

STAN GRANT: 'Talking with ghosts: the haunting of history'

Not far from here at the old Darlinghurst Gaol I went looking for a ghost. It is the ghost of Jimmy Governor. This is the place where he took his last breath. The old gaol is now the site of the National Art School. The gallows are gone. But the place is haunted.

It is not at all hard to imagine what it once was. I walked down old corridors, past what once were cold prison cells. I turned a corner and stopped suddenly. I looked up and my tour guide said that's where it happened. Exactly there, she said, where I was now 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 January 18, 1901. He was a murderer he killed children. He killed women. He took an axe to a family and then went on a rampage of murder, rape and theft. Nine people he slaughtered. He became the most hunted man in the country.

Jimmy lives and dies at the crossroads of our history: he marks a moment between the old and the new. Between what was and what is yet to be: time-between-time.

That's what draws us to this story, not just the crime but what the crime represents. Jimmy Governor was an Aboriginal man who at the turn of the 20th century challenged the very idea of this country.

He was married to a white woman. He had white ancestry himself. He demanded a place in a white world. In the end – taunted, cheated, humiliated – his white wife rejected an insulted he struck out violently.

Jimmy was executed just two weeks after federation and here I am searching for him still, 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. Jimmy Governor haunts me and he haunts Australia.

He has been immortalised in Thomas Keneally's famous novel 'The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith' later a film by director Fred Schepisi.

To me it is a ghost story. The philosopher Jacques Derrida coined the word 'hauntology', to describe how the traces of our past – our ghosts - throw shadows on our world.

It challenges the very idea of modernity: that we in the West can vanquish history itself. There is an end to history, so it is said, not that time stops or that events or people cease to matter, but that we win our freedom.

Triumphant Western liberals declared victory after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the battle of ideology settled: liberal democracy alone was humanity's final destination.

If history is indeed an arc of freedom what was I doing standing 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?

Derrida went looking for ghosts after the wall came down in 1989. He saw the dead rising and bringing their history with them.

History we know did not end. It quickly returned twinned with identity and fuelled by vengeance. From China to Russia to Turkey and Hungary to ISIS and Al Qaeda and the far right, identity has set our world ablaze.

In the United States supposedly a beacon of democracy, identity across race class and culture has made the country almost ungovernable. Political Scientist, Mark Lilla, has called these seething, angry identity tribes, the 'shipwrecked minds', who see no future but only the past floating by like debris from a wreckage.

This is what Jimmy Governor has been to me: a memory of a wound. He is a scar on our history that runs like a fault line between black and white. Jimmy's cell was a place of pilgrimage for me.

But why? Why would I need this? Why should history have this hold on me? Why am I so haunted by Jimmy's ghost? Why must I remain in the grip of what Friedrich Nietzsche called an all-consuming historical fever?

Jimmy is the spectre that will not let us bury our history, he holds modernity just out of reach.

"What does it mean to follow a ghost"? Derrida asked. "And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we

are leading?” The future Derrida said, “comes back in advance: from the past, from the back”. We have “the bread of apocalypse in our mouths.”

Albert Camus said “All revolutionaries finally aspire to world unity and act as though they believed that history were dead”.

The story of modern times is humanity’s struggle with history.

History has been buried so many times...and history always returns.

In fact 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”.

We are now at a hinge point of history. To many this looks like Cold War 2.0. China and the United States are locked in an escalating great power rivalry.

Shots have already been fired. A trade war between the two biggest economies in the world damaged both countries and weakened global economic growth.

China and the US have brushed up against each other in the disputed islands of the South China Sea.

It is just one of multiple flash points – the Taiwan Strait; the Diaoyu-Senkaku islands claimed by both China and Japan; or the India-China border.

All could trigger a rapid escalation to a much broader conflict.

Just this year there were casualties when Chinese and Indian troops exchanged fire along their disputed regions.

Then there’s the nuclear armed existential stand-off between Pakistan and india.

The demilitarised zone between North and South Korea.

The Middle East remains a powder keg: from Iraq to Syria to Yemen and Libya.

In the Sahel region of Africa; the Democratic Republic of Congo; or Ethiopia; terrorism and conflict rage.

