

# Comprehending Conservatism: Frameworks and Analysis

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## I Introduction

In a communication to this journal, Jan-Werner Müller (2006) offers a novel framework for the analysis of conservatism as a ‘coherent political ideology’. Noting that many self-styled conservatives are sceptical about the deployment of analytic methods, Müller offers a ‘multi-dimensional approach characterized by four dimensions. He specifies that at least two of these dimensions must be in play to justify the ascription of political conservatism. One feature of this dimensional approach is that it allows political conservatives to be associated by ‘family resemblance’ rather than by strict (ideo)logic; and so the deployment of the kinds of analytic tools typically used in political philosophy might prove unhelpful – and indeed may be demonstrably inappropriate. As Müller notes, the thought ‘that defining conservatism would inevitably be a form of “rationalism”’ p360<sup>1</sup> has been something of a tradition in conservative thought; and rationalism in politics is something that conservatives tend to be against. The ‘family resemblance’ method of definition, in serving to inhibit the direct application of simple logic<sup>2</sup>, might on this count prove congenial to the conservative tradition, while still allowing, variously, the exploration, study, analysis, or ‘making sense’ of conservatism that Müller thinks desirable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All references to page numbers without further attribution are to Müller (2006).

<sup>2</sup> We take it that this methodological point is part of what Müller has in mind when he suggests that the multi-dimensional method might be “*applied to other strands of political thought, even though the dimensions clearly would then have to be described differently*” Müller (2006) p.360. Note that the ‘family resemblance’ method does not block ‘logic chopping’ entirely – but it does render any application of standard tools of analysis much less direct.

<sup>3</sup> The classic philosophical reference to the concept of ‘family resemblance’ is Wittgenstein, L. (1953/2010) *Philosophical investigations*, London, Wiley-Blackwell..

We agree with Muller that this exercise of ‘comprehending’ conservatism<sup>4</sup> is an extremely worthwhile - and somewhat under-pursued - enterprise. However, we have serious misgivings about various aspects of Müller’s treatment. Although we do not want to deny that the multi-dimensional method may have its uses, we think that in filling in the details, Müller says both too little and too much – too little in that important distinctions between different lines of reasoning are ignored; and too much in that his particular dimensions include elements that do not bear on a specifically ‘*political* ideology’ (which is his claimed focus). We seek to set out these criticisms in what follows.

It needs to be acknowledged at the outset that our interest in conservatism arises out of a concern over its neglect within political philosophy. In that sense, we would describe our ambition as being the comprehension of conservatism as a ‘coherent political *philosophy*’ as opposed to a ‘coherent political *ideology*’ (Müller’s self-description). So one ambition in what follows will be to explore what might be at stake in the distinction between a political ideology and a political philosophy. However, what we say in this connection does not, we think, vitiate the force of our misgivings about the Müller treatment – and indeed there are textual reasons that make us think that Muller’s conception of the task and our conception are not too far apart.

Our discussion is organized as follows. In section II we offer a brief description of the content of Müller’s four dimensions and make some general comments about three different aspects of his approach. In section III, we discuss the possible distinction between a political ideology and a political philosophy. The succeeding four sections deal with the four dimensions in greater detail. Section VIII offers a brief conclusion.

## II Müller’s Argument Summarized

The four dimensions that Müller suggests are:

1. A sociological dimension;
2. A methodological dimension;
3. An aesthetic dimension;
4. A philosophical dimension.

Briefly, sociological conservatism is the ‘ideology or the specific political program of a particular social group trying to hold onto its privileges’ p 361. The European aristocracy in relation first to the rising bourgeoisie and then mass democracy is identified as providing the ‘original template’.

Methodological conservatism or ‘prudential particularism’ centres on the proposition that in managing the process of reform conservatives will take account of ‘what is already there’ p 362. In Müller’s view such methodological conservatism is neither necessary nor sufficient for

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<sup>4</sup> We shall use the term “comprehending” to include the various more specific tasks of exploring, studying, making sense of, and analyzing – appealing to the “comprehensiveness” connotation of “comprehending”.

political conservatism,<sup>5</sup> but merely recognizes a possible strand of conservatism that is particularist in the sense that conservatives of this style see political concerns as deeply embedded in a specific time and place, and prudential in the sense that recognises that change, while sometimes desirable, is always both costly and risky.

