Bacchanalian carnival or political event? Remembering the sixties in Australia

In 2009, the fortieth anniversary of Woodstock—a three day love-smoke-live-in on a cow paddock in upstate New York—provided a vivid illustration of the extent to which modern audiences frame their understanding of the sixties around this one event. The festival, which saw hundreds of thousands of countercultural enthusiasts tune into a stellar line up of musical talent in a laid back “communal” environment, is seen to epitomise everything the decade stood for—a tame type of cultural rebellion by white, middle class youths whose ideals of ‘doing your own thing’ resonated perfectly with the post-modern dictates of today’s lifestyle capitalism.1 If the decade is not being presented as a teenage Oedipal spasm against their “square” parents, it is constructed as the deluded rebellion of a rabble of confused neo-communists. As repentant radical, and now conservative ideologue for Rupert Murdoch’s Australian, David Burchell has noted, ‘there were thoroughly defensible reasons for demonstrating against the Vietnam War’, that one great motivator of the sixties passions. However ‘these were hardly ever the reasons actually used by the anti-war leaders, who preferred instead to morally grandstand as pseudo-pacifists or part-time Maoists, or else, more commonly, as some improbable fusion of the two’.2 Such a view, of sixties radicals as either drug addled hippies or loony politicos, is so pervasive as to take on the appearance of fact.

Roland Barthes once observed that myth is a form of ‘depoliticised speech’. It ‘does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them…it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification [and] a clarity which is not

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1 A version of this argument was recently employed in a scholarly setting by Alexander Sedlmaier and Stephan Malinowski, “1968” – A Catalyst of Consumer Society, Cultural and Social History 8, No. 2 (2011): 255-74.
2 David Burchell, ‘Mythic 60s revolution is still mired in the Woodstock mud’, The Australian, August 17, 2009.
that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact’.³ Similar concerns around the power of speech to distort the past are central to the recent upsurge of work on (mis)remembering the sixties which seeks to understand how, in the words of French-American academic Kristin Ross, the decade’s events ‘have been overcome by their subsequent representations’—whether these be books, articles, films, sociological commentary or activist recantations.⁴ Ross’ key concern is how the events of May 1968, where ten million workers and students went on strike against France’s Gaullist government, have been converted into a consensual narrative of youth cultural rebellion, by a process whereby ‘what [is] sayable and thinkable about the political culture of the 1960s’ has been lowered ‘to just a few tropes or phrases’.⁵ Ross locates how several keywords synonymous with the events—youth, culture, individualism and deterritorialisation—have transformed what was a revolutionary outburst into a ‘generational revolt of the young against structural rigidities that were blocking the necessary momentum of cultural modernisation’, an ode to the multiplying lifestyle choices and globalised life world of late capitalism.⁶ Much is lost, however, in such a narration. It is impossible to discuss the youth in the Sorbonne without the workers and unionists in the factories, Ross argues, just as it is dishonest to remove the Women’s Liberation Movement from narratives of cultural change around sex and clothing, and outrageous to contemplate events in Paris or Lyon without recourse to Algiers or Saigon.

This article seeks to understand whether such a process—whereby an event of world shaking, revolutionary, import can be lowered to a

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mere generational tiff or disagreement over musical tastes and fashion styles—is evident in the Australian context. In doing so it seeks to locate these appropriations and distortions in their transnational context while adding to previous critiques of memorialisation. While Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett’s work comes closest to bringing some of these ideas and themes to Australia,7 it has been accused by some of being more an exercise in reinforcing a set of identifiable tropes than combating them, of weaving a narrative ‘largely coessential with the sixties as packaged and presented by the daily papers and the TV news’.8 This lowering of the sixties to a set of images or spectacles is aptly critiqued in Anthony Ashbolt’s work, which highlights how such superficial readings discredit and undermine the properly counter-hegemonic project sixties radicals undertook—a project this article seeks to unearth.9 Representations of the sixties in popular literature, particularly memoirs as well as newspapers, journals or fictional works will here be analysed alongside contemporary sources as to their reflection of dominant discourses on the sixties. While memoirs, as so many have noted in the past, are often a form of myth making in and of themselves, subject as they are to omission, misremembering or outright misrepresentation, Kenneth Barkin explains that they act as a way of understanding the ‘lives of real people as interpreted by those people rather than by generalisations...of groups’.10 They are able to relate occurrences from the position of those involved, capturing the essence of the times and assisting in broadening our understanding of the meaning and importance of events to individual actors. As such, it will be demonstrated here that memoirs are not only a useful historical source, but when read against and beside contemporary sources, can challenge the domination of (mis)memory over the 1960s.