Relations are toxic between the US and Russia. Vladimir Putin has reasserted Russian power throughout the world but particularly in the Middle East.

He has grown closer to China and Xi Jinping.

The post-American world imagined by writer and journalist, Fareed Zakaria, more than a decade ago is looking more real.

The great fear is a war between the two biggest powers on the globe: the United States and China.

The battle plans are already being drawn up.

Historians look at this, and see like Eugene O'Neill, the past happening over and over again.

They look at the world and see the same fault lines as 1914. Then they said war would never happen; Germany and Britain were each other's biggest trading partners; the kaiser and the king were cousins.

How wrong they were. The Australian historian Sir Christopher Clarke, wrote a magnificent book about how the world drifted to war, he called it "Sleepwalkers".

In 1914, the world was enjoying a great peace; economies were booming; trade connected the world. Just like today.

And then the assassination of an Austrian Crown Prince in Sarajevo tipped the world into the bloodiest conflict we had ever seen. The war to end all wars.

Christopher Clark says political leaders become hostage to events.

"Causes trawled from the length and breadth of Europe's pre-war decades are piled like weights on the scale until it tilts from probability to inevitability," he wrote.

Now many believe we are sleepwalking to war all over again.

The weights are topping the scales just like 1914.

The Asia Pacific is a tinderbox of old enmities, expanding militaries, disputed territories, unfinished conflict, and nuclear weapons.

A spark in the South China Sea could set fire to the region: China on one side; the U.S on the other, with the rest of the world forced into choosing sides.

The script for this was written by Thucydides in 400 BC, when Athens went to war with Sparta – today military strategists warn of the Thucydides Trap: when a rising power meets a waning power and go to battle for supremacy.

Founding dean of the Harvard University Kennedy School, Graham Allison, fears the world is lurching towards conflict unseen since World War II.

He puts his case in his book, *Destined for War: Can America and China escape Thucydides' Trap?*

Allison says we should heed Thucydides' warning from 2,000 years ago.

"It was the rise of Athens and the fear this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable," he writes.

Then it was Athens-Sparta. In 1914 it was Germany-Great Britain and now China-United States.

"As far ahead as the eye can see, the defining question about global order is whether China and the US can escape Thucydides's trap. Most contests that fit this pattern have ended badly," Allison writes.

On the current trajectory, Allison says, war is "not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognised".

Any clash between the US and China is potentially catastrophic, but as much as we may try to wish it away, right now military strategists in Beijing and Washington are preparing for just an eventuality.

Global think tank the Rand Corporation prepared a report in 2015 for the American military, its title could not have been more direct — War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable.

It concluded that China would suffer greater casualties than the US if war was to break out now. However, it cautioned, that as China's military muscle increased so would the prospect of a prolonged destructive war.

Australia is in the crosshairs. Our Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, says we are living in a 'poorer, more disorderly and more dangerous world.' He has increased defence spending and investing in new weapons technology to fight a potential war in the Indo-Pacific.

He doesn't mention China by name but increasing political and military ties with the likes of India and Japan leave no doubt about where the threat lies.

China is more assertive – even aggressive. It is fast returning to what it sees as its rightful place at the apex of global power.

China is ruled by a new emperor; a man considered the most powerful leader of the country since Mao Zedong.

Xi Jinping is a son of the communist party – he puts the party above all – he is crushing dissent; locking up the Uighur Muslim minority; jailing his rivals; shutting down the media and locking up activists.

He has made himself president for life. He is a self styled strongman who has promised his people he will deliver on the China Dream. He is not the type of leader to back down.

For the past four years the United States has been led by a man retreating from global leadership. This is not the America we have grown so used to.

He has belittled allies; cosied up to despots. He has withdrawn from the Paris climate accord and walked away from the Trans Pacific Partnership the biggest trade deal in history.

He promised to make America great again; to put America first. He will soon be gone but Joe Biden inherits a volatile world that is testing the limits of American power.

Coronavirus has revealed and accelerated the fractures in our world. What started in China has only further weakened America.

