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# 1

# Comparing national identities

Long before most people took their nationalities for granted, Elbridge Gerry, a delegate to the American constitutional convention in Philadelphia, was puzzled about what it could mean to be American. "We were neither the same Nation nor different Nations," he said of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and the other former colonies. What could it mean to be "American," he seemed to be asking, when all the states appeared quite different? A century later, at their own convention, Australians had a nationality problem too: trying to work out their links to Britain, some wondered whether they might be "a nation within a nation," or "part of a nation." Americans and Australians faced questions about their national identities which have been encountered, in one way or another, by people around the globe. They wondered what they all shared; and they wondered how to draw the boundaries between themselves and others. There were many possible responses to these questions; what answers did they find, and why did they choose them?[1]

This book addresses the question of how two similar sets of people with many similar experiences formed and reformed their different national identities. Comparing major celebrations of national identity in the United States and Australia – the centennial of the American Revolution in 1876 with the Australian centennial of settlement in 1888, and the American bicentennial commemoration in 1976 with the Australian bicentenary in 1988 – I ask how different national identities developed and why each nation came to mean what it did. I compare the national identities which people created and recreated in big national rituals in these two "settler nations," and explain how similarities and differences in American and Australian national identities emerged.

We often take our nationalities for granted now. The nation-state has become a norm of social organization, and nationality a commonsense



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frame of reference. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to a nationality," and most people say they are proud of their nations. Indeed, our nationality is one of those assumptions – like our gender – which lie unacknowledged behind many of our everyday actions, which, as cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu puts it, "structure what is thought." In the United States and Australia, as elsewhere, national identity flavors everyday life in familiar ways, and a commonsense rhetoric of nationality makes an unnoticed backdrop to public life. We hardly question the grounding of common appeals to national identity, like that of the yachting commodore who thought it was "traitorous to commit our club in litigation against another American yacht club," or the "patriotic Australians objecting to the sell-out of the nation's independence." These particular claims happened to be obscure, fleeting, and debatable; but they were also archetypical.[2]

These days, Americans and Australians may often differ among themselves about what exactly characterizes their nations, and some are disillusioned. But rarely do they wonder whether they are somehow composed of other nations, or part of some larger nation. Few people now doubt that they are, or should be, part of a nation, although this identity may sometimes be less salient than other identities. Like our gender, a sense of nationality is deeply part of our common sense. Perhaps, as philosopher George Santayana once wrote, "nationality . . . [is] like our love and loyalty toward women . . . too radically intertwined with our moral essence to be changed honourably, and too accidental to the free mind to be worth changing."[3] But many of our assumptions about gender have indeed been altered in the course of a wide-ranging critical analysis (like the apparent presumption in the passage that readers were heterosexual men). We are now well aware of many different ways that gender attachments may be expressed and interpreted. Our commonsense interpretations of national identity also deserve such attention.

What, then, does it mean to be part of a nation, and how do ideas about nationality change? In what terms is the nation seen as a natural unit of society, in contrast to more local or more cosmopolitan groups? When people talk about their national identities, they are making special sorts of claims about what they share; in Benedict Anderson's useful formulation, they are appealing to "imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." Cultures of national identity are those sets of meanings and values with which we talk of our actual or prospective political communities. People in the United States and Australia formed their ideas about their nationalities on the basis of a shared cultural frame of what it meant to be a nation-state – collectively, to have things in

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common and to be different from others. National identity is the symbolic elaboration of this imagined community.[4]

Claims about shared experience of language, ethnicity, land, religion, or history sometimes seem to make a self-evident symbolic grounding for national communities. But themes expressing national identities are volatile and various: national identity may be based on many different sorts of meanings and values, and the many symbolic associations used to characterize nations have defeated easy understanding. Further, Max Weber early concluded that "the concept of 'nation' . . . cannot be stated in terms of empirical qualities common to those who count as members of the nation."[5] Not only are there many variations and possibilities in how nations are symbolized; the acute listener in a new land will also be struck by the fact that the same symbols may have a very different meaning and importance in different contexts. The process of endowing the commonalities and boundaries of imagined national community with meaning is complex and intriguing, but the very contingency and creativity of such symbolizing often makes it hard to grasp. A sense of nationality, something like an emotional attachment to a particular symbol such as a flag, often seems both too trivial and too messy to fit into any general categories, to be accessible to the sometimes blunt tools of general social explanation. How can we explain such fluid and subtle cultural differences as differences in national identity?

