"Australia's most evil and repugnant nightspot" Foco Club and transnational politics in Brisbane's '68'

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Abstract

This paper locates Brisbane – traditionally seen as a backwater both politically and culturally – within the transnational flows of people, ideas and actions which constituted global sixties activism. Host to a wide assortment of youth dissidents, Brisbane provided a plethora of streets and spaces in which activists became part of an imagined community of global revolt. Through investigating such locations, ranging from cultural centres such as the disco-cum-movie and poetry spot Foco Club to bookshops like Red and Black, radicals are revealed as engaging in a sophisticated and globally conscious urban politics of occupation and creative transformation – seeking to invent a differentially youthful social geography and everyday life in the face of overt hostility from the establishment.

Introduction

A new youth venue opened its doors on the first Sunday of March 1968 on the third floor of Trades Hall—then located on the intersection of Turbot and Edwards Streets in the Brisbane CBD. Called simply 'Foco', club organisers produced a small poster indicating their desire to interest "young people" in "how entertaining a combination of culture and entertainment can be with only a little imagination", detailing their agenda of incorporating "modern films from international sources" with "drama, poetry [and] a discothèque adapted to controversial designs" (Opening night poster 1968). A Brainchild of Brisbane student radicals Brian Laver and Mitch Thompson, the innocent-enough sounding group was forced to close its membership rolls after only three months, at a height of some 2500, due to difficulties managing the huge numbers of participants. By September, the local Member of Parliament Don Cameron had labelled Foco "Australia's most evil and repugnant nightspot" (Courier-Mail 1968)—sparking a media and political campaign symptomatic of the most outraged moral panic. The 1960s seemed to have belatedly arrived in Brisbane.

An 'event' is characterised by French philosopher and veteran student Maoist Alain Badiou as "a rupture in the laws of the situation" (2009). "An event is not the realization/variation of a possibility that resides *inside* the situation" to Badiou, but is rather "the creation of a new possibility" (2009). Badiou and scholars influenced by him, particularly Kristin Ross (2002), have sought to cast the '1968' moment as such a rupture

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in the situation of post-war normality—creating new, emancipatory possibilities based on fundamental challenges to the cold-war status quo of bureaucratic capitalism and state-socialism, furnished with a dynamic sense of transnational identification. This new wave of scholarship has sought to understand such emerging possibilities within a global framework: "situating the local within the global while locating the global at work locally" as a means of "capturing, in a concrete way, something of the globality of '1968'" (Brown 2009: 70). Such globality was born not only of the spread of ideas and actions through types of media, but also via the relatively unhindered transnational mobility of activists. As Richard Jobs explains "travel became the foundation for a youth identity that emphasized mobility and built a shared political culture across national boundaries" (2009: 376-7). The spaces and locations activists appropriated reflect this transnationalism. In the West German student community evoked by Belinda Davis: "activists mapped characteristics and qualities of themselves onto the city" (2008: 247), taking advantage of the less traversed locations offered by urbanity to construct spaces that reflected their participation in an "imagined community of global revolt" (Prince 2006: 851) stretching from the jungles of Vietnam to the western metropole.[2]

Australian sixties radicalism has never received such a thorough, let alone transnational, treatment.[3] A recent global history of 1968 dealt briefly with the topic, taking as its basis Prime Minister (1966-67) Harold Holt's pronouncement that Australians were "a nation of lotus-eaters—hedonistic, materialistic, and lazy" (Mackay 2009: 73). We may have been "intrigued, saddened, even alarmed" by the traumatic events of 1968—ranging from the assassination of Marin Luther King to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia—"but [were] not really engaged" (Mackay 2009: 74). The aim of this paper is to read the happenings, personalities and ideas surrounding Foco Club, and the earlier formation of Brisbane's New Left, through new lenses provided by transnational history as a means not only of correcting this obvious oversight, but locating Australia as a thoroughly engaged participant within the global 'event' that was 1968.

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[2] This is only a brief, pointed overview of recent literature in the field of transnational Sixties studies. Highlights include, from a scholarly perspective, Klimke's (2010) study of the 'other alliance' between West German and US student activists and Varon's (2004) analysis of the American Weather Underground, the West German Red Army Faction and the politics of violence within the New Left. From a more personal slant is Ann Curthoys' (2002) memoir of her participation in the famous New South Wales Freedom Rides and Tariq Ali's (2005) engaging account of his truly global Sixties experience, from the jungles of Bolivia to the streets of West Germany and ducking bombs in North Vietnam.

