One of the revelations of Eastern Europe has been the resilience of local and ethnic identity after the breakup of communism. Not for the first time, the language of ‘class’ has come off second best. Colin Mercer argues that the politics of identity is undergoing a resurgence worldwide.

A relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘identity’ has been central to the working of modern forms of government since at least the beginning of the 19th century. It is basic to the ways in which the modern polity works that some sort of contractual relationship should be established between an individual identity, whether of subject, citizen, comrade, welfare recipient, householder or victim - or any combination of these - and the general arrangement and apparatus of government. There is nothing new about the politics of identity, notwithstanding the ways in which this expression seems to be enjoying an ascendancy in some Left or ‘post-Left’ thinking.

What started out as a useful agitational slogan and political emphasis was fused into a way of resolving, through an act of will, conflicts between the public and private spheres. This, according to Sheila Rowbotham, had negative consequences:

Because the political was fused with the personal, and because there were no external structures and formally elected leaders, there were no mechanisms for distaining feelings of hurt, betrayal and anger, and the movement fractured.

Nonetheless, the emphases and new ways of thinking produced by the proposition that the personal is political served to return to the agenda something that had been either forgotten or displaced: that the ‘borders’ between politics and personal identity formed by family life, ethnicity, lifestyle orientations and a range of other factors relating to our ‘subjectivity’ or sense of self are so porous as not to be borders at all. Child care is an example of this tangle of lines and one where it would clearly be unproductive to say categorically that this set of responsibilities lies in the public domain and this set in the private. As with housework, or domestic and community health and hygiene, the demarcations will remain a matter of political calculation rather than being enshrined forever in a balance sheet of public and private responsibilities. So, the personal is political but there is little to be gained from repeating this as a mantra until due attention has been paid to the detail of the democratic mechanisms which are necessary to realise and exploit its implications.

This is the ‘governmental’ side to the relationship between the personal and the political which establishes a
relationship between private individuals and the public state. There is another dimension of this relationship which results from the fact that we live not just in any old state but in a particular nation state. This aspect of the relationship between the personal and the political which we might call ‘cultural’ has recently been dramatically highlighted in an international reminder of the persistence and importance of the politics of identity.

Ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan, Poles in Lithuania and the Ukraine, Hungarians in Romania, Germans in Poland, Albanians and Slovenians in Yugoslavia in the wake of the Gorbachev reforms attest, in a worst-case scenario to a resurgence of mitteleuropean, Baltic and Balkan nationalisms of an ugly hue. More dispassionately, they can be characterised as the failure of a marxism in theory and in governance to recognise and come to terms with the politics of identity in its most resilient form: ethnicity. While at a purely formal and legal level Stalin and his successors may have settled the ‘nationalities question’, it is absolutely clear that the profound ethnic substrata of these ‘nations’ remained untouched. In fact, they were untouchable by a doctrine whose fundamental category of identity and classification remains that of class.

These two aspects of the politics of identity are closely related. Your identity as a member of a family, for example, or as a citizen holding a passport, is not a purely abstract or legal matter. Both the family and citizenship are overlain and defined by layers of national-cultural affiliation. Ideas concerning behaviour, values, dispositions, and even size, mark out what is to be understood as a typically Australian, Vietnamese or Italian family. The manners and mores of family life are often the most difficult things that a student of languages has to learn. The legal identity offered by citizenship is usually related to ideas about national character reproduced in literature, histories and the print and electronic media. National identity and character retain a strong currency in Australia and the inevitable and very boring metaphors of the Bush and the Bushman will keep cropping up in movies and public debate.

So, the politics of identity is real, historical and integral to the development of modern nation-states. Where does this lead us? First to the recognition that the politics of identity has a long history which is dense, resilient and complex. Second, to the recognition that the politics of identity involves definite forms and mechanisms - political, administrative, cultural, linguistic, historical - which enable identities to be formed, secured and reproduced. We need to say, in other words, that, yes, the personal is political in a very general sense but the job now is to differentiate the slogan and to ‘un’- or de-fuse the two terms; and to ask more particular and discrete questions about how, why, in what terms and through which processes and mechanisms the personal gets linked to the political.