On youth and the generational conceit

9 Anthony Ashbolt, ‘Hegemony and the Sixties: Observations, Polemics, Meanderings’, Rethinking Marxism 19, No. 2 (April 2007). Hegemony is defined here in Gramscian terms, with the sixties viewed as part of a war of position (and sometimes one of movement) within the politics and culture of everyday life.
An important aspect of this (mis)remembering is the discourse of “youth”, that marketable discursive category fashioned by the global post-war consumerist upsurge, whose existence was seen in a fundamentally ambiguous light by conservative authority. Gerster and Bassett present the sixties as the domain of those lucky enough to be well under thirty at the time, describing the decade as ‘propelled by the rebelliousness and confrontation of teenagers and young adults’.\textsuperscript{11} As Herouvin relates in his condemnatory review of their study, ‘the essence of the sixties protest, then, was vanity and teenage defiance’, with the youthful protest culture presented as merely a fashionable ‘alternative to the discotheque’ for a generation liberated from financial constraints by the post-war boom.\textsuperscript{12} This obsession with the ‘children of the revolution’ is symptomatic of popular media’s engagement with the sixties. David Burchell presents the sixties as an entirely youthful event in his op-ed ‘Mythic 60s revolution is still mired in the Woodstock mud’.\textsuperscript{13} The article denigrates the ‘Woodstock Generation’, which is described as a somehow unified block of global opinion, whose rebellion left no lasting change and whose ‘revolutionary ideas’ were decades, if not hundreds of years old.\textsuperscript{14}

It is in this final point, on the age of many sixties ideas, that Burchell comes closest to “the real” of events, though perhaps not in the manner he envisaged. While young, energetic students, whose numbers were multiplying exponentially with the increase in demands for tertiary education, played the leading, most visible role in the decade’s activism, they were working within a framework laid down by earlier activists and struggles. Ann Curthoys, Sydney student activist, feminist and later renowned historian, provides a particularly insightful engagement with these themes in her memoir/history of the Freedom Ride.\textsuperscript{15} Curthoys focuses on her involvement with this 1965 bus trip—modelled on similar activities in America from the early sixties—which constitutes an early and emblematic example of sixties activism in Australia. Curthoys’ experience with activism was

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\item[13] Burchell, ‘Mythic 60s revolution’.
\item[14] Ibid.
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from an early age, with both her parents members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), an organisation which had been campaigning against institutionalised racism for decades but whose influence on campus was ‘slight’.\textsuperscript{16} The politically-charged Curthoys joined other students protesting in their thousands against American infringements on civil rights in 1964.

They were, however, shocked when asked by indigenous elders and certain sections of the media why they ‘were…so prepared to demonstrate for civil rights in the United States, when they should be campaigning against racism in Australia itself?’\textsuperscript{17} From the United States, the students were reprimanded in a similar fashion by various news outlets, with \textit{Life} magazine looking askance at the acts of Australian students around foreign issues, while ‘Australia herself possesses some of the most stringent racial exclusion laws in the world’.\textsuperscript{18} The letter of a black civil rights activist sent to Sydney University newspaper \textit{Honi Soit} immediately after the protests, picked up similar themes, asking ‘if your concern was sincere, profound and genuine…can you find the sympathy in your hearts and consciences to conduct PEACEFUL demonstrations against these laws in your own country?’\textsuperscript{19} Such transnational questioning drove the students in the direction of existing organisations, like the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), who had been pursuing matters of indigenous disadvantage, often with CPA leadership, since the 1950s, as well as 29-year-old Charles Perkins, who had been an organiser for FCAATSI before entering Sydney University in 1964 on a scholarship.

This involvement of “older” organisations and personalities is reflected in the broader sixties youth movement, and had important repercussions for its practice. Richard Neville in his rather self-

\textsuperscript{16} Alan Barcan, \textit{From New Left to Factional Left: Fifty Years of Student Activism at Sydney University} (North Melbourne, Vic.: Australian Scholarly Publications, 2011), 22.
\textsuperscript{17} Curthoys, \textit{Freedom Ride}, 8.
\textsuperscript{18} Quoted in Sean Scalmer, \textit{Dissent Events: Protest, the Media and the Political Gimmick in Australia} (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002), 18.
aggrandising memoir *Hippie Hippie Shake* notes the importance of several academics at the University of Sydney to the development of the campus’ radical culture.20 ‘Our philosophy lecturer, Eric Dowling’, Neville notes, ‘was an incisive libertarian, whose scandalous behaviour matched his beliefs’ while ‘Paddy McGuinness, a bearded and mumbling economics lecturer, slouched around the campus in bare feet and black corduroys, promoting the creed of anarchy as the best solution to the world’s ills’. These older intellectuals, both members of “The Push”…a renowned cell of free thinkers who favoured promiscuity, jazz and getting pissed’, provided bohemian youths with the ideas they would need to articulate their rebellion.21

