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## **The Liberal / Conservative Nationalism Divide: A Distinction Without a Difference?**

### *Abstract*

Liberal nationalism has been the subject of increased attention in the wake of the 2010s rise in national populism. It has been seen to offer a concessionary form of national identity which is compatible with the liberal values of inclusivity and egalitarianism. This paper argues that recent attempts to delineate the contours of a specifically liberal national identity fail to highlight much that is distinctively liberal, as opposed to conservative, about its content. The criteria that such attempts propose typically apply almost equally to conservative accounts, thereby overshooting the target. However, further ideological excavation reveals that there is an alternative axis for distinguishing between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity: democratic inclusivity. The paper further proposes that shifting the emphasis to this dimension, and to liberal and conservative accounts differing aims and formation processes, is conducive to both greater ideological transparency and bridging the gap between theory and practice.

### **Introduction**

Liberal nationalism, the view that liberalism and nationalism are compatible with one another, and that national culture is necessary for liberalism to achieve its normative political ends, has received increased attention of late (e.g. Gustavsson 2019; Tamir 2019; Gustavsson and Miller 2020; Kaul 2020; Miller 2020a). This has coincided with the surge in national populist parties and candidates of the 2010s, which is widely perceived to have fanned the flames of racism, xenophobia, and religious bigotry; and caused Vladimir Putin's (2019) recent verdict that western liberalism has "outlived its purpose" to gain much symbolic currency. The realisation that nationalism is ineliminable for the foreseeable future has reinforced the need for political theorists to articulate a form of nationalism which is compatible with the values of inclusivity and egalitarianism which liberal democracies aim to embody.

Accordingly, several works have recently emerged, aiming to highlight the contemporary relevance and internal coherence of liberal nationalism. Tamir (2019), for instance, argues that liberal nationalism can serve as a middle way between right-wing populism and neoliberal hyper-globalism which, throughout the twenty-first century, has accelerated the levels of inequality between rich and poor, intensified relative poverty levels, and caused some unwelcome cultural shifts within nation states. Liberal nationalism, she argues, can mitigate inequality, political polarization, distrust, authoritarianism, and other contemporary challenges to inclusive democracy. Gustavsson and Miller (2020), on the other hand, comprises a succession of multidisciplinary articles on the effects of national attachments on attitudes towards welfare policy goals; potential tensions between liberal nationalism and state neutrality on cultural matters; and the coherence of the notion of national culture given the prevalence of complex and nested cultural, religious, and multinational identities.

A noteworthy omission from the literature to date on liberal nationalism, however, is the lack of clarity as to what, specifically, is liberal about the national culture whose state promotion liberal nationalists endorse. How should it be determined which aspects of national culture warrant institutional embodiment or state promotion, and in what way might that culture be described as liberal? As Gina Gustavsson (2019) notes, there is, at present, no analytic tool for properly distinguishing between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity with adequate precision. Indeed, there is scant clarity as to what is liberal at all about national identities that are presented in liberal terms.

This deficit of understanding is problematic for two reasons. The first is - simply – that the term liberal nationalism may turn out to be misleading at best, and a misnomer at worst. The second is that the recent interest in liberal nationalism as a concessionary antidote to right-wing populism has occurred in a context where liberalism in its contemporary ideological sense is being overtly rejected left, right, and centre among populist parties, leaders, and voters. If liberal nationalism is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and thereby achieve liberal nationalists' recently articulated goal of mitigating political polarization, distrust and unrest, the current attention to its nature and contemporary relevance had better have a ready answer to the following question. To what extent is liberal nationalism compatible with the social conservatism<sup>1</sup> that is widespread among populist parties and their supporters?

The aim of this paper is to therefore clarify what, if anything, is liberal about the content of the national identity whose state promotion liberal nationalists endorse, and to what extent it can make room for moderate social conservatism. Put differently, can liberal nationalism consistently reject what are perceived by populist voters as the offending elements of liberalism while simultaneously remaining liberal in any ordinary sense of the term? In this paper, I argue that recent attempts to delineate the contours of a specifically liberal national identity fail to show any significant surface-level differences between liberal and conservative accounts of national identity. Nonetheless, there are some marked second-order differences in the national identity's aims and formation processes.

By critically engaging with Gustavsson's (2019) typology for distinguishing between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity, and Lenard's (2020) and Miller's (2020b, 2020c) attempts to characterize a specifically liberal national identity, I show how their criteria apply almost equally to conservative accounts, thereby failing to properly demarcate the target phenomenon<sup>2</sup>. The solution I propose is to highlight a different axis on which liberal nationalism differs from its conservative counterpart: democratic inclusivity. I further suggest that liberal nationalists would benefit from shifting the emphasis to this dimension in the future framing of their theory. This is necessary to attaining greater ideological transparency and bridging the gap between theory and practice, for influential political theory has rarely developed independently of political activity<sup>3</sup>.

It should be noted that since the term 'liberal nationalism' encompasses a constellation of arguments by theorists whose background motivations and ideological commitments do not coincide in every respect, the paper's scope is not exhaustive within the domain. Rather, in line with the recent scholarship, I shall focus on the works of David Miller as the prime example of liberal nationalism, since they contain the most extensive and analytic defence of its internal coherence, and their relevance has been carried over and elaborated upon in the current debate. Correspondingly, I shall use the works of Roger Scruton as the chief example of conservative nationalism (or 'patriotism', as he calls it (Scruton 2002: 29-30)), since similarly, they contain the most elaborate and influential defence of conservative political thought and its contemporary relevance in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

The paper is structured as follows. §1 explains the relationship between national populism's ascendancy and liberal nationalism as a mitigating response. §2 argues that the term liberal has mutated into a different ideological category from its traditional classical and social-democratic senses; and that it is liberalism in its new ideological guise that is being rejected by populist voters. §3 critically engages with attempts by Gustavsson (2019), Lenard (2020) and Miller (2020b, 2020c) to specify the nature of a specifically liberal national identity; and argues that their distinctions apply equally to conservative accounts, thereby overshooting the target. §4 builds on the case studies of Miller and Scruton to argue that it is the aims and formation processes of national culture – rather than its content – that differ across liberal and conservative accounts. §5 challenges recent attempts to characterise liberal national identity as specifically public; arguing that a strict public/private divide cannot be upheld on liberal nationalism's own terms. The paper concludes that it is the alternative

axis of democratic inclusivity, rather than liberalism, that should be emphasised in the future reframing of the theory.