Müller treats aesthetic conservatism<sup>6</sup> as being exemplified by Oakeshott's well-known description – ‘to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss’ Oakeshott (1991) p408. However, Müller draws a connection here (as the aesthetic label suggests) with various nostalgic elements in literature and ‘in poetry in particular’ p361 - but perhaps also in other art forms.

The philosophical dimension of conservatism requires the conservative to pursue particular substantive values and Müller suggests that the values associated with social hierarchy may be central.

Before interrogating Müller's dimensional understanding of conservatism in more detail, three general observations are in order.

First, it is notable that Müller initially describes his four categories as ‘dimensions’ but then in the more detailed description refers to them as ‘variants’ of conservatism. This is either a terminological slip – since conservatism, on Müller's account, is defined by reference to the simultaneous acceptance of (at least) *two* of the four dimensions or aspects – or it is designed to distinguish *political* conservatism from conservatisms of the ‘dimensional’ kinds. If the latter, it needs to be explained why the various possible combinations suffice to render the conservatism in question ‘political’ when no one dimension on its own could suffice to do so. What is it about political conservatism specifically that insists on the hybrid character?<sup>7</sup>

Second, the use of the terminology of ‘dimensions’ carries the suggestion that each of the features relevant to identifying the relevant aspect of conservatism naturally comes in degrees – and that a metric of the ‘extent of realization’ emerges naturally from the definition in each case. But it is not self-evident what the metric in each case is, or why ‘degree of realization’ would be of particular importance. For example, in relation to the fourth ‘dimension’, the metric might be understood in terms of the degree of hierarchy;, or for a given extent of hierarchy, the costs associated with any (futile) attempt to circumvent it; or the costs in terms of other valued things

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<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Huntington, S. (1957) ‘Conservatism as an ideology’, *American Political Science Review*, **51(2)**, 454-73. For Huntington, a clear commitment to existing institutions is certainly necessary and probably sufficient to identify conservatism.

<sup>6</sup> We prefer to reserve the term ‘dispositional’ for a different purpose – to refer to a habit of mind or inclination – or, as Buchanan and Tullock might put it, to the agent's “personal constitution”, so we will use the phrase aesthetic conservatism hereafter. See Buchanan, J. M. and Tullock, G. (1962) *The Calculus of Consent*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. p97.

<sup>7</sup> This is important from the ‘family resemblance’ perspective, because it would imply that once conservatism is more finely specified there is no barrier to analysis of a standard kind: only *political* conservatism would be resistant to standard logical methods and this only because of its (definitional but unexplained) hybrid character.

forgone that circumventing the hierarchy would entail.<sup>8</sup> We are ourselves generally hospitable to the idea of relevant aspects of conservatism ‘coming in degrees’ – but of course what the aspects are, and why the degrees matter are issues that need explication (which is precisely why a metrical treatment is desirable.)

Third, there is an interesting locution evident in Müller’s writing that we also find present in many writings by conservatives themselves<sup>9</sup>. This is that definitions often proceed ‘negatively’: in explicating what is at stake in the various aspects, Müller frequently remarks: well, it’s not X and it’s not Y, and it’s not Z. This kind of creeping up on a definition by sequential exclusion is, we suppose, legitimate in its own way: each successive elimination serves to refine the concept at issue to some (indeterminate?) extent. But this is a distinctive method and to the extent that it is common in conservative apologetics<sup>10</sup>, one wonders whether there is some non-coincidental connection between conservative reasoning and the ‘negative definitional method’. In this connection, Müller refers to Freedman’s observation that it is mainly self-styled conservatives who write about conservatism – and that this fact gives grounds for suspecting bias in evaluation. This may well be true. However, we find that it is mainly *opponents* of conservatism like Hayek and Buchanan (coming arguably out of a more ‘analytic tradition’) who are clearest in defining what conservatism is. Opponents need, of course, to be clear on definitional questions, in order to explain what it is about conservatism that they are against.<sup>11</sup>

### III Political Ideology vs. Political Philosophy: the role of ‘feelings’?

Müller sees his dimensional approach as a mechanism for analyzing conservatism as a coherent political ideology. We identify our own efforts as analyzing conservatism as a coherent political philosophy. Is there a significant difference between these two tasks?