[3] The foundational work remains journalist and social commentator Donald Horne's *Time of Hope: Australia 1966-72* (1980). It charts Australia's broad social-political-cultural transformation from the end of Menzies reign to the rise of Whitlam in a lucid and readable style which, consequentially, can only focus on a small portion of the period's events, and pays little attention to the 'inner life' of activism, but rather observable impacts it had on dominant culture. O'Hanlon and Luckins' (2005) collection of essays on Melbourne in the 60s also stands out as solid contribution to the field, alongside Clark's (2008) work on the role an upsurge in Indigenous struggle played in bringing 'the winds of change' to Australia during the decade.

American academics in the antipodes, or, the birth of a 'New Left'

Ralph Summy arrived in Brisbane in 1964, a recent emigrant from the United States. From a pacifist family, Summy graduated from Harvard in 1960 and became a full-time organiser of the Great Boston area Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy (SANE). This group's principled opposition to nuclear weapons on either side of the 'iron curtain' made it a key forerunner to the student New Left, which was to announce itself to the world with the 1962 *Port Huron Statement*. After his activities came to the attention of the Senate Internal Security Sub-Committee, charged with investigating "subversives" (Social Alternatives Undated) and playing a similar role to the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Summy took the option of transferring to Australia, subsequently joining the politics department at The University of Queensland

Summy's arrival coincided with an increase in activism on a campus that had begun to shake off the conservative hubris pervading both state and nation—providing a useful example of what can be called the "long '68".[4] Queensland's conservative "state of mind" (McQueen 1978: 41-3), facilitated by educational and economic backwardness, was intricately wedded to an often reactionary political life, with a rural based and politically uninspiring Labor government replaced by an even more agriculturally centred, if slightly more politically adventurous Country-Liberal coalition after the disastrous 1955 'grouper' split. Nationally, Sir Robert Menzies steered Australia into the 1960s as he had done since 1949, embracing the post-war boom, ideals of domesticity, the American alliance and anti-communism as central to his notion of Australian identity (Murphy 2000). International factors, however, began to open new possibilities. A massive worldwide increase in student numbers at increasingly crowded higher education institutions (of which Brisbane had only one) due to government scholarships and new demands of business saw a wider array of social backgrounds represented than ever before. Additionally, challenges to colonialism and racism, particularly represented by civil rights struggles in America, the growing conflict in South-east Asia and other third world liberation struggles coalesced with a growing international youth culture to fashion the "conditions of possibility" (Jameson 1984: 183), around which struggles could materialise.

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[4] As Brown relates: "This is one reason why "1968" must be seen and analyzed in a wider temporal dimension; not only did the political "big events" take place on their own timetables—in West Germany it took more than a decade for the key events of the late sixties (the most important of which arguably took place in 1967) to be retroactively fitted into the scheme of a world-revolutionary "1968," and in East Germany other caesurae (1953, 1965, 1971, 1989) loom large—but the reception and processing of international popular culture, the speed and extent to which it could become connected with an emancipatory politics, was decisively affected by local cultural-political conditions" (2009 :71).

Early examples of Brisbane activism revolved around the dual axis of colonialism-racism and conservative conformity. 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" (Semper Floreat 1962: 7) while Humphrey McQueen and others set up the Free Thought Society, modeled on Sydney University libertarianism, whose distribution of a particularly salacious leaflet advocating masturbation created a media storm and saw McQueen's brief suspension (McQueen 2009). Student protests, when they occurred, were generally small and ineffectual. Historian and 60s activist Raymond Evans recalls a rally, called in reaction to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August of 1964: "as usual its not publicised and only about two dozen students show—however there are around 50 police scattered around…[in the melee] one woman was knocked to the footpath" (Evans 2007a: 13).

