racial self-interest, helped to make Bowden a favourite in US White nationalist settings – a status that gathered steam, albeit posthumously, after the temporary rise of the Alt-Right. Bowden believed that ‘America’s in a more radical state, [i]t’s further into decline’ but with a better chance of a ‘moral Rightist resurgence,’ and he praised the US intellectual contribution to racial-nationalism.<sup>49</sup>

Bowden continues to be revered in both American and European Alt-Right networks. Bringing them together, Midjord’s *Guide to Kulchur* podcast always opens with Bowden’s voice from a California speech declaring, ‘What matters is that you’ve become a minority now. You’ve become a minority mentally, because these things happen to people mentally and psycho-spiritually before they have a physical impact.’ To Midjord, what that essentially means is that ‘we have lost the will and ability to defend our territory. The inescapable consequence is that we are being replaced by more assertive races.’<sup>50</sup> Collett, whose Patriotic Alternative put the idea of replacism through mass migration at the centre of its cultural-political combat, praises Bowden for shining a light on ethnocentrism, which had been kept out of mainstream discourse, ‘with many British nationalists bending and pursuing a multi-racial civic nationalism in the 2000s for quick electoral gains and acceptance.’ Collett added, ‘[T]hanks to the current liberal political discourse, race is now more central to politics than it has been for decades; I think Jonathan would be happy about this and it certainly vindicates his position.’<sup>51</sup>

Bowden’s post-mortem popularity – which owes much to the dissemination of his recorded lectures and ‘YouTube orations’ that have led to posthumous collections of speeches and interviews as well as to a Bowden meme industry where quotes from him are celebrated – seems as natural and likely to continue to grow, since, as Woodbridge argues, his ideas ‘can only find increased traction as the West thrusters around trying to fill the current moral vacuum.’<sup>52</sup> The belief is that Bowden will be in the pantheon of post-liberal times. ‘I’m not sure that liberal democracy has been as unpopular and weak as it is now, there is clearly an appetite for something different,’ says Tait, who finds similarities between Bowden’s role and the cultural critic and YouTube personality, Jordan Peterson. ‘I’m glad that I played a role in making JB speeches available in perpetuity on the web (until it’s fully censored) and I know that Peterson has been a stepping stone to asking bigger more serious questions of the kind that JB had answers to.’<sup>53</sup> It will be Bowden’s public persona as an orator that will be etched in the minds of future listeners, although the gap between his private and public life was very real in the testimonies of many close to him. Butler remarks that Bowden ‘lived a slightly Walter Mitty double life . . . The tension of reconciling his true private life with his overt performing political life undoubtedly contributed to his early death. In front of other people he had to keep up

appearances, to conform to the model of the Nietzschean superman that he theoretically and rhetorically idealized.<sup>54</sup> Reflecting upon this private-public gap, Southgate remarks that ‘Jonathan was always very kind and considerate when one met him face to face and certainly not the domineering authoritarian that he loved to project before an audience.’<sup>55</sup>

Bowden is also celebrated in other more mundane, material ways by a coterie of friends. Woodbridge says that on the occasion of Bowden’s birthday, they meet every year in Peppard, the village where he grew up, in Oxfordshire, where a black mulberry has been planted as a memorial. ‘He always told me he would die young and that he had inherited a genetic condition from his mother,’ Southgate says. Reflecting more, he adds that ‘despite someone remarking at the time of his death “My god, what have we lost?” I think most of us always knew what we had and cherished Jonathan a great deal.’<sup>56</sup> As part of such effort to cement his legacy, Alex Kurtagic, a close friend, is writing a Bowden biography.