Curthoys, on the other hand, particularly notes the importance of Bob Gould, thirty-something Trotskyite and staunch anti-Stalinist, to many young Sydney radicals, explaining how

Gould managed to take leadership of the youth in the anti-war movement away from the CPA, which was a leading organisation until then...[he] had a confirmed form of Trotskyist politics, and a more confrontational approach that appealed to a lot of people.22

The importance of Gould is particularly vivid in John Percy’s memoir/history of Resistance, the main Sydney Trotskyist current.23 It was the intervention of Gould, Nick Origlass and other members of the tiny Fourth International grouping which facilitated, in Percy’s mind, the development of an organised alternative to CPA domination over what constituted Sydney radical politics. Such importance was given to these older activists that, as the author relates, ‘part of the routine for any likely recruit to Trotskyism was to visit Nick Origlass’, a quasi-religious pilgrimage whereby one would

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20 Richard Neville, *Hippie Hippie Shake: the dreams, the trips, the trials, the love-ins, the screw ups... the sixties* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1995).
22 Ann Curthoys quoted in Greg Langley, ed., *A Decade of Dissent: Vietnam and the Conflict on the Australian Homefront* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992). This work is a collection of interviews with various individuals active in some capacity with activity surrounding the Vietnam War, from soldiers to protestors.
‘get a lengthy state of the world speech and, if lucky, come away with a precious pile of magazines’.²⁴

Origlass, a working-class boilermaker, unionist, and self-taught intellectual, was emblematic of the type of milieu the largely middle-class students wished to engage with in their attempts to avoid any association with purely “youth” demands. Indeed many students’ idolisation of Chinese leader Mao Zedong seems to have kindled a similar reverence for Ted Hill, the ageing leader of local Maoist front the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist). Michael Hyde, leading Monash University Maoist and anti-war activist notes in his recently published memoir that his first meeting with Hill, over tea and biscuits, had a similarly religious air. Hill’s recounting of the political situation and instructions on the role of radical students was taken on without question, while his casual mentions of having met Mao or Chou En Lai saw Hyde ‘pinch myself and check that I was indeed still in suburban Melbourne’.²⁵ Historian Jeff Sparrow relates that these third-world inclined student activists sought a ‘militant orientation to the working class’, particularly noting how their protests would ‘march...into the industrial suburbs around campus’ so as to recruit the idealised ‘proletarian’ into their demonstrations’.²⁶

The famous 1969 jailing of Maoist Tramways Union leader Clarrie O’Shea, Hyde recounts in a previous text, saw ‘masses of students and workers attack the courtroom and the beginning of a real student-worker alliance [was] fired’.²⁷

And indeed, even when demands were made for ‘student power’, as d’Avigdor has recently argued in a history of such campaigns at the University of Sydney, they were framed around notions of participatory democracy—of everyone having an equal say in the running of institutions. Academics such as ex-Communist Party member Rex Mortimer, well into his forties by the time of the 1973 philosophy strike, played significant roles in formulating the student’s

²⁴ Percy, Resistance, 67.
theories and demands. Consequently, it is argued that ‘[s]tudent movements must be reformulated as “Staff-Student” movements in opposition to the administration and “God Professors”’, as challenges less to the primacy of “old” professors than the aging ideologies that kept them in power.\textsuperscript{28} Examples such as this, as well as more well known ones like the mass participation of Australians, young and old, in Moratorium demonstrations, and the importance of figures like Jim Cairns or existing peace groups like the Association for International Cooperation and Disarmament, present youth as only part of a broader, universal movement for society-wide political change that traversed age brackets and tired generational stereotypes.

**Separating the cultural from the political…**

If the sixties are often presented as a type of generation spasm, a fit of youthful self indulgence, they are just as easily caricatured as a flowering of individualised cultural practice, divorced from the decade’s more political developments. Frank Devine, until his recent passing a right-wing humorist for The Australian, penned a piece on his experience, or lack thereof, of the sixties in that conservative bastion Quadrant.\textsuperscript{29} Unsurprisingly, the author regaled readers with his relatively sober experience of the decade, admitting to smoking (and inhaling, thankfully) several marijuana cigarettes, but finding the experience, along with other aspects of the sixties—from sex to eastern religion and outsider art—fundamentally lacking.\textsuperscript{30} Politics only intruded into Devine’s narrative of individualised culture when he accidentally found himself involved in a traditionally insurrectionary Japanese student riot (‘protesting against something American, probably’) and his typical explanation of the Vietnam War as ‘[giving] ribs to the drop-out cause’, which later descended into ‘the politics of self interest’.\textsuperscript{31} These connected concepts of culture and individualism pervade popular discourse on the decade, with Gerster and Bassett’s work amplifying the importance of what they term a ‘fashion of protest’ which rendered ‘the [political]

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\textsuperscript{30} Devine, ‘How Woodstock Passed Me By’, 49.

