The left has been slow to understand that patriotism doesn’t have to be the preserve of the right. In defending the Aboriginal cause, argues David Burchell, the left’s best hope may well lie in taking on definitions of ‘Australianness’ on their own home turf.

January 26 in Sydney was a proud day for the Aboriginal people, and also, incidentally, for the left. Twenty or thirty thousand people, black and white, provided a potent display of peaceful opposition to a version of Australia’s history which had become the fig-leaf of governments-incapable of coping with a less convenient reality. In Australia, it merited more than a footnote to the reportage of the Great Day: around the world, however, it stood as a particularly potent symbol of Australia’s guilty conscience.

This should not lead us to forget, however, that for at least a million other residents of Sydney (not to mention the millions of passive viewers there and around the country), January 26 represented a quite different set of political and cultural images. Precisely what it symbolised for most is not automatically clear — and I shall discuss that question further in a moment. But what does bear saying is that, in its own terms, the strictly “celebratory” version of the Bicentenary which came to be seen as the only “safe” official response to the dilemmas of 1988, was also a considerable success. A success not, incidentally, because it necessarily brought the denizens of national jingoism out of their holes — for, as far as national celebrations go, it was, by all accounts, an astonishingly apolitical affair. Rather, a success because most people, somehow, found some way in which this apparently ideologically empty depiction of nationhood satisfied or stimulated the vague, inchoate feelings of national price which lurk in the breasts of most of us. It raised no difficult questions but, equally, it brooked no clearly reactionary response. And, much as the unexpected “Australia Live” TV extravaganza on New Year’s night had done, it carefully eschewed official or ceremonial rituals of nationhood for a studiously popular hedonism. This was clearly a big factor in its success.

The left in this country has been a bit slow to realise in recent years that popular patriotism — or nationalism, to use the more complex form — does not necessarily have to be the preserve of the political right. In part, this has probably been because most of the surviving symbols from our era of radical nationalism are, at best, not particularly relevant to Australian society and the political agenda of the 1990s, and at worst deeply underlaid by racism and sexism (a point to which I shall also return shortly). In particular, we have been slow to understand more recently that 1988 is not at all about choosing between being a defender of the Aboriginal cause and being Australian. Indeed, to a large extent it seems reasonable to argue that for the predominantly white left (as well as for the Aboriginal people and their leaders), the most effective way to struggle against the foes of the Aboriginal people in 1988 is precisely by taking on nationalism, and definitions of “Australianness”, on their own home turf.

As Aboriginal leaders pointed out prior to January 26, there is little need to convince the thousands or tens of thousands of people who have already indicated their support for the Aboriginal cause by word or deed. Rather, the task is to get the message out there into the communities within which “Australianness” and the Aboriginal cause are defined as two different, perhaps even contradictory, things. 1988 is all about winning the hearts and minds of white Australia. And while it may be fair to assume that broad swathes of the country — the rural rednecks, those dependent on the pastoralists or property developers for a living, the concerted racist lobby, and so on — are never really going to be convinced, it remains true that we have to build alliances not just among the already-converted subcultures of the social movements (important though that is), but also among broad strategic slices of the population as a whole. And this is, of course, a horrendously intimidating task.

This is why, in the first instance, it is important to understand what patriotism and nationalism are, and
what roles they play in a country of such spectacular social, cultural and religious diversity as ours. This entails understanding, in turn, what the political significance of that diversity is — given that it has become a tenet of a certain sort of official multiculturalism that diversity means simply lots of happily jostling “cultures”; represented as artefacts, plus “ethnic” restaurants, and multilingual government booklets. These are the two central questions underlying the arguments which follow.

The first and most obvious thing about nationalism is its ubiquity, and thus its inherent ambiguity. From national liberation struggles in Africa in the Fifties, South-east Asia in the Sixties, or Central America today, to the calculated jingoism of National Socialism or fascism, nationalism has, in terms of twentieth century political development, made the world go round. One could argue with considerable justification that more popular struggles have been waged around national questions this century than explicitly “class-based” ones (which is not to say, of course, that class was entirely absent from them). The Bolsheviks campaigned in 1917 around a specific definition of Russian patriotism; the Chinese communists did so explicitly in the Forties; and indeed most of the great progressive figures of Australian history have been nationalists of one sort or another.

