‘UP THE NEW CHANNELS’

STUDENT ACTIVISM IN BRISBANE DURING AUSTRALIA’S SIXTIESTS

Jon Piccini

This paper seeks to locate the development of Brisbane’s New Left student movement within a growing body of transnational studies on ‘the sixties.’ In particular, it focuses on the interrelation between global issues such as the Vietnam War and the local realities of Queensland under the supposedly oppressive and philistine Country-Liberal government, and the role this played in cultivating a radical practice during the sixties and seventies. Appropriations of urban space, both on and off-campus, were vital to youth activists fashioning oppositional identities within the parameters of this transnational mediation. Foco Club, headquartered in what was then Trades Hall, provided a place for youth entertainment and political involvement on an otherwise culturally-sterile Sunday night, while students’ continued attempts to redefine The University of Queensland as a space for struggle, saw a variety of interlinked contestations with the state, administration and other, less radical, students. An important, if overlooked, period of Brisbane’s youth history is thus contextualised, placing the city firmly within a developing narrative of the transnational sixties.

Oh yes, we all know that young people are hedonistic and naive, and perpetually dissatisfied. But the joke is that the dissatisfaction is starting to be articulated.¹

In 1970, several dozen Brisbane activists collectively published a wide-ranging assault on the capitalist university, using as a case study their base at The University of Queensland. This work, entitled Up the Right Channels, now constitutes one of the largest and most important publications of Australia’s New Left.² Offering a systemic analysis of the operation of higher education in late-capitalist society, particularly its complicity in the managerial ‘degree factory’ as well as the continued bloodshed in Vietnam, the book contained lengthy critiques of individual faculties and schools for failing to live up to their liberal pretensions. This was only the best-known of hundreds of leaflets and publications, demonstrations and spaces which constituted Brisbane’s experience of the transnational ‘sixties,’ recently elaborated by Simon Prince as an ‘imagined community of global revolt.’³ Drawing on overseas examples—particularly from the American Students for a Democratic Society—mixed with local concerns related to matters such as freedom of speech and conscription, Brisbane student activists sought to establish new ‘channels’ of resistance by holding bookstalls and rallies on campus, while setting up social centres, headquarters and cultural venues within the city itself. These ideas and activities provided means of challenging what activists perceived as a conservative political life and philistine culture.

2. Ibid.

Jon Piccini is currently in the early stages of a PhD in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at The University of Queensland on the transnational nature of sixties protest in Australia, particularly focusing on the role of travel, reading and spaces in the creation of political-cultural identities.
This paper will discuss Brisbane’s experience of the global New Left phenomenon during ‘Australia’s sixties’—a period which is said to have begun with the 1965 decision to conscript soldiers for Vietnam and ended with the Whitlam Government’s dismissal a decade later. Through the intersection of local concerns with global ideas and issues, student radicals were able to establish ‘alternative cognitive maps that corresponded to a new type of politics’—one beyond Cold War certainties of consumer capitalism and Stalinist state-socialism. These maps, it will be argued, were not purely mental or imagined, but took the form of a lived geography encompassing both campus and the surrounding city, with a plethora of activist enterprises and spaces being constructed in these often hostile terrains. Historian Belinda Davis explains this process well in her analysis of the urban politics of West German New Left activists. These rebellious youths ‘mapped both the[ir] dreams and the everyday means to reach them onto gritty West Berlin … inspired by and taking advantage of the city’s internal spaces, its possibilities for networks … that lay behind the surfaces.’

It is the development of this truly transnational, yet consciously metropolitan, ‘new type of politics’ in the supposedly staid and boring Brisbane of the 1960s and 1970s which this paper seeks to reveal. After a discussion of origins and precursors, focus will shift to the youth club Foco, whose mixture of culture with radical politics made it a decidedly ‘sixties’ enterprise, and to two particularly vivid examples of campus conflict loosely surrounding the September 1970 Vietnam Moratorium. Though this selection is in no way an exhaustive examination of the myriad events that constituted Brisbane’s experience of the global sixties radicalisation, these ‘moments’ reveal much of the flavour of the time, contributing to our understandings of a tumultuous decade.