Müller suggests in his closing remarks some characteristic features of ideologies as he sees them:

After all, nearly every ideology needs an account of ‘method’ as well as its relationship to history; all espouse core values and all might be related to particular interests and contexts; and all, I would say, have an emotional component or tend to be associated with particular “structures of feeling”. p364<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A hierarchy of ‘degree n’ might be infinitely costly to overcome (where n could be larger or smaller); and yet the necessarily futile gestures railing against it might not cost very much.

<sup>9</sup> We take it as an open question whether Müller is himself a conservative in one or more of the senses his categories admit.

<sup>10</sup> To establish this claim would require a more extensive interrogation of the conservative library than is appropriate here. Besides, there is the danger that assigning certain authors to that library begs exactly the definitional issues that Müller’s discussion declares open. So we leave the relation between conservatism and the negative method as a speculation based on casual observation.

<sup>11</sup> See Hayek, F. (1960) *Why I Am Not a Conservative*. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Buchanan, J. M. (2005) *Why I, too, am not a conservative: the normative vision of classical liberalism*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

<sup>12</sup> We set aside the proviso implied by the opening ‘nearly’: Müller doesn’t indicate what cases he has in mind where method and factual claims wouldn’t be required.

What stands out here as a point where an ideology and a political philosophy might come apart is the reference to an ‘emotional component’ -- to the ‘structures of feeling’ with which particular ideological positions might be associated. Structures of feeling can clearly have political significance – even under the broadest ‘definition of the political’ p363. Much of our own previous work, for example, has focused on the ‘expressive dimension’ of democratic politics<sup>13</sup> and more particularly on why we ought to expect that ‘affective’ considerations will play a more extensive role in democratic electoral politics than for example in markets. We would be the last people to deny the importance of relevant emotions. But it would have to be conceded that such considerations do not routinely receive much attention among political philosophers – less attention, arguably, than they merit.

There are three possible grounds for interest in the ‘affect’ aspects of ideological positions:

1. One may be interested in these issues for their own sake. That is, one might be interested in tracing the associations between various ideological positions and the affective considerations variously to which they give rise, or on which they depend. Note that nothing in that exercise depends on the empirical or logical credentials of the affective considerations in question. For example, contestants in the Presidential candidate debates might be extremely interested in the way in which the audience support barometer reacts to particular topics or positions or rhetorical devices. They treat these audience reactions as basic facts: the question as to whether such reactions are in any way justified scarcely arises. Any analytic interest in these basic facts might be thought to be properly restricted to political psychologists or perhaps political scientists more broadly. But that might be too quick: for certain questions in political philosophy, facts about affective issues may indeed be crucial.
2. Specifically, one might be interested in these facts for instrumental reasons. Suppose for example that a greater perception of legitimacy of government on the part of the general populace is on balance an advantage – at least in regimes that are tolerably decent. Different ideological positions might support that sense of legitimacy – democratic liberalism (in broadly democratic regimes) by fostering enthusiasm for democratic institutions; certain kinds of conservatism perhaps by fostering popular enthusiasm for familiar ways of doing things and so on. The prevailing ‘structure of feeling’ represents one aspect of the ‘feasibility considerations’ that constrain policy choice or institutional modification. The question of whether particular ‘structures of feeling’ are conducive or inimical to institutions or policies or mid-level evaluative principles that are independently justifiable is certainly important for issues of implementability. And if an institutional change that is identified as desirable within some political philosophy is more easily implemented (or implemented at lower cost in terms of other valued ends forgone) when accompanied by a ‘feeling’ of a given character, then political philosophers might properly attend to the question as to how the relevant feeling could be promoted.

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<sup>13</sup> Specifically, why that expressive dimension ought to be considered a crucial part of political process within the ‘rational actor’ framework. See Brennan, G. and Hamlin, A. (1998) ‘Expressive voting and electoral equilibrium’, *Public Choice*, **95**(1-2), 149-75, Brennan, G. and Hamlin, A. (2000) *Democratic Devices and Desires*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Brennan, G. and Lomasky, L. (1993) *Democracy and Decision*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Hamlin, A. and Jennings, C. (2011) ‘Expressive political behaviour: foundations, scope and implications’, *British Journal of Political Science*, **41**(3), 645-70.