### **Bowden and the US context**

Bowden had no discernible impact on the American right until the final years of his life. He gave his first speech in the United States in 2009. The speech was before a small private gathering and not recorded. The event occurred during an important period, however, as this was the time when the so-called Alt-Right was coming into being, and many people who would later become prominent figures in the Alt-Right were present at the event. Alt-Right is short for ‘Alternative Right,’ and the Alt-Right movement was one of the more successful recent iterations of the American white nationalist movement. The term entered the American political lexicon in 2008, based on a collaborative effort between a paleoconservative scholar named Paul Gottfried and Richard Spencer, the editor of a political webzine called *Taki’s Magazine* and the person most associated with the movement.<sup>57</sup>

The Alternative Right always had a racial element, but it was not initially explicitly associated with race. It began as a catchall term for right-wing ideologies that broke with mainstream American conservatism in an important way, which included many different groups, not always aligned. Over time the Alt-Right became much more explicit in its racial agenda, and first entered the mainstream national consciousness in the context of the 2016 presidential election. By this time, Bowden had already been deceased for several years, yet his influence on the movement remained unquestionable.

Beginning in 2011 and continuing until his death the following year, Bowden appeared on Spencer’s podcast at his webzine *Alternative Right*. In total, they recorded fourteen programs, discussing both current events and more esoteric philosophical content, such as the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler. It was also during this period that recordings of Bowden’s earlier speeches given over the previous decade began to receive a growing number of views on YouTube, especially his London ‘New Right’ speeches. Bowden also published 35 essays for the American white nationalist webzine *Counter Currents*.

As a lecturer trying to inform an audience about challenging thinkers, Bowden deserves, at best, mixed reviews. Although many of his speeches were, apparently, intended as primers on specific intellectuals or artists, Bowden often went on wild,

lengthy tangents. His hour-long discussion on Martin Heidegger, for example, conveys surprisingly little information about the German philosopher's ideas.<sup>58</sup> A viewer with no knowledge of Heidegger before watching the speech would not be able to summarize Heidegger's fundamental ideas after viewing it. Even what was probably Bowden's most famous recorded speech – his lecture on Friedrich Nietzsche, his intellectual idol – provided relatively little information about his subject; the talk was more about Bowden's personal philosophy than Nietzsche's.<sup>59</sup>

Even knowledgeable scholars seeking to judge Bowden's speeches on their accuracy in conveying a thinker's ideas are faced with challenges. Bowden rarely directly quoted any of his subjects. He never wrote his speeches ahead of time, preferring to speak extemporaneously. He would occasionally tell his audience which work he was referencing, but he never included anything equivalent to footnotes that would allow an interested listener to find a specific passage. The viewer, listener, or reader can learn Bowden's interpretation of a given thinker or artist, but checking the veracity of some of his factual claims can be difficult.

If we judge him as though he was an academic trying to give a group of undergraduate students an accurate and accessible introduction to philosophers, political theorists, and artists, Bowden must be mostly graded as a failure. However, as propaganda, Jonathan Bowden's speeches succeeded on multiple fronts. Bowden gave compelling, and not altogether inaccurate, speeches arguing that right-wing ideas have an impressive intellectual pedigree. For people on the far right worried that their views are rooted entirely on ignorance and insecurity – an argument frequently levelled against people with those political views – Bowden gives reassurance that many brilliant people shared their ideas and articulated them well, giving them confidence. For more intellectual people on the far right, those looking for thinkers who vindicate their worldview, Bowden points them towards more obscure figures rarely mentioned in mainstream media – radical right-wing thinkers like Savitri Devi, Julius Evola, and Yukio Mishima. Bowden's online speeches and podcasts serve as a kind of spoken bibliographic essay on right-wing intellectuals. In this way, Bowden was serving both a sensebreaking and sensegiving function. In his drawing from key cultural figures, Bowden was establishing a pedigree – a respect-worthy foundation – of right wing intellectual thought and right wing cultural production that could serve as a source of pride and moral support; a foundation that would not only help other members in breaking mentally free of status quo framing of social issues, but would also further provide new solutions to those social issues.

Even when his talk was ostensibly a high-brow explanation of an esoteric thinker, Bowden was ultimately acting as a motivational speaker. Although the titles of his speeches suggested an academic discussion of a right-wing intellectual, he also sought to inspire his audience to action. He sought to inspire confidence and convince his audience to fight for their beliefs.