‘… The Dry Plains of Antipodean Philistinism’: Queensland’s Political Culture and the Birth of a New Left

Queensland celebrated its first 100 years of statehood in 1959. It was a year of socialist revolution in Cuba, growing insurgency in Indochina and persistent unrest in America’s segregated south. In the eyes of mainstream opinion, however, such global occurrences barely warranted attention; instead, celebration was the order of the day. An almost-divine heralding of progress and regional exceptionalism characterised proceedings, encapsulated well in the dreadfully-titled work accompanying celebrations, *Triumph in the Tropics.* A souvenir guide to festivities distributed by the conservative *Courier-Mail* fell prey to a similar sense of torpor. Half a page was devoted to Indigenous people (and even then only to the profitable, white-managed craft industry), two pages to what passed as ‘culture,’ while the remainder abounded with tales of primary industry, rugged bushmen and far-flung regional centres. The capital Brisbane, with a population of 500,000, warranted only six pages, with its newest architectural marvel, an eleven-storey “skyscraper” taking centre stage. The sense of pervading political hubris emanating from these pages carried over into cultural activity, with Raymond Evans, amateur poet and literature buff as well as ardent protestor, relating how ‘wowsers in Queensland strode confidently across the dry plains of antipodean philistinism’ during much of the sixties. What little bohemian cultural activity Brisbane hosted during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath had, as Betty Churcher described,
been washed away by the outflow of American servicemen and subsequent return to the antipodean status quo, leaving surviving institutions ‘gasping for air in the sub-tropical and staid city.’

The continuation of this arch-conservatism into the late sixties, only symbolically (or rather, aesthetically) challenged by the construction of the Torbreck apartments in Highgate Hill, provided impetus to radicals’ well-justified sense of living in a colonial backwater. Activist imaginations of the city and its capacity for spatial appropriation were informed by the town’s realities alongside their own ‘ideological’ presuppositions. The type of indolent regionalism evoked by the state’s political establishment drove activist-writer Gerard Lee to scornfully describe Brisbane as ‘a nowhere place, a non-entity,’ a town with ‘everything except an identity,’ which served only a utilitarian purpose to the real job of state: primary industry. Lee’s descriptions of the city invoke those of contemporaneous authors like David Malouf, who paint a quiet country town of weatherboard houses, poorly maintained colonial façades and Country Women’s Association bake sales.

This mask of quaint civility must, however, be seen as papering over a seedy, corrupt underbelly, where separation of powers was only theoretical and dissent was seen — by governments from both sides of the political divide — more as an outside force to be eliminated for political gain than as a prerequisite to a functional democracy. This bipartisan inclination towards political monism is easily demonstrated: restrictive laws on street marching were the result not of traditionally conservative governments but Labor’s 1938 State Transport Act, while the infamous Special Branch was born of Premier Ned Lanlon’s 1948 campaign against the Communist Party. Such a dark side was common knowledge to someone like Anne Jones, feminist activist and presenter on mid-1970s radio station 4ZZZ, who believes the city ‘was very much a backwater’ where ‘they [the Bjelke-Petersen Government, the police] just really did whatever they liked.’

This understanding of a city both staid and boring yet fraught with possibilities for conflict was understood in historical terms. Evans recalls a mid 1960s speak-out by radicals at the campus refectory where, after interjectors questioned the place of European radical thought in this antipodean ‘metropolis,’ New Left leader and history student Brian Laver ‘hailed forth with … a potted history of local strikes and lockouts, police suppressions and street clashes,’ transforming this boring town ‘into a place of real historical significance.’

A youthful, cultural angle emerges from this narrative through the Barjai literary circle, who challenged entrenched philistinism during the mid to late 1940s, and the Radical Club, a communist youth group of Queensland University (as it was then known) which brought political revolt into the lecture halls and common rooms of campus during the same period. These ‘pioneering examples of cultural nonconformity,’ in Brisbane and around the world, provided ‘fluid points of reference for subsequent generations of outcasts and rebels.’

Queensland’s early experience of New Left activism was informed by such multi-layered imaginations, and was a distinctively local affair. Chris Rootes explains how ‘Queensland … witnessed the earliest and purest development of a student New Left of any of the Australian universities’ — forming before the 1966 Labor electoral defeat and finding its base not in the established left poli-

tics of various Labor Clubs, but in inventive forms of activism. Humphrey McQueen, local radical and Marxist historian presents these occurrences as a reaction to the state’s attempted conservative hegemony alongside the unavoidable nature of national and transnational developments. McQueen recalls that the first action of Brisbane’s New Left, a sit-in modelled on headline-grabbing examples from America—like that which had just occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina—was attempted in 1960 at the Criterion Bar on George Street, an institution legally precluded from serving Indigenous people under the Aborigines Protection Act. The demonstration collapsed, however, when staff decided to serve the Indigenous woman, a young Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), seemingly more out of confusion than any abiding sense of equality.

