Introduction
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We suffer unmistakably, though our land is so ancient, from a most uncomfortable sense of newness. Oral legend and wonderful stories of bygone days serve to refine the imagination of the poorer classes in the old countries and to cultivate their hearts, but the lower classes in Victoria have no such resource.

(Guerin 1886)

This recurrent anxiety to discover and affirm what it is to be an Australian – to define a distinctive national ethos and type – to set up Australianity as an identifiable quality and merit – reminds us that Australia is largely a nineteenth century creation, and therefore congenitally diseased with nationalism, that ‘doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century’ to the infinite harm and confusion of mankind.

(McAuley 1962: 122)

Issues of identity – being clear about our identity and culture – are an important part of how we as a nation will behave and present ourselves in the 90s.

(Keating 1994a)

National identity develops in an organic way over time. It may be changed by cataclysmic events like Gallipoli. But government and their social engineers should not try to manipulate it, or to create a sense of crisis about identity. Constant debate about identity implies that we don’t already have one or, worse, that it is somehow inadequate.

(Howard 1995a, 1995b: 3)

Australian cultural nationalists have long pursued the task of discovering, or indeed creating, a distinctive Australian character, ethos, or tradition. It is only since the early 1970s, however, that Australian
academics have employed the term ‘national identity’ with regard to such projects (Inglis 1991: 14). What critics like James McAuley (1962: 123) castigated as the search for an ‘essence of Australianity’ we have now come to understand as a search for ‘identity’. In the 1890s such cultural projects were often associated with nationalist political aspirations (see Palmer 1954), and the same may be said of those of the 1990s. Where the cultural nationalists of the 1940s and 1950s had little sympathy with political nationalism (Phillips 1988: 138), recent governmental efforts to promote Australian cultural identity have become part of a program to transform the country’s national identity. Nonetheless, such programs form only one element of a multifaceted ‘politics of identity’ in Australia.

The political usage of the word ‘identity’ in English-speaking countries has only come about comparatively recently. Unqualified by the adjective ‘national’, the term first gained popular currency during the 1950s. From its psychoanalytic origins in Erik Erikson’s work (e.g. 1951, 1968) on ‘identity crises’ among American adolescents and American blacks, the concept of identity has risen rapidly to prominence in history and the social sciences. The word ‘identity’ is now deployed not only to organise our knowledge of certain kinds of contemporary political conflicts, but also to reframe and refine our knowledge of a past in which the term was never used. Such applications are evident in Australia. Since at least 1966, Aboriginal political activists have used the word ‘identity’ in describing their problems and political objectives (e.g. Kabarli 1966: 21). The outspoken social critics, architect Robin Boyd (1967: 55) and journalist Max Harris (1970), used the term to focus attention upon what they saw as the flaws and insecurities in Australian character and culture. The rudiments of a scholarly discourse of identity, however, are evident somewhat later in the work of the Australian sociologist Jean Martin (1972) and the historians Serle (1973), Walker (1976), and Mandle (1980). Among the historians, Manning Clark (1979) drew specific attention to a ‘quest for identity’ by white Australians, and Richard White (1981: viii) has called the historical enterprise ‘a national obsession’.

Until the 1980s, many of the influential commentators on identity used the term in the singular. They generally assumed the existence or possibility of a single national identity. It was thought that a core of attributes, values and attitudes, albeit one that was slowly evolving, was discernible that marked things and people as authentically Australian. This belief provoked argument over which aspects of national heritage – symbols, events and public ceremonies – could legitimately be regarded as Australian. Controversy inevitably ensued over the meaning and relevance of those symbols and events (Day 1992) – the flag,
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For some, however, the very discussion of matters of identity and heritage merely affirmed a lack of national self-confidence (McGuinness 1993; see also Howard 1995b). Observations on the strengths or weaknesses of Australian character and national identity paralleled remarks made about the ‘cultural cringe’ (Phillips 1950) and its opposite, ‘cultural overconfidence’ (e.g. Wallace-Crabbe 1990). Yet the critics of Australian identity have seldom engaged in purely scholastic inquiries. They have frequently sought practical, remedial outcomes. That is, the ‘quest’ for identity has been as much about what Australians ought to be, as what they are. From the early invasion and settlement to the present, claims about social, cultural and political identity have often been used in attempts to persuade Australians to reform their ways. Journalists, novelists and historians have not only aimed to delineate the distinguishing characteristics of Australians, but also asked whether these have been adequate to the national tasks deemed important at the time (see essays in Beaumont 1993; also White 1981).