Bowden's influence on the radical right in the U.S. further reinforces the importance of new forms of media to marginalized movements and their leaders. As a writer, Bowden never stood out. His many self-published books had little discernable impact on radical right-wing thought. His essays and paintings similarly do not seem to have made much of an impact. Oratory was his most significant talent, especially extemporaneous speeches on right-wing topics, and new media platforms are able to showcase these talents in ways that haven't been possible before.

According to Richard Spencer, ‘Without notes [Bowden] would, as it were, open his mouth, and he would allow the spirit to move him. And anyone who witnessed one of these performances will tell you that Jonathan was – when he was onstage – possessed by a demon. He was able to channel a life force. He was a force of nature.’<sup>60</sup> When describing the first time he was present for a Bowden speech, Greg Johnson, a prominent American white nationalist declared, ‘Jonathan’s speech that night was quite simply the greatest speech I had ever heard. He upstaged all of creation that day.’<sup>61</sup> Jared Taylor, founder of the influential ‘race realist’ organization, American Renaissance, stated in 2010 that ‘Mr. Bowden is a force of nature, an orator who could have made a dazzling career for himself had he not been, like me, earnest about the survival of his people.’<sup>62</sup>

Public speaking is obviously not an unusual skill on the radical right. This has historically been a salient feature of radical right politicians and movement leaders across the globe. However, we have no video evidence of Bowden ever addressing large rallies or other mass gatherings. All of Bowden’s speeches were before relatively small groups. In an earlier era, Bowden would have been mostly forgotten after his death. Even if his speeches had been recorded, they could only have been distributed via VHS tapes sent in the mail. He would have become little more than a footnote in a future academic study of the BNP.

Although Bowden’s speeches were typically focused on a particular intellectual or some element of popular culture, he would at times deviate from his main topic to make a larger point about right-wing strategy. In these speeches, he would discuss some of the radical right’s most vexing problems. Some of his ideas subsequently were adopted by elements of the Alt-Right. Bowden, for example, suggested a novel solution for the radical right when dealing with a particularly challenging issue: the Holocaust. For the radical right, particularly in Germany but also throughout the Western world, the facts of the Holocaust represent a significant stumbling block. The connection between radical right-wing thought and Hitler’s attempted extermination of the Jews in Europe has been used to successfully delegitimize the political right. If the world is to take seriously the maxim ‘never again’ when it comes to genocide, it presumably means that all forms of thought even in the same ideological family as Hitler’s National Socialism must be shunned – either legally in the form of bans on hate speech, or via social stigma.

The radical right, for its part, has recognized this challenge, and different voices have tried to resolve it using a variety of tactics. One of the more common arguments from American white nationalists is that the Holocaust never happened (or, if it did, the numbers were greatly exaggerated). This has been a common theme on the radical right since Francis Parker Yockey, arguably the father of modern American white nationalism, published *Imperium* in 1948. Since then, Holocaust revisionists have sunk enormous amounts of time into finding fault with various accounts of the Holocaust, arguing that mainstream historians’ claims about the Holocaust are implausible. Another radical right tactic used in discussions of the Holocaust is to compare it to other 20<sup>th</sup> century atrocities, arguing that, even if the Holocaust occurred in some form, it was no worse than the crimes against humanity committed by communists, or by the United States and Britain during World War II. This argument holds that, even if every account of the Holocaust is true, it was less unique than it is often portrayed in the media. According to this perspective, when it comes to the horrors he inflicted on innocent people, Adolf

Hitler was not qualitatively different from figures like Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, who are responsible for similar body counts.

In a 2007 speech, Bowden rejected both of these approaches to the Holocaust. By engaging in these historical debates, either denying the Holocaust entirely or trying to contextualize it in a way that diminishes its impact on our understanding of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the radical right implicitly accepts its opponents' frame. By treating these intellectual battles as important, the far right seems to admit that the moral legitimacy of its political project hangs in the balance. Again adopting a sensebreaking strategy, Bowden told his listeners to abandon this approach entirely. Instead, according to Bowden in a 2007 speech, the right needs to declare that the Holocaust is irrelevant to the contemporary discussion. According to Bowden, white peoples' right to exist as a distinct people into the indefinite future is not dependent upon what happened in Europe between 1939 and 1945:

