

# Australia Day

Stan Grant

 dyslexic  
books

---

 RHYM

---

## THE OWL OF MINERVA

I was eighteen when I arrived at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. It was a world for which I was utterly unprepared. No one in my family had ever completed high school, university was not even spoken of. There were a handful of other Aboriginal students, and we clung to each other. I was so intimidated I barely left my room in the college dorm. I would wait until the other students had gone to the dining hall and then sneak out under darkness to eat at some local take away. My university life began as Australia was waking up to its past; the Great Australian Silence was being pierced by a new generation of historians. Henry Reynolds wrote of life on the other side of the frontier, he wrote of massacres and war. Lyndall Ryan reminded us of the attempt to exterminate the First Peoples of Tasmania. It was a story I had grown up with, a people extinct, wiped out with the death of the 'Last Tasmanian', Truganini. What happened, I was taught, on that remote island stood as condemnation of the brutality of the British but it also reinforced the story of the doomed fate of Aboriginal people; that we were a



# VL OF RVA

n I arrived at the  
Wales in Sydney.  
hich I was utterly  
ny family had ever  
university was not  
were a handful of  
and we clung to  
ntimidated I barely  
lege dorm. I would  
dents had gone to  
sneak out under  
e local take away.  
as Australia was  
ne Great Australian  
rned by a new  
Henry Reynolds  
other side of the  
massacres and war.  
s of the attempt  
irst Peoples of  
I had grown up  
iped out with the  
manian', Truganini.  
taught, on that  
ndemnation of the  
n but it also  
the doomed fate  
at we were a

people who faded from the landscape. Lyndall Ryan turned that on its head: the people had not died out but lived on in their descendants, the offspring of Aboriginal women and white sailors and whalers. This was a thriving distinct community - just like my own - but one living under the burden of the myth of extinction. A race of people to be pitied but unseen.

These were vital corrections to a whitewashed history that had blanked out the worst of the frontier. For me, though, this revisionist history was something more. It took on the importance of myth, it gave me a story to live by. As Australians we turn to the Anzac legend and the courage of Kokoda as evidence of Aussie fighting spirit; I looked to the massacres, the poisoned flour, the miserable missions, to revel in Australia's shame. These stories, I thought, explained my world: we were the victimised, trampled on as the real Australians built this nation. Historians have called this 'the invention of tradition'; if I believed we had lost our place in the world, I could recreate a glorious struggle against a vicious enemy. Soon I began to act it out, I wore land rights T-shirts and took to tying my hair in a black, red and yellow headband, the colours of the Aboriginal flag. A year earlier I had been going to pubs, watching rock bands with



my mostly white mates, wearing a mod jacket festooned with a Union Jack and emblazoned with the name The Jam, my favourite English rockers. I had gone from little Englander to budding black activist - from Michael Caine to Malcolm X - in a matter of months.

It was the German philosopher Hegel who once wrote, 'the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk'. What Hegel meant was that we only truly see history as it passes; wisdom is gained only in hindsight.

Reading Hegel is an exhilarating experience, although it can be hard going; his writing swings from impenetrable and abstruse, to sublime. His ideas have as much as any philosopher helped shape our modern world. Along with Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche, Hegel has been the thinker I have returned to time and again to shine a light into the darkest corners. They're like code breakers, making sense of the otherwise indecipherable noise of humanity. Their ideas can be truly terrifying, like a rip in the ocean that drags the swimmer beyond the breakers and into the deep water; the only way back to shore is to stay afloat. Each has been linked to some of the worst of humanity: Hegel to the rise of Nazism, communism and totalitarianism; Nietzsche likewise and



appropriated today by the resurgent alt-right nationalists; and Kant linked by some to racist imperialism. Yet despite that, they are indispensable; their ideas greater than those who have appropriated them.

Think of what they ask of us. Kant and his ideas of universal humanity, a cosmopolitanism that shatters allegiance to fixed identities: nation, race or faith; Hegel and his belief that freedom is only attainable through the ultimate spirit and that spirit resides in the state; and Nietzsche with his warning that we have killed God, and elevated the individual to the point where we are devoid of meaning, a rootless species believing in nothing, 'men without chests'.

Reading philosophy, great thinkers like John Locke, David Hume and John Stuart Mill, is the reason that I recoil from the latter-day denunciation of the Western tradition; those who dismiss these figures as merely 'dead white men'. These thinkers laid the platform for liberalism, democracy, human rights, globalisation, and yes, patriarchy, white privilege, structural inequality. This is our world, this is what we wrestle with and this is why I return again and again to these giant figures of intellectual history.

For me it is Hegel who opens a window onto understanding the forces of



history. His is a philosophy of history that looks beyond the catalogue of events – the great figures, the wars and disasters, the rise and fall of empires – to a quest, a human quest to live another day, to search for meaning, to seek new ways to live together, to confront our worst and ask what it is to be human. Hegel saw his task as writing history as philosophy; it was the grandest undertaking of all, not a history of a people or a nation, but what he called a 'Universal History'. Read what he wrote in his famous lecture on history:

It is not history itself that is here presented. We might more properly designate it as a History of History; a criticism of historical narratives and an investigation of their truth and credibility.

Hegel said that we are rational beings, and that reason 'is the sovereign of the world'; therefore history must be a 'rational process'. To explain history, wrote Hegel, is to 'depict the passions of mankind', to observe the 'great stage' and divine 'the plan of providence'. History was progress, and progress was the road to freedom. Hegel charted a geographical course through the span of humanity from, he said, Eastern nations who 'knew only that one is free', to the Greek and Roman worlds



where 'only some are free', to a point in the future - an absolute spirit, a zeitgeist - where 'all men absolutely (man as man) are free'. Hegel sought clarity in a world of seemingly brutal chaos; history, he said, can be a 'slaughter-bench at which the happiness of people, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimised'. The task, he said, was to find the principle, the final aim of 'these enormous sacrifices'. History he said, was 'not the theatre of happiness', happiness is a 'blank page' in history; history is driven by disruption; it is the emergence of an antithesis that forces change. To Hegel, history was the human quest for freedom and recognition.