The general question of how and why nations come to be characterized in particular ways becomes even more puzzling as we consider the United States and Australia. These days, when they mention "the nation," Americans might often talk of their political values or their founding; Australians might commonly talk of their land or their place in the world. Comparing two similar nations shows vividly that it is not merely natural that they associate these symbols with their nations; some few Americans would talk of the land, some few Australians would talk of their political values, and a century ago Americans emphasized their place in the world much more, and Australians their founding moment. What is more, many people from other places would see the United States and Australia as more similar than different. Visitors to both countries will now find functioning democracies, predominantly English-speaking peoples, extensive and varied lands, big cities, and developed economies. The two countries also share many important historical experiences: European conquest, British settlement, long-established liberal political culture, extensive exploration, immigration and settlement, the joining of smaller polities to form the nation-state, and economic growth. In both countries, those who wanted to find shared qualities, and to draw boundaries between themselves and

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others, faced circumstances which were analogous in many respects, and could draw on many similar experiences to talk about their nations. In such circumstances, one might expect that American and Australian national identities would be very similar. On the other hand, uniqueness can be an important claim in a national identity. So do Americans and Australians think of themselves in the same ways? Or have their national identities developed very differently?

Australia and the United States are rarely compared, but answering these questions is important for two reasons. First, neglected mid-range comparisons like this one between two settler countries provide national historians with a deeper and more systematic understanding of what is really different about their country, and why. Most investigations of national identity focus on one country alone: most of what we know of nation-formation in the United States and Australia we know from the work of national historians. In the fine grain of national historiography, other nations are often thought to be irrelevant. But for those who are interested in understanding the United States or Australia, this study highlights some curious absences by placing talk of national identity in each country in a new comparative light. For instance, while the highly urbanized Australians now think first of their distinctive continent when they think of what they share as a nation, the equally impressive and much richer American land is not now a central symbol of the nation, and its exploration and development is more the subject of local than national myth and legend. How can we explain this difference? Political values are another example of the apparent unaccountability of claims about national identity. While we know that democratic political values in the United States have been seen as crucial to American national identity, by scholars as well as nationalists, it seems strange to find Australians in the late nineteenth century viewing themselves, and not Americans, as the most politically advanced nation on earth. On the other hand, the American experience has sometimes led us to assume that all new nations will use ideas about shared political values to express their national identities – but for contemporary Australians, such ideas are not the first things they think of when they celebrate their national identity. National historians more often look at what is said than what is not, but might have been; the comparative analysis of two cultures of national identity allows us to understand more systematically the themes of national identity which do emerge by contrasting them with those which do not.[6]

Secondly, examining the development of national identity in these two similar countries is important for the comparative study of nation-formation. Until recently, the historical record most important for generat-

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ing accounts of nation-formation has emphasized places where it has been most politically consequential, where strong states or critical national movements promoted national ideas. We know very little about how the process by which the United States and Australia became nations fits into this bigger story, because the settler countries show a pattern of nation-formation which is both more subtle and less contested than elsewhere. In these cases, cultures of national identity did not emerge fully formed from prior historical experience; nor can they be attributed simply to the powerful visions of nationalist political actors.[7]

Yet these countries show a neglected side of the process by which nations came to seem natural. They suggest that national identity need not be a simple function of strong states or critical social movements, often the most obvious causes in other countries. They allow us to examine the development and meaning of national identity in the relative absence of such proximate causes. Rather, the process by which Australians and Americans came to think of themselves as naturally grouped, as natural social units, suggests the importance of what some sociologists have called a "world cultural frame" – especially of nations in a world of nation-states – as a model for the interpretation of emerging global realities. We see both Australians and Americans using this model as they try to think about what they have in common and how they are different from people elsewhere. For Australia and the United States, the availability of the idea that nations were natural social units was enough, with comparatively little in the way of nationalist movements or officially promoted nationalisms, to form their identities as nations. While the detailed comparison of these two similar countries does not show conclusively the more widespread influence of "world cultural frames," it does suggest that the global availability of cultural models of the nation has been important and sometimes crucial as the world became a world of nation-states, and tells a neglected part of the story of how nation-formation occurred. These cases show in purer form the process by which elements of local cultural repertoires were reconceptualized as national, as nation-states became plausible and later necessary forms for political action in the larger geopolitical context.[8]

Comparing national identities in the United States and Australia provides a deeper and more systematic understanding of each country, and it broadens our understanding of the global process of nation-formation. My purpose here is to account for previously unexamined differences and similarities in national identity in these two settler nations, and, taking them together, to extend our understanding of how national identity has come to "structure what is thought."