The resolutely practical dimension of this national obsession was apparent in the political rhetoric and policies of former Labor prime minister Paul Keating (1994a), who made it one of his government’s explicit goals to develop a clear and coherent national identity (see also Keating 1993d; 1994b). Thus the terms of reference of an advisory committee established to plan for the centenary of Australian federation in 2001 (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 1994) included the statement: ‘An over-riding objective will be the building of a better sense of identity for the next century.’ One of the principal issues at stake was the way Australia presented itself internationally, particularly to those countries to the north with which it conducted the greatest proportion of its overseas trade. In this region Australia had, in the words of Alison Broinowski (1993: 115), an ‘image problem’. Keating (quoted in Gordon 1994) explained:

We can only play a part in it [the region] if we go to the world as one nation, as a nation united and not a nation in any way divided. That is why Australians need to be clear about their identity and proud of it. That is why you can’t go hollering to the world saying: ‘Please put us in the big race, but by the way our indigenes don’t have a real part of it and by the way, we are still borrowing the monarchy of another country.’

The government contended that the presentation of our national self was inadequate, and assumed that it could be corrected by creating a singular identity that reflected better the current realities. Prior to his
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election as prime minister in March 1996, John Howard, the parliamentary leader of the Liberal Party of Australia, rejected Keating’s definition of the problem. Howard (1995b: 3) claimed that, although Australians shared a common national identity, governments ought not intervene to shape it. He also contested Keating’s version of history. Howard (1995b: 5) argued correctly that Keating’s history served the political cause of republican nationalism and marginalised Australians who supported a constitutional monarchy. This conflict of interpretation, however, demonstrates only one narrow dimension of the politics of identity in Australia. Increasingly, such political statements of the problem have come under critical review.

Aims of this book

The essays in this book continue that task of criticism by rejecting many of the assumptions underlying contemporary political debates. The collection draws upon a range of disciplinary perspectives (political theory, history, sociology, cultural studies), to examine the broader political dimensions of identity discourse in Australia. Despite their often divergent theoretical orientations, the authors would generally reject the assumption of a singular national identity as a historical fact, or as a political goal. Although these essays further our understanding of Australian nationalism, their inquiries extend beyond the topic of national identity to consider different versions of gender, racial and civic identity. The primary focus, however, remains on the macro-politics of identity in Australia. The essays do not consider in detail the important micro-politics of identity associated with sexual identity, disability or material cultural heritage. Nor do the contributors examine the expressions of identity politics arising from allegiance to states and regions, or those to be found within and between ethnic communities. Worthy as these topics are, they would require another book. The aims of this collection of essays are the modest ones of bringing to a wider audience the variety of ways in which Australians have conceived of their personal and collective identities, and of indicating the complexity of identity discourse and its political function.