By 1962 a local chapter of the anti-racist group Student Action was in operation, carefully registering its opposition to the ‘present implementation of the White Australia Policy,’ while McQueen and others had set up a more confrontational body, the Free Thought Society, at UQ—where student numbers were exploding thanks to combined state and commonwealth funding. This group, clearly influenced by the Andersonian tradition of libertarianism at Sydney University, sought to overturn many of the conservatively religious institution’s moral strictures in a manner invoking the Marxian dictum that all criticisms of society must begin as criticism of religion. McQueen was suspended over the club’s activities, particularly the distribution of leaflets advertising a speaker of Sydney Push fame who advocated the inclusion of a “masturbatorium” in suburban houses. This was an unheard-of incident, with city newspapers attacking students for daring to discuss sexual matters in public, especially in such a debauched manner, while a letter to student newspaper Semper Floreat added wryly, ‘as God banished Judas from the Kingdom, the University did banish Mr. McQueen.’

Such diverse activism can be seen as re-opening space for critical debate on campus—acting as precursor to the variety of groups that emerged during later years. In an article for Semper, New Left leader, English lecturer and general thorn in the side of university authority Dan O’Neill described how unlike 1965, a year marked ‘by the usual pervasive apathy,’ 1966 saw a small group of students take notice of the escalating conflict in Indochina, the ‘fire that burnt down the rotten framework of cold war politics,’ and begin ‘to recognise their concerns as very similar to those of other groups, especially in America.’ In particular,’ O’Neill explained, ‘they began to read the literature of SDS—Students for a Democratic society—and began to think beyond Vietnam.’ James Prentice posits that responsibility for this change in political sensibility ‘rests in the role of [Ralph] Summy,’ American-born politics lecturer and former regional head of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, who brought ‘the ideals of the Port Huron statement … into the Queensland context.’ Over the August vacation in 1966, the SDS became the SDA—Students (later Society) for Democratic Action. The 1966 manifesto of the SDA,

19. McQueen interviewed 27 May 2009. McQueen believes the staff thought Oodgeroo was a foreign diplomat, due to her “re- spectable attire.”
22. For more on this tradition, see James Franklin, Corrupting the Youth: a History of Philosophy in Australia (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2003).
23. The club distributed a newsletter called the Freethinker, where the offending material was published. A morally-conservative Catholicism dominated the university, like much of the Queensland Public Service. McQueen, who reminisces that the University Vice Chancellor inspected his hands for undue quantities of hair before commencing suspension proceedings, makes the university’s Catholic character clear. McQueen interviewed 27 May 2009.
‘a critique of the Australian social system in terms of ‘participatory democracy,’ of bringing the social reality of various areas of social life into line with the liberal rhetoric,’30 appeared ‘remarkably similar in flavour to the Port Huron text.’31

Global issues like Vietnam or apartheid in South Africa, which had attained national attention since the early 1960s due to the Sharpeville massacre and solidarity campaigns led by the National Student Union,32 could be challenged using this framework, alongside local concerns like compulsory national service and civil liberties, fostering a growing awareness of systemic violence and inequities.33 Seeking a name for their new organisation, the students crossed the initials of VAC, or Vietnam Action Committee, a campus offshoot of the Communist Party dominated Queensland Peace Council,34 with SDS, leading ‘to the new name of the group—SDA.’35 This organisation would constitute the most important New Left group in Brisbane and played a vital role in its many struggles, both off-campus and on.

‘Australia’s Most Evil and Repugnant Nightspot’: Foco Club as an Example of Youth Urban Organization

The Society for Democratic Action, having in its membership many key Brisbane activists such as student leaders Brian Laver and Mitch Thompson as well as militant staff like the aforementioned Dan O’Neill and Ralph Summy, began to play a leading role in organised expressions of dissent in Brisbane’s otherwise-sleepy metropolis. From 1964 onwards, protests against the escalation of the Vietnam War, and growing Australian involvement, became commonplace in Brisbane, with activists seeking to push their demands beyond the confines of the university, breaking the spatial dichotomy between “gown and town” by attempting marches and rallies in the centre of the CBD. Raymond Evans, writing in his diary at the time, provides a useful exposition of just one such demonstration, a ‘draft card burning’ modelled on examples from the United States held during 1966. Evans recalled how, after the marchers arrived at the corner of Queen and Albert Street, ‘the forces were waiting for us … as the action started pamphlets rained down and various people with hidden placards tried to display them … the man handling by the cops had to be seen to be believed.’36 Two dozen protestors and several bystanders were arrested.