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## National identities and cultural explanation

Comparing and explaining cultures often seems an unwieldy task. But "culture shock" is such a common experience that it is strange that cultural sociologists have so far devoted little systematic attention to understanding it. Here, I draw from recent cultural sociology to specify the terms of this cultural comparison and the analytic tools I use to build a comparative account of what American and Australian national identities have come to mean and why.[9]

It is important to be precise about what we are comparing. Any visitor to another country is struck by a variety of differences, and learns to be conscious of his or her own assumptions about society in many new ways. Some of the differences are interactional: the easy way of dealing with shop assistants may suddenly be a puzzle, for example, or the proper tone of debate among friends. Some of the differences are larger: patterns of institutionally available resources and dependencies run counter to what seems natural. What children learn in school may be decided nationally rather than locally, for example, or there may be more poverty, or fewer banks. But what are most obvious to the visitor are symbolic differences: even if we speak the same language, we see more flags, or hear more talk about the working class or ethnic groups, or observe more obvious pride in the land or sports. When we talk loosely of "another culture," we sometimes mean interactional or institutional differences. But a term which can mean anything means little; to understand cultures we first need to think about culture more precisely. Cultures are symbolic repertoires of meanings and values, some of which are heard widely, some of which are less commonly heard. Here I analyze the persistent and influential sets of meanings and values which have been used in making claims about American and Australian national identity.[10]

One of the best ways to see what nations mean to us is by comparison, and one of the best ways to compare systematically the ways we formulate our national identities is to compare what people say about their nations in very similar circumstances. Both the United States and Australia celebrated what they labeled as centennials in the late nineteenth century with huge international exhibitions, parades, and other ceremonies. Each country also held a national bicentennial commemoration in the late twentieth century, and these too were organized in very similar ways. Such organized public festivals have long been seen as important representations and affirmations of collective identity, and they became important instruments for the constitution of national identities during the nineteenth century.[11]

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I draw the analytic tools for understanding national identity in centennials and bicentennials from the recent work of cultural sociologists. I use these tools to avoid as far as possible the long-recognized tension between idiographic and nomothetic, particular understanding and general explanation. If national identity is a form of imagined community which is understood in many different ways, we need the conceptual tools to understand cultural variety and contingency, while placing this understanding in the context of more general explanation. We need an approach which allows us to see the forest through the trees, without clearfelling the woods in the process.[12]

To this end, I ask questions drawn from three types of cultural analysis as I examine and explain what people said about their nations in the centennials and bicentennials. These different approaches to cultural analysis can be seen as different sorts of lenses on the celebrations; I combine these lenses, as an optician might, for greater depth and focus.[13] To understand and account for national identity in these cases, we first need "thick description" of that symbolic repertoire as people used it in contingent and complex figural action. Second, we need to understand the context in which it was produced. Third, we need to understand the broader discursive field within which the symbols were organized and became meaningful as *national* symbols. Different cultural analysts have stressed these different aspects of cultural explanation to different degrees, but this book combines these different insights. Taken together, these lenses, illuminating different aspects of the social process of making meaning, provide both interpretive context and general explanation as I account for similarities and differences in the ways national identity developed in Australia and the United States.

The central part of the story of national identity in the centennial and bicentennial celebrations is the story of the many symbols with which people have expressed American and Australian national identity in national celebrations – symbols appealing, for instance, to national freedom or progress. For each celebration, I look at the particular meanings and values people associated with their nation, at what people said as they spoke about what they were celebrating and why. What was the range of meanings and values they attributed to the nation, the range of possible claims about national identity? By answering these questions about public culture for each event, I show the symbolic repertoires expressing national identity available to cultural actors in Australia in 1888 and 1988, and in the United States in 1876 and 1976. We will see reflection on such themes as place in the world, collective memory, political values, the land, diversity, and spectacle itself to different degrees in each event.

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This examination of what their nations have meant to Americans and Australians in their big national celebrations provides a new perspective on important symbols of national identity, allowing us to see what has persisted and what has changed about how national identity has been understood.

Cultural sociologists have sometimes viewed culture as the result of a production process, and this is the second lens I use to view national identity in the centennials and bicentennials. Symbolic repertoires are frequently produced and reproduced in specific organizational contexts: available meanings and values are often influenced by the goals, constraints, resources, conventions, and technologies of particular culture-producing groups, and their audiences. Particular sets of meanings and values are often effective or ineffective depending on the resources and conditions which accompany their production, selection, and institutionalization.[14] Symbolic repertoires available to express national identity may be produced by state organizations or nationalist movements, for instance, or by those who write national textbooks or arrange local Fourth of July parades; and the chosen themes of national identity may vary accordingly.