### **§1. Liberal Nationalism and the ascent of National Populism**

That the 2010s will 'go down in history as the Age of Populism' (Goodwin 2019) as a challenge to if not outright rejection of Western liberalism has been a much-repeated verdict of late. From the political advances of right wing and nationalist parties across Europe, India, Israel, and Brazil; to 2016's 'double disruption' of Brexit and Trump; to right wing parties topping the polls in Italy, France, Poland, Belgium and Hungary, one finds oneself hard-pressed to find examples of countries unaffected by so-called right-wing, nationalist, and populist candidates and movements.

Despite the relative decline in support for populism in favour of mainstream parties during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is reason to doubt that this decline is set to remain. One cannot ignore the relevance of the 'rally round the flag' effect here; nor the overall increase for the populist right and *Chega's* breakthrough in the 2021 Dutch and Portuguese elections respectively; nor indeed the recent crises of social democratic parties in Sweden, Germany, France, and Italy, for instance. In any case, there is little to suggest that the underlying causes are dissipating.

These causes are both economic and cultural, relating to the increasing mismatch between class and value structures, and inclusive political representation. The economics-based explanations are familiar: neoliberal reforms such as financial and business deregulation, increased privatisation of the public sector, and tax cuts for the rich; coupled with the shocks of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone predicament, have cumulatively eroded voters' trust in the political system, thereby inducing a populist backlash (Roubini 2016; Rodrick 2018; Berman and Snegovaya 2019). As social-democratic parties moved continually to the right on economic issues and left on cultural issues, traditional working-class voters became increasingly dealigned from their previous partisan affiliations. This created a gap in the electoral market for populist parties to shift to the left on economics while remaining on the right on cultural matters, thereby mobilizing support from the 'left behind' working and lower-middle classes (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Gidron 2020).

Regarding culture, there has been a continually-increasing value divide over recent decades between middle-class professionals, ethnic minorities, and graduates; and the working classes and older white voters within Western democracies (Tilley 2005; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Typically, the middle+ classes view high levels of multiculturalism and migration as core social strengths; race, gender, and sexuality discrimination as ubiquitous present-day evils; and individual freedom as a central value which should take precedence over communal ties. The working / lower middle classes and the older white population, on the other hand, tend to prioritise communal ties, national identity, and law and order; valuing cultural conservation over multiculturalism and *rapid* mass-migration (Ford and Goodwin 2017; Goodwin and Heath 2016).

The evidence indicates that the rapid demographic shifts caused by mass-migration have cumulatively undermined social cohesion, trust, and collective solidarity among lower middle and working classes communities in western democracies (Putnam 2007; Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Kaufmann and Goodwin 2018; Maggio 2020)<sup>4</sup>. Given that communal ties and local attachments appear to be disintegrating, it is of little surprise that liberal nationalism has been proposed as a *via media* between neoliberal globalism and the reactionary instances of populism which are excessively chauvinistic and xenophobic. To properly understand how this is so, it is necessary to recall the communitarian underpinnings of liberal nationalism.

Liberal nationalism originally arose out of what has come to be known as the communitarian critique of liberalism, where communitarians (e.g. Taylor 1989; Macintyre 1981; Walzer 1983) objected to the atomized and individualistic conception of the self that was implicit in the works of liberals such as

Rawls (1971) and Nozick (1974). Whereas Rawlsian liberalism emphasises the primacy of individual autonomy and liberty to pursue life choices, communitarians objected that this overlooks the fact that individuals are largely constituted by their family ties, civil society associations, and compatriots. These, they emphasised, are prerequisites for individual choice and autonomy.

Charles Taylor (1989), for instance, drew on the Hegelian view that one's identity is largely developed through intersubjective communication with others, and the Burkean emphasis on the relation between individuals and the civil society associations which contribute to their identity and freedom. The conclusion that communitarians drew was an essentially Burkean one: politics should be concerned with sustaining and promoting the cultural and social attachments which make the liberal values of freedom and autonomy possible in the first place. Liberal nationalists subsumed and domesticated these insights into the liberal framework: Kymlicka (1995) and Tamir (1993) claimed that cultures provide a 'context of choice' by delineating meaningful life choices for citizens, while Miller (1995) argued that national culture is a prerequisite of the social cohesion that is necessary to attaining social justice.

The reason that liberal nationalism has been the subject of recent attention in the context of populism, then, is this. The lower middle and working socioeconomic classes prioritise communal ties and national identity over multiculturalism; and reject *rapid* mass migration and inflated identity politics. However, since the mainstream social-democratic parties with which they were previously aligned have shifted left on cultural issues and right on economics, they have turned increasingly to populist parties which have capitalized on this displacement. Problematically, however, the populist breakthrough is often intertwined with xenophobia, and cultural or religious chauvinism. Liberal nationalism, then, has been presented as an ideological middle-ground, since its communitarian underpinnings emphasise the necessity of communal ties and nationality to social cohesion, while simultaneously guarding against populism's questionable elements.

## **§2. Shifts in the Use of the Term 'Liberal'**

To examine the attempts to specify the content of a liberal national identity with adequate precision and focus, it is necessary to first clarify the different senses of the term 'liberal' currently used by liberal nationalists and populist leaders. As we shall see, their respective uses of the term are equivocal and mutually divergent; and without an accurate understanding of the different senses at use, it is extremely difficult to engage in a constructive dialogue about the nature and contemporary relevance of a liberal national identity.