The key to nationalism as a political organising force in this regard is its very “emptiness” as a concept. Unlike “class” or “gender” or “race” which, while not being fixed throughout history, do tend to take on fixed meanings in specific historical situations, nationalism is a terrain for struggle, not one of the participants. Like the other “isms” which move political mountains, it is an aspiration, something which the political existence of nation-states in itself never really satisfactorily embodies — any more than “actually existing socialism” has embodied socialist values to any satisfactory extent.

We have been slow to realise that 1988 is not at all about choosing between being a defender of the Aboriginal cause and being Australian.
This was precisely why Antonio Gramsci, the fiftieth anniversary of whose death was commemorated last year, took his concept of the "national-popular" to be such a pivotal point in his political thought. For Gramsci, the political force which dominates the ideological battleground for the nation does so precisely because of its ability to articulate a program, a way of thinking, and a political language which is capable of "speaking for the nation" — which is to say, speaking for a particular conception of what "the nation" represents — rather than limited class or sectional interests. "Hegemony" is all about defining "the nation" and "nationalism" in ways which articulate political programs with the social forces necessary for their implementation.

This is not to say that nationalism as a concrete political force at any particular place or time is a kind of ideological vacuum just waiting for us to fill it up with whatever content might take our fancy. Clearly, the dominant forces in societies exercise considerable sway, in the media and elsewhere, in defining the content of nationalisms: and this often serves to give even the most apparently innocent national icons a subtly reactionary tilt. Likewise, of course, patriotism does not operate in isolation from all of the other motivating forces in human affairs. And, in Australian history, racism and xenophobia have been evident allies of even the more apparently radical forms of nationalism both in society as a whole, and in the culture and heritage of the labour movement in particular.

Again, as Tony Bennett notes elsewhere in this issue of ALR, "national identity" is a notoriously tricky and delicate thing to negotiate in the terms of political slogans and political culture. Nothing strikes people as more crudely manipulative than the kind of political appeal which attempts to assimilate a complex web of national and local traditions into a standardised political slogan or formula — as, for instance, certain traditions in the communist movement, or maoism, have tended to do. Georgi Dimitrov told the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 that, in the defence against fascism, socialism had to "so to speak, 'acclimatise' itself in each country in order to sink deep roots in its native land". All too often, however, the possible implication lurking in this statement, that socialism was really an "international" message which had merely to be toggled up in national fancy dress, has been mirrored by crude attempts to simply take slogans from another time and place and add the local touch of, say, a few Eureka flags.

On neither of these counts is it realistic to believe that nationalism is a kind of blank tablet in the ideological terrain of society, where we can inscribe our message at will. But it would be too easy to leave it at that. Not even the most conspiratorial thesis of ruling class, media and state is going to deflect satisfactorily the recognition that popular patriotism, for all the mass-market jingoism of Messrs. Mojo and Murdoch, operates with a crucial degree of autonomy in people's daily lives. Nationalism, in other words, isn't just what people are "led" to believe: it's also a kind of emotional shorthand for their understanding of their relationship to the wider society. To some extent, as has often been noted, it's also a kind of psychic index of belongingness: the personal expression of the myth of the "imagined community" of the nation.

It is in this regard that it's sometimes commented that patriotism acts as a sort of personal compensation for the breakdown of actual organic communities in industrial society: the "imagined community" stands in for the real community of neighbourhood, pub and club, and so on. Of course, there are more than a few problems with this sort of argument, quite aside from the question of whether local communities really have "broken down". After all, the motif of the loss or absence of an original organic whole is a highly repetitive myth of crucially, it's about the need to imagine a totality of the communities, neighbourhoods, subcultures and so on which represent people's lived experiences of a social environment — the totality being called the nation.

This is where the second part of my argument comes in. For what is most obvious about the nature of popular patriotism in a country like ours is the discrepancy between the implied homogeneity of the "imagined community" of nationalism and the spectacular heterogeneity of the society itself. Indeed, one of the key riddles to the meaning of patriotism in Australia today is to be found in the meanings of what the theorists call "the social": what exactly, in other words, we take the idea of "society" to mean.

One of the most constant features of almost any form of nationalism — be it the nationalism of profound historical projects or simple popular assumptions about our "national character", the ethic of a "fair go", and so on — is their tendency to define their object in terms of a national essence. Even the very idea that there is an "Australian identity", which is in itself a unique type of identity, but also a singular one, is part and parcel of the mythology of an Australian essence.