Though clearly drawing on militant protest techniques designed to engender the very conflict they provoked, and highlighting a relatively small number of ‘violent’ incidents when compared to the overall consensual approach taken by Brisbane police during the period, activists’ stories of repression nonetheless spread on campus. Led by Summy, Laver and Thompson, a Civil Liberties Co-ordinating Committee was established, which, whether consciously or not, bore many similarities to Berkley’s 1964 Campaign for Free Speech. The committee drew together ‘representatives from staff, the political clubs, the religious clubs, and other groups on campus,’ many of whom would not have mobilised over more divisive issues such as the Vietnam War, culminating in a vibrant series of marches.37

30. Ibid.
32. A recent exploration of the role such ‘racial’ politics played in the foundation of Australia’s New Left is Jennifer Clark, Aborigines and Activism: Race, Aborigines and the Coming of the Sixties to Australia (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2008). Particularly see the chapter on “race and the universities.”
The largest of these, occurring on 8 September 1967, attracted half of the student population and was met in the city by 250 police and more than 100 arrests. *Semper Floreat*, which had taken a radical turn for the first time since 1948, described it as ‘the day that this University came of age,’ while O’Neill, a key organiser and participant, noted how these events ‘seemed to have changed overnight’ the political constitution of campus—starting a cycle of mass political involvement which ended only in 1972. Laver’s winning of some forty percent of the vote for Union presidency only weeks after the march indicated the level of disillusionment with ‘old-style student “professional” politicians’ amongst a growingly militant student body, which was to march again—albeit in smaller numbers—in 1968 over similar concerns.

The first inkling of the need for a space like Foco Club was born at rallies such as these, where it became clear that any moves to bring the global student movement exploding from Paris to Tokyo and New York onto the streets of Brisbane would be met with force by the repressive arm of Queensland’s government. Initially, however, the radical communities’ spatial appropriations took less grandiose forms. Activist houses were an important first step, playing a dual role as meeting and organisational spaces. Such spaces were particularly important for many student radicals who, according to a survey conducted by Christopher Rootes, still cohabited with their families, as opposed to examples in the USA and Europe where the vast majority of students moved either to campus or to surrounding suburbs to study. More generally, three quarters of Australian students, Anderson notes, cohabited with their parents, more than ‘any other country for which figures were available.’

Locations such as these, ‘where leaflets were discussed and produced, pot was smoked, endless booze was drowned, Dylan, the Band and the Stones, the Beatles and the Doors harmonised and melodised a whole world of abstract and concrete connections,’ soon proved insufficient to those increasingly keen on spreading their militant message to larger groups of non-students, particularly young workers. This political desire, possibly a result of the failure of activists to win more ground on campus, provided one of the material causes that would culminate in Foco. Laver additionally notes that the club was the result of a growing understanding amongst SDA’s leadership that the group’s high rate of activism was exhausting it, requiring them to ‘find some way to hold together our movement and rest it, have some R&R’ in a safe environment. ‘The movement itself was doing these things all over the world,’ Laver explained, and ‘there happened to be people around us who had many of these skills’—from Di Zetlin and Doug Anders’ knowledge of the dramatic arts to Larry Zetlin’s experience in band promotion and underground film.

On 3 March 1968 Foco Club—named, in a wonderful marriage of the global and the local, after the recently-deceased Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara’s guerrilla strategy—opened its doors to ‘young people’ intrigued by ‘how entertaining a combination of culture and entertainment can be with only a little imagination.’ Located on a disused level of Trades Hall, then on the corner of Turbot and

---

43. O’Neill, “The Rise and Fall of Student Consciousness.”
44. Brian Laver interviewed by Andrew Stafford, 6 November 2001, Andrew Stafford collection (UQFL440, Fryer Library).
Edwards streets, close to Central Station, Foco operated as a mélange of cultural and political forms, seeking to provide an outlet for radical film, music, poetry and art not provided by other youth cultural venues in Brisbane, whilst facilitating the dissemination and discussion of New Left political theory and action. This intermeshing of political action with bohemian cultural forms was vital to the Foco experiment, with a New Left-inspired infusion of these two forms—using overseas examples as far afield as the American Yippies and the Dutch Provos—taking centre stage. As Brian Laver spells out, ‘we wanted to politicise people, we weren’t just about providing entertainment.’ Such an activity would, the organisers hoped, break down ‘the pervading conformity and conservatism of our society.’

Foco operated as a membership-based club, charging a nominal fee of seventy cents so as to avoid Brisbane’s restrictive regime of Sunday opening. Consequently, the club became immensely popular as a Sunday nightspot, with attendees hitting a peak of 2500 in mid-July 1968, forcing membership rolls to close. Adherents were then members of ‘an exclusive club.’