3. One might be interested in whether the ‘structure of feeling’ is itself justified. This kind of case is best illustrated by the situation in which the emotional affect itself depends on a false belief. For example, in his treatment of expressive rationality, for example, Robert Nozick (1993) explains why it might be rational for an individual to vote for increasing the minimum wage even when she believes that an increase in the minimum wage will actually hurt those who it is designed to assist.<sup>14</sup> Conceivably a high minimum wage could have a role in an ideological position that could not be traced to any foundational values or facts about the way labour markets operate. But that role *could* be traced to facts about the beliefs about labour markets that most people happen to have, or to positive connotations that particular policies might have for other reasons. Or consider the case of social mobility in the US. It seems to be a widespread belief (specifically in the US polity) that social mobility in the US is high – relative, say, to most European countries; and this belief is congenial to arguments for certain existing US institutions (and specifically for extensive reliance on relatively unhindered market mechanisms). But that belief is false. The correlation between parent and child lifetime income is considerably higher in the US than in most European countries with much more extensive tax/transfer systems.<sup>15</sup>

We take it that the presence of this widespread illusion could not ground an analysis of free market liberalism as a political *philosophy*. But it might well be held relevant as an element in a coherent political *ideology*. The fact that many people believe something that is false may be part of the account of why a particular ideology has significant sway or why particular appeals have emotional force. Moreover, such false beliefs may be tolerably robust, either because most people do not take the trouble to check the facts or because many tend to distrust or undervalue contrary evidence.<sup>16</sup> If we wish to understand political processes and the role of ideology in them, we have to attend to facts about people’s actual beliefs (even where the beliefs are illusions). If, on the other hand, we want to understand whether conservatism can be *justified* as a coherent political philosophy then false beliefs, however widespread, need to be exposed.

Where exactly Müller himself stands in relation to this array of possibilities is not clear. In general terms, one might think that ‘comprehending’ a political ideology (as against a political philosophy) might shift the weight of interest from the kinds of considerations at stake in 3 above towards 2 and 1. But we think Müller’s position and our own on these issues are fairly close. For one thing, Müller is insistent that his treatment is designed to uncover a *coherent* political ideology – and though we would not want to accuse political psychologists of incoherence, we think that the coherence requirement is most easily understood in terms focused on the justifiability of any cognitive aspects of relevant feelings. We concede however that in focusing on feelings that depend on identifiably false beliefs, we leave unaddressed the cases in which the feelings in question are not based on epistemically rejectable propositions. In all the latter cases, seeing the domain of enquiry as an ideology rather than a political philosophy seems to be more hospitable to consideration of the purely affective elements – both as a pure matter of descriptive completeness and in terms of aesthetic or other possible understandings of ‘justifiability’. To the

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps by causing a significant proportion of the marginal workers to lose their jobs.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, OECD (2010) *Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth*. ch. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Rabin, M. and Schrag, J. L. (1999) ‘First impressions matter: A model of confirmatory bias’, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, **114**(1), 37-82.

extent that Müller is seen to be insisting on consideration of these latter aspects, we are inclined to think he has a point – and that political philosophers ought to be (more) receptive to it.

There is a piece of textual evidence here. Müller insists that “‘libertarianism is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a form of conservatism.’ p364. We totally agree<sup>17</sup>. The fact that classical liberals, libertarians and conservatives have been for much of the twentieth century engaged in a broad coalition against communism abroad and democratic socialism at home should not obscure the fundamental differences that exist between coalition partners. Of course, at the level of apologetics, quite some effort has been expended in papering over the cracks within the coalition. We think that any serious attempt at analyzing conservatism must be committed to tearing that paper away. And it seems Müller agrees. But a more thorough-going theorist of ideology might be more inclined to take these patterns of association as relevant facts, and insist that distinctions be made as much on affective as on conceptual grounds.

In the same way, we should want to distinguish conservatism, whether understood as a political philosophy or an ideology, from the use of the term ‘conservative’ in everyday politics. Of course, many political actors and parties style themselves (or are styled by others) as ‘conservative’, or otherwise identify themselves by reference to ‘conservative’ positions; and the use of such labels is in itself not uninteresting. But the search for a conservatism that can be seen as a coherent political philosophy must, at least initially, be independent of such uses. It will be a further question to ask to what extent those who style themselves as conservatives adhere to any recognizable form of the underlying conservative political philosophy.

Which brings us more or less immediately to one point of contention.