However, a small layer of students began seeking an organisational and theoretical basis for these activities, soon finding inspiration in Summy and another American academic, Marvin Kay. "A dynamic speaker and organizer" (Young 1984: 71), Kay's position in the History department from 1964 to 1966 saw him teach and supervise many budding radicals on topics related to the American civil rights movement and the New Left, as well as establish possibly the first expressly anti Vietnam war organisation in the city, Brisbane Professionals for Peace. But it was Summy, whom Mark Young has called "living proof" that Brisbane "was not isolated from the international new left" (1984: 71), who is largely credited with introducing Brisbane's emergent radicals to the new theories being developed by American group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). "American new left material" (Young 1984: 72), ranging from anarcho-pacifism to the work of C. Wright Mills and debates in *Partisan Review* or various SDS publications, "was introduced into the Australian context" by Summy, who is also credited with first bringing key activist Brian Laver to Kay's Professionals for Peace—his "first political baptism"—in 1965

Additionally, Summy used these American theories to critique existing organisations on campus, describing the only vaguely activist Labor Club as "a "pseudo-intellectual ginger group" which "opts for passivism, not pacifism" in a 1964 issue of sometimes-radical student rag *Semper Floreat* (1964: 2). Student's took notice of this new approach, and sought to appropriate it for their purposes. As staff activist Dan O'Neill (1969: 9) explains, a small group of students established the campus-based Vietnam Action Committee (VAC) in early 1966 in response to the widening of the war—which now involved large numbers of Australian conscripts—leading them "to recognise their concerns as very similar to those of other groups, especially in America" (O'Neill 1969: 9). Summy's continued influence is evident, with activists "beg[inning] to read the literature of SDS, notably the newspaper *National Guardian* and…to think beyond Vietnam" (O'Neill 1969: 9) to a wider array of issues such as the Cold War itself and distribution of wealth and power in Western society. Thus, "a critique of the Australian social system in terms of 'participatory democracy'", and an agenda of "bringing the

social reality of various areas of social life into line with the liberal rhetoric" (O'Neill 1969: 9) became core to this emerging form of practice. Seeking a name for their new organisation, the initials of VAC were crossed with those of SDS, leading "to the new name of the group – SDA – or Students for Democratic Action" (O'Neill 1969: 9), founded over the August vacation.

SDA's early documents portray a political position close to, if not directly borrowed from, their American counterparts, with reprints of SDS leaders speeches on "corporate liberalism" and other topics appearing to have been produced in large quantities.[5] The *PHS* is best described as a radical call for a functional liberalism. The group's first historian, Kirkpatrick Sale describes it as demanding only fairly traditional reforms like "party realignment, expanded public spending, disarmament [and] civil rights programs" (1973: 51). These demands, the author claims, only exceeded "the traditional mold [sic] of enlightened liberalism" in their radical conception that "all of these problems were *interconnected*" (Sale 1973: 51). It was this sense of interconnection that activists around SDA saw as giving structure to their "intensified desire to embrace a whole range of social issues" beyond the war in Vietnam and other global calamities, and to challenge them with "radical alternatives" (O'Neill 1969: 9). SDA's radicalism however did not yet involve a Marxist-style critique, with one early leaflet exhorting the West to "stop the spread of communism by <u>proving</u> democracy is better" (Vietnam Protest Week leaflet), while another pointed out the organisations debt to "the American student's concept of 'grassroots democracy'" (Society for Democratic Action leaflet). The group's movement towards a more Marxist politics would be, like that of their American counterparts, slow and particular.

One issue that seemed to embrace the plethora of causes SDA sought to engage with—alongside facilitating the broadening of student involvement—was the growing struggle for civil liberties. The State *Traffic Act* made it illegal to stage a rally or street march without an often difficult to acquire permit alongside placing a prohibitive cost on the use of placards. Police were given extensive powers to arrest anyone deemed in breach of said regulations (Evans 2007b: 184; 215). Evans (2007a: 14) recalls how an attempted burning of call-up papers in early 1966 fell foul of these laws. After the marchers arrived at the corner of Queen and Albert St, "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…twisting a broken arm, chocking, rabbit-punching" (Evans 2007a: 14). Two-dozen protestors and several bystanders were arrested.

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[5] Various SDA ephemeral collections held in the Fryer Library, particularly Geoffrey Dalton-Morgan, Miscellaneous Publications of the Society for Democratic Action (F 3235, Fryer Library) and Society for Democratic Action Ephemera (FVF 381, Fryer Library), illustrate the quantity of SDS material reprinted.

1967 saw members of the student/staff body, led by Summy, Laver and Mitch Thompson, establish a Civil Liberties Co-ordinating Committee as a means of broadening their concerns to the student population. Modeled loosely on 1964's campaign for Free Speech at Berkeley, the committee was able to use their experiences and stories of repression to draw "representatives from staff, the political clubs, the religious clubs, and other groups on campus" (O'Neill 1969: 11), culminating in a vibrant series of marches. The largest of these, occurring on September 8 1967, attracted half of the student population (some 4000 people) and was met in the city by 250 police and more than 100 arrests. *Semper Floreat* (1967: 2), appearing a week after the mass arrests and media coverage, described it as "the day that this University came of age" while Laver's winning of some 40% of the vote for Union presidency only weeks later indicated the level of disillusionment with "old-style student 'professional' politicians" (O'Neill 1969: 11) amongst the growingly militant student body. The stage was set for the 1968 'event'.