Perhaps Donald Trump understood this world better than his critics: it is increasingly looking like dog eat dog; each nation for itself.

This potential nightmare comes as authoritarianism is rising and democracy is under attack – if not in retreat.

John Adams, one of the founding fathers of the United States and its second President, once said: “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, murders itself. There never was a democracy that did not commit suicide”. Is that what we are seeing in our time? Is this the inevitable death of democracy, before it has even had time to grow old?

When I set out on my journalistic adventure in the 1980’s democracy’s future looked assured.

The second half of the 20th century was boom time for democracy.

Germany emerged from the trauma of Nazism; South Africa threw off the yoke of apartheid; decolonisation across Africa and Asia created new free, democratic nations and in other parts of the world – Latin America and Europe – autocratic regimes were swept aside.

Between 1970 and 2010 the number of democracies in the world increased from 35 to 120: according to Freedom House – which measures the health of democracy - 63 percent of the world lived in democracies.

But something has happened.

Freedom house which had trumpeted the growth of democracy, In 2015, released its report “Discarding Democracy: the Return of the Iron Fist”, which found an erosion in civil liberties and rule of law. It said that democracy was “under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years.”

What has happened? History has happened.

Let me return again to Albert Camus and his vision of the absurd.

“The divorce between man and his life...is properly the feeling of absurdity.”
He wrote.

“A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien a stranger”.

There is a great feeling of unease in our world. We have lost our grip. People are more wary, more suspicious, borders and razor wire are going back up to keep people out.

We are turning away from each other right at the time when technology has made us more connected than at any time in human history.

The sense of alienation has sparked a blowback against globalisation, immigration has become a flashpoint issue.

Anti-immigrant sentiment is fertile ground for resurgent populists and nationalists.

The political strongman exploits anxiety and fear; the feeling of being over-run.

It is shaking up politics as we know it. Banning migrants and putting up walls has put Donald Trump into the White House.

Concerns that Britain has lost control of its borders to an open Europe played a big part in the Brexit vote.

Politicians on the right are on the rise across Europe.

These populists prey on fear and all spin a tale of catastrophe – and not without reason.

Islamist terrorism has bitten hard in Europe that can't be denied. There are concerns reasonably held that some migrants will not integrate. What we call

the Global Financial Crisis - more correctly a depression elsewhere – cost houses and jobs that have never come back.

Globalisation promised to make us richer and it did – hundreds of billions of people were lifted out of poverty – but in recent decades the wealth has not been evenly spread.

In established economies and democracies some have felt left out and spurned – inequality is growing and people are angry.

When Hillary Clinton in 2016 called the Trump supporters ‘a basket of deplorables’, she all but handed him the presidency.

He told them he would make America Great Again...that he would save them from “American carnage”.

As Camus said “the hell of the present, is his Kingdom now”.

What happened to the “End of History”.

As a young reporter I remember the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I remember the words in 1987, of US President, Ronald Reagan, to his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev: “Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall”.

Indeed in 1989, the Wall came down.

The Soviet Union was dismantled: on December 26, 1991 at 7.32pm the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time.

In the United States, a little known State Department official, Francis Fukuyama, had been looking on and believed he saw not just a pivotal moment for the world; but the very zenith of humanity.

He penned an essay published in the National Interest magazine in 1989, with the title “The End of History?”.

Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy may constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution – the final form of human government”.

As Fukuyama wrote back then: “as mankind approaches the end of the millennium the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potential universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty”.

Fukuyama took his inspiration from the great 19th century German philosopher, Hegel, his writings on history helped give birth to the modern world.

Hegel believed that the desire for recognition and freedom were the engines of history.

History was time...and time was progress. We were moving ever forward to what he saw as the “ethical state”: the end of history.

It was Hegel who first believed he had seen the end of history when he glimpsed the triumphant Napoleon after the battle Jena in 1806.

As Hegel said “I saw the emperor this world spirit go out from the city to survey his realm – stretching over the world and dominating it”.

Hegel may well be proved right – but Francis Fukuyama would have done well to read Camus.

“The individual cannot accept history as it is.” He wrote. “He must destroy reality, not collaborate with it, in order to affirm his own existence.