Foco’s Trades Hall location, a seemingly odd space for such an avant-garde exercise, was motivated by two interrelated factors: a wish to unite the predominantly middle-class student radicals with blue-collar workers, and a desire to gain access to a location with limited overheads. With the agreement and financial encouragement of Alex McDonald, member of the Communist Party (CPA) and Trades Hall Secretary, SDA and other bohemian cultural activists undertook a creative transformation of the building’s third level into a space capable of hosting the variety of cultural and political forms Foco intended. This was despite the quiet protests of some Labor-allied unionists, who were concerned about the youthful, confrontational venture being established under their noses.

Katherine Brisbane, a well-known Australian theatre critic, captured some of the club’s energy in a review published by the Australian newspaper in July of 1968. After queuing under a fashionably blood-red neon sign inscribed simply with “FOCO,” Brisbane was ushered into a lift which discharged her group into a corridor with a hundred or so people all thumbing copies of How Not to Join the Army, Australian Atrocities in Vietnam, the weekly newspaper of the Cuba[n] Communist Party … on the walls were posters for the Ninth World Festival in Sofia this month … and others celebrating Che Guevara and demanding the arrest of Jesus Christ as a political agitator.

This display of radical literature from both sides of the ‘Iron Curtain,’ while largely not censored, was deliberately pushing at the edges of acceptability in a state that had recently banned the soundtrack to the well-known counter-cultural play Hair and was soon to take Red and Black Bookshop proprietor David Guthrie to court over an Audrey Beardsley poster—in keeping with the climate of cultural, but generally not political, censorship. The reviewer then found her way to the folk room, where the indefatigable street theatre troop ‘Tribe,’ including amongst their members a young Geoffrey Rush, were engaging in what was described as a short performance of a Dadaist extraction in between the musings of a classical guitar.

Next was the club’s hugely popular disco, with the author finding ‘five or six hundred [people] having their ears pierced in almost total darkness by a pop group called the Coloured Balls,’ to her obvious aural dismay. Brisbane was pleased to then discover a film room, usually reserved for European art house productions, many from the Eastern bloc but today displaying, in keeping with

46. Members of the Youth International Party were commonly called Yippies.
47. Laver interviewed by Andrew Stafford, 6 November 2001.
48. “Foco Club Opening Night Poster.”
54. Brisbane, “Guerrillas in Brisbane.”
the times, an anti-war documentary from America. Though ‘cracked, blurred at the edges and with the sound-track almost gone, it was still a compulsive piece of film — peace marches in the US, police action, army combat training, and an army funeral in Vietnam.’\(^{55}\) ‘This type of political-cultural heteroglossia, a heralding of diffuse, even contradictory mediums brought ‘together for a polemical purpose,’ was entirely new and challenging to parochial Brisbane.’\(^{56}\) The reviewer was convinced there was ‘nothing quite like it anywhere else in Australia.’\(^{57}\)

The venue was laid out in such a way as to make these various attractions – from the ever-popular disco featuring either the Coloured Balls or the ‘the most exciting group in Australia … Max Merritt and the Meteors,’\(^{58}\) to political discussions and poetry, including on one night Brisbane luminary Tom Shapcott — easily accessible and flowing. On occasions these already thin spatial distinctions would break down. The Foco Vietnam Environment, a night which involved everything from ‘film, theatre, music, painting’ to ‘architectural structures … anything which can be used to explore the central theme’ of the conflict in Vietnam, and the need to involve young people in upcoming anti-war rallies, is emblematic of this breakdown, as well as of the club’s desire to bring international problems to a local audience.\(^{59}\) Foco also held workshops in everything from art to theatre, silk screening to film, aimed at ‘giving people the opportunity to learn and experiment with creative forms’ so as to ‘build a focal point for the arts to inter-relate.’\(^{60}\) Additionally, the club’s newsletter — sent to members on a weekly basis — played more than a purely informational role, including reprints from *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone* on countercultural themes as well as providing space to local poets and artists.

