

STAN GRANT'S MANNING CLARK LECTURE – 17 June 2021

An all historical fever: how history may yet be the death of us

Thank you very much for the invitation here. My respects as well to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. My respects as well to you, Sebastian, and the Clark family for having me here. When I was a young journalist I had the great pleasure of being sent to interview Professor Clark and we had several fantastic afternoons together in his home, in his garden, to just share in that incredible wisdom and knowledge. It's one of those things that's fixed in my mind, actually. I can see myself where I was, what the day felt like and I remember him saying to me, of all the things about this country, that blood should never stain the wattle in Australia. I have never forgotten that.



Tonight I wanted to talk to you about history, fittingly, but about what we do with history and the dangers of too much history. So what is this picture behind me? Some of you may be familiar with it. And what does it have to do with my lecture tonight? It is of the Angelus Novus, a monochrome drawing created in 1920 by the German artist Paul Klee.

Take a close look closely at it and I wonder what you see? It is certainly odd and not immediately attractive or arresting, perhaps even childlike. But it has become an iconic image, one that symbolises the relationship that so many of us have with history.

It was the Jewish-German philosopher, Walter Benjamin, who transformed the meaning of this work of art. Benjamin bought it for a thousand marks in Munich in 1921. He became obsessed with it. He hung it on the walls of every apartment he subsequently lived in. It spoke to something that he'd been grasping for, some way of understanding or explaining the hold that the past has on us.

History is power, it is written by the victors, the victors get to decide what history is. And those who are vanquished, the victims of history, well, they stare into the abyss. This is what Benjamin saw in this strange image. The Angelus Novus became for Benjamin the Angel of History. It became the centrepiece of his famous essay 'On the philosophy of history'. As he said of it:

“The Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, the Angel sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage

upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

This storm is what we call progress. Benjamin meant that we are propelled to a future which remains out of reach. We cannot face the future so we are fixed on the past. Fixed on catastrophe. The Angel wants to raise the dead to redeem us from history but Benjamin dwells among the ghosts. He is haunted and the spectre is history itself.

To Benjamin history is an unfolding tragedy. As he says: “There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time document of barbarism. History filled the empty time with the presence of now.” What does he mean by history itself?

It is not the sum of events, not every occurrence. It is the act of catastrophe, the one single defining event. This catastrophe – this schism – was the engine of progress and had delivered the world once again to the brink of annihilation. “Blame it on the Enlightenment” Benjamin said. That 17th century triumph of reason had given rise to an inevitability of history, as if the future was already written. He looked warily upon the Enlightenment, upon ideas of progress. To Benjamin it was:

“... something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind ... progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.”

Benjamin believed that history measured in a straight line emptied the world of meaning. Think about the time that he was writing, 1920s and 1930s Germany, a Jewish man watching the rise of Nazism, a fascist ideology that sought to usher in the final act of history. “One reason” he said, “why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm.” Benjamin fled Germany for France and he left behind his precious artwork, his Angel of History, with its eyes turned to the past.



Like Walter Benjamin I am haunted too. Like his Angelus Novus, this image speaks to me. It is the photograph of Aboriginal Jimmy Governor. Like the Angelus Novus Jimmy's eyes are fixed on the past. They seem to stare into darkness, into the abyss.

I have gone in search of this ghost of Jimmy Governor. I went to the place where he took his last breath. The old Darlinghurst Gaol in Sydney is now the site of the National Art School. The gallows are gone. But behind the high sandstone walls, it is not so hard to imagine what it was like, back then. I was taken through the time-worn corridors, past what once were cold prison walls. I turned a corner and stopped suddenly, like something – or someone – had grabbed hold of me. I looked up and my tour guide said, “That’s where it happened. Exactly there”, she said. Where I was standing, is where Jimmy was hanged. Above me was where the trapdoor would have been, and where the hangman would have placed the noose around Jimmy’s neck.

Jimmy Governor was executed at 9am on 18 January 1901. The newspaper reported that he had slept well, had a good breakfast and had walked to his death smoking a cigarette. A priest walked with him. Jimmy took the cigarette from his mouth and threw it away before the white hood covered his face. He tilted his neck, just slightly, to make it easier for the hangman to attach the noose. Death was instantaneous. “There was hardly a tremor in his body”, the reporter wrote. Jimmy Governor’s clothes were burned and he was buried beyond the prison walls.