Liberalism is an essentially contested concept with no fixed, uniform meaning. Although it is typically associated with a commitment to individualism, the rule of law, rationalism, minimal government, egalitarianism, government by consent and contractarianism; none of these distinguishing marks are strictly necessary, with the possible exception of individualism (see e.g. Waldron 1987: 128; Freedman 1996: 86; Kelly 2015: 2). Nonetheless, it is appropriate for analytic purposes to distinguish between its two main schools: classical and 'new' liberalism.

Classical liberalism's formal unity consists in two factors: individualism and freedom from arbitrary coercion (Vincent 1992: 29). Although the term liberal, in modern parlance, connotes welfarism and distributive justice, classical liberalism does not. On the contrary: its commitment to a self-perpetuating and self-regulating social and economic order free from centrally planned state interference *precludes* a socialist state. Indeed, classical liberalism's commitment to an unhampered market economy is what most closely characterises its modern-day descendant: neoliberalism – which itself underpins the deregulation of capital markets, austerity, and public sector privatisation: the exact reverse of socialism.

The social-democratic new liberalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries differs from its classical counterpart in its denial of the individualistic atomism and self-regulating capacity of society. In line with F.H. Bradley's characterisation of the self as 'penetrated, infected, characterized by the existence of others, its content implies in every fibre relations of community' (Bradley 1927: 172), the new liberals emphasised that the good of the individual is inextricable from the good of the community. This denial of the self-regulating capacity of society was driven by the realization that the social imbalances caused by industrialisation could not simply be redressed by voluntary charity; rather, they required state intervention. These ideas brought about the creation of the modern welfare state with the Liberal Party's welfare reforms of 1906-1914; and influenced most West European social-democratic trends until the mid-1970s (Vincent 1992: 31).

It is this quasi-socialist new liberalism, rather than its classical and neoliberal counterparts, that fits Miller's ideological bent (Miller 1990: 234-51). Miller rejects individualism in favour of communitarianism; and indeed, a prime motivator behind his liberal nationalism is social justice – which requires statism than minimal government<sup>5</sup>. However, although this 'new liberal' constituent of Miller's liberal nationalism is compatible with the social-democratic sensibilities of populist voters, it remains unclear whether liberal nationalism can also accommodate their cultural conservatism. To properly address this question, we must first clarify how the term 'liberal' is being used by strong-man leaders in relation to national identity. For this directly illustrates what, roughly, the offending elements of liberalism and the socially conservative values held by populist voters are.

An examination of the political rhetoric surrounding the term 'liberal' by Orbán, Bolsonaro, and Putin reveals that it is neither classical nor new liberalism that is being rejected by populist leaders and voters. Rather, it is a revised sense which denotes a commitment to open immigration policies, identity politics, and political correctness-induced restrictions on freedom of speech. This revised sense represents a noteworthy shift in the terms of the current debate: the term 'liberal' has come to be seen as inescapably hostile to national identity and values.

Orbán's (2014, 2018) propagation of the notion 'illiberal democracy', for instance, involves contrasting liberal democracy with its 'illiberal' counterpart by emphasising their opposing attitudes towards multiculturalism, immigration, identity politics-induced political correctness, and traditional national values. Whereas illiberal democracy defends traditional values and norms inherited from Christianity such as 'human dignity, the family and the nation' (Orbán 2018), liberal democracy seeks to abolish nationality by prioritising open immigration policies and multiculturalism over national identity and state security (ibid.). Similarly, Putin's (2019) verdict that the 'liberal idea' has 'outlived its purpose' refers particularly to immigration, open borders, and multiculturalism. Likewise, Bolsonaro's rhetoric concerning liberalism involves rejecting 'inverted values, the bloated state and political correctness' (Bolsonaro 2019), and pledging to 'value the family, respect the religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, oppose gender ideology, and preserve our values' (ibid.).

Such rhetoric, however, appeals to a notion of liberalism which is largely at odds with the traditional senses of the term. As Plattner (2019) rightly notes, multiculturalism, open immigration policies, and a flexible approach towards family law were rarely, if ever, found in liberal democracies until the last half-century. Moreover, nations which did receive high levels of migration 'tended to favor assimilationist rather than multicultural approaches to integrating newcomers' (Plattner 2019: 11). Despite this, however, populists (most notably Orbán) misleadingly frame the debate in terms of a dichotomy between liberalism and national identity, where liberalism is characterised in terms of support for open immigration policies, multiculturalism, and identity politics – none of which have traditionally been associated with the term.

For the sake of clarity, then, it is necessary to further distinguish between (1) liberalism as a catch-all term for its traditional senses, and (2) liberalism in the revised sense which populist voters and demagogues reject and denounce. I shall refer to these here as traditional liberalism and identitarian

liberalism, respectively. Traditional liberalism and national attachments have co-existed in liberal democracies since the mid-19th century, and indeed their symbiosis has been defended by mainstream liberal figures such as J.S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin (see e.g. Miller 2005); hence, they are neither practically nor theoretically opposed to one another. By contrast, there are clear tensions between identitarian liberalism and national attachments. What is problematic, moreover, is this. By taking ownership of the term 'liberal' so as to imply that it is liberalism in general that is the problem, rather than identitarian liberalism, strong-man leaders shift the posts of the debate. This in turn helps to partly mask the illegitimacy of their dismantlement of elements of traditional liberalism, such as judicial independence and press freedom.

Miller's liberal nationalism, on the other hand, does not endorse liberalism in its revised ideological sense. Rather, he has argued extensively in favour of limits to immigration (Miller 2015, 2016); and his arguments for institutionalising national identity concern historically rooted majority cultures (Miller 2020c). Miller also criticises inflated identity politics: it undermines national solidarity by causing people to 'affirm their singular identities at the expense of shared national identities' (2000: 79); and undermines its own cause by seeking a specifically political recognition of identities which are beyond the remit of politics (*ibid.*). While it is evident, then, that Miller's liberal nationalism does not belie the offending elements of liberalism, it remains to be seen whether it can accommodate the above social conservatism. It is this question that the remainder of the paper will address.