Brisbane in the '68' Moment

"A blood-red neon sign was flashing FOCO and a trail of expressionless youth were spilling over the steps. 'Are you sure this is where you want to go', said the driver and sniffed, 'you'll get done here'" (Brisbane 1969: 63). Thus, theatre reviewer and journalist for the *Australian* newspaper, Katherine Brisbane, had her first experience of Queensland's new youth political-cultural venue, which had begun to attract national attention. Grounded in Brisbane by an airline strike, the Sydney-based journalist had instructed a taxi driver to take her to the inner-city location—to his obvious dismay—and was soon ushered into a lift "crammed with teenagers in slacks" (Brisbane 1969: 63) and a distinct tinge of rebelliousness. Foco grew out of initiator Brian Laver's realisation that Brisbane's protest movement was "pretty exhausted…by the political activities we'd been conducting in 66-67" (Laver 2001) which, despite their success, had not been able to breach the boundaries between 'gown and town'—the barrier separating student radicals from their imagined constituency in the broader community. Laver recalls how many in SDA felt that "we've got to find some way to hold together our movement and rest it, have some R&R and at the same time reach out and make links with the…young worker's movement" (2001).

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara died in Bolivia on October 9, 1967, after a retrospectively futile campaign to overthrow that nation's military dictatorship. Young French academic and radical leftist Regis Debray (1967) contemporaneously published *Revolution in the Revolution*, a theoretical exposition of Guevara's 'Foco' theory of revolutionary warfare, based on extended periods spent with the famous Argentine in his mountainous encampment. 'Foco' (Spanish for Focus) was to Che, and the many guerrillas and organisers who took up aspects of the idea in their own practice, a theory whereby a small group of activists could instigate a rebellion which would transcend the ordinary political life of a society, provoking its previously conformist population to revolt. Additionally, as Jameson explains, such locations constituted "emergent revolutionary

'space'—situated outside of the 'real' political, social or geographic world…yet at one and the same time a figure or small scale image and prefiguration of the revolutionary transformation of that real world…a properly utopian space" (1984: 202).

It is logical that, when Laver and his compatriots imagined somewhere free from the usual repression encountered on the streets of Brisbane, they looked to Guevara and his theories. Few figures colonised the iconography and style of the global student moment more than the erstwhile Argentine, with the Cuban government declaring 1968 'Year of the Heroic Guerrilla' and his image adorning millions of bedrooms, meeting spaces and city streets globally. Indeed, SDA launched its campus 'counter-orientation week' program for 1968 with a meeting discussing "who is Che Guevara", attempting to tap into publicity the romantic leader attracted, while also illustrating the groups gradual turn towards a more confrontational, far-left politics (Who is Che Guevara leaflet). More than a mere semiotic allusion, Foco was imagined by its organisers as a truly, by Brisbane standards, utopic space: one which attempted to unite working class youths with middle class students in a location where the borders between politics and culture were consciously undermined. "The movement itself was doing these things all over the world" (Laver 2001), and "we needed something…where we could show film; where we could have folk singing, which was fairly big; where we could have political discussion [and] where we could distribute our leaflets".

Katherine Brisbane explains how these global imaginings and desires were inscribed onto the physical landscape of Trades Hall:

> When the lift door opened we were thrust into a corridor with a hundred or so people all thumbing copies of *How Not to Join to the Army*, *Australian Atrocities in Vietnam*, the weekly newspaper of the Cuba [sic] Communist Party…on the walls were posters for the Ninth World Festival [of Youth] in Sofia this month – *Solidarite, Pax, Amitie* – and others celebrating Che Guevara and demanding the arrest of Jesus Christ as a political agitator (1968: 63).