A recent example from Eastern Europe might serve as a starting point. Ethnic Poles in the Ukraine are, on the whole, a very religious community. They share with many Ukrainians a profound historical adherence to the Church and they attend the same churches for worship. After the Mass has been celebrated, however, the Poles often stay behind in order to celebrate Mass again, this time in their own language and with their own ethnic or national icons. The performance of this ritual, the language in which it is
performed and the icons deployed matter a great deal to ethnic Poles.

There are three factors here which are important in offering, securing and reproducing social identity. First, there is the role of the Church in providing religious practices which, while theoretically international, nonetheless provide a distinctive and tangible 'home' for proto-national and ethnic sentiments. The Catholic Church has historically been very good at the adaptation of distinctive regional ethnic and national icons and practices to its own liturgy.

Second, there is the fact that we are dealing here with a regularly performed ritual which punctuates and gives a structure and rhythm to the lives of those people who participate in it. The performance of the religious ritual - not so very far down the spectrum from attendance at political party meetings and rallies - doubles here as a simultaneous affirmation of daily ethnic existence. You know, more or less, who will be at the meeting, that they will be performing gestures and saying things and offering respects to icons in the same way as you and in the same language. As Pascal once said, there is no need for a programmatic theory of religious belief: you kneel, you pray and therefore believe. In this case you perform these practices, recognise the icons, believe in God and participate in the general communion of Catholic Christendom but you know also that you are doing this at a particular time and place and simultaneously confirming an ethnicity or other sense of 'belonging'. Ritual practices are important in securing and reproducing social identity.

Third, there is the matter of language. This is a profound historical and cultural index of ethnicity and, for that matter, of any form of sub-cultural identity. The language of political meetings again springs to mind. Language makes you a 'member' of a community, culture or sub-culture insofar as it gives you a visible and audible mark of adherence and affiliation. It is one of the most obvious ways along, perhaps, with dress, that marks you out as a 'foreigner' and it has been one of the primary objects of legislation for governments which have attempted to deal with the 'national question' since the beginning of the nineteenth century. 'Unity of idiom is unity of the Revolution' said one of the key legislators of Revolutionary France in 1796. The fate of Gaelic in Scotland and Ireland, Welsh in Wales, Cornish in England, Breton and Provençal in France, and the hundreds of indigenous languages of Australia tell their own story in this regard. Language identifies, defines, includes and excludes more immediately and more dramatically than any other daily cultural practice. At a less dramatic but no less historical and resilient level, consider the role of Australian dialectical forms, the vocabulary, syntax, intonation and general organisation of 'strine' in its critical relationship to those forms of identity and affiliation offered by the 'Queen's English'. After Menzies, no Australian prime minister could conceivably slip back into the bad old obsequious ways of fully rounded vowel tones and what is known by British linguists as Received Standard Pronunciation. This linguistic strategy has mattered a great deal in Australian political and cultural history since the late 1960s in the elaboration of a political culture and identity at a calculated distance from the 'Old Country'. It matters more intensely when, within the same state, you have divergent languages which are geographically concentrated, linked to social status and identified as a social and cultural bloc.

Another example from daily and routine existence: food and eating. Eating, including access to a viable market of appropriate commodities and forms of preparation is, like religious ritual and language, a social and cultural marker and classifier and, like language and ritual, can lead to dramatic forms of conflict. In Bradford, in the north of England, at the moment there is an uneasy political and cultural truce over eating. This is between the large Muslim community for whom the Halal method of animal slaughter and preparation is essential to the practice of their religion, and bodies like the RSPCA and animal welfare groups to whom this practice of slaughter is barbarous. In such a situation of intense politics of identity, one can imagine that the proposition that the personal is political won't get you very far since it is glaringly obvious but offers no answers.

Of course the personal is political, will say the local Labour Councillor who happens to be a devout Muslim. That is why my access to food prepared in accordance with Islamic doctrine is an issue, being fundamental to my personal lifestyle and religious preferences. Of course it is, will come the response from a member of the same Labour Party branch who also belongs to Animal Liberation and is committed to multiculturalism. That is why it is absolutely justifiable for me to resist these practices in order to protect both animals and my own deeply felt humane sentiments about their treatment and place in the order of things.

The arguments could be multiplied in relation to dress, gender, sexual orientation and preference, and so on. The politics of identity produces a multitude of new problems which are not resolved by the old solidarities, forms of allegiance and logics which characterise traditional political organisations. But it is not worth being too triumphalist about this. The politics of identity is not, as some advocates of post-Fordism, postmodernism and 'New Times' seem to suggest, a liberated zone of daylight into which we are now emerging after the dark age of the blue-collar worker and the factory system. It has been around at least as long as them although obscured by a political choice which preferred one form of identity over others.