### **§3. The Liberal/Conservative Nationalism Distinction**

Where, then, does the border fall between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity? To date, what has been viewed as liberal about liberal nationalism is that its arguments conclude that nationality is needed for attaining liberal *aims*. Tamir (1993, 2019), Kymlicka (1995) and Margalit & Raz (1990), for instance, argue that national culture is a precondition of individual autonomy. Miller (1995) and Tamir (1993, 2019) argue that national culture is needed to foster enough national solidarity for citizens to support institutions that realise justice. Canovan (1996), Miller (1995, 2000), and Moore (2001) argue that national culture is necessary to a properly functioning deliberative democracy which is inclusive and legitimate. So far, so unambiguous. But the question remains: what, if anything, is liberal rather than conservative about the content – rather than just the aims – of the national culture in question?

Before the discussion unfolds, it is necessary to identify the distinguishing marks of conservatism which are of relevance here. These are: an emphasis on tradition, institutional continuity, the socially embedded nature of individuals, scepticism about the reliability of human rationality, and a preference for gradual, rather than rapid social change. Conservatism's roots lie in Burke (1790); and we shall later see that the social embeddedness element of Burkean conservatism significantly characterises both Miller and Scruton's ideological frameworks, thereby further blurring the boundary between their respective liberal/conservative conceptions of national identity. The focus of this section, however, will be confined to the positive attempts to distinguish between both accounts.

Gustavsson (2019) has recently proposed an insightful and analytically useful framework for distinguishing between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity. Nonetheless, it is somewhat limited in its present form, for despite its comprehensive engagement with Miller's liberal nationalism, the discussion of its conservative point of comparison - Scruton's work – is overly synoptic. This is a likely result of the different aims of Gustavsson's paper, which contrasts liberal and conservative varieties of nationalism with constitutional patriotism: its greater breadth does not permit a more elaborate analysis. For the purpose of this paper, however, further ideological excavation is needed for properly identifying any significant differences in kind between liberal and conservative accounts.

Gustavsson's framework comprises five dimensions along which liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity can be distinguished. These are: 1) whether national identity is defined by vertical or horizontal ties; 2) historical continuity; 3) whether the identity should be sustained in the public or private sphere; 4) whether the attitude citizens should cultivate towards their homeland should be one of piety or loyalty; and 5) whether national identity is changeable and enforceable. In what follows, I examine each of these in turn, with the exception of (3), which requires lengthier treatment and will therefore be examined in §5.

First, the vertical/horizontal dimension to national identity. The ties that bind a nation together, Gustavsson explains, are vertical for the conservative nationalist, and mainly horizontal for the liberal nationalist. Whereas conservative nationalists view national ties as linking people through common allegiance, reverence, or even piety for certain established authorities, liberal nationalists view the same ties as mainly horizontal in the sense that 'they link us to our fellow-nationals, in the present as well as in the past (Miller 1995: 124)' (Gustavsson 2019: 699).

Contrasting Scruton's statement that citizens should 'bestow authority upon the existing order' (Scruton 1980: 33) with Miller's notion of a common national membership whose meaning 'changes over time' via an inclusive collective conversation where 'No voice has a privileged status: those who seek to defend traditional interpretations enter the conversation on an equal footing with those who want to propose changes' (Miller 1995: 127), Gustavsson concludes that liberal nationalism 'focuses on horizontal ties to our fellow-nationals rather than allegiance to national authority' (2019: 701).

Although there may be some difference in degree here, any clear-cut distinction is harder to pin down. For conservative nationalism does not deny that we have horizontal ties to our present-day compatriots. Rather, it simply stresses the notion that one should look to history as the 'best guide to understanding the present and planning for the future', as Kekes (1997: 352) puts it<sup>6</sup>. This is not equivalent to a tunnel-visioned and backward-looking dogmatic reverence towards the past; rather, it simply emphasises that political action should be planned in the spirit of continuity between the past, present, and future, such that society takes the form of a partnership between 'those who are living, those are dead, and those who are to be born' (Burke 1999: 193). In fact, there would be no point in looking to the past for present and future guidance if people didn't consider their link to their present (and future) compatriots to be of equal importance. As Scruton puts it: citizens have a duty to pass on inherited values, customs, institutions to future generations so as not to 'mortgage our future for the gratification of those who are living now' (Scruton 1996).

Indeed, this begins to look rather similar to Miller's continuity condition in his fivefold definition of nationality: national identities 'stretch 'back and forward across the generations' [...] they always carry with them an irrevocable obligation to the past generations: that of continuing their work for the nation' (1995: 27). To characterise liberal nationalism in terms of horizontal ties, and its conservative counterpart in terms of vertical ones is therefore to exaggerate the contrast here. For they both concede the relevance of national ties which span the past, present, and future; emphasise cultural and historical continuity within nations; and deny that historical tradition should be dogmatically adhered to in an uncritical manner. There are, however, some subtle differences regarding the precise status of history, tradition, and institutional authority in Miller and Scruton's accounts; however, uncovering these requires a finer-grained contextual examination, which will be given in §4.

Regarding the second dimension to national identity – historical continuity – Gustavsson contrasts liberal and conservative accounts as follows. Whereas the conservative conception 'requires a national identity that reveres and follows history, taking it as a given authority' (2019: 703), the liberal conception takes 'history as a starting point for an on-going process of change' (ibid.). Historical authority, according to Miller, resembles that of a cookery book: 'it lays out the existing principles of cuisine and provides a base from which experimentation and innovation are possible' (Miller 1995: 127).



It is instructive that Miller uses the example of a cookery book to illustrate the status of pre-existing principles in relation to the range of deviations that one can make from them. Cookery books contain time-tested recipes which have proven their success; and as such, any deviations that one makes from them must be done with due regard for the vast reservoir of pre-existing cooking principles which the recipes either mention or presuppose. One becomes competent at cooking through learning long-established set patterns, and it is only within this context that successful alterations can then be made. Just like conservatism, then, innovation and experimentation must happen relatively gradually, and with due regard to pre-existing, historically accumulated practices and principles.