This display of radical literature from both sides of the 'Iron Curtain' seemed to be pushing at the edges of acceptability in a state whose restrictive censorship banned the musical *Hair* and regularly organised police "visits" to radical bookshops and centres (Evans 2007b: 222-3). The reviewer then found her way from this bookshop annexe 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 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" (Brisbane 1968: 64), 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 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” (Brisbane 1968: 64). The film room often doubled as a space for discussion, with invited guests ranging from local cultural figures like Thom Shapcott to Maoist students from the famously radical Monash University providing a controversial mix of topics. As Brisbane explained, “there is nothing quite like it anywhere else in Australia” (Brisbane 1968: 65).

This level of cultural practice in a city largely unknown for its avant-garde exercises may seem surprising, however as Laver explains “there happened to be people around us who had many of these skills” (2001) —from Di Zetlin and Doug Anders’ knowledge of the dramatic arts to Larry Zetlin’s experience in band promotion and underground film. In other states, with more government funding for the arts or an established cultural community, such individuals may have been less interested in radical alternatives, however Brisbane’s (at least perceived) cultural philistinism and political repression allowed Foco to coalesce a bohemian subculture of rebel artists and political activists, “an attempt to institutionalise our movement in culture and entertainment” (Laver 2001). The club’s physical space, on the other hand, was provided by Laver and Thompson’s association with the ‘old left’, particularly the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). From its height in the immediate post-war years, historian Tom O’Lincoln (2009) explains how the CPA had survived the 50s with a greatly diminished membership and, by the late 1960s, a willingness to distance itself from Stalinist orthodoxy in order to stem its growing tide of irrelevance. Brisbane’s Trades and Labour Council, under the leadership of aging communist Alex Macdonald, had employed Laver as a research assistant in late 1967 while Thompson worked for Left-Labor senator George Georges, giving them sufficient bargaining room to secure the location with support from the CPA’s youth wing, the Young Socialist League (YSL). Many members of the Communist Party would play important roles in the running of the club, however creative and political control was firmly in the hands of New Left figures, with some Young Socialists like Alan Anderson skirting the boundaries between old and new.[6] Costs incurred by the venture, including the necessary remodelling of Trades Hall and the importation of radical literature or hiring bands were met by the clubs small entry fee ($1 to join, 70c to attend) as well as occasional fundraising attempts amongst the group’s large membership, which was closed again in August 1968 at a height of 3200 (Hatherell 2007: 178).

[6] Alan Anderson (1970) wrote a rather scathing condemnation of the Communist Party’s activities in regards to Foco—effectively accusing the group of marginalising the club and using the excuse of an ‘office refurbishment’ to throw it out of Trades Hall.

Foco's *Newsletter*, produced weekly and mailed to members, displays the clubs developing transnational politics as well as its attempts to transcend arbitrary divisions between art and politics—illustrating the utopic, imagined nature of the space.[7] The clubs immersion in global youth culture is well illustrated, with one newsletter carrying an image reading "Foco: where the price of entry is your mind" (Foco Newsletter 1968a), while another proclaimed, "you can do your own thing at FOCO" (Foco Newsletter 1968b). Internationally inspired poetry and artwork from 'Focoists' was constantly sought for publication, which often took up so much space that the "suburban big-heads" (Foco Newsletter 1969a) at the post office would refuse to distribute it at the reduced rates set for organisations, forcing organisers to take the more expensive route of distribution as a newspaper. Mao Zedong made an appearance on the cover of one newsletter, claiming the publication to be "culturally revolting" (Foco Newsletter 1968c) while a cartoon of Ho Chi Minh declaring the clubs slogan, "Foco Lives" (Foco Newsletter 1968g), adorned another—indicating the level of importance these third world revolutionaries held in the political consciousness of Foco's organisers. This confluence of political and cultural forms both in printed material and the club's layout seemed to generate minimal conflict, and reflected the dissolution of these two forms into one-another throughout the sixties experience. When the club hired "a disc jockey at an early Foco meeting" they doubled "as a lecturer on pop music's relationship with modern art and culture" (Hatherell 2007: 180), while the Foco Vietnam Environment, a special night held in October of 1968, featured everything from "film, theatre, music, painting" to "architectural structures…anything which can be used to explore the central theme" (Foco Newsletter 1968e) of the conflict in Vietnam, and the need to involve young people in upcoming anti-war rallies.