History is back and it is back with a vengeance and its engine is not freedom or recognition it is vengeance and resentment.

The great Irish nationalist poet, William Butler 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 lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity”.

This is the return of history.

This is what the Indian writer, Pankaj Mishra, calls “the age of anger”.

This has been my world.

In thirty years of reporting I have followed the blood dimmed tide of hate.

I have followed the trail of blood where “the ceremony of innocence is drowned”.

I have stood bombed out market places awash in boiling blood with 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 have seen how quickly we turn to violence. I have seen too often the evil we can do. I have seen how easily we acquiesce for tyranny.

I turn again to Camus “In the age of ideologies, we must make up our minds about murder. If murder has rational foundations, then our period and we ourselves have significance.”

We have made up our minds about murder and we have decided we are ok with it. If we weren't we would not keep committing it as we have done from world war to world war from korea to Vietnam to the Balkans, to Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria and Yemen .

We are ok with it. Sometimes it comes to us – it is true – sometimes war is necessary.

The slaughter of innocents cannot stand. Terrorism that can strike in our streets here – cannot stand.

And so we pick our sides and we do our killing and we are ok with it.

We tell ourselves god – or history – sometimes they are the same thing – are on our side.

As Camus wrote “ideology...limits itself to repudiating other people...this leads to murder. Everyday masked assassins slip into some cell: murder is the question of today”.

Let me turn 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.

All of it feeds on history.

Think of what Xi Jinping tells the Chinese people “remember the 100 years of humiliation by foreign powers”. Or Vladimir Putin who laments the end of the soviet empire as the “greatest catastrophe of the 20th century”; in Turkey Recep Tayip Erdogan reminds his people of the greatness of the Ottoman Empire; in Hungary Orban tells his people they were cheated after the end of

World War One when the country lost two thirds of its territory and vows never again; Islamic state is still fighting the crusades and dreams of rebuilding the caliphate for the final battle of humanity.

The German philosopher, Nietzsche, told us that God is dead. And it seems to me we have replaced God with History. As Camus said “between history and the eternal I have chosen history because I like certainties.”

History is the poison in the blood of our identities. What the Polish Nobel Prize laureate Czeslaw Milosz called ‘the memory of wounds’

Nietzsche warned of the “man of resentment”.

To Nietzsche, the French word goes further than resentment. Ressentiment is more than harbouring a grudge or seething anger, it is the unquenchable thirst for revenge; it is the refusal to let go; suffering forms the core of identity.

To Nietzsche the “Man of Ressentiment”, is a prisoner of his past, caught in a time warp. He returns always to the source of injustice that he cannot fix and does not want to fix.

In the words of the 19th century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi

“Life has shrunk to dregs and rancour
The world is unclean”

History, for men of resentment, is a festering wound, to be picked at over and over, never being allowed to heal. His suffering is his strength; his weakness the greatest weapon he has over his oppressor.

This Ressentiment has lit the fuse of the stories that have shaped my own 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.”

Here’s a provocative idea: should we just forget?

Why do we make such a fetish of history, why do we surrender our minds to the past?

Truly we are letting 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 bound 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. To live happily he said we must develop the ‘capacity to live unhistorically”.

In his 2017 book “In Praise of Forgetting”, journalist and philosopher David Rieff, challenged the adage that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Rieff warns “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.”

Here is the big test of forgetting: must we sacrifice justice for peace?

Think about that – we can pursue justice, we can endlessly litigate the past or we can choose a peace and put the bones of our ancestors to rest and know that their struggle and their suffering released us from their burden.

That was the choice facing South Africa at the end of apartheid: justice or peace – it was that simple.

They could pursue the crimes of apartheid and prosecute the perpetrators or they could let truth set them free.

Listen again to the words of Desmond Tutu forgiveness and reconciliation are the “only truly viable alternatives to revenge, retribution and reprisal”.

“Without forgiveness” – he said – “there is no future.”

Archbishop Tutu headed a “truth and reconciliation commission” not a “truth and justice commission”.

Justice perhaps would have been easier and it would have electrified the blood of a people with every cause for vengeance.