This marriage of transnational culture and politics was, however, not always a happy one, with criticism emerging from several quarters. One aggrieved patron noted that the club’s supposed use of ‘culture’ to bring in young people ‘runs a big risk of exposing hidden motives.’ Commenting on Foco’s proliferation of Eastern European movies, the reviewer commented that while ‘the films that come from Poland are intensely artistic and not fettered by politics … I wish the same could be said of FOCO’\(^{61}\) — indicating the level of distrust the club’s left-wing affiliations still engendered in cold war Australia. Foco’s newsletters also reveal its decided lack of interest in the rising tide of women’s liberation, with one carrying an advertisement proclaiming ‘He lost it [his virginity] at Foco,’\(^{62}\) presumably to a woman whose role goes unmentioned in the supposedly liberated publication. Additionally, SDA’s campus newsheet, *Student Guerrilla*, carried a picture of a dishevelled young woman lying in bed accompanied by the words ‘this woman went to Foco, and look what happened to her’\(^{63}\) — the image seems to be pure eye candy for the publication’s (male) readership. It was against such structural sexism — noted as being endemic amongst male leaders of the New Left — that women’s liberation groups, consciousness-raising circles, and the like were to emerge, both in Brisbane and globally.

Criticisms was not restricted to the club’s attendees, with the Federal Member for Griffith, Don Cameron, launching a virulent attack during a late-night sitting on September 12, 1968, during which he castigated the club as ‘Australia’s most evil and repugnant nightspot.’\(^{64}\) The representative’s unsubstantiated claims, including that ‘Marihuana and Methedrine [sic] “are procurable for the asking”’ at Foco, while its ‘communist or almost-communist’ leadership could ‘arrange a young woman for a whole night in a matter of seconds,’\(^{65}\) were widely publicised in the print media, and led to a decline in

---

56. Ibid.
57. Brisbane, “Guerrillas in Brisbane.”
63. *Student Guerrilla* 1:3 (2 April 1968).
65. Ibid.
attendance which one *Foco Newsletter* blamed on ‘lots of mums and dads’ keeping their children away from the club.  

Conflict within Foco itself, however, was often as extreme as that which it encountered with the denizens of conservative authority. Foco’s transnational politics reveal something of the club members’ (and particularly leaders’) political development. Starting as a radical-liberal protest group, SDA’s leadership began drifting, in a similar fashion to their American counterparts, towards a more avowedly revolutionary politics by the beginning of 1968, with the first issue of *Student Guerrilla* carrying a quote from Karl Marx and an open student meeting addressing the politics of Che Guevara. By late 1968, many of these radicals had developed theoretical dilemmas with the Foco enterprise. CPA member and Foco stalwart Alan Anderson noted in a retrospective piece how ‘the student left develop[ed] a theory that Foco was not aiding the revolutionary movement,’ instead suggesting that ‘it was channelling potential revolutionary people into non-revolutionary activity’ of a cultural, unorganised nature. This saw SDA largely pull out of the operation by the beginning of 1969, after which ‘the radical student movement had little action, less socialism and not a lot of masses. Foco continued, the poorer for their going.’

Additionally, the club’s alliance with the Trade Unions and Communist Party, many of whose younger members played important roles in club management, often led to confrontation surrounding the overtly radical nature of the books and pamphlets on display — which many of these more conservative “Old Left” figures saw as a danger to the club’s respectability. Such conflict between consciously radical youth and reformist unionists came to a head at 1969’s May Day, usually a staid, boring procession which activists around Foco and other radical groups sought to seize back ‘symbolically under red and black flags, socialism and freedom.’ Press reports the next day described how ‘a group of about 250 students and others’ intervened, ‘sat in the streets during the procession, calling out “Ho Chi Minh” [and] poked the federal ALP leader Mr. Whitlam with red flags.’

The majority of the labour movement then came out against Foco, with TLC President Jack Egerton drawing a line between the respectable reformist left and radical students, whom he described as ‘a group of misguided way-out individuals.’ ‘Responsible trade union officials have no intention of allowing a group of scrubby, confused individuals who are unable to differentiate between civil liberties and anarchy to cause dissent in the trade union movement,’ Egerton insisted. The Foco experiment came to an end in this manner, with a bang not a whimper, however, its example lived on to inspire activists in a plethora of other political-cultural activities and spaces over the next decade, culminating in the radio station 4ZZZ-FM. As cultural activist and student radical John Stanwell relates, ‘We never looked back.’