The fourth dimension to national identity, concerning the attitude one should take towards one's homeland, is this. Whereas on the conservative view, reverence and piety are the attitudes that fellow-nationals should cultivate towards their homeland, liberal nationalism has it that it is loyalty, rather than piety, that should be encouraged. The distinction, according to Gustavsson, is that loyalty 'allows us to question and criticise, although it still demands that we side with and not against the object of our critique; that our goal be constructive criticism' (2019: 703-4); whereas piety, it seems, makes criticism a much 'trickier business' (2019: 704).

This distinction is a natural starting point in that, although an endorsement of loyalty towards the homeland is common among conservative and liberal nationalists alike, piety is not an attitude that liberal nationalists explicitly endorse. However, conveying the contrast in terms of a *boundary* between the permissibility / impermissibility of questioning is an exaggeration, since conservatives do allow for questioning and criticism of elements of national culture. Regarding national traditions, for instance, John Kekes writes: this is 'not to say that values and the political arrangements that reflect them cannot be rationally justified or criticized' (Kekes 1997: 359). Scruton, moreover, denies that conservatives adopt an attitude of unquestioning reverence towards national identity, claiming that it is 'compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity' (Scruton 1984: 11). There is, nonetheless, a more subtle distinction regarding the (im)permissibility of questioning and scrutiny to be drawn here; however, understanding it requires a detailed examination of Scruton's underlying conservative framework; this will be examined in §4. In the absence of further excavation, however, there are no visible differences in kind between both accounts.

The fifth dimension - the (im)mutability of national culture - has it that conservative nationalists see national culture 'as per definition immutable' (Gustavsson 2019: 704), whereas liberal nationalists allow national culture to change over time; particularly when elements of the national identity are 'repugnant to the self-understanding of one or more component groups' (Miller 1995: 142). This is not to suggest that liberal nationalists' attitude to change amounts to an 'anything goes' approach, since liberal nationalists view the common public culture as 'something that can legitimately be enforced politically' (2019: 704). The difference is rather a matter of degree: liberal nationalists welcome gradual and democratically-induced change, whereas conservative nationalists - according to Gustavsson - are averse to such change.

Again, it is an exaggeration to claim that conservatives see national culture 'as per definition immutable'; for we have already seen that conservatives do allow for cultural change (Kekes 1997: 359; Scruton 2002: 11). However, there are, in fairness, stricter limits to the degree of permissible change on the conservative conception in comparison to its liberal counterpart. Scruton's conservatism seeks to 'uphold all those practices and institutions [e.g. the common law, established state, monarchy etc.] through which the habits of allegiance are acquired' (Scruton 2002: 23); and it is only within this context that change can occur. It is not permissible on Scruton's conservatism for traditional established institutions to be overhauled. Nonetheless, it is permissible to amend them in the spirit of continuity (2002: 37). Miller's liberal nationalism, by contrast, does not in principle prohibit such institutional overhauls, providing that they are democratically induced as a result of significant value changes among the electorate (Miller 2020b, 2020c).

These dimensions, then, do not by themselves uncover any significant differences in kind between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity. Nonetheless, Gustavsson's framework does pave the way to uncovering subtler differences in its aims and formation processes. Clarifying these differences, however, requires further excavation into the background ideological frameworks which motivate Miller and Scruton's accounts. I shall now clarify these differences by examining their divergent views on institutional authority, rationalism, and elitism.

#### **§4. Institutional Authority, Rationalism, and Elitism**

So far, we have seen that there exists much convergence between liberal and conservative accounts of national identity: Miller and Scruton both see national identity as defined by both vertical and horizontal ties; both permit historical criticism; both allow for questioning and criticism of national culture; and both permit cultural changes. Nonetheless, there are some differences in degree at play: conservative nationalism places tighter limits than its liberal counterpart on the criticism of, and changes to, national culture. What explains these differences? Here, I argue that the explanation lies in Miller and Scruton's divergent views on institutional authority, rationalism, and elitism.

Scruton (2002, 2005) argues that political legitimacy and civil order depend on a sense of membership and belonging which are underpinned by a recognition of the authority of our inherited cultural values and institutions, such as family, language, civil society associations, and established state institutions. State institutions, moreover, should perpetuate citizens' 'memory of that membership [and exalt it] into something natural, unchangeable and serene' (Scruton 2005: 112). For this recognition of the authority of national culture is a necessary precondition of citizens' sense of common membership, which in turn is necessary to the social cohesion that is required to foster civic virtue, national loyalty, allegiance, piety, and duties to future generations (Scruton 2005: 37).

The sense of the term 'authority' which Scruton employs must be made explicit here. Authority, as it is understood by ordinary people and functions as part of human nature, Scruton (2002) explains, has nothing to do with choice or contractual consent. Rather, it can be elucidated by considering its preeminent form: the familial authority of parents over their children. The bonds that exist between parents and children are unchosen and inexorable: by default, parents love and nurture their children, and are their primary formative influence. Correspondingly, children recognize and submit to their parents' authority and established power. The mutual obligations which emerge from such ties are not up for questioning, scrutiny, or reductive articulation; rather, they are founded in respect, honour, and piety: 'To neglect my parents in old age is not an act of justice but an act of impiety' (2002: 23).

It is authority in this sense that Scruton claims is necessary for both state institutions and the mediating institutions of civil society to embody. For it is authority of this kind that actually fosters allegiance and loyalty among citizens, thereby mobilizing them to non-coercively put aside individual interest for the benefit of the nation and fellow citizens, including future generations. And if this primeval sense of familial loyalty and obligation (which must be underpinned by authority) is to expand outwards 'from hearth and home to place, people and country' (2002: 23) while retaining its motivational force, state and civil society institutions must function as vehicles for the transmission of the inherited traditions, values, and customs which comprise national culture.

The main sense in which Scruton's conservatism is less permissive of questioning and criticism than its liberal counterpart, then, is that the very concept of authority is almost ineffable and mystical because of its primeval and visceral nature. Just as familial authority precludes radical questioning and criticism of established familial ties, so too does the authority exercised by the state institutions preclude radical questioning. By contrast, Miller endorses no analogous notion of authority which precludes radical questioning. Rather, he has argued extensively in favour of deliberative democracy, claiming that national communities should be 'actively self-determining rather than subject to the

authority of tradition' (Miller 2000: 105). National culture, moreover, is 'open to revision when the members deliberate collectively' (ibid.).