#### **IV The Sociological Dimension: conservatism vs. deployment of conservative arguments**

We are extremely suspicious of what Müller understands as the sociological aspect of conservatism, and which we take to be simple political self-interest. Appeal to this consideration as a mechanism for *making sense of conservatism* seems to us to confuse categories. We think there is an important distinction between analyzing the intellectual and/or emotional force of conservative arguments/considerations on the one hand and analyzing the motives of those that wield them on the other. It is one thing to explain the force (logical, empirical or emotive) of conservative arguments/considerations and another thing entirely to recognize that certain persons might, given their location in the current social structure, have prudential reasons to exploit that force. Self-interest does not become conservatism, just because conservative arguments are deployed by people who stand to lose by a particular institutional/policy change; any more than self-interest is radicalism just because radical arguments are deployed by those who stand to gain by change.

Of course, it may be that the claim: ‘policy X will make individual A worse off’ is seen by B and C and D as significant grounds for not doing X. And then we might seek grounds for why B, C

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<sup>17</sup> As do Hayek, F. (1960) Why I Am Not a Conservative. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. and Buchanan, J. M. (2005) *Why I, too, am not a conservative : the normative vision of classical liberalism*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

and D should have that attitude; and/or explanations of why they do. But we take it that it is *only if* those grounds/explanations are connected to some recognizably ‘conservative’ considerations that they would constitute an explication of conservatism, rather than, say, altruism towards A. The fact that A has purely self-interested reasons to oppose the change has no conservative credentials whatsoever.

The point generalizes. Suppose, for the purposes of the exercise, that conservatism involves a presumption in favour of the status quo as such – by virtue of the fact that it is the status quo.<sup>18</sup> An individual A may support the status quo against some possible reform, Y, on any of a number of grounds: perhaps Y involves redistribution in favour of the rich and A is an egalitarian; perhaps Y involves a reduction in freedom and A is a libertarian. In such cases, A’s support for the status quo is contingent. Only if A’s support for the status quo is non-contingent, arising from the simple fact that it is the status quo, will be properly described as a conservative. This point is made eloquently by Tännsjö (1990) and perhaps does not require further elaboration.<sup>19</sup>

So, we reject the sociological dimension as a genuine aspect of conservatism. This is not to deny that individuals with a wide variety of political dispositions (self-interest, egalitarianism, libertarianism) may find themselves agreeing with conservatives on particular issues, and may find it tactically expedient to deploy conservative arguments in those cases. It is to deny that that fact tells us anything about the validity or otherwise of those conservative arguments.

## **V The Methodological Dimension: substance, posture and practicality**

We are inclined to think that what Müller terms the methodological dimension of conservatism is where most of the analytic action lies. But it is here that we think his treatment says too little. We agree with Müller’s general claim relating to what he terms prudential particularism. However, in our view, this label hides several further analytic distinctions of some importance. The general idea, as we read it, is that methodological conservatism involves a status quo bias that falls well short of an absolute bar to reform, but which involves a genuine attachment to the present as well as concern about the risks and costs of reform. A key, if implicit, point here is that methodological conservatism will normally involve the recognition of some values or reasons for action which, when appropriately tempered, will yield a cautious approach to desirable reform.

In analysing this idea further we focus on identifying conservatism in relation to fundamental values and reasons for action, whatever they may be. Broadly, our strategy is to identify three distinct ways in which a conservative can relate to underlying values or reasons for action (hereafter, just values).

First, a conservative might recognize the same values as the non-conservative but have a different attitude or posture relative to those values – we term such a conservative an adjectival or postural conservative, since their conservatism qualifies or conditions the pursuit of basic substantive values that are not themselves distinctively conservative. Clearly a major issue here

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<sup>18</sup> In the spirit of Müller’s multi-dimensional framework we need not suppose that a status quo bias exhausts conservatism.

<sup>19</sup> But see below for further discussion of the status quo bias as an element of conservatism.



is to provide a satisfactory account of the form of such conditioning, and the account we have offered elsewhere focusses broadly on perceptions of and attitudes towards normative risk.<sup>20</sup>

Second, a conservative might identify a value (or values) that is (are) not recognized by non-conservatives. We term such a conservatives substantive conservatives, since their conservatism builds on a substantive claim about values. Clearly a major issue here is to give an account of a value or values that *are* distinctively conservative. We ourselves are drawn to the idea of ‘particular value’ proposed by Cohen (2011) and have interrogated Cohen’s analysis elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> However, we do not necessarily commit to Cohen’s notions being the only form of substantive conservatism.