67. Influenced by the militant struggles of African-Americans at home and colonised peoples abroad, SDS progressively threw away its radical-liberalism in favour or a more militant Marxism-Leninism — finally dissolving into several Marxist groupuscules in 1969, with most of its membership dissipating into other causes or political inactivity.
70. Laver interviewed by Andrew Stafford, 6 November 2001.
73. “Student Radicals ‘Never Again’ at Labor Day.”
Raymond Evans has noted how ‘from the mid-1960s the University of Queensland vied with Victoria’s Monash as Australia’s most defiant campus.’ This defiance took many forms, ranging from using the campus as a place for the dissemination and contestation of ideas to outright protest activities which were often met with vehement opposition. Channelling overseas examples of radicalised campuses from Berkley to Paris, Brisbane students sought to appropriate particular spaces as locations for free political debate. Such locations were not immediately forthcoming, however, with an SDA leaflet from late 1966 advertising a protest rally against ‘Sir Fred Schonnel’s [the Vice-Chancellor’s] decision to deny permission for the South East Asia and Australia Conference,’ an anti-war teach-in organised by a variety of community groups, to use university premises for its purposes.

The rally, which was said to have attracted some 2000 students and staff, accused the Vice-Chancellor of buckling to political pressure from the National Civic Council and the Country Party, who labelled the conference a ‘communist front.’ One leaflet distributed at this rally ended with the memorable slogan ‘Students of the University Unite. You have nothing to lose but your Vice-Chancellor.’ Carole Ferrier and Ken Mansell note how ‘sheer persistence’ against the joint menace of university authority and right-wing, particularly engineering, students eventually won through, with ‘the “Forum” between the Union building and the Relaxation Block’ offering by 1967 a ‘moderately relaxed environment, as well as space for heated and inspiring political debate.’ The radicals’ presence at this lunchtime hotspot soon became such an accepted fact as to allow for SDA to set up a “mini” book stall behind the speaking area, with students sitting for hours drinking coffee and listening to an array of speakers and debates.

The radicals’ imagined domination of the university, which O’Neill described as a ‘liberated area’ during the period under investigation, was self-perpetuating. In June 1969, a few weeks after Foco’s expulsion from Trades Hall and the Queensland government’s banning of the soundtrack to Hair, radical students united with cultural bohemians once again to hold the Erotica Festival, a protest against censorship, in the Great Court. The festivities, noted in Semper to have attracted around 3000 people, included the display of pornographic images, readings of erotic poetry and the soliciting of a ‘marijuana cigarette’ (later found not to contain the substance) to acting Vice-Chancellor Teakle. These were high points on a day otherwise plagued by rain, poor organisation and attempts by university security forces to halt proceedings. Events like this, followed by appropriations such as People’s Park, when activists established a tent-city on campus as part of the moratorium protest, fostered in activists a sense of place, if not ownership, of ‘their’ university—a sense they were prepared to defend.

Just after one o’clock in the afternoon on 2 September 1970, a pre-prepared leaflet was distributed to lunchtime crowds, carrying the rather confrontational heading ‘The University Regiment now stands on Liberated Ground.’ The act of leafleting was in and of itself a daily occurrence on campus, however this one was different—declaring that ‘Anti-Imperialist students have today liberated the premises of the University of Queensland Regiment’ with an intention of highlighting how ‘for years the building...
has been used by the Australian Army to train students to become part of the war machine.”

The leaflet announced student plans to turn the space into “a twenty-four hour … centre for the September moratorium for Indochina” which would host workshops “and a centre for discussion.” Dick Shearman, leading member of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Alliance (RSSA)—established by SDA members who sought “to pass from a protest organisation to a radical or revolutionary movement” after the group’s April 1969 dissolution—describes how the occupation was organised by fifteen to twenty radicals as a part of the lead up to the September moratorium rally.85 After declaring their intention to occupy the building at a lunchtime rally, 200 students entered the army headquarters unmolested; “the main problem,” however, “was how to get out.”86

While some students took to destroying army files, others felt the need to leave “for French at two, or a tute at three,” a desire only exacerbated by the swift arrival of “the Army … along with students from the Union and “would-be liberal candidates” intent on ending the takeover.”87 Most occupiers then left the building by smashing a rear window, leaving Shearman and a small group of other radicals to negotiate. While no arrests were made on the day, seven students (including Shearman, Mitch Thompson, and Semper editor Jim Prentice) were charged with offences under the Crimes and Defence Act, culminating in a short period during which the activists went “underground,” hiding from the Special Branch. Shearman, being interviewed about the takeover years later, defended the group’s actions as a response to the use of university grounds for reactionary purposes, declaring, “the Army had no place on campus.”88 Admissions, however, were made as to “the doubtful nature of the decision-making process” surrounding the occupation, while other students of a less radical nature labelled Shearman and other RSSA members “provocateurs.”89