\textsuperscript{31} Devine, ‘How Woodstock Passed Me By’, 49.
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issue...symbolic rather than one of real importance’ to the hip, stylish radicals.32

What this type of memorialisation ignores is the interconnectedness of political (in a firmly non party-political sense) and cultural practice during the sixties. As many scholars have recently noted, any claim that the decade was defined by either its political or cultural dimensions alone does not provide enough scope to understand the deep intersections which in fact existed between the two.33 Ann Curthoys strikes a common pose when describing the heady spirit surrounding 1965’s Freedom Rides: ‘only a few weeks before, the Rolling Stones had visited Sydney, and seven months earlier the Beatles had made their historic visit, rapturously received by youth all over the country’. ‘The music’, Curthoys relates, ‘somehow expressed the mood of the age group...a generation that produced a New Left beyond earlier Cold War certainties of either the self-congratulation of the “free world” or the rigid authoritarianism of communism, interested in challenging consciousness as well as social structures and institutions’.34 Such intersections also emerge in Raymond Evans’ memoirs, sporadically published in the Queensland Review, which detail his involvement in Brisbane’s eclectic protest movement.35 Bob Dylan’s concert of 1966, Evans explains, was met with a ‘folk purist push from the Old Left...venting their spleen in a seemingly organised, sustained assault’ on the musician and his daring to absorb the musical heresy of Rock ‘n’ Roll. The few in the audience who supported Dylan’s electric turn, many from the small New Left community, felt themselves ‘awash in a sea of cat-calls’. This cultural isolation was tied to a broader displacement from Brisbane’s conservative political life. As Evans relates, ‘not only were we clearly adrift from the mainstream and targeted by the state ‘with ‘the student body itself...unevenly ranged against us’, but ‘on the matter of the coming intonation of protest—the new sonority, captured

32 Gerster and Bassett, Seizures of Youth, 102.
34 Curthoys, Freedom Ride, 57.
more in the abrasive form the new music rather than its content—the Old Left appeared as seriously riven from the New’.36

Culture and politics, rather than being seen as two different spheres by sixties radicals, were then clearly perceived as deeply interconnected to the point where the two became indistinguishable. Early sixties left-wing folk music not only inspired students to their actions, Curthoys recalls, but also provided a means of organisation. Much of the money used to fund the riders’ transportation was raised at student-organised folk concerts ‘with non-aboriginal…and aboriginal singers’, which also served to popularise the students’ actions amongst socially conscious music-goers.37 Foco Club, a Sunday night entertainment venture put on by Brisbane radicals at Trades Hall, expanded this use of culture as a medium to broaden their message into a large-scale capture of urban space.38 Described by Federal Liberal MHR Don Cameron as ‘Australia’s most evil and repugnant nightspot’, Foco, participant and radical organiser John Stanwell notes in reminiscence for Queensland Review:

showed that decidedly suspicious characters, like radicals, students, unionists, feminists, black activists, and even hippies, could put on a damn good show, and that the political messages being flogged by these strange characters might just be worth thinking about after all.39

The club’s wonderfully produced newsletter, mimicking US underground press style and dutifully mailed to the club’s three thousand-plus members weekly, provided a rundown of weekly events as well as articles on a range of political or cultural issues. A disco featuring popular rock acts like the Coloured Balls and, on occasion, Max Merritt and the Meteors, proved a big drawcard, while alternative European films by the likes of Jean-Luc Goddard and