"We're here to politicise people, we're not just here to provide entertainment", Laver (2001) explained of the Foco experiment, and this desire was expressed well in the club's selection of national and international speakers. Alongside stocking a dozen countercultural or underground newspapers from around the world, Foco received a visit in early August 1968 from a "Leading American Civil Rights Worker, the Rev. Bill Yolton" discussing "the underprivileged America" (Foco Newsletter 1968d) while speakers from around Australia, many of whom had visited global hotspots, were a common occurrence. Brian Laver's trip to Europe in 1968, during which he claimed to have "met most of the world leaders in the struggle" (Foco Newsletter 1968f) was a subject of important discussion one night, while Dexter Daniels, "aboriginal delegate to the 9th World Youth Festival in Bulgaria" spoke on "the aboriginal movement, possibilities of a black power movement, and background to the Wave Hill disputes" (YSL Newsletter), of which he was an organiser. Such discussion intermingled with international films and documentaries from a variety of sources, ranging from

[7] The Newsletters, though well produced and interesting in and of themselves, were often incorrectly dated, either due to a revolutionary opposition to an arbitrary bourgeois calendar, or the more likely scenario that organisers were overworked.

Czechoslovakian films produced during the 'Prague Spring' to a variety of underground films about Vietnam from American and European sources (Evans 2004: 274). This marriage between rock and roll—provided by local acts like The Coloured Balls or international groups like Max Merritt and the Meteors—and serious political discussion could however create a break in this supposedly utopic space. This was particularly problematic, one newsletter explains, when "one's ear-holes were hammered with the band in the disco and the speaker had to compete with it" (Foco Newsletter 1969b)—leading to discussion occurring prior to the disco's commencement.

Income derived from Foco, if any, was used to improve the club's facilities and offerings, or was ploughed into the city's growing array of New Left political spaces and publications. The Red and Black Bookshop, set up alongside SDA's headquarters 'The Cellar' in the now defunct Roma Street Markets, was presented in a club newsletter as an extension of Foco's operations into an environment "unhampered by noise and great crushes [of people]" (Foco Newsletter 1968c). The bookshop, managed by activist David Guthrie, was a central point in the urban 'map of meaning' student activists were constructing around the city, from meeting places to coffee shops and their living rooms. Described by SDA as "the work centre of the radical movement which…must of necessity have a momentum of its own and an independent infra structure" (Letter R.E. The Cellar), James Prentice notes how it's basement location also provided "a real, and poetically speaking, underground location, through which students…could see themselves as subterranean outsiders" (2005: 167).

The shop stocked a wide selection of New Left authors—from Frantz Fanon to Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse alongside overseas radical periodicals—not to mention an assortment of controversial posters, which saw the shop raided by police and Guthrie slugged with a significant fine (Healy 2004: 204-5). Despite such legal difficulties, the location became a centre around which activists gravitated, with one detailing the club's importance in poetic form:

> The Red and Black Bookshop, in Brisbane, when I was nineteen,
> was the place to discover poets.
> 'A corrupting place', our parents called it –
> dubious as Dracula lurking near blameless sellers of batik
> and too many flavours of ice cream.
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> In the dangerous spaces left there by banned Beardsley prints,
> young men who had recently fainted,
> spit-polished and khaki-creased, cradling cadet rifles
> on Anzac Day, were turning over Marx and Mao,
> arguing for anarchy and intently
> lengthening their hair (Kent 2002: 75).

Friday nights at the Cellar featured performances from Jazz band 'The Red Belly Stompers', adding a more cultural tone to the otherwise bookish destination, while Foco's many workshops ranging from drama to silk screening and film found a home in its darkened confines (Foco Newsletter 1968c).

The printed word, in the form of radical pamphlets and newssheets, had always been vital to Brisbane's New Left, and the Cellar also provided a space for the latest incarnation of this tradition. A Young Socialist League newsletter remarked how "a spokesman for the paranoid right claimed in the 'Telegraph' that a 'professional communist agitator' had been specifically imported from Monash Uni to disrupt Captive Nations Week" (YSL Newsletter).[8] The report was partially correct, in fact, Melbourne radical Dave Nadel, one of Australia's more famous student rabble-rousers, had been solicited by SDA to edit "[t]he Brisbane Line…a new radical underground paper that will start publication next month" (YSL Newsletter). Envisioned as an Australian version of *Village Voice* and similar publications from the United States or Europe, *The Brisbane Line* was headquartered in The Cellar and proudly declared its independence: "we don't have the printing resources of the establishment press…but we do have one advantage – no-one can censor our Multilith 1250" (The Brisbane Line leaflet). Though lasting only three issues, the paper carried stories ranging from a thorough investigation of Black Power to a critique of educational training institutions. The Czechoslovakian crisis occupied a significant amount of space, including an interview with Brisbane academic Phillip Richardson, who had been touring Dubcek's 'democratic socialist' regime and been caught up in the Soviet invasion. It was to some extent however, a fanciful exercise, as Nadel explains: "It was an idea in Brian's head and like all of Brian's ideas he assumed because he thought it was a good idea…it would work" (Nadel 2002 [2004]: 165), and that the Brisbane radical community would happily fund and support it. The closure of the paper then captures some of the realities of attempting to directly import the 'big 68' into a local context. the initial idea of starting an underground paper was "absurd", Nadel explained, "American underground newspapers sell mostly to the American underground community, and about half their news relates to the underground community. There is no such thing as an underground community in Australia" (Nadel 1968 [2004]: 168).