What the agenda of the politics of identity calls for is not the triumphant affirmation of a 'new reality' because it is, after all, not so new. And there is no point either, in the 'hundred flowers' mode, of simply celebrating the emergence and proliferation of 'democratic identities'. Not all identities are democratic and there is no reason why we should expect them to be. Rather than romantic affirmation, what is needed
is a way of posing the question of the relationship between

democracy and identity, between the political and the

personal, which takes into account the sorts of tensions and

conflicts mentioned above over ethnicity, religion, lan-

guage, eating and those other multiple goods and services,

commodities and daily activities which define and shape

the substance of people's daily lives.

These dimensions of the plurality and complexity of the

personal/political relationship are not well-met, either, by

the sort of political romanticism with distinctively anti-

democratic implications which, as Sheila Rowbotham

argues, was one of the outcomes of the 1970s argument that

the personal is political. The theory was

...that politicising all aspects of life it would be

possible to bring democratic relationships into

being. Only when this split (of the per-

sonal/political) was overcome could political par-

ticipation be 'self-actualising' and integrate

women as whole people.

In effect, she says, this fusion only

served to construct new boundaries. One obvious negative outcome of this

 politicisation of everything and the

failure to differentiate between the
different levels and complexities of the

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was a tendency which all on the Left,
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The problem with this easy inter-

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always so easy to make and they are certainly not automatic.
Things get in the way; things like external democratic

mechanisms vested in, for example, family law and things

like personal obligations and commitments vested in the

nature of the family or household as an institutional form.

These too are the components of a politics of identity but

they have not been well-addressed by the

'psychologisation' of the personal/political relationship.
The problem here has been the assumption that the real

and experienced demarcation between the personal and

the political, the private and the public is actually a 'split'
which needs in some way to be healed, resolved or over-

come. This is a classic Romantic conception of the world.
First, organise the world into those things that are as-
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tinctive lifestyle patterns but this is

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should, therefore, be about recognising
and engaging with the whole

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One of the consequences of this complex set of alliances

is that people are not 'whole' or 'full' or 'actualised' iden-

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But it is a pity, from the point of view of both pluralism

and the recognition of democratic mechanisms, that the
demarcation between personal and political, private and

public, has to be thought of in this way. Why think of this
demarcation as 'split'? It seems to me, on the contrary, that

the relationship between the personal and the political or

the domain of identity and the domain of government is

not at all characterised by splits and divisions but rather

by historically variable forms of alliance. Social identities

are secured and reproduced by establishing a relationship

between a specific 'sense of self' and a range of institutions,
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_Identities and personalities are multiple. This is not a postmodernist credo or a problem_
gives him a national character and the demeanour of a free man.

This logic of government - one which establishes, as a condition of its existence, a social identity who is simultaneously national, free and republican - is not so arcane. It is a logic which is not very far from a recent experience in Australia. Think back a couple of years to the 1988 Bicentenary and recall the importance of ‘signs’ there in ‘getting hold of the senses’ and ‘penetrating the soul’. Add language, the rituals of community and daily life, characteristic and preferred images of a national landscape and the configurations of a national character and you come up with a continuing rather than a one-off Bicentennial and celebratory logic.

Bicentenaries and other, more regular, forms of spectacular national celebration, rehearse, albeit in accelerated and condensed ways, a politicisation of the stuff of everyday life and demonstrate the persistence and importance of the relationship between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’. This is transacted and negotiated through the central category of the citizen which is contractually related both to the state and the apparatus of government and of the nation and the less formal cultural accretions of national identity, or, even more informally, that ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘sense of place’ which have such a central role in Australian political and cultural history.

Where do these senses and this texture of a distinctive everyday life get elaborated and consolidated? In institutions like the family, the school, the workplace and the pub. In practices like eating, worshipping, rallying, watching the television and reading newspapers and other forms of literature. In forms of behaviour like dress, language and other forms of ‘self-presentation’. In the print and electronic media, in icons and emblems and government documents and in forms of local, regional and national celebration. Everywhere, in fact.