36 Evans, ‘From Deserts the Marchers Come’, 17.
37 Curthoys, Freedom Ride, 57.
political documentaries were shown nearby, separated only by a thin layer of soundproofing fabric. Another room was devoted to folk and drama performances, while organised political lectures from a variety of speakers—ranging from a visiting American civil rights worker to Communist journalist Malcolm Salmon and members of the local Australian Union of Women—were scheduled before the disco drowned out such earnest discussion.40 Katherine Brisbane, reviewing Foco for the Australian newspaper, stated that there ‘is nothing quite like it anywhere else in Australia’.41 Despite the club’s supposed uniqueness, its mixture of alternative cultural forms with radical politics was merely part of the broader explosion of activity that constituted Brisbane’s—and Australia’s—experience of the sixties. The Psychedelic Stir, Sydney’s first supposedly underground newspaper, carried reports on the LSD community and an ad for local ‘Psychedelicatessen’ The Pot Hole, alongside a discussion of North Vietnamese politics, Black Power in America, and Harold Holt, in its August 1967 edition.42 These popular ventures, spaces and publications came to constitute a ‘map of meaning’ to radicals, as Evans explains:

we were building our own networks of creativity, comradeship and discussion – at the primativ coffee lounge, the folk club…the Red and Black Bookshop, the University of Queensland refectory and Forum, and so forth. These were our safe houses in an environment of social and political violence, framed by censorship, policing, surveillance, suspicion, incoherence and rage.43

Forming these intricate urban connections allowed activists to experience their city as both politically and culturally independent of its broader conservative ‘life-world’. As Evans relates, ‘we combined cultural appreciation and creativity with protest from the streets…one cannot know this era culturally without understanding this’.44

40 Piccini, “Australia’s most evil and repugnant nightspot”, 9-10. The Fryer Library holds an almost complete collection of the Foco Newsletter, along with a range of other ephemera consulted for this paper.
42 The Psychedelic Stir, No. 2 (August 1967), in Philip N. West Papers (no call number), Mitchell Library, Box 1.
44 Evans, ‘A Queensland Reader’, 79.
Clive Hamilton, left-wing intellectual and former director of the Australia Institute, sees less to be excited about in this explosion of politically conscious cultural forms than Evans. Echoing a line shared by both the right and left, Hamilton attacks the sixties generation’s individualism and permissiveness in an article entitled ‘From Free Love to Narcissism’, published in online journal Crikey. ‘The objectives were noble’, the author relates, ‘but the demand for individual rights in the sixties and seventies released a self-centredness that has grown into full-blown narcissism’, a personality politics which ‘dovetailed perfectly with the logic of hyper-consumerism’. This was an intensification of previous attacks in acclaimed 2003 work Growth Fetish, where Hamilton explains how the sixties generation tore down the social structures of conservatism that, for all their stultifying oppressiveness, held the market in check. The demands for freedom in private life, freedom from the fetters of career and family, and for freedom of sexual expression were noble in themselves, but it is now evident that the demolition of customary social structures did not create a society of free individuals. Instead, it created an opportunity for the marketers to substitute material consumption and manufactured lifestyles for the ties of social tradition.

One would be excused, upon reading Hamilton’s well-worn critique, for thinking that sixties movements amounted to a pure celebration of the neo-liberal individual divorced of broader societal or political concerns. This is, however, far too clean an image to be taken at face value. Individualism, often co-existing with heavy drug use and eastern mysticism, was irrevocably central to the sixties experience, yet is in no way its sole inheritance. Michael Hyde’s reminiscences of radical politics in Melbourne, for example, very rarely touch on the individualised nature of cultural activity. Instead Hyde recalls its political orientation, describing how after a night of covertly smashing windows at the US consulate, activists ‘were back home

drinking flagons of cold hock in less than ten minutes’. A deep suspicion of drugs was shared by many, with Hyde noting elsewhere that the Labor Club forbade drugs at its gatherings, not only due to the fact that they could take people out of political activity, but because police used them as a means of incarcerating troublesome activists.

John Jiggens, Brisbane cultural activist and founder of the *Cane Toad Times*, notes in his partially-fictionalised recollections of that great celebration of sixties culture, the Aquarius Festival, that activists struggled against what they saw as troublesome ‘lifestylist’ deviations. Jiggens was a member of the Brisbane ‘countercultural left’ group HARPO (How About Resisting Powerful Organisations), in many ways a quintessential politically attuned countercultural group. Emerging from the radical youth movement, HARPO desired not only to change politics but also to wage a cultural revolution within everyday life. They ran an alternative newspaper, club member John Stanwell recalls, as well as an organic fruit shop and a vegetarian restaurant, amongst other counter-institutions, while touring national and interstate musical or poetic acts, coming close to what Ashbolt describes as a ‘counter hegemonic’ practice. Overall, Jiggens felt that HARPO ‘occupied a position between the radical left and the cosmos’, the derogatory term more politically-inclined activists gave to the less collectively-oriented and socially-conscious ‘hippies’. This type of division was clear at the festival, held in the northern NSW town of Nimbin during May 1973, with political radicals like HARPO, the Draft Resisters Union and Aboriginal activists camping out together. These groups, all involved in the