Third, a conservative might be essentially similar to the non-conservative, both adjectivally and substantively, but differ from the non-conservative in relation to empirical beliefs about the world. In this case, the distinctively conservative disposition reflects beliefs about the way in which the agreed values fall in the world. We term such a conservative a practical conservative. One possibility here is the emphasis on the transactions costs associated with political reform. The claim in this case is that even those reforms that are desirable in themselves, should be recognised as costly – usually in some way that is not self-evident. To the extent that such (hidden) costs are systematic, a form of status quo bias results. Clearly a major issue here is what form such putatively systematic costs take and whether claims that they are routinely in play can be justified.

These three forms of conservatism, the postural, the substantive and the practical, may operate in any combination, so that rather than just three types of conservative, we may identify a total of seven forms of conservative disposition each characterised by a particular combination. But, in our view, each of these seven has a real claim to the title conservative.

In stressing the role of the status quo, we do not propose a more complex return to Huntington’s (1957) account of conservatism as a purely positional political philosophy – one that supports the status quo, whatever it might be, against reform of whatever form. Rather we accept Freedén’s view – which is that conservatism ‘is *not* an ideology of the status quo. It is not merely an attempt to forestall change and to arrest the historical process. Rather it is an ideology predominantly *concerned* with the problem of change: not necessarily proposing to eliminate it, but to render it safe.’ Freedén (1998) p332. One way of understanding our notions of postural, substantive and practical conservatism is precisely as an attempt to identify the ways in which such a conservative concern with change and its associated costs and risks might be grounded.

## VI The Aesthetic Dimension

We now wish to raise some queries about Müller’s identification of the aesthetic aspect of conservatism. As Müller recognizes, there are some genuine problems in connecting sentimental or intuitive commitments towards the past (in the way that these have taken form in the English tradition at least) with *political* conservatism. Although Müller refers in this connection to a *politics* of nostalgia, it seems to us that he is right to emphasize that the nostalgia of sentiment

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<sup>20</sup> On adjectival conservatism see Brennan, G. and Hamlin, A. (2004) ‘Analytic conservatism’, *British Journal of Political Science*, **34**, 675-91.

<sup>21</sup> On substantive conservatism see Brennan, G. and Hamlin, A. (2013) ‘Conservative Value’, *Paper presented to the Public Choice Society Conference, New Orleans*.

and intuition (which is real enough in certain strands of the English aesthetic imagination) is 'less interested in putting forth a political doctrine than in expressing a disposition' p361. The difficulty here, it seems to us, is to establish any connection whatsoever between this aesthetic and politics. And here, we simply carry forward what seem to us to be the logical implications of Müller's own remarks.

This is what he says. First, aesthetic conservatism tends to be associated with 'political passivity'. Second, as he puts it, if '...it is the nostalgic glance backwards that allows conservatives to see more clearly' it is also the case that 'conservatives always arrive too late actually to conserve' p361. This form of nostalgia connects with a mild, and not altogether unpleasant, melancholia – but it is associated with a sense of irreparable loss, 'irreparable' here being the operative word. This feeling does indeed seem to be a recipe for political passivity. In fact, by its very nature, it appears to have nothing to do with politics at all, except to lament the hopeless irrelevance of all things political (even broadly construed).

Müller himself declares that such souls are 'not what I would call *political* conservatives. They are *aesthetic* conservatives, more concerned with protecting the purity of sentimental and intuitive commitments that cannot (and in a sense should not) be articulated as prescription' p361. The things they are nostalgic about have nothing to do with politics. So why are they part of Müller's account of 'conservatism as a coherent political ideology'? Is it the case that, after all, political conservatives have somehow been able to mobilize an association with aesthetic conservatives? If so, what are the grounds of that association?

Associations from the past can of course be potent political weapons. Remember 'Remember the Alamo!'<sup>22</sup> But it does not seem as if political conservatives have any monopoly on such appeals – or even that they have a special privilege in making them. Müller's structure of argument implies that there is such a link (however ambivalent his surrounding discussion). If so, the presence of that link is interesting. But it is also puzzling. And Müller finally provides no hints as to how that puzzle might be resolved – why there is any connection at all between this particular 'structure of feeling' and conservatism as a coherent political ideology and, still more challengingly, conservatism as a coherent political philosophy.