By choosing peace Tutu set South African people a more godly task.

“Forgiveness is not facile or cheap. It is costly business that makes those who are willing to forgive even more extraordinary”.

But are there crimes so monstrous they cannot be forgiven?

The Austrian philosopher, Jean Amery, refused to let go of the horrors of the Holocaust....he refused to forget what he had seen.

He railed against what he called “the hollow, thoughtless, utterly false conciliatoriness or the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation”.

His anger was as righteous as Desmond Tutu’s love.

Amer’s words were chilling:

“What happened, what happened. But that it happened cannot be so 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.

But under new laws passed in 1935, he became legally recognised as Jewish and that would in time become a death sentence.

In 1938 he fled to Belgium but 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 is not an honour” he said.

You can read his words in his extraordinary book “Behind Guilt and Atonement”.

I hear Amery and I admit as someone whose people have suffered in Australia his words touch me profoundly but in the end I listen to others – to Desmond Tutu and a Nelson Mandela - to those who would free me from history not chain me to vengeance.

And I read the words of our literary guide tonight – Albert Camus –

“Resentment is always resentment against oneself”.

Jean Amery who as Hans Meier survived the Nazi death camps – who refused to relent in his burning resentment – took his own life at the age of 66 in a hotel room in Salzburg.

So, what of Australia where we struggle with reconciliation and our own history?

What can a French historian and philosopher teach us.

More than a century ago, when in Australia it was still widely presumed that Aboriginal people were a dying race, Ernest Renan was grappling with the question: what is a nation?

It remains one of the most profound and powerful statements of identity, written in 1882.

Renan sought to look beyond the “grave errors” of race or language or religion; he came to his essay he wrote in “an absolutely cold and impartial fashion”.

A nation, he wrote was defined not by anyone thing but the sum of its many parts “the fusion of the populations that comprise them”.

Race could be no foundation for nationhood, to Renan “there are no pure races”; race he said “has always been of diminishing importance” no one, he wrote, “has the right to go about the world examining men’s heads and then grabbing them by the throat and, saying “you are of our blood, you belong to us”.

The nation he wrote was a “daily referendum...a perpetual affirmation of life”, the search for a “collective identity”.

Renan wrote a nation “is a soul, a spiritual principle”. It was born of a marriage of the past and the present, one the “possession of a rich trove of memories”, the other “actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the undivided shared heritage”.

Critical to Renan was the question of history; history could bind a nation or tear it apart.

The study of history, he wrote, “often poses a threat to nationality”. Renan posed a challenge that resonates still today: “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation”.

Renan’s words sound so incongruous today when we place so much weight on truth telling. It has become a modern shibboleth that truth can set us free; that there is healing in truth.

Perhaps so. As someone who was born into the Great Australian Silence, whose history – Aboriginal history – was written out of our national story I know too well history’s burden.

I cannot easily wish it away. Forgetting has not been an option. And yet I know too well the dangers of too much history.

I know that truth can be its own weapon. Truth does not always heal it tortures us and it turns us against each other.

Surely we approach truth with trepidation. And I wonder: whose truth? What is truth? Do we not choose the facts to fit like items in a shop front window? When truth becomes identity are there no longer facts only interpretations.

As we reckon with our past we must also know that the past will reckon with us.

Let me return again again to that spot near here where Jimmy Governor was executed. What was I looking for? What did I want from this man dead now for more than a century? Why should I look to him and his awful crimes for some sort of validation?

There have been times in my life when Jimmy Governor has been a symbol: when he has stood in for every face in my family; every humiliation suffered; every injustice visited on us. In his murderous spree I saw vengeance.

What I see now is a tragedy. His victims deserve to rest peacefully in our country and I should put Jimmy’s ghost to rest.

I don’t know that history reaches its end. We like to believe that the arc of moral universe is long but it bends toward justice – I have seen enough of the worst of the world to know that is not true.

If it bends at all it more often bends to power. And power draws on history – history as a tale of unending suffering and humiliation and that wound is never healed. Instead it becomes our reason for being.

Save me from that.

In the words of James Joyce 'history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'.