There is another underlying reason why Scruton's account is less permissive of questioning and criticism than that of Miller; namely, his Burkean scepticism concerning the human rational capacity and the reliability of its use in political reasoning. Crucially, however, this is neither a repudiation of reason nor a commitment to irrationalism; rather, it is based on arguments which turn on subtle distinctions between different types of reasoning. The general motivation behind such arguments is the refusal 'to condense intricate moral, social and political realities into a few principles or elements of an intellectual system' (Vincent 1994: 211). Conservatives therefore view the excessive use of abstract and theoretical reasoning in the political realm as both misleading and unreliable; hence their emphasis on a more cautious approach to politics whereby tradition (i.e. time-tested institutions and customs) is given greater weight. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to examine the conservative distinction between two senses of the term rationality.

Burke distinguished between, on the one hand, prejudice or principles, and on the other hand, abstraction (Burke 1987: 188-9). Prejudices are characterised not in terms of irrational bigotry, but rather in terms of pre-judgments<sup>7</sup>. These are time-tested considered judgements and practical knowledge which humans have amassed throughout history – 'the supra-rational wisdom of the species' – as Kirk (1953: 365) puts it, which cannot be tidily formulated in a few words but are nonetheless deeply embedded in a nation's institutions, customs, and common sense. Abstraction, on the other hand, refers to intellectual systems or metaphysical reasoning (such as Lockean natural rights or utopian programmes) which purport to be detached from custom and tradition, and to start from a blank slate, but rather are misleading, artificial, and apt to lead to upheaval such as that witnessed across communist regimes. The key point here is that rationality of the 'abstraction' kind is likely to erroneously overlook relevant underlying factors such as customs, traditions and knowledge-how. Although these underlying factors may be partly tacit or intuitive, they have probably stood the course of time precisely because of an intrinsic rationality which is not immediately detectable to the superficial observer.

Scruton endorses Burkean prejudices, emphasising that they are not just arbitrary customs, but rather forms of knowledge containing the 'residues of many trials and errors' (Scruton 2014: 21). Since many elements of national culture – 'military honour, family attachment, the forms and curricula of education, the institutions of charity and good manners' (ibid.) - are tacit and not susceptible of precise articulation, criticising them is largely redundant and destructive. For doing so is likely to involve erroneously overlooking their intrinsic rationality: the 'accumulation of reason in society that we reject at our peril' (ibid.).

Miller shares no such wariness about the adverse consequences of the unreliability of the human rational capacity in democratic deliberation about cultural revision. However, he is not a rationalist about national identity either. Rather, he imposes limits on the permissible degree of scrutiny of national identity, which is 'in large measure inherited from the past, and not fully open to rational scrutiny' (Miller 1989: 70). This is a manifestation of his commitment to the Tocquevillian notion that a cohesive society depends on a sufficiently high level of cultural consensus (see e.g. the 1st epigraph to *On Nationality* (1995)). This consensus, moreover, is part of the necessary starting point for democratic deliberation to proceed (Miller 2000).

The main difference between Miller and Scruton's approaches to rationalism, then, is this. Scruton's commitment to the Burkean prejudice/abstraction distinction rules out radical criticism and overhaul of time-tested elements of national culture, given the unreliability of human rationality in the political sphere. Miller's anti-rationalism, by contrast, does not involve such pessimism about the human rational capacity and its use in democratic deliberation; rather, it places the burden of proof on those who wish to revise or discard elements of national culture. It also places constraints on the amount of

criticism and change that can happen at a given time: much of national culture has to be taken for granted in order for discussions about its revision to be possible in the first place. To avoid a cacophony of competing claims and opposing viewpoints with no underlying unity or cohesion, it is necessary to 'establish common parameters – questions that for this particular purpose are to be taken as settled' (Miller 2020c).

The final underlying point of division between Scruton and Miller's respective conceptions of national identity concerns elitism. According to Scruton, the national culture perpetuated in educational institutions should be of a distinctively high kind: 'art, literature, scholarship and philosophy that establish a shared frame of reference among educated people' (Scruton 2012). It should not be democratically decided, since 'the majority can't easily distinguish genuine culture, which is the province of a minority, from fake culture, which we can all acquire' (Scruton 2015). The democratisation of culture, moreover, results in the tyranny of the majority over the learned minorities; the trumping of hard-earned expertise by popular sentiment. Such is Scruton's wariness of tyranny of the majority that he endorses a doctrine of cultural trusteeship, so to speak, which places procedural limitations on democracy: constitutions should serve as obstacles against such tyranny; and we need a 'political discourse that conceals this fact from the majority' (ibid.).

Scruton's elitism also involves the propagation of myths to sustain social order and much of the received national culture. State institutions should generate their own ideology by maintaining appearances and conducting ceremonies which generate a symbolic depth resembling military honour and grandeur, whereby citizens experience 'something 'transcendent', which they may only partly understand' (2002: 156). Hence emerges the myth of the nation's 'absolute unqualified right to allegiance', which should be reinforced with every state manifestation of civil or military power; and should determine its forms of literature, religion, and art (2002: 157). The mythical status of such ideology, however, must only be revealed to the 'elite which recognises them', and concealed from the ordinary voter, since such disillusionment would instil them with doubt, and thereby threaten social order and cohesion (2002: 180-181).

This elitism is the main difference between Scruton and Miller's background ideological frameworks. Miller's democratic and egalitarian approach is altogether incongruent with Scruton's elitism: Miller continually emphasises equal citizenship whereby members deliberate collectively about their national culture's aims, purposes, and content; and are able to revise and reshape it collectively on an equal basis (Miller 2000: 105, 1995: 127). Accordingly, he rejects the idea that there can be 'privileged guardians of national identity' (2020b: 27). Moreover, although Miller, like Scruton, allows for the existence of certain myths which fulfil cohesive functions among citizens, such as 'reassuring them that they are the legitimate holders of the territory they occupy' (2020c: 16). However, such myths are not immune to scrutiny; nor should the state legislate on how (if at all), they should be perpetuated (ibid: 16-17).