My view is the following: that whatever occurred, and whatever occurs, we don't have to apologize. We step over what exists. There is a concept in my philosophy which is called self-overbecoming . . . And you step forward and say, 'No,' to past humiliations, to past indoctrination and degradation of the German people, who are cardinal to the European identity . . . if they have to apologize every day of the week, for being who they are, our group as a whole can never assert itself.<sup>63</sup>

The Alt-Right, as it developed, would often take an approach that echoed Bowden's suggestion, though often in a different form. The Alt-Right was never of one voice on this subject, as it contained neo-Nazi elements that wanted to celebrate every aspect of the Third Reich, as well as those who wanted to create as much distance as possible between themselves and Hitler's regime. However, the minimization of the Holocaust was a regular theme throughout the movement. During the peak of the Alt-Right's 'meme warfare' in the run-up to the 2016 election, before the movement suffered major crack-downs on social media, the common approach to the Holocaust was to treat it as a joke.<sup>64</sup> Rather than something that needed to be taken seriously, it was the source of ridiculous humour.

Similarly, Bowden promoted a novel argument about fascism, and how to respond to critics that said a right-wing movement showed fascist tendencies. Rather than avoid the subject, or claim that it is irrelevant to the discussion, Bowden suggested that people in his movement should just be uncompromising and embrace the label. When accused of being fascistic, Bowden said people on the right should just say the following: 'There's nothing wrong with Fascism. Nothing wrong with Fascism at all!'<sup>65</sup> This is another position that many later voices in the Alt-Right embraced – though there was also precedent in the U.S. far right for such an approach. Bowden's key point was again that the right must abandon its defensive posture. Even when its opponents on left, centre, and mainstream right bring out their most extreme accusations (that one is a fascist), someone with far-right views should simply shrug off the claim, and even accept the label. A common trope within the Alt-Right in its most successful period was that it should 'agree and amplify' when faced with accusations of this kind, a concept developed by masculinist dating websites.<sup>66</sup> According to this idea, when people make a negative claim about you, becoming defensive will be ineffective. Defensiveness makes you look weak and implicitly acknowledges that your opponent has a moral high ground

on this particular issue. Rather than become defensive, you should double down on it, and demand that your critic provide a compelling explanation for why your position is unacceptable – for people who simply take it for granted that fascism is bad, and also have little concrete historical knowledge, this may be difficult.

## Conclusion

It's clear at this point that many of Jonathan Bowden's ideas continue to resonate with activists on the far right today. Many public intellectuals, however, have written articles and books that have helped develop and spread quite similar political ideas, and with arguably more sophistication; and yet most of them are not spoken of and followed with the same reverence that Bowden typically is today. Amongst those on the far right, Bowden's influence seems to loom larger than what could be gathered from his political ideas alone. Even critics have noted how emotionally appealing he was and continues to be, as well as how influential he has become.<sup>67</sup>

This paper has argued that it is Bowden's further leveraging of leadership behaviours, coupled with his breadth (if not always depth) of far right politics and its history (to include past and present cultural figures) that has helped propel his influence above and beyond many other far right intellectuals. The ability of not only understanding these politics, but an ability to effectively display this expertise and make it accessible to many others, while incorporating several other key leadership mechanisms of influence, have all been key to his success as a vanguard leader. One final contextual factor that may also have contributed to his increasing influence is the role of early death. Bowden's early death at 49, still in his prime and before the implosion of the burgeoning Alt-Right movement that was yet to come (and which would eventually taint the reputation of many far-right vanguard leaders), set the ground for later social attribution processes that would further heighten followers' sense of Bowden's charisma, leading to an even more positive evaluation of Bowden's overall influence and legacy. A talk that he gave in 2009 in Atlanta (U.S.) has become near mythologized, with a number of far right intellectuals, such as Alex Kurtagic, describing the event as history being made, noting that his speech has now 'become a part of American nationalist folklore'.<sup>68</sup> A review of some of the eulogies that have followed his death all suggest that his legacy will live on,<sup>69</sup> with one done recently – by a writer that never met Bowden – declaring that he is a 'searing flame burning forever brightly in our collective memory'.<sup>70</sup>

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.