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Jon Piccini

*‘The University Regiment Stands on Liberated Ground!’: Contested Understandings
of the Vietnam War on The University of Queensland*

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that The University of Queensland must be seen as a diffuse, pluralistic space for the debate of ideas surrounding the Vietnam War, rather than the monolithic ‘anti-war campus’ presented in some popular literature. This is revealed through an analysis of primary source material left by various ideological factions and reports related to two particular incidents of campus political conflict.

BIOGRAPHY

Jon Piccini has completed a Bachelor of Arts double major in History, and has recently completed his Honours year, with a thesis focusing on imaginings of urban space in 1960s Brisbane.

‘THE UNIVERSITY REGIMENT NOW STANDS ON LIBERATED GROUND!’: CONTESTED UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

Australia has seldom experienced a period of such division in popular debates as that engendered by this nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War. The morality of supporting what many saw as an unwarranted intervention in an avowedly civil conflict was directly challenged, particularly by the New Left student movement, in a manner unseen since the conscription debates of 1916-17. Alongside Monash, The University of Queensland is considered to be one of the most successful ‘anti war campuses’, one capable of politically mobilising half of the student population. The aim of the present study is to look beyond this rather tidy image of The University of Queensland as a monolithic anti war campus and instead contextualise some of the fault lines which existed within this sharply radicalising community, one best characterised as a battleground for ideas around the war. For, as Barry York states in his work on La Trobe radicalism, ‘Th[e] popular view of the old student revolt...when all students were rebelling all the time...is mythical’. Rather, the author insists, ‘student rebels were always a minority’, one which was further divided into ideologically opposed factions prone to internecine struggle.ⁱ The notion of a monolithic campus also ignores the fact, as Gerster and Bassett state, that ‘many students adopted a trenchantly conservative stance in opposition to the radicals.’ⁱⁱ

These themes of divisive pluralism in the campus community will be explored through analysing firstly the shape of politics in Australia and Queensland in the 1960s which helped to foster the New Left as well as discussing previous examples of activism at The University of Queensland. The campus community will then be analysed in term of the Left and Right, seeking to highlight not only conflict between them but also within their ranks. Finally, two examples of student activism, the occupation of the Citizen Military Force building and the so called ‘Black Friday’ incident will be investigated as a means of highlighting how these divisions found their physical manifestation. Scrutinising the campus in this way will assist in painting a more realistic picture of an important component of Brisbane’s radical tradition alongside working to place Queensland activism within a broader national, if not international, context.

Queensland and Australian governments during the period in question were politically and socially conservative as well as firmly in line with the dictates of U. S. foreign policy, facts which helped to foster a local rumination of global New Left ideas and consequential campus conflict. Gordon and Osmond have commented that, while sporadic student movements, generally around indigenous and anti racist issues, had existed prior to 1964, it was the Menzies government’s decision ‘to introduce a selective conscription system’ in November 1964 and the April 1965 announcement that Australia would send a battalion of troops to Vietnam which triggered wide scale opposition from students.ⁱⁱⁱ The spectre of the supposedly ‘conservative’ 1950s also played a role, as student activists sought to cast off the decades stifling social and cultural norms, which many saw Menzies’ Liberal government as personifying.^{iv} In Queensland, this conservatism can be seen as taking its most extreme form, with the Country-Liberal government under Frank Nicklin taking power in the wake of Labour’s implosive 1957 split. This government, along with its more infamous successor, profited from what Raymond Evans sees as the state’s far right regionalism and racism in order to create a monoculture exclusive of even the notion of dissent. As such, when ‘knots of student radicals’ began emerging in the early 60s, in response to the Vietnam conflict amongst other issues, they were met with the repressive arm of Queensland’s police force, whose heavy handed policies helped to inadvertently foster an insipient political culture at The University of Queensland.^v Yet, this recipe of unpopular policies, repressive governments and radicalised minorities was in no way the monopoly of the 1960s generation; in fact it is a formula observable in previous examples of campus activism.