Jimmy Governor killed children. He killed women. He took an axe to a family and then went on a rampage of theft, rape and murder. He slaughtered nine people in all. He was at the time the most hunted man in the country. A man could earn himself a fortune for shooting Jimmy dead. From our vantage point, Jimmy lived and died at the crossroads of our history: he marked a moment between the old and the new.

Between what was and what is yet to be: a time-between-time. In books and films, storytellers have sought to cast Jimmy’s life and crimes as a morality play or a national *cri de coeur*. The author Thomas Keneally immortalised Jimmy Governor in his novel ‘The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith’. To Keneally his Jimmie was the man between worlds. His eyes fixed on the catastrophe of history. Australia – its brutal treatment of Aboriginal people – was put on trial as much as Jimmie himself.

What Jimmy did was monstrous, barbaric. No provocation could justify such violence. I know that is the correct moral reaction to the murder of innocent people, but I can’t let it rest there because he was pushed to this insanity, he was cheated, humiliated and belittled. His white wife was scorned and laughed at for “living with savages”, as thy put it. That’s what draws us to this story, not just the crime but what the crime represents.

Jimmy Governor has stood in for every one of my ancestors, and he has put a face to my own rage at the injustice of history here. To me, conscious as I am of my own family’s suffering, Jimmy’s execution has resonated not only as an example of justice done, but a reminder of the times that justice went undone – the slaughter of black people that was never prosecuted. Jimmy was executed less than three weeks after Federation, and here I was still searching for him, looking back into the past to try to make sense of who I am. More than a hundred years later, Jimmy Governor still casts a shadow over this nation. He haunts me and he haunts Australia.

This is a ghost story as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida would have seen it. He coined the word “hauntology” to describe how the traces of our past – our ghosts – throw shadows on our world. To Derrida it is a tear in time, a crack in the fortress of modernity. Modernity is built on the idea that we can vanquish history. History, we are told, is an arc of progress that bends towards freedom, and each generation shakes itself loose from the grip of its ancestors. There is even said to be an end of history itself.

Triumphant Western liberals declared victory after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, proclaimed the battle of ideology settled: liberal democracy alone was humanity’s final destination. The end of history. It’s an idea that the West claims as its own, something the philosopher Hegel called the “absolute spirit” where master and slave are each freed from the chains of the oppressed and the oppressor. Whatever its sins – and it is certainly not free of sin – liberalism contains the promise of liberty. To paraphrase Pascal Bruckner, the French philosopher, it is a jailer, but one who slips you the key.

So why am I here, outside Jimmy Governor’s cell? What is the pull of the past, and what is so lacking now that I have to go in search of a ghost? The battleground of liberalism is littered with corpses; that’s what Jacques Derrida sensed after 1989, when he saw the dead rising and bringing their history with them.

In Jimmy Governor I am bringing out my dead. He is a scar on our own history that runs like a fault line between black and white in Australia. Coming to the place of his execution was like a pilgrimage. But it was an impossible burden to place on a dead man I never knew. It was my worst impulses that drew me to Jimmy Governor. It was the sense of resentment, an all-consuming historical fever. My own eyes turned, like the Angelus Novus, to the catastrophe of history.

Jimmy Governor was a grotesque murderer who took an axe to the skulls of children, I know he is beyond sympathy ... and yet there is still something in those eyes that holds me. He is the spectre that will not let us bury our history; he holds modernity – its promise of freedom and liberty – just out of reach. “What does it mean to follow a ghost?”, Jacques Derrida asked. “And what if this came down to being followed by the ghost itself, always persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading?”

“The future”, he said, “comes back in advance: from the past, from the back”. We have “the bread of apocalypse in our mouths.” The bitter aftertaste of our history.



Xi Jinping has the bread of apocalypse in his mouth. He is born into a country burdened by history. He too looks to the past and sees catastrophe. Forever reminding his people of the hundred years of humiliation, how China has been occupied, exploited and brutalised by foreign powers. The hundred years of humiliation is burned into the soul of Chinese people. China's return to power is in no small measure a story of vengeance – and a warning that China will not be humiliated again.

To uncover Xi Jinping, we have to go to the mystical place called Yellow Earth. It is the dusty plateau of Shaanxi Province, in north-west China, alongside the fabled Yellow River – considered the cradle of Chinese civilisation. It was here that Xi was banished as a young man during the Cultural Revolution. His family was in disgrace. His father, Xi Zhongxun – a revered figure in the years before the Revolution – had been purged from the Party.

It is extraordinary to think that Xi's father had been one of Mao's most trusted figures, he was the youngest man appointed to Mao's cabinet, someone Mao said had been "tempered by fire". Now he was banished. One of Xi Jinping's older stepsisters, it is said, committed suicide during this time, humiliated and taunted. Xi was sent to work the farms, like so many other children of the elite. He needed re-education in the truth of the Communist Party.