Everything we have said so far in relation to aesthetic conservatism echoes Müller's own remarks. But there is one aspect of his discussion of aesthetic conservatism that strikes us as decidedly odd – namely, the link he makes between this particular aesthetic and Oakeshott's account of the 'conservative disposition' as quoted in section II above. For, in this kind of aesthetic, there is more appeal to '*mystery*' than to '*fact*'; it is often the more '*distant*' past rather than the '*near*' that is invoked; there is more a yearning for the impossible than focusing on the possible. In short, Oakeshott's conservative seems a very long way from a Wordsworth or a Herrick or an Elgar – and frankly we are mystified as to why Müller would identify such a close association.

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<sup>22</sup> Or, in the Irish case, the Battle of the Boyne or, in the post-Yugoslavian case, 14<sup>th</sup> century battles the details of which even the protagonists can't relate.

## **VII The Philosophical Dimension**

Müller's philosophical dimension might simply be interpreted as a form of the substantive conservatism discussed above; as he notes, 'This stance implies a commitment to realizing a set of substantive values' p363 and, to the extent that this interpretation is appropriate we have no problem with it beyond suggesting that, contra Müller, there must some connection between the relevant set of substantial values and the status quo (and change therein) in order for this form of conservatism to be distinguished from the wide variety of other value-based, ideational political philosophies. However, Müller's particular suggestion in relation to the identity of the relevant value revolves around hierarchy: 'I claim that philosophical conservatives are primarily invested in the importance of hierarchical relationships, or some more or less naturalized conception of inequality.' p363. In identifying this aspect of conservatism, Müller tracks a central element in Buchanan's (2005) definition of conservatism and one that also figures, albeit to a lesser extent, in Hayek (1960) – though of course Hayek and Buchanan's purpose in pointing up the conservative commitment to hierarchical social and political relations is to reveal why conservatism is objectionable rather than to endorse it.

Conservatism as the positive valuation of continuing hierarchies certainly seems to capture some part of what we commonly understand as conservatism, but the appropriate analytic questions are whether the idea of hierarchy is foundational, and what exactly is the appeal of hierarchy? This is not the place for detailed discussion, but we might mention several specific queries in pointing to the need for that more detailed discussion. First, is it 'continuing hierarchy' or just hierarchy that is valuable? If the emphasis is on continuation, is this just a particular example of a status quo bias, or is there anything specific about hierarchy? Is it a specific form of hierarchy that is valuable, or is the claim rather that a 'stable social order' is valuable, and that hierarchical society is just one possible form (perhaps a particularly stable form) that such a social order might take? What is the relationship between hierarchy and inequality and social mobility? Buchanan (2005, p4-5) certainly sees conservatism as including a view antipathetic to the idea of the natural equality of human potential, but might hierarchy be combined with a form of meritocratic equality provided that positions in the hierarchy were available to all in a fair competition?

Whatever the response to these questions, it seems to us natural to parse Müller's philosophical dimension of conservatism in terms of some combination of the postural, substantive and practical forms of conservatism discussed above in relation to the methodological dimension. We may of course be in the grip of our own analytic categories; but our general challenge is whether these two dimensions are quite as independent as talk of separate dimensions would lead one to expect.

## **VIII Framework and Analysis: some concluding comments**

We have cast some doubt upon the relevance of some of the dimensions of Müller's framework for analysing conservatism, if conservatism is to be seen as a political philosophy. The sociological dimension seems too superficial and insufficiently distinctive, while the aesthetic dimension seems insufficiently political and principled. If this is accepted, the core of political

conservatism must lie with the methodological and philosophical dimensions. Even here, however, the distinction between the two dimensions is not as clear cut as might be expected.

The main point of Müller's contribution may however be seen more in terms of the multi-dimensional idea: as Müller himself puts it, 'The main point of the argument is that, for us properly to speak of a political conservatism, at least two of the four dimensions outlined earlier need to be present.' p363. But there is, we think, less of an argument here than an interestingly suggestive claim.

And we, at least, are not convinced that the suggestion of a framework is any substitute for an analysis of the categories that the framework suggests. Here, we have gestured at how a more detailed analysis of such dimensions as are relevant might go. This analysis will fit broadly within Müller's methodological/philosophical dimensions; but it will go further to draw distinctions between what we term the postural, substantive and practical elements of conservative argument. Of course, analysis of these elements needs a great deal of further development. Our reference to these categories here is just to signal our conviction that the 'analytic conservatism' project is by no means impossible or implausible – even if one had deep misgivings about Müller's attempt.

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