The rail strike of 1948, for example, saw an explosion of campus activism alongside division and conflict. The immediate post World War II years saw an upsurge in union activism and demands, alongside growing anti communist feeling, fostered at both the federal and state levels. These phenomena found their climax in the rail strike of 1948, when Queensland’s state rail employees struck for better wages and conditions, in the face of a hysterical media who ‘drew...parallels between a local struggle with a state employer and the ongoing Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia.’^{vi} The State Labor government under Hanlon reacted in a similar fashion by passing the *Industrial Law Amendment Act*, making even the mention of strike action illegal along with street marches or meetings.^{vii} It was into this volatile situation that The University of Queensland Radical Club, a front for the small but industrially significant Communist Party, stepped by inviting the leader of the rail union to address a campus meeting. Ted D’urso, then a fledgling communist, recalled that ‘the second row [of the meeting] was full of medical students...with the deliberate intention of destroying the meeting.’^{viii} D’urso remembered vividly the moment when ‘in the midst of the presentation, a medical student near the front...jumped up, interrupted proceedings and moved a motion of loyalty to his Majesty King George the Sixth, and also moved that the Communists should be sent back to Russia’, a proposition which saw the meeting descend into riotous affray.^{ix} Brisbane’s *Courier Mail* reported events the next day under the headline ‘Uni Club

Seeks Ban of Communist Party’, an interesting conclusion to be drawn, given the ‘club’ in question was in fact a front for that same party.^x Division and conflict were clearly nothing new to The University of Queensland, but nothing in its history quite compared to the ‘battleground for ideas’ which erupted during the Vietnam War.

Evans has noted that ‘from the mid-1960s The University of Queensland vied with Victoria’s Monash as Australia’s most defiant campus.’^{xi} However the notion that the left were in any way monolithic does not stand up to inquiry. Dan O’Neill, well known English lecturer and New Left leader, wrote in the 17 March 1969 issue of *Semper Floreat*, the Student Union newspaper, that unlike 1965, a year characterised by ‘the usual pervasive apathy’, 1966 saw ‘a number of independent sources of social criticism’ emerge upon campus.^{xii} These forces can be largely characterised as representative of the global New Left, and included the Catholic Newman Society and the Students for Democratic Action. Even in these early days tensions existed, mostly between the orthodox New Leftists and the ALP oriented Labor Club, described by SDA founder Ralph Summy as ‘opt[ing] for passivism, not pacifism’ in a 1964 *Semper Floreat*.^{xiii} These divisions became more pronounced over time, and by 1969-70 contours of debate can be seen as between the ‘hard left’ of the now Marxist oriented Society for Democratic Action, soon to be Revolutionary Socialist Student Alliance, and the ‘soft left’ New Left Group, Labor Club and Liberal Group. The differences between these two wings are best expressed in their positions on the Vietnam War, a conflict the ‘hard left’ sought to posit, as Mark Young recounts in an unpublished thesis, as resulting from the capitalist system of imperialist exploitation.^{xiv} As an RSSA leaflet stated in 1970 ‘Vietnam is a stake not a mistake...the war in Vietnam is a war to perpetuate US control over the third world...My Son (My Lai) was not caused by a breakdown in the machine, it is the logical outcome of it’.^{xv} This militant anti-capitalism was coupled with a clear desire to break the ‘apathy and insensitivity of many University of Queensland students towards the question of imperialism’, even if this meant ‘disrupt[ing] every minute of their bourgeois individualist existence.’^{xvi}

The ‘soft left’ did not adopt such militant rhetoric, and in fact acted as ‘a moderating influence on the socialist revolutionaries’ in Young’s opinion.^{xvii} They instead opted for a broader approach, one much more characteristic of the liberalism at the core of New Left politics. As Bruce Dickson, then leader of the Labor Club, recounts; ‘most club members...adopted a surprisingly open minded approach’ and were not ‘caught up in ideological excesses.’^{xviii} Frank Varghese, leader of the New Left group, went so far as to accuse the RSSA in an open letter of ‘left wing infantilism’, a crime it supposedly committed by spouting such open signifiers as ‘US Imperialism’, which ‘in terms of being adequate to deal with social reality – amounts to meaningless crap.’^{xix} It is clear that important ideological divisions existed within the University anti war movement, however these were nothing compared to the divisions between left and right.