By attempting to shed light on the past and present political discourses about identity in Australia, the book also aims to contribute to more enlightened public debate. The intellectual problems surrounding assertions of identity are as much bound up with how we understand the concept as with the substantive contents of a particular identity. It will be my task therefore to examine the concept of identity and identity politics, and to outline the structure of identity discourse. I conclude by reviewing the content of the different chapters and indicating their
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significance for Australian debates. It must be stressed, however, that the following discussion simply sketches the main lines of selected theoretical controversies. In many respects, the account oversimplifies complex issues, and makes no claim to having provided an exhaustive analysis of the literature on identity. For various general surveys of social and political theories of identity and their critics, see Calhoun (1994b), Lash and Friedman (1992b: 1–30), and Hall (1994).²

Identity and its politics

At its most rudimentary, to assert an identity is to distinguish oneself or one’s group in a certain way and to differentiate oneself or one’s group from others.⁴ Claiming a personal or group identity is a means of recognising those with whom one shares values, experiences and beliefs, as well as those who are considered to be different (Calhoun 1994b: 20). Schemes of classification and categorisation are essential to social interaction and provide the basis for establishing one’s sense of personal and group identity (Lash and Friedman 1992b: 4). Peressini (1993: 16) has offered a basic anthropological account of the essential cognitive functions that identity categories perform:

Like the concepts we use to put names to things and designate ideas, identity categories … enable us to put names to ourselves and to others, form some idea of who we are and who other people are, and ascertain the place we occupy along with other people in the world and in society. Lastly, as a means of recognizing the members of a particular group … identity provides the framework for interpreting, predicting or managing our behaviour or that of other people …

All representations of collective identity (social, cultural, ethnic) comprise a substantive content which also indicates boundaries between one’s own group and another. Symbols, in the form of distinctive marks, badges, insignia and flags for example, are ways of indicating both the content and the limits of group identity. To claim an identity, however, is always to construct an ‘other’ in more or less pernicious or benign ways.

The formation of personal and group identity is inherently a dynamic, interactive, social process, and an individual’s personal identity is inextricably bound up with its relationship to a collectivity. Where there is an ‘I’, there is also a ‘we’ and a ‘they’, as well as various representations of those categories and the relationships between them. One way of describing this relationship is to say that we form our identities dialogically. Charles Taylor (1992: 32–3) explains this in terms that can serve as a metaphor for the process that occurs within both individuals and groups:⁵
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We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.

Such dialogues may take many forms. The ‘significant others’ in the dialogue may be real or imagined, political leaders, historians or poets for example, who invoke a variety of collective memories, in written, oral or symbolic form. The nature and consequences of such dialogues in culture and politics provide the problems of identity that concern us here.

Conflict over definitions of identity and who should define identity is not a new phenomenon. From the more virulent manifestations of nationalist ideology and ethnic rivalry to local conflicts over heritage conservation, issues of identity politics have long been with us. Identity politics is the contest over and conflict arising from claims to or about social or group identity. It may be inspired by a sense of threat to values or material resources considered central to the very survival of a group. Such conflict may take the form of theoretical or intellectual disputes, and involves the direct exercise of, or contests over, institutional, material and symbolic power.6 Identity politics may occur both between different groups, and within a group itself, over interpretations of key traditions, texts, and symbols, or over behaviour and possible courses of action arising from them.

At the heart of contemporary identity politics, conceived as the ‘politics of recognition’, is the problem of minority and/or oppressed groups, and their assertion of their legitimate interests in a polity. In largely cultural terms, Taylor explains (1992: 25) why this is important:

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Identity politics has its origins in the imposition of collective representations of identity and their reception or resistance by individuals and groups (see also Honneth 1995). Applying derogatory labels to indigenous peoples, gays, women and migrants in societies such as Australia still constitutes one such form of oppression.