The moratorium campaign, though highly successful in mobilising hundreds of thousands of Australians against the war, was seen by the right wing of student politics as an unpatriotic affront. One leaflet distributed by the right-wing Democratic Club (associated with the Democratic Labor Party) entitled “A Comment on Vietnam Moratorium Campaign” indicated that “it [the moratorium] serves only communist purposes” and “undermines the morale of not only the South Vietnamese anti communists, but of anti communists throughout the region.”90 In response, pro-war students invited Luic Tuong Quang, South Vietnam’s ambassador to Australia, to an open meeting two days after the CMF incident. The events which occurred during and immediately after this meeting—labelled either “Black Friday” or “The Quang Incident”—are still disputed, however what is known is that the meeting was attended by both anti- and pro-war students in roughly equal measure. Conflict was quick to develop over the inability of the ambassador to adequately answer a question pertaining to the safety of an arrested Saigon student leader, at which point radicals spontaneously decided to blockade Quang’s exit.

Shearman, a participant in these events also, recounted that “scuffles broke out between students and security … and several union cleaners as Quang was escorted down some stairs to a waiting car,” while Special Branch and ordinary police officers—at the invitation of either the Union or the Democratic Club—entered campus in order to assist the ambassador’s exit, a clear violation of university regulations.91 What ensued was described in the Courier-Mail as an “hour long battle,”92 with a growing number of anti-war radicals facing off with police, whose vehicles were blockaded. Several officers

84. Ibid.


86. Shearman interviewed in Young, 77.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid., 78

89. Ibid.


91. Shearman interviewed in Young, 76.

were injured, one of whom was apparently hospitalised, while one student was arrested for assault, leading to calls from the new, relatively-unknown premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen that the university be brought ‘under control.’" Police Minister Hodges commented a day later that ‘the State Government had no intention of allowing a minority of anarchist students to disrupt decent community life,’ while accusations flew between the centre-right student union and anti-war radicals as to who was responsible for events. A full university enquiry later saw Shearman suspended from UQ for two years for his participation in both the CMF occupation and the “Quang Incident,” a clear indication that the university administration was unwilling to support the activists’ imagined purchase on the university as a radical centre.

**Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted how throughout the period characterised as ‘Australia’s sixties,’ youth and particularly student radicals sought to take their protests over political repression or cultural conservatism up new channels. This was a global phenomenon, with a transnationally conscious generation playing their part in an imaginary community of global revolt through the construction of confrontational spaces or engaging in activities considered taboo, if not downright disreputable. Drawing on a Queensland they saw as both deadly boring as well as a site of historical conflict, Brisbane’s student radicals sought to enact particularly American ideas about the ‘corporate state’ and a wide-ranging critique of liberalism as a means of understanding their particular historical conjuncture. This discursive appropriation of international ideas on rebellion and non-conformity, which took an increasingly militant tone as the years progressed, was matched with a desire to map international New Left political and cultural forms onto local surrounds—transforming previous drab or unused locations as diverse as Trades Hall and the student refectory into centres of transnational contestation and conflict.

Several examples amongst many have been discussed. Foco’s meshing of a highly popular disco with political movies and discussion on a Sunday night entertainment wasteland can be seen as a high point of politicised culture in Brisbane, given the concern it engendered on the part of press, politicians and trade unionists alike, who sought the club’s closure in the name of moral order. Space was of equal concern in an on-campus environment, with a location for free expression only coming after a struggle with both university authorities and right-wing students. What the CMF occupation and the “Quang Incident” reveal is a struggle on the part of radicals to maintain their hard-won association with the university as a site of struggle and resistance against the odds of the state’s “repressive apparatus.” In conclusion, then, it appears that Brisbane’s New Left student groups had an impact far beyond their relatively small numbers, constructing a subculture of protest and resistance, ‘arguments and parties, gestures and kitchens, bedrooms and open books’ which provides much of the background to Brisbane’s more recognised musical enterprises of the 70s and 80s. While events such as Expo and the 1982 Commonwealth Games solidified Brisbane’s rebirth as a modern metropolis, its experience of the ‘global sixties’ reveals how some of the city’s inhabitants had tried to break its subtropical torpor long before these events—painting Brisbane as part of that decade’s developing global narrative, as well as adding an important element to its radical history.

---

93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. O’Neill, “The Rise and Fall of Student Consciousness.” For a useful and highly readable overview of these musical developments see Andrew Stafford, *Pig City: from the Saints to Savage Garden* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006). Many of the interviews consulted for this paper were initially undertaken by Stafford, who used them sparingly.
96. Thanks must go to Greg George, author of the Fryer Library’s online exhibition “Radical Politics and The University of Queensland,” (http://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/radical_politics/page1.html) for providing this useful title, and Crossroads’ anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.