Gerster and Basset have mournfully noted that ‘years of myth making’ about the 1960s have led to the belief that ‘students were engaged in subversive political activity on masse.’^{xx} These assumptions are challenged by the reality that there existed vocal minorities of right wing student who adopted many tactics to challenge their leftist opponents. These forces of conservatism were represented at The University of Queensland by the Democratic, Liberal and Country Club, groupings united at times behind the umbrella organisation ‘Anti Left Front’. These groups sought to undermine and challenge the left’s interpretation of the Vietnam War, claiming it as a humanitarian struggle to save the South Vietnamese people from the perils of international communism.^{xxi} The loyalty of dissenters is also brought into question, the Anti Left Fronts ‘newspaper’ *Stupid Gorilla* (a parody of SDA’s *Student Guerrilla*) makes this clear by stating ‘to them – internationalism is the goal, as it is for the communists...so if you want to be un-Australian you can become one of the ‘Stupid Gorillas’.’^{xxii} This attempt to smear questioning students as unpatriotic communists is continued in a leaflet questioning the Moratorium marches, stating 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.’^{xxiii}

Through characterising anti war activists as beholden to communists, the right was able to proclaim itself as the voice of ‘ordinary students’ against the radical ratsbags. A Liberal Club recruitment leaflet states that ‘for too long a very small minority of leftists and radicals have held the limelight’ and that it was time for the ‘moderate majority’ to ‘show the people of Queensland that the vast majority of students are opposed to violence, terrorism, communism and anarchy.’^{xxiv} Raymond Evans recalls however, that if the conservatives were unable to be convincing polemically, some were more than willing to adopt a physical approach. The author recalled how during an illegal anti war march ‘a retinue of know-nothing greasers (engineering students) marched threateningly around us chanting ‘we hate commies’ and ‘up democracy’ with a ‘lynch like intensity.’^{xxv} This led the young student to believe that ‘we were inches from being physically attacked’, had it not been for quick police intervention.^{xxvi} The incendiary, if not violent activities of conservative students do much to undermine the myth of a monolithic anti war campus, as do the examples of the CMF occupation and the ‘Black Friday’ incident.

The occupation by radical students of the campus Citizen Military Force headquarters does much to reveal divisions both within the left and the broader campus community. These events, along with those of 'Black Friday', are by no means the only examples of radical activity on this famously dissenting campus. However, the fact that they occurred within two days of each other during the highly polarising Moratorium campaign make them useful candidates for investigation. An RSSA leaflet issued moments after the occupation of the CMF building on September 2 1970, entitled 'The University Regiment now stands on liberated ground' makes the case of the occupiers clear.^{xxxvii} They state that the building was liberated to highlight that it 'has been used by the Australian Army to train soldiers to become part of the war machine.'^{xxxviii} The occupiers make reference to the fact that 'US students have burnt down ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corp) buildings in dozens of universities' while calling for students to decide whether they 'are on the side of capitalist exploitation and suffering or on the side of the people.'^{xxxix} The picture painted by this leaflet, of a left united behind a radical objective, differs to that illuminated by RSSA leader and CMF occupier Dick Shearman in a later interview, where he recalled that 'the students agreed to the plan without really thinking about it.'^{xxx}

The occupation began as the idea of 15 to 20 radicals who called for the action at a lunchtime meeting, and were able to gather two hundred students. Divisions emerged immediately, as one quarter of the students chose to barricade themselves inside the unattended building while others remained outside. Some students – members of a radical Christian group – then began to destroy army documents, to Shearman's surprise.^{xxxi} Further divisions soon arose over the matter of attending class, as some occupiers saw 'the need to get out – 'for French at two, or a tute at three'' as more important than international proletarian solidarity, especially once the army arrived 'along with students from the union and 'would-be liberal candidates'' intent on ending the seizure.'^{xxxii} Shearman defends the action on the justifiable basis that 'the army had no place on campus', however he saw the major problem with the occupation as being 'that the action was not preconceived by a large group' leading to a 'doubtful...decision making process.'^{xxxiii} The occupation was also criticised by those of a soft left persuasion, such as Varghese, who claimed that he was 'sick and tired of bad analysis and bad action' making clear that 'I consider the introduction of things such as the open classroom...to be of infinitely greater significant importance than any raid on the CMF building.'^{xxxiv} This incident clearly reveals not a united campus, but rather a battleground for ideological and tactical notions, which were to come to the fore much more violently on 'Black Friday.'