Yet, of course, if there is a single
defining characteristic of Australian society nowadays it is precisely the absence of this supposed unifying essence. Rather, there is a growing diversity of communities, subcultures and what the theorists would call “subject positions” (meaning those “subjective” personal senses of identity which so often fail to square with the raw data of sociological pigeonholes, or which go beyond them). Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe speak similarly of the “growing complexity and fragmentation of advanced industrial societies” as creating a “fundamental asymmetry” — an asymmetry between the growing proliferation of these senses of identity and the difficulty of “fixing” them into an imagined ordered entity known as society.

The most obvious example of this absence of an Australian “essence” is the vast growth and development in “ethnic” communities in this country since World War II, and the complexity of those communities themselves. It is in this sense that “multiculturalism” as a concept appears least adequate as a description of Australian society today: for the emphasis on “culture” as a series of artefacts to be observed from “outside” — a range of cuisines, “lifestyles”, and languages — fatally abstracts that culture from its material basis in the communities of which it forms a part.

Nor is the question of the various “ethnic” communities in Australia — Greek, Italian, Turkish, Armenian, Spanish, Latin American, Lebanese, Yugoslav, Vietnamese, Kampuchean, and so on and so on — simply a matter of quantitatively expanding entities, but also of their change over time, as the content of the cultural and linguistic cement holding them together becomes more and more of an anachronism from the time of mass emigration, as the second and third generations distance themselves from many of the original orthodoxies of their communities, and as customs and language become modified or displaced. It is in this jagged and uneven lived experience of the several generations of these changing communities, rather than in the deceptively common experience of “ethnicity” implied by some of the official forms of multiculturalism, that the roots of our growing social heterogeneity are to be found.

Moreover, and as this implies, the profound diversity of our society also cuts across communities as such — even when cemented by ties of blood, language and ancestry. This is the realm of the growth of these “subject positions” mentioned earlier — a terrain deeply ingrained with the contours of gender and class. But it is also a means of getting “under the skin”, as it were, of some of the more simplistic sociological commonsense about the “necessary” relationship between people’s sociological position and their political behaviour and outlook. The subcultures of the social movements, for instance, while comprising but a tiny percentage of Australian society as a whole, are a graphic illustration of the crossover between these rapidly splintering “subject positions” and lifestyles, customs and habits, both across and within certain sociological slices of society.

Look, for instance, at the subculture of contemporary feminism in the late 1980s, with its fully-formed and largely autonomous fashion ethic of op-shop mismatch and match, post-hippie scarves and hats, and rainbows of colour schemes (unified by the significant mauve). Crossing over with this is the vaguely “green” inner-city regime of vegetarianism and alternative, cottage industry products, inquisitive dips into mysticism and tarot, and herbal remedies. And add a vaguely left ethic of anti-uranium, pro-Aboriginal, anti-the “system” causes — none of which necessarily follows from the others. These, in microcosm, and at an admittedly “vanguard” fringe of society, are the kinds of social, cultural and lifestyle linkages which serve to make political sense of the dramatic diversity of these “subject positions” in Australia today.

And, if we pursue the example a little further, we can see other processes at work. Look, for instance, at the remarkable “ripple-effect” of much of the cultural symbolism of contemporary feminism — the significant minority of suburban girls, for instance, often straight out of school, who now wear severely short haircuts and colourfully baggy clothes, often without a strict awareness of their origins. This kind of ripple-effect is a major dynamic of cultural change in Australia today — from the explosion of the idea of men’s fashion today from its varied origins in Italian male flamboyance and gay male subculture, to the exponential growth in the health food market or the concern for conservatism. It is also part and parcel of this break-up of the cultural and social correspondences of the past.

Of course, it is the conceit of much political debate, both on the right and left, that the focus of the political quest is still the search for the “average Australian”, with the implication that Australia has a “mainstream” core — be it “middle Australia” or “the working class”. Witness also the ritual invocation of, for instance, Sydney’s west as an allegedly homogeneous hinterland of perfectly-preserved “average Australians” from the indefinite past — the frontier beyond which, it is said, the cosmopolitan invasions of feminism and environmentalism will never reach.