Hegel has been many things to many people; there are Hegelians on the political right and left. Karl Marx drew on Hegel's philosophy of history for his own work *Das Kapital*, especially seizing on the inherent contradictions - the thesis-antithesis - that Hegel believed was the engine of change. For Marx that was captured in the struggle between the workers and the bosses, the Proletariat and the Bourgeoisie. Marx was inspired by Hegel but he also sought to turn the philosopher on his head; where Hegel saw 'absolute spirit' culminating in the state, Marx saw the state upended by the workers' revolution.



In our time, the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, drew on Hegel for his famous 'End of History' thesis. In 1989, Fukuyama seized on the end of the Cold War to declare that the great ideological battles had been fought and won. Fukuyama, then a little-known analyst at the US State Department, penned an essay for the magazine *National Interest*, in which he argued that we were seeing the triumph of the West, that liberal democracy may constitute the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution - the final form of human government': indeed the end of history.

It may sound strange: 'the end of history'. Of course history does not end, there are always events and twists and turns in the fortunes of human beings, but Fukuyama was talking about history in a different and altogether more profound sense. He was talking about history as the struggle for justice, for freedom and for recognition; he was talking about an arc of progress that he believed had now delivered humanity to its summit. This was Hegel's idea of the absolute spirit. It was Hegel who first believed he had seen the 'end of history', when he glimpsed the triumphant Napoleon after the Battle of Jena in 1806, saying: 'I saw the emperor - this world-spirit - go out from the city



to survey his realm ... stretching over the world and dominating it.' History did not end, not in Napoleon's time and certainly not at the end of the Cold War, and there is a potential for Hegel's ideas to lead to triumphalism, yet there is something still so tantalising for me about humanity's quest for freedom.

How does Hegel speak to history in my country? Freedom, recognition? As the world was subject to revolution and upheaval, so the arrival of the British was a rupture in the lives of the people whose civilisation had endured here largely untouched for thousands of years. It did indeed represent a 'slaughter-bench', but what was the 'plan of providence'? Following Hegel's arc of history, if Indigenous society was the thesis, the arrival of Captain Cook was the antithesis; the centrifugal force that tilted the axis of life here, am I and people like me not it's synthesis? I am born of black and white, formed out of a collision of such vastly different cultures. Critics of this Hegelian idea of a history of progress see fatalism; that the destination exists ahead of the journey. There is also an inherent ethnocentrism; a belief in the triumph of the West. It is true that Hegel saw history through a European lens, freedom like the sun dawned in the east and set in the west. As



Hegelian scholar Terry Pinkard writes on Hegel, 'European modernity is where things had ended up. And the foreseeable future was, so he thought, ineluctably going to be a version of European modernity.'

It is inarguable that the revolutions – technological, industrial, philosophical – begun in eighteenth-century Europe have transformed our world. Democracy, capitalism, freedom of expression, universal rights, individualism, rule of law, separation of church and state, accelerated change in a way never before seen in human history. We are today more literate, more materially wealthy, and healthier than ever before. We are more connected to each other, borders have come down and trade moves more freely. Peoples have thrown off the yoke of imperialism and have looked to bodies forged out of Enlightenment principles of liberalism, like the United Nations, to enshrine the rights of previously colonised or indigenous peoples. As I will write later, liberalism has sown the seeds of both destruction and liberation.

In Ancient Greece, Hegel saw the birth of a polis, a democracy, where citizens could be bound together and pursue their ambitions and desires. As Hegel called it, the birth of a 'beautiful individuality'. Yet everything holds its own contradiction. As Athens celebrated the rights of citizens it

ba  
an  
sla  
the  
ecc  
anc  
cor  
ver  
see  
as  
a  
her  
to  
It  
law  
dee  
each  
Enli  
We  
excl  
the  
phil

Heg  
liber  
as  
muc  
a b  
was  
at  
beco  
has



barred others from joining that citizenship, and Greece could not have existed without slavery. In our time, we too struggle with the realities of democracy and market economy that contain their own exclusion and inequality. But to Hegel, those contradictions, that tension, is essential, the very locus of change. There are some who see the arrival of the British on this land as an end: a cataclysm. But is it not also a beginning? The civilisation that existed here had been remarkable for its ability to thrive in a hot, dry, isolated continent. It had an intricate social structure, kinship laws and ceremony that gave people a deep belonging and connection to place and each other. The Dreaming met the Enlightenment, and people met each other. We cannot pretend it was an equal exchange; disease and violence tore through the local populations, but history – Hegel's philosophy of history – was doing its work.

We are all set on a journey that Hegel believed gave us our best hope of liberation. We look to others for recognition as they look to be recognised by us. For much of my life I have seen history as a ball and chain, something from which it was impossible to be untethered; something at best to be endured. Hegel's ideas of becoming – change, driven by rupture – has helped ease the burden. We are not



locked in time and place, we are on a journey. Yet history haunts us, it whispers in our ears, voices of our ancestors, from old wars, pitting us still against each other.

S  
th  
a  
o  
to  
to  
hi  
ar  
se  
de  
ha  
th  
en  
of  
Rv  
No  
Su  
-  
anc  
tie  
age  
  
Am  
issu  
wha  
dan  
ider