Rarely has an invited speaker created such furore and division as that which developed around the address given by South Vietnamese ambassador Luic Tuong Quang on 4 September 1970. The event, labelled either as the Quang incident or 'Black Friday', reveals a clearly pluralistic, diffuse campus prone to ideological conflict. Quang's invitation by the right wing Democratic Club was a clearly provocative step, occurring only days after the CMF occupation and during the build up to a Moratorium rally. The meeting, said to be attended in equal measure by right and left wing students, developed into conflict over the inability of the Ambassador to adequately answer an RSSA posed question pertaining to the safety of an arrested Saigon student leader, at which point radicals spontaneously decided to blockade Quang's exit.^{xxxv} 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'.^{xxxvi} What happened next is still open to conjecture, however someone, the radicals claimed a member of the Democratic Club or of the moderate Student Union, called the infamous Special Branch onto campus in breach of University regulations. The *Courier Mail* reported what ensued as an 'hour-long battle', during which a growing number of anti war radicals faced off with police, leaving several injuries, one student jailed for assault and calls from the new, relatively unknown premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson that the university be brought 'under control'.^{xxxvii}

Aside from the clear disunity intrinsic to such an event even taking place, further discord is revealed by various post event leaflets. The Student Union, for its part, placed full culpability for the events at the feet of radicals who President John Chapman, a Democratic Club sympathiser, claimed had resorted to abuse and violence. Chapman also defended the conduct of Union staff and denied any involvement in calling the political police.^{xxxviii} Radicals, on the other hand, defended their actions as necessary to 'make people realise how strongly we feel about the war,' and accused the Union and University of complicity with the Special Branch.^{xxxix} A report to the University disciplinary board by a member of staff present at the action provides another window into events. Fred Fielding, a librarian, reported a public debate between Chapman and the 'demagogic' Shearman over whether to allow the police vehicles to leave and a further confrontation between Varghese and Shearman over the virtues of pacifism, all while elements of the student body jostled for control of the situation.^{xl} This violent manifestation of ideological pluralism amply illustrates clear divisions within the student community, contours which assist in contextualising the 'anti war campus.'

‘Whatever happened to the student movement’ is a question often posed by today’s campus radicals. Glowing nostalgia seems to have taken the place of an apathetic reality, as militants recall the supposed glory days of 1968 when students from Paris to Prague challenged not only University administrations, but the capitalist or bureaucratic system itself. This idea of a unified student movement fired by the passions of that most revolutionary of decades is one which has also become intrinsic to popular perceptions as well as a mainstay of academia. However it must be noted that much of what is said about it is, as York notes, a myth, one which is directly challenged by this discussion of University of Queensland anti war radicalism. The 1960s indeed saw a massive and inspiring student movement against deeply conservative governments and their support for an unjust war, but to characterise it as in any way monolithic is not only fallacious, but highly condescending. The decade was not the first in which students have taken radical action, as the events of 1948’s rail strike make perfectly clear, there were politically conscious students, and those willing to challenge them before many 1960s radicals would have even been born. The campus during this period was clearly one characteristic of a battleground for ideas rather than a monumental entity, as divisions between the ‘hard’ Marxists and their ‘soft’ liberal counterparts alongside those between the left and a highly agitated right wing often took centre stage. These divisions found their physical manifestations in many outbursts of campus activism, with the occupation of the CMF building and the ‘Black Friday’ incident clearly revealing deep contours. These existed between the committed and the not so, those who supported the war and did not, those who saw revolution as necessary and those who saw it as a fleeting abstraction. It is these facts which are ignored by much 1960s popular nostalgia and attendant historiography. However they are vital to generating a realistic, historical picture of the actual events and their place within Brisbane’s long radical tradition, as well as within the context of wider national debates. For the ‘sixties’ were indeed a time of great change in Queensland and broader Australian society, culminating in the election of the Whitlam Government and its withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. However the mythologising of this loosely defined decade in no way generates greater understanding of these events or their appropriate context, either to a new generation of radicals or to historians, and as such must be directly confronted.

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