In the centennials and bicentennials, specific sets of organizations produced and elicited claims about national identity as they tried to make plausible celebrations in their broader public spheres. By looking at these patriotic commemorations as cultural productions, we can also see in each case organizational constraints which influenced the cultures of national identity produced. The sorts of themes which could be claimed to express national identity depended especially on the relationship between planning organizations (themselves often composed of quarreling elites) and other groups – groups which were sometimes enthusiastic but just as often dissenting or apathetic. I note, for instance, that organizers of the American centennial made a deliberate appeal to the revolutionary founding moment across contemporary North/South divisions, and that organizers of the Australian bicentenary deliberately muted references to the Australian "founding moment" of British invasion in the face of contemporary Aboriginal protest. For each event, I examine the constraints and possibilities of production context, asking who produced the national rituals, for whom, why, how they saw the problems they faced, and how they addressed them.

Each of these events deserves more specific historical attention in its own right. Much that is interesting in the history of each event – like more detailed pictures of each social group involved, or the stories of intra-organizational politics – is neglected here in favor of the larger comparative picture. Thus, for instance, I do not examine the changing social composi-

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tion of organizing elites so much as the similarities and differences in the challenges they faced in expressing national identity. But keeping such constraints and the possibilities of the context of cultural production in mind, I do ask whether dominant cultural repertoires seem to have been widely shared in each event, and how what was said was influenced by prospective audiences and available organizational technologies. Each set of events I examine shows variations in the salience and meaning of national identity claims among different groups. So as I account for the emergence, persistence, and disappearance of aspects of what it has meant to be Australian or American, I will be situating those themes in the context of their cultural production.

It is worth noting here that the "cultural production" lens shows the value of these national patriotic events as evidence of repertoires of national identity claims. In these events, there were many claims about the nation made by a number of different elite groups to whom national identity was most important, but at the same time the plausibility of their claims depended on many more peripheral social groups, and organizers often spoke to elicit a wide response. The centennials and bicentennials were both culturally dense and relatively inclusive. Of course, focusing on these events also has limitations. First, we would expect to find some difference in emphasis in themes of national identity if we looked at other sorts of cultural productions, because some symbols may be more meaningful or useful in some contexts than others, and there are likely to be some differences between the versions of national identity produced by different groups and for different audiences. Nevertheless, the centennials and bicentennials are more likely than most other indicators to give a broad overview of what Australians and Americans have associated with their nations. Second, of course, we would expect to learn more of each national identity with more detailed attention to familiar historical developments in the century intervening between the centennials and bicentennials. The comparative overview of events largely similar in their cultural production is not a substitute for more particular historical understandings; rather, it shows those histories in a new light.

Organizers of centennials and bicentennials in each country faced very similar tasks. The cultural production of centennial celebrations was largely comparable in the United States and Australia, as was that of the production of the respective bicentennials. Centennial talk differs much more from bicentennial talk in its general themes and style than the two countries differ in their respective centennials or bicentennials. Methods of organizing national celebrations, and the problems organizers faced, changed significantly between the late nineteenth and the late twentieth

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centuries, and thus help to account for the ways the national identities produced in such celebrations changed over time. Languages of popular inclusion – appealing to "progress" or "diversity," for example – were very different in centennials and bicentennials. Production organization and constraints account for many differences between centennials and bicentennials; viewing the events through the lens of "cultural production" helps to show what we can expect to be similar in national celebrations in each country, and also what will change over time.

The third analytic lens I bring to these celebrations reveals a common discursive structure underlying the contingent and various sets of meanings and values in each of the four events. I draw here on the work of those cultural analysts who suggest that particular symbols become meaningful within discursive fields. Discursive fields establish "limits of discussion" and define "the range of problems which can be addressed." They delineate the meaningful and valuable from a large range of potential meanings and values available. All talk of national identity, whatever its themes, is framed by a discursive field which is defined by concerns about international position and internal integration. Particular themes and symbols gain their meaning as elements of national identity to the extent that, in specific historical contexts, they can be seen to be answering one of two questions: "What can we agree that we share?" and "What is our position in the world?" As I analyze symbolic repertoires in each set of events, I compare and contrast the ways Americans and Australians spoke of what they shared and how they were placed in the world.[15]

Seeing national identity as a discursive field is useful for several reasons. First, it furthers the comparative analysis of national identities without denying their variety or the indeterminacy in their production. We can generalize across the many particular ways in which national identity has been characterized, seeing the cultural forest through the trees. The discursive field provides a systematic basis for identifying similarities and differences in national identities both cross-nationally and over time.

Second, identifying the common discursive structure behind different symbolic repertoires can help to explain important cross-national differences. With this general framework, we can see that "what may appear to be cross-national differences may really be instances of lawful regularities, if thought of in terms of some larger, more encompassing, interpretation." Specifically, I ask here, as I develop the comparison of the centennials and bicentennials, whether integration concerns or geopolitical concerns were more important for plausible national identity in each event.[16]

So in the chapters which follow I compare the Australian and American national identities which were formulated in centennial and bicentennial

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