Perhaps the most serious political problems arise when certain categories of difference harden into unbridgeable, dogmatic and apparently incommensurable oppositions; between one’s own social group and
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another, between superiors and inferiors, or friends and foes. The process may be described in the modernist terminology of agency and instrumental power. Where a dominant group defines the identity of another (often subordinate) group in ways that are negative, and that preclude the possibilities of redefinition or renegotiation, one may discern what du Preez (1980: 71) has called an ‘identity trap’.7 In these situations, the identity rhetoric invariably oversimplifies the variety in a group, preventing recognition of shared qualities or values, and reinforces the isolation, self-absorption and intolerance of both groups. Poststructuralists of a Foucauldian persuasion might describe the process in a different way, as involving the formation of intractable ‘subject positions’ within a ‘discursive formation’ (Frow 1985; Mouffe 1990: 64).8

Where formal institutions and legal codes of conduct enforce narrow and inflexible definitions of identity, the struggle for recognition becomes vital. Such was the case under the policies of ‘apartheid’ in South Africa and of ‘protection’ in Australia. These systems of domination explicitly prohibited renegotiation of black or white identity and confined subordinate groups to a narrowly prescribed range of behaviours, social and economic activities or political options. Identity traps give impetus to political struggles for recognition and legitimacy. In such situations one group or the other seeks not only to redefine or reassert its identity, but to change, reform or overthrow the system of institutional and ideological power that maintains the identity. A central point of struggle is that which occurs over the issue of who has the authority to define any particular identity.

Because of the repression of other forms of political expression, movements for transforming identity often begin with the process of cultural revival. This may include recovering older traditions and languages or inventing new traditions and forms of language, writing new histories, or creating songs, plays, poems, novels in a new idiom (see Hutchinson 1987; Smith 1991a). The new histories and literatures of oppressed and often previously non-literate peoples that go under the name of postcolonialism represent one such cultural project (Tiffin 1988). The significance of postcolonial critique lies in its particular emphasis upon identity, its conceptualisation, formation and renewal. This is one of During’s (1985: 368) interpretations of postcolonialism that he describes as ‘the name for the products of the ex-colonies’ need for an identity granted not in terms of the colonial power but in terms of themselves’ (see also During 1992). Benedict Anderson (1991: 205) offers an interpretation of why this occurs, especially following significant ‘ruptures’ with the past: ‘As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of “forgetting” the experience of
this continuity … engenders the need for a narrative of “identity”.’ Nations (or any other community for that matter) may meet the demand for a ‘narrative of identity’ by creating new histories and traditions.

In liberal capitalist democracies, identity concerns have pressed activists to form political movements, of feminism, gay liberation, and indigenous self-determination. The goals have usually been to seek equal recognition in both symbolic and institutional terms, and even political autonomy. Such movements are represented as engaging in a ‘politics of subjectivity’, and exemplify the politics of identity. Yet, a distinction must be drawn between those movements that seek cultural recognition and autonomy within a polity and those seeking substantial forms of self-determination such as separate states (Zaretsky 1994: 199). Furthermore, movements of resistance and reform ‘from below’ do not exhaust the impulses to identity politics in liberal democracies. Political elites may also engage in nationalist identity rhetoric in efforts to win support or reshape the future of a country. Such a project may seek to create new types of men and women as foundations for a new vision of the polity, society or economy.

**Identity discourse in politics**

Identity discourse in politics usually exhibits a distinctive logic or structure of argument and evidence. From the perspective of modernist social and political theory (of either its traditional or critical varieties), the notion of identity can be understood as one component of a larger conception or theory of human nature. Neither the most abstract political theory nor the most practically engaged political ideology can do without some such conception. That is, within all political thought may be found some minimal assumptions about human needs and capacities. Such conceptions serve to indicate the limits to, or the possibilities for, political action by rulers or the ruled. Just as our conception of human nature operates as a presupposition to political argument (Berry 1986: 133), so notions of identity may perform similar functions. Linnekin and Poyer (1990b: 13) exemplify the basic logic when they write: “Who I am” now determines what I can and cannot do, can and cannot have, can and cannot be.’ As a premise within political argument a conception of identity provides a foundation for political thought and action. This is not to say that the political logic and use of evidence follow any ideal philosophical model. Discourses of identity are generally dynamic, and are reworked or reconstructed according to the political needs of the time.
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The need to reform identities may also be the conclusion of a political argument articulated in terms of destiny or opportunity: ‘If this is what we as a group or nation have to do, then this is what we ought to become.’ In these formulations, an identity can become a source of unity and political action towards common objectives, or, depending upon the political location, a source of division and resistance. However incoherent or ambiguous, claims about group identity therefore may provide the substance of, and rationale for, nationalist political ideologies. Those who speak of the soul of a nation or the spirit of the people and claim to have divined its historic mission deploy powerful ideological resources. Adolf Hitler and national socialism are possibly the most infamous examples of this political strategy.