It is this contrast between democracy and quasi-aristocratic elitism that constitutes the main difference between Miller and Scruton's liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity, and which explains their divergent views on the permissible degree of criticism of and changes to national culture. Scruton's elitism precludes radical criticism and changes to established national culture because of his Burkean commitment to the unreliability of human rationality in the political realm; and his related pessimism about citizens' ability to cooperate cohesively without the myth of the nation's unqualified right to allegiance.

By contrast, Miller's egalitarian and democratic approach has it that the sustained institutionalisation of national culture should be conditional on citizens' present values: the democratic mandate is the court from which there is no appeal. Although critical scrutiny of, and changes to national culture must happen in a gradual and piecemeal manner (2020c), there is no obstacle in principle to a democratically induced overhaul of established institutions, providing that the majority have ceased

to value them. Religious establishment, for instance, is taken to be an intrinsic good only insofar as most citizens continue to 'value the fact that their physical environment bears the marks of their country's historic religion' (Miller 2020b: 32).

## **§5. The Public/Private Sphere Divide**

Regarding the four dimensions of Gustavsson's framework thus far examined, closer ideological scrutiny has revealed that what explains the differences in degree between Scruton and Miller's accounts of national identity is their divergent background assumptions concerning rationality, institutional authority, and elitism. These differences concern national identity's formation processes rather than content: Miller endorses inclusive deliberative democracy whereas Scruton endorses a quasi-aristocratic doctrine of cultural trusteeship. What, then, of the public/private sphere dimension which has been proposed a further distinguishing mark in Gustavsson (2019), and Lenard (2020)?

According to the public/private sphere distinguishing mark proposal, liberal nationalist's conception of cultural identity must be a strictly public identity in that it 'defines members in public spaces' such as 'political spaces, [...] public parks, beaches, community centres, libraries, and roads' (Lenard 2020: 160). This proposed distinction arises from the fact that classical liberalism has traditionally treated the public and private spheres as independent from each other: government intervention is only permissible in the public sphere, whereas how one acts in private is a mainly a matter of individual choice.

However, nationalism's reliance on any kind of sharp boundary for distinguishing between the public and private spheres is problematic. Recall that liberal nationalists endorse the 'social embeddedness' communitarian view, according to which people are inescapably moulded by intersubjective communication and civil society associations. These Hegelian and Burkean foundations on which communitarians drew - and which then fed into liberal nationalists' works - cannot be overlooked here. What they highlight is that the public and private spheres are not independent or compartmentalized realms in the first place.

Gustavsson (2019: 703) writes that on the liberal nationalist view, faith, ritual and worship are matters which should be confined to the private sphere, thereby remaining beyond the reach of political intervention. But this overlooks the fact that they are symbiotically connected through the mediating influence of civil society. Languages, customs, and religions, for instance, are communally derived: they typically depend for their existence on being practiced in communal civil society institutions. Correspondingly, the formative influence of communal civil society institutions on individuals has a knock-on effect on their values and activities in the private sphere: the two cannot be straightforwardly detached.

Since liberal nationalists accept that individuals are moulded by their communities, cultural identity cannot be a strictly public identity which defines members in public spaces alone. The very fact that liberal nationalists endorse the communitarian insights precludes such a sharp distinction in the first place. This symbiosis of the public and private spheres highlights the fact that liberal nationalism cannot consistently detach them from one another on its own theoretical terms<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, since the communitarian insights are themselves essentially Hegelian and Burkean, a strong element of conservative political thought has arguably been smuggled in through the back door into the liberal nationalist ideological compound. This further fudges the boundary between liberal and conservative conceptions of the content of national identity. Nonetheless, this is an advantage rather than a hinderance in that it further confirms that liberal nationalism can accommodate elements of social conservatism. The question that remains, however, is: why should liberal nationalists such as Miller continue to erroneously frame their position in terms of liberalism, given that, of all the major political ideologies, liberalism appears to be the least accurate description?

## Conclusion

What in fact distinguishes between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity, then, is not their respective contents, but rather their aims and formation processes. Recent attempts to delineate the contours of a specifically liberal national identity either overshoot the target by applying significantly to conservative accounts; or collapse upon scrutiny on the terms of liberal nationalists' own communitarianism-inspired framework. This, however, is an advantage rather than a hinderance: it shows that liberal nationalism can indeed accommodate moderate elements of social conservatism. This is necessary in the recent context where liberal nationalism has been proposed as an ideological middle ground which can help steer vast segments of the electorate away from far-right, ethno-nationalist, and populist parties which capitalize on their sense of cultural displacement.

Nonetheless, Gustavsson's typology does pave the way to uncovering salient distinctions between Miller and Scruton's accounts; namely their divergent attitudes towards institutional authority, rationalism, and elitism. Indeed, the main point of division which makes it to the surface concerns Miller's democratic inclusivity versus Scruton's democratically exclusionary elitism. I further suggest that it is this alternative axis of democratic inclusivity that should be highlighted in the future framing of the theory. For it effectively captures the main underlying second-order (aims and formation process) differences between liberal and conservative accounts, and explains the surface-level differences in degree brought out by Gustavsson's (2019) blueprint framework.