These kinds of conceptions are convenient because they reinforce the myth, common to the most
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otherwise diverse political frameworks, that “society” has some magical inner core — “real Australians” — which holds it together. Likewise, much of official multiculturalism seems premised on the assumption that a multicultural society “works” because all those happily jostling cultures are bouncing around within, as it were, the balloon of an already-constituted entity called “Australian society” — an entity which somehow predates and exists independently of the human beings who comprise it. Both of these conceptions are not only manifestly wrong in the real world but, if pursued rigorously enough as guides for political thought, tend towards inescapably anachronistic and reactionary political conclusions.

It remains true that you can always define a majority of Australians who are not part of some relatively distinct social grouping or subculture — be it the political and social elites on the one hand, or the subcultures of the social movements on the other. But it doesn’t follow that this act of definition somehow confers a mystical “sameness” on the majority so defined — as if simply in defining differences from others one could create an “identity” within. This is precisely, of course, how some of the more reactionary myths of nationalism work — and the result generally has been intolerance and xenophobia.

The political implications of a position which refuses to see Australian society as some kind of imagined tidy, bundled-up, seamless whole, are too numerous and complex to go into here. As Stuart Hall noted recently (Marxism Today, March), it means, among other things, that political majorities “have to be ‘made’ and ‘won’ — not passively reflected”; and that “they will be composed of heterogeneous social interests, represented through conflicting social identities”, which have to be united by “a large political project which overrides, without obliterating, their real differences”.

For our purposes here, however, the chief implication of such a position is this. Western nationalism, as it has been experienced through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has almost universally been predicated on the assumption that modern society — the “nation state” — was heading in the direction of an increasingly unified, increasingly homogeneous, whole. (Nor was this a conception limited to a liberal ideology of social consensus — look at the Communist Manifesto and its picture of the onward rush of capitalism, swallowing up class, cultural and regional differences in its standardising mission).

In fact, however, the progress of advanced capitalist countries was never quite like this and, in recent years, this has become increasingly obvious. In the first instance, capitalism’s imperialist thrust created massive bouts of emigration which meant that very few Western societies survive today as racially united entities (if, in fact, they ever did). In the second, this same imperialism created vast “national” problems among the subjected peoples of yoked together nation states, and vast “internal” problems in the repression and often extermination of indigenous peoples in the conquered territories — problems which resolutely refuse to go away several hundred years later. The era of nationalism has accentuated, rather than “bundled up”, all of these problems. Finally, and particularly in the last twenty or thirty years. Western societies have seen a tremendous splintering of the fault lines of the social forces in those societies, and an unhinging of those social forces from relatively unified cultural senses of identity of the pre-war years, with the effects I have described above.

Yet the substratum of assumptions around popular conceptions of “the nation” and nationalism has remained remarkably impervious to these changes except in xenophobic, nostalgic terms (say, in Britain or France) or within the boundaries of the already defined nation (the “melting pot” idea, some forms of multiculturalism). This is not to say that we may “hereby declare patriotism obsolete, as is sometimes argued in even the more sophisticated interventions from the left — an idea rather akin, I would have thought, to that of abolishing the weather. What it does mean is that definitions of “the nation”, and all the political implications that carries with it, are one area in which the new politics of the left over the last twenty years has an excellent opportunity to intervene in a serious way on the national stage.

Specifically, we have the task ahead of us of formulating a new radical vocabulary and imagery of “Australianness” starting from the premise I outlined earlier of the dissolution of the myth of the “real Australians”, or an Australian “essence”. More particularly, 1988 presents us with the opportunity of shaking up the common sense of Australian patriotism with the unanswerable fact that the myth of the “real Australian” (as well as that of Australian society in all its colour-postcard diversity, as a seamless whole) sits uneasily on top of a previous nation of some 40,000 years’ standing, which can claim with absolute justice to be more “Australian” than any Johnny-come-lately colonist or migrant.

It’s not merely a matter, in other words, of recovering the radical traditions of the Australian past, valuable though they are in specific contexts. Rather, the task is to construct a radical imagery of Australianness which doesn’t just recognise the cultural, ethnic, racial or religious diversity of today, but argues from the start that such diversity is, in fact, the founding principle of any genuinely democratic vision of Australian society. And that entails replacing the picture of the Australian nation as a neat, ordered whole, with one of it as an uneven, jagged collection of different communities, subcultures and senses of identity, whose coexistence is based not just on a citizenhood passively felt, but on the play of uneven social alliances and linkages, as well as on people (those “subject positions” again) defining themselves, making sense of their surroundings and, indisputably, struggling.