As we have seen, the assertion of identity inevitably requires construction of an ‘other’, and political struggles over identity call for the reconstruction of outside groups as ‘others’. As suggested above, certain narratives of group identity, such as those of nationalist ideology, inevitably overstate commonalities within a group and exaggerate differences with others considered alien. The protagonists may tend towards ‘essentialism’. That is, they may invoke the essential and ineradicable cultural traits of their group, and denounce the culture and values of the outsiders as inherently evil or dangerous.

The resources drawn upon for the construction of such identity claims are generally historical (such as stories, narratives, texts and material culture), which are deployed to establish the authenticity of the interpretation of the group. Steedman (1991: 50) has described the process as follows:

In the project of finding an identity through the process of historical identification, the past is searched for something (someone, some group, some series of events) that confirms them as they want to be, and feel in some measure that they already are.

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have demonstrated how traditions are constantly being invented or refashioned according to contemporary needs. Thus, the question of the authenticity of the traditions, the historical, literary and cultural heritage used in claiming an identity, may become a central focus of the political discourse surrounding the claim. In the construction of identities and ‘narratives of identity’, however, there are no definitive arbiters of historical judgement, if only because the status of arbiter is often that which is most highly contested. The recognition that identities are malleable and that identity discourse involves ‘inventiveness’ raises the vexed issues of the epistemological status of such inventions. The social constructivist view is that narratives
of national identity and history are indeed purely inventions created to serve the political purposes of the present (see e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1993). People who see themselves as members of the nation, for example, are simply part of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991). Anthony Smith, however, contests the more extreme relativist assumptions in these interpretations and argues that such identities and histories are never mere fictions. Not just any past can be appropriated (Smith 1991b: 359):

Traditions, myths, history and symbols must all grow out of the existing, living memories and beliefs of the people who are to compose the nation. Their popular resonance will be greater the more continuous with the living past they are shown to be.

Pierre Bourdieu takes a similar line with reference to the efficacy of symbolic power. He argues (Bourdieu 1989: 23) that symbolic power, ‘the power to make things with words’, depends on the degree to which it is ‘founded in reality’.\(^9\) For such reasons it would be preferable to conceive the process of history creation as a reconstruction rather than invention. Like all cultural constructs, therefore, identities are founded upon different measures of authentic inheritance (such as ideas, material objects or geographical spaces), judicious interpretation, and unconscious selection. Another difficult question raised by postcolonial critique, but one also applicable to other movements engaging in identity politics, is whether the cultural products and political outcomes represent ‘resistance’ to the oppressive culture or ‘incorporation’ into it. Responses to such questions, however, can only be determined provisionally and by detailed investigation of the consequences for those concerned.

In summary, wherever identity is given prominence there exists a continually unfolding political project based upon unrealised ideals and aspirations (Calhoun 1994b: 28–9). The politics of identity involves political contest over the content, boundaries and practical implications of the group identity, as well as dispute over who has authority to define this identity. The public rhetoric and argument surrounding this process may be understood as a form of political thought. Such political thought offers a reinterpretation of the past from the perspective of a particular present, and articulates a vision of a future, often different in kind, and arguably better than life in the present. That future, however, may be based upon visions of community life to be found in mythical or romantic conceptions of the past. In these instrumentalist terms, a conception, discourse or theory of identity is simply another type of theoretical resource within a political ideology. Those engaged in identity politics may draw upon the universalist political discourses, such