Foco's closure: the end of a dream

It seems that the forces of law and moral order disagreed with Nadel's pessimistic characterisation of the strengths of Brisbane's New Left subculture. Foco Club's huge attendance rates soon brought it to the attention of local parliamentarians; with MHR Don Cameron making his "evil and repugnant nightspot" speech barely a month after the

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[8] Captive Nations Week is a now relatively defunct occasion used during the height of the Cold War to highlight the barbarities of Soviet Communism and its client states to secure the hegemony of Western capitalism.

organisation shut its doors to non-members for the second time. Cameron's allegations, that "Marihuana and Methedrine '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" (Courier-Mail 1968), were not substantiated by evidence, and publically repudiated by none other than Police Commissioner Bischoff. Foco was nonetheless hit hard by these allegations, with one newsletter explaining:

> Just as we thought we were in the clear, our friend Cameron dropped his bundle. Although we hate to admit it, he had a certain amount of success. No doubt lots of mums and dads who found a Foco Newsletter in the mail, and who didn't realise the whole thing was a political stunt, applied pressure…attendance dropped as low as 200 some nights. We were running at a loss for months (Foco Newsletter 1968h).

If one reason for Foco's closure can be laid at the feet of moralising parents and a yellow media, causes closer to home must also be identified. SDA dissolved itself in April of 1969, noting a desire on the part of members to "pass from a protest organisation to a radical or revolutionary movement" (SDA Dissolves leaflet), established as Revolutionary Socialist Student Alliance (RSSA) soon after. Seeking to model international examples of revolutionary organisations, particularly those Laver encountered in his trip to Europe, the RSSA moved away from Foco, seeing its purpose as building a libertarian-Marxist political group rather than a social club. Additionally, tensions with a Trade Union movement concerned that reporting on Foco would impugn their respectable position spilled into open conflict at the 1969 May Day rally, where an assortment of helmet-wearing Focoists intervened by "sitting down during the procession, calling out 'Ho Chi Minh' [and] poking the federal ALP leader Mr. Whitlam with red flags" (Courier-Mail 1969) in a protest typical of those which washed over much of the West throughout 1968. The Labour movement took this opportunity to disassociate itself from youth radicals, whom TLC President Jack Egerton described as "a group of scrubby, confused individuals who are unable to differentiate between civil liberties and anarchy" (Courier-Mail 1969).

Brisbane's experience of the "long '68'" can then be characterised as an "event" in Badiou's terms—"something that arrives in excess, beyond all calculations", as Kristin Ross elaborates, "something that displaces people and places, that proposes an entirely new situation of thought" (2002: 26). The importance of 'arrivals' in Ross's characterisation seems vital to understanding how the global idea of 1968 became set in a local spatial dimension. Globally mobile people ranging from American academics to militant student leaders helped to set the coordinates for the development of Brisbane's rebellious youth culture through their introduction of new and exciting forms of protest and organisation. 'Place' also played a role in this mediation of the transnational and the local, with Foco illustrating how a confluence of international youth cultural forms with radical political ideas and happenings from America, Europe and Asia allowed activists

to inscribe their dreams onto the club's physical space through its multifaceted uses. It would then seem that not only were some, particularly youthful, Australians intrigued, saddened or alarmed by the events of the 1960's, they sought to fundamentally engage in their own locally specific way with the events of the period. While many scholars place the coming of 'the sixties' in Australia contemporaneously with the election of Whitlam, the characterisation of Australians prior to 1972 as "a nation of lotus-eaters" (Mackay 2009: 73) seems unfair to the thousands of young people who made Foco club such a success, and in no way assists in bringing Australia into the developing global narrative of the 1968 'event'.

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