This is the hard and compacted ground of a politics of
identity. It is compacted and therefore complex because it is the accumulated result of a long process of securing a resilient relationship between 'people', 'nation' and 'state'. The objective of this politics of identity would be the consolidation, progressively at arm's length and in increasingly negotiated ways, of 'manageable' and preferred forms of social identity. The nation becomes, in this context, a text, a time (with a specific and identifiable and 'meaningful' history), a place (with demarcated borders but, more importantly, a distinctive sense of place, land and landscape) and, for want of a better term, a lifestyle (with distinctive ways of living, manners, customs and behaviours which are peculiar to this time and place, this nation and no other).

These forms of social identity have been amassed under the general category of citizenship. And what is crucial about this category and the ways in which it has developed - and which give it a significant potential in rethinking the contemporary politics of identity - is that it is not a purely legal-constitutional definition. To be effective in holding together multiple possible forms of identity, citizenship has depended crucially on its interconnections with a whole network of cultural identifications and points of reference.

These have been secured through popular education, through the development of the print and electronic media, through the histories, literatures and reports dealing with the preferred attributes of national character and other forms of training in 'personal', 'cultural' and 'civil' attitudes. Citizenship is, in this sense, much more than having your name entered on a register of births or making an oath at a naturalisation ceremony. It involves entry into - and forms of affiliation with - a cultural network of institutions, identifications and practices from the British monarchy right down to the backyard barbie.

Which brings us to the rub. If the politics of identity and the politics of the personal are inextricably tied up with the politics of citizenship, what then?

Bertrand Russell once advised in a rather squeaky and imperious way that every democrat should have what he called 'a portion of the governmental mentality'. This point is well taken but we would need to tread carefully here to avoid another regime of sententious moralising which might rival the worst aspects of the personal is political' push and produce another Jacobin Terror of invigilation and condemnation. The question of citizenship is far better approached not simply from its civic, constitutional or governmental dimensions but rather from the range of related identities which have accumulated around it. These are its more resilient and complex dimensions and they include questions of ethnicity, of gender identification, of religious and political affiliation, of being a member of an indigenous or ethnic community. These forms of affiliation are often the fundamental medium which determine our relationship to government.

To say that the citizen is a white bourgeois male with a single ethnic affiliation is probably overstating it a bit but not too much. The birth of the citizen in the late eighteenth century was in the context of a certain relationship to property rights, a certain legal classification of the individual, a certain definition of gender and a certain sense of a homogeneous national culture. Some countries, notably the UK, are busily reinventing these initial constraints in order to deal with problems like Hong Kong and local government financing in the explicit name of the 'active citizen'. This indicates some of the problems associated with the inhered concept of the citizen, the fact that it is, for large sections of the population, through gender, inequality of income and educational opportunity, only ever a partial citizenship. But while signalling its limitations, these factors also indicate the potential of a politics of citizenship when elaborated in terms of a more general politics of identity.

The politics of citizenship means, in this context, a politics which would enable us to coherently address questions of social and economic justice, of access to the market defined not in purely economic terms but rather in terms of quality of life, of rights of access and participation in social and natural environments and the custodianship or stewardship of them. The politics of citizenship offers a strategic way of addressing those nitty-gritty components of 'lifestyle' - how people get clothed, fed and live - by recognising that these are simultaneously 'economic' questions of resource allocation and distribution and 'cultural' questions of identity and quality of life.

There are, of course, the legal and constitutional dimensions of citizenship which would enable this reworked politics of identity to be firmly rooted in due legal process and the governmental domain. This is important in order to prevent it from being romanticised into the ether of personal or even group liberation.

The politics of identity, when thought of in terms of citizenship, is not about the celebration of the 'exceptional' identities associated with race, ethnicity or gender. Rather, it is about enabling access to social justice in those institutions and practices of everyday life like domestic organisation, work, schooling, the market, the environment and the community which is where identities get constructed and mobilised in the first place.

Citizenship is about rights, entitlements and duties and all of these have been given distinctive new profiles on the political agenda by feminism, anti-racism, the environmental movement and various campaigns on social justice and policy. It would be a pity to lose these profiles for want of a political logic which is able to address them together, strategically and coherently. Two hundred years after its first formulation the concept of citizenship may, in the context of the porosity of national borders, the reality of multiculturalism and the new politics of identity, be ready for a transformed existence.

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FOOTNOTES:
2 Ibid., p.90.