In terms of strategic reframing, I suggest that the term 'social-democratic nationalism' is more appropriate and ideologically transparent than liberal nationalism. For not only do liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity effectively merge on the surface level; Miller's liberal nationalism is also intrinsically democratic and quasi-socialist in that it is largely driven by distributive justice considerations<sup>9</sup>. Finally, the new, mutated meaning of the term 'liberalism' which connotes inflated identity politics, open borders, etc. conflicts with liberal nationalism's spirit and letter. If liberal nationalism is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, thereby achieving the recently articulated goal of mitigating political polarization, distrust, and unrest, then, the minimal starting point is to reframe it using ideologically transparent language. This terminological change can only be a step in the right direction.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term social conservatism denotes the set of values typically held among national populist voters. These include the rejection of: excessively permissive immigration policies, inflated identity politics, the repudiation of communal ties, self-centred individualism, and the undermining of traditional social and national values such as the family unit, religion, and other civil society associations (Ford and Goodwin, 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018, Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Some attempts have previously been made to distinguish between liberal and non-liberal conceptions of nationalism or national identity. Other than Miller's (1995: 120-30) contrast between liberal nationalism and its conservative and multiculturalist counterparts, Kymlicka (2002: 54-59) distinguishes between liberal and illiberal forms of nation-building, focusing on ethnic and religious diversity, civic freedoms, and coercion avoidance. Uberoi (2018: 48-55) distinguishes between liberal and conservative nationalisms in terms of their somewhat different views of nations and uses of nationality for their respective conservative and liberal agendas. My own approach differs from these in the following respects. Whereas Kymlicka's focus is on the contrast between liberal and *illiberal* nation-building efforts, my own focus is on that between liberal and *conservative* conceptions of national *identity*. While Uberoi's prime focus is Bhikhu Parekh's multiculturalist national identity, distinctively understood independently of the concept of a nation, this paper's scope is confined to the central sense of national identity used by liberal and conservative nationalists. Merging them here would risk talking at cross-purposes. While these are insightful angles worthy of further pursuit regarding ethnic and religious inclusivity, the present focus will take off from Gustavsson's framework, since it is the most developed attempt to date at providing a comprehensive analytic tool for distinguishing between liberal and conservative conceptions of national identity.

<sup>3</sup> Some have recently questioned whether a liberal national identity is worthy of further consideration, given the suggestion that other alternative, multicultural forms may be more inclusive (see Modood 2020; Uberoi 2020; Chin 2021). There is certainly scope for exploring how the multiculturalist tradition can inform or reshape the aspects of liberal nationalism which may be insufficiently accommodating of cultural-religious diversity and belonging. However, given the multiculturalists' reconstruction of national identity along non-majoritarian and 'multiculturalized' lines, examining these in adequate detail while avoiding equivocation would require a separate paper. Thus the present scope is confined to liberal and conservative nationalists' conceptions of national identity. However, it is hoped that highlighting the need to restate democratic inclusivity as a central feature will present an opening to further research on how this might interact more specifically with the multiculturalists' emphases on inclusivity.

<sup>4</sup> Although Putnam's and Alesina & La Ferrara's findings have been contested, a meta-analysis has since been produced by Kaufmann and Goodwin (2018) concluding that in 71% of the cases analysed, an increase in the minority share of populations was indeed associated with perceptions of threat. Overall, rapid demographic change does appear to challenge social cohesion.

<sup>5</sup> It must be acknowledged that the 'classical v social-democratic liberalism' and 'individualism / communitarianism' distinctions are not entirely parallel to each other. Rawlsian liberalism and Miller's 'new' liberal nationalism, for instance, are both strongly social-democratic; however, only the former is individualistic. As Miller (2000: 99) notes, it is possible to detach communitarianism and individualism from their typically accompanying ideologies. However, this is typically the exception rather than the rule: classical liberalism is strongly individualistic; and although Rawls' (1971) social-democratic liberalism was bereft of communitarianism, the social-democratic 'new liberalism' he partly appropriated was indeed communitarian; as is Miller's modern-day descendant.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to imply that there is a strict uniformity to the conservative positions of Kekes and Scruton; indeed, their respective approaches to the status of history and tradition differ in noteworthy respects. Conservatives such as John Kekes, Michael Oakeshott, and Kenneth Minogue endorse weaker, pragmatic, and purportedly non-ideological accounts which emphasise caution, pragmatism, and a wariness of unbridled rationalism in political reasoning. By contrast, Scruton's conservatism involves a *programme* whereby history, tradition, and ideology have an explicitly prominent role in society (Scruton 2002). However, the extent of these differences is contested (Vincent 1994), and the Burkean partnership principle is common to all.

<sup>7</sup> This distinction has parallels among numerous other conservatives, not least Michael Oakeshott (1962) who distinguishes between practical and technical knowledge. Technical knowledge consists in principles or propositions which are susceptible of precise formulation, such as in mathematics and the natural sciences. Practical knowledge, by contrast, is interwoven with traditions and customary ways of life and is not susceptible of precise formulation because it encompasses physical skill, preferences, moral and aesthetic sensibilities etc. which cannot be compressed into tidy doctrines. Such customs and traditions provide us with 'intimations' (subtle historically-accumulated knowledge which is sometimes tacit or embodied) which guide political reasoning more reliably than technical knowledge. See also Joseph de Maistre's (1994 [1797]) distinction between 'reason' and 'intuition / instinct', and Justus Moser's distinction between 'thought' and 'life' (Vincent, 1994: 212).

<sup>8</sup> Although Lenard and Gustavsson present the distinction in political, rather than ontological terms, liberal nationalism's commitment to the ontological symbiosis of the public and private spheres makes the distinction problematically artificial here. Gustavsson (2019: 706) claims that according to liberal nationalism, Muslim veils

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cannot be democratically banned (since they are an outward expression of the private realm), but minarets can (since they form part of a shared public space). The problem here, however, is the arbitrariness of the classification of the niqab as pertaining primarily to the private realm: permitting the niqab (designed to be worn in public) represents part of a civic, public culture which (unlike say, France) allows the wearing of such garments. Correspondingly, while it may be true that the decision to wear the niqab originated in the private realm, the same could equally be true of decisions to build minarets.

<sup>9</sup> Although social democracy has traditionally been ideologically committed to internationalism, this has often fallen short of the mark in practice, particularly in relation to immigration policy, not least in the Scandinavian countries where an increasingly restrictive approach has been adopted (Hernes 2018; Hagelund 2020). Liberal nationalism, which opposes heightened internationalism, coincides with this relative retreat from it as we move into the post-pandemic era.

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