Xi calls himself a "son of Yellow Earth". In a short autobiography, he describes arriving in Shaanxi "anxious and confused". He recalls living in lice-infested caves and toiling all day. It toughened his body, fortified his spirit and hardened his hands. Xi attended daily "struggle sessions", as they were described, and had to denounce purged Chinese revolutionary leaders, including his father. Yet rather than turn away from the Party, Xi Jinping grew ever more devoted. By the time he left Yellow Earth, Xi writes, "my life goals were firm and I was filled with confidence."

Yellow Earth is a state of mind as much as a place. The China scholar Geremie Barmé has described Xi's years in Shaanxi as the Chinese version of the American log cabin story – the tale of the politician who rises to power from humble beginnings. Barmé says it is a powerful narrative of hardship that binds Xi to the struggles of ordinary Chinese people.

I remember once driving through Shaanxi Province in north-west China – this fabled Yellow Earth when I was posted there by CNN – it was during a drought that had cracked open this rock-hard soil. My news crew and I had gone in search of survival stories, to see how people were holding up in one of the driest periods in more than fifty years. Between 2010 and 2011, the lakes had emptied, crops had failed, and millions of people were without water. From my car window, across a parched open field, I saw a man chipping away at the ground. It intrigued me. We parked and walked closer to him. He was digging a well, searching for just a drop of buried water. Right then it was as precious to him as gold. All day he hacked away at the ground, but it gave him next to nothing. The man's wife showed us a bucket that held only a few centimetres of water. That was all they had to show for their toil. Yet he didn't stop, not even to talk to us, he kept on digging, his shirt off, his wiry muscles aching, dripping with sweat. That image has never left me, because it tells me how these people will endure. It captured a maxim I had heard over and over in China: to eat

bitterness. To eat bitterness. These are the people who looked to the revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, and now they look to Xi Jinping. They have lived through monumental change; those old enough still remember famine where tens of millions of people died, revolution, war and death.

China is again a powerful country, but it is still in search of its identity: what it is to be Chinese. What is it to be China. Has China triumphed over foreign domination or is it a victim, forever trapped in its past – forever living out the hundred years of humiliation? The Chinese people have lived at the crossroads of modernity; they are haunted by chaos and history. That's what I found so intoxicating about reporting China; it is what spoke so profoundly to me as a reporter. I was never just telling the story of China; I was looking for some part of myself, because China stands in for so many of us who have felt the West wash over us like a tsunami.

We are caught in the undertow of the West, which drags us to a future that the ideas of the West created. As French historian François Hartog wrote, “The West has spent the last two hundred years dancing to the tune of the future – and making others do likewise.” I shared with the Chinese that journey from the past to the future. It is a journey those born truly of the West don't truly understand. How could they, when the future – when progress, when history, is their invention?

But I have spent so much of my time as a reporter telling the stories of people on that same journey as me: people from Palestine and Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and North Korea and, of course, China. And we outside the West have to ask ourselves harder questions. Existence itself is something that we cannot take for granted.

The West came to China as it came to the land of my ancestors, in gunships, with flags and money and progress. It brought upheaval and death yet promised freedom, promised progress. The humiliation of the opium wars plunged China into a dark night of the soul. The Qing Empire was corrupt and weak, and China was occupied by the British, the French, the Japanese. The fall of the Qing triggered rebellion, civil war and revolution. For China, the arrival of the West shattered thousands of years of culture and assumed Chinese superiority. Western imperialism forced change.

From the 1890s, Chinese thinkers wondered how they would respond to the West. A new generation of Chinese scholars, writers and philosophers wrestled with the very nature of time and being. The collapse of the Qing Empire punctured the view of China as the centre of world civilisation.

Perhaps the most influential thinker of all, Liang Qichao, looked to the Western idea of history as a march of progress – and progress meant modernisation. Liang is the thinker who paved the way for those to come, including Mao, including Xi. China historians Orville Schell and John Delury have called Liang “the godfather of Chinese nationalism”. He looked at his nation, defeated and humiliated, and saw weakness. Liang coined the phrase “the sick man of Asia” to describe China's fallen state. Being crushed by Japan in 1895, Liang said, “awoke our nation from its four-thousand-year-long dream”. China was no longer the centre of the world.

He especially began to sow the seeds of what would become a Chinese national consciousness. As Liang embraced Western ideas, he also advocated the unity of what he called “the yellow race”. He coined a term, “minzu”, to describe the people of the nation. It was a “victim” mentality that would grow into the narrative of national humiliation. The seeds of Chinese resentment were sown. Liang Qichao, who championed progress and modernisation, now turned sour. “Following Western faith in science and progress”, he said, “would lead China to catastrophe.”

We cannot understand China without understanding history. Without understanding the grievance of history. Xi Jinping knows the pull of the past. The return of China to global power delivers us to a hinge point of history. China has emerged as an authoritarian superpower at a time when democracy is seen as being in retreat and the United States is seen as a power diminished. There is talk again of war. Xi Jinping’s eyes, like the Angel of History, remain fixed on the past, fixed on catastrophe. And the West still believes that it can bend history to its will. That it is unfolding certainty that delivers us to the end of history itself. The story of modern times is humanity’s struggle with history. History has been buried so many times, and history always returns.

When it comes to history I am reminded of the words of the playwright Eugene O’Neill who said, “There is no present or future, there is just the past happening over and over again”. The great Irish nationalist poet, Yeats, once wrote:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best of all mankind, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

This is the return of history.

This has been my world as a reporter. In thirty years on the road I have followed the blood-dimmed tide of hate. I have followed the trail of blood where “the ceremony of innocence is drowned”. These are the stuff of my nightmares. It is standing in a bombed-out market place where the blood boils, where it is so hot that it gurgles under my feet. There is twisted metal and the stench of burning flesh. Mothers pick out what is left of their children from the shell-marked holes in the walls; they place the charred bits of hair and skin into plastic bags because it is all they have left to bury.

I remember once at a double bus bombing in Be’er Sheva in Israel; a scene of dead bodies, broken glass and there amongst it all was a small packet of chocolate teddy bear biscuits and on the box was the bloodied handprint of a child. It is those things that rattle me the most. The thought that here was a child – just like my children – on a bus with his or her parents eating a box of biscuits talking excitedly and then in an instant gone. Why? Because so much of the world that I have seen, with its eyes turned to history, is insane.

It was insane in the town of Mingora in Pakistan where I saw the Taliban, led by a crazed mullah who rode a white horse and broadcast his hate-filled dictums over the local FM radio, hang the headless corpses of men that he had killed from the tower square. These are the things I have seen.

Let me return again to Yeats. In his poem 'The Rose Tree' he imagines a conversation between two Irish rebels, Pearce and Connolly:

But where can we draw water,
Said Pearce to Connolly,
When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right rose tree.

Nothing but our own red blood. This is the blood of vengeance and anger and grievance. It is the blood of identity poured through the strainer of history. Everywhere there is resurgent populism, nationalism, sectarianism, tribalism. And all of it feeds on history.

As Xi Jinping tells the Chinese people to remember the 100 years of humiliation; Vladimir Putin laments the end of the Soviet Empire as the great catastrophe of the 20th century; in Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan reminds his people of the greatness of the Ottoman Empire; in Hungary Viktor Orban tells his people they were cheated after the end of World War I when the country lost two-thirds of its territory and vows never again; Islamic State has fought the crusades and dreams of rebuilding the caliphate for the final battle of humanity.

The German philosopher, Nietzsche, told us we all "suffer from an all-consuming historical fever". We see this in the identity-rooted conflicts of our age: Hutu versus Tutsi in Rwanda, Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland, the blood feud of Sunni and Shia Islam, Hindu pitted against Muslim, the existential nuclear armed stand off between India and Pakistan, the blood-soaked Balkans, ethnic cleansing of Rohingya in Myanmar. These are the stories that have shaped my career.

The Indian philosopher and economist, Amartya Sen, has written extensively about issues of identity and justice. He warns of what he calls 'solitarist identities': the dangers of limited or restrictive ideas of identity. A solitarist approach, he says, can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world, "our shared humanity gets savagely challenged". Singular classifications, he says, can make the world inflammable. Put simply, "identity can kill – and kill with abandon."

History and identity have the certainty of faith. But here is a heretical idea: should we just forget? Why do we make such a fetish of history, why do we surrender our minds to the past? Why do we let the dead bury the living? Forgetting goes against everything we are taught.

Who doesn't remember George Santayana's warning: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But what if remembering the past locks us into a cycle of unending, permanent violence?

Nietzsche said of our historical fever that it "may bring about the decay of a people". If history becomes sovereign, he wrote, it "would constitute a kind of final closing out of the accounts of life for mankind." Forgetting – for Nietzsche – is truly the only way to tame our savagery. He begins his work on history by observing animals and wondering at their ability to live now ... they live in a permanent state of forgetting. He believed we must rediscover that animal instinct – to achieve happiness he believed we must develop the 'capacity to live unhistorically'.

In his 2017 book 'In Praise of Forgetting', the journalist and philosopher, David Rieff, picked up where Nietzsche left off and he warned that "thinking about history is far more likely to paralyse than encourage". He says we risk turning it into a "formula for unending grievance and vendetta". But here is the test of forgetting: do we also forgo justice?

Is there a higher justice? That was the choice facing South Africa at the end of apartheid. They could pursue the crimes of apartheid and prosecute the perpetrators or they could let the truth set them free.

Listen again to the words of Desmond Tutu: "Forgiveness and reconciliation", he said, "are the only truly viable alternatives to revenge, retribution and reprisal. Without forgiveness", he said, "there is no future". His eyes were not turned to the catastrophe of history. Archbishop Tutu headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 'Justice' perhaps would have been easier and it would have electrified the blood of the people who had suffered under apartheid with every cause for vengeance. By choosing peace Tutu set South African people a higher task. "Forgiveness is not facile or cheap", he said. "It is costly business that makes those who are willing to forgive even more extraordinary".

But are their crimes so monstrous they cannot be forgiven? Are their sins so heinous that they cannot be moved from history? The Austrian philosopher, Jean Amery, refused to let go of the horrors of the Holocaust, he refused to forget what he had seen, what he called "the hollow, thoughtless, utterly false conciliatoriness of the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation". His words are chilling: "What happened, happened", he said. But that it happened cannot be easily accepted. I rebel against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history."

Jean Amery was born as Hans Meier in 1912, his father Jewish but his mother Catholic. Under new laws passed in 1935, he became legally recognised as Jewish and that would become a death sentence. In 1938 he fled to Belgium. By 1943 he was caught and tortured by the Gestapo. He was eventually sent to Auschwitz. He arrived with 655 others; 417 were immediately killed. He saw the totality of the brutality of the Nazis and wrote that "the world always dies where the claim of some reality is total". Jean Amery never relinquished his resentment – to him it would have been a betrayal. For him there would be no place for war monuments acknowledging the

Nazi shame or the Jewish suffering – “to be a victim alone”, he said, “is not an honour”.

I hear Amery and I admit that as someone whose people have suffered in Australia his words touch me profoundly but I am reminded too of the words of the French writer Albert Camus: “resentment is always resentment against oneself”, he said.

Can I truly be free when, like the Angelus Novus, my eyes are turned to catastrophe? Must I always carry the weight of my history? Am I condemned to it? It has been said that we don’t live in the past but the past lives in us. I can’t deny that. But the past need not define us either.

We talk a lot today about truth-telling as if there is just one truth, as if the truth itself is not messy and contested. I am an indigenous Australian. My family is born out of the great tragedy of invasion and colonisation. That is the truth and these truths have never been fully told in our country.

Yet I am here tonight because the Angelus Novus, the storm of history, propels me into the future. My indigenous heritage joins also with my Irish heritage in this place we call Australia to create something new, something that could only have been born here. I am the colonised and I am the coloniser. That is the truth, a messy complicated truth. We imagine that the truth can set us free; that in history we can find healing.

Yet history is also a weapon. It can – and does – lock us into unending grievance. In the eyes of Jimmy Governor I glimpsed my history – my catastrophe. I would not allow him to be free – as I would not allow myself to be free. For much of my life, I looked to Jimmy for the impossible: to tell me who I am. I would not let him escape history. I would not let his crimes die with him. And I was so wrong.

Jimmy lived in a world defined by black and white. Tom Keneally crafted a fictional character, the doomed Jimmie Blacksmith and kept him there. For the longest time, so did I. After standing on the spot where Jimmy was executed, I walked over to one of the art galleries. And there, on a stained-glass window, one of the artists had painted Jimmy’s face. It struck me then that in that kaleidoscope of colour, the explosion of blue and green and red and yellow, Jimmy could no longer be captured in a world of black and white. Jimmy was set free.

But what of Walter Benjamin and his Angel of History that kept its back to the future and its eyes on the past? After Benjamin fled to France to escape the Nazis he was reunited with his precious artwork. He put it on his wall and when the Nazis came for him, he took his own life. He would not endure any more history.

Thank you.

**This lecture, the 21st in the series, was delivered in Manning Clark Hall
in the Kambri Cultural Precinct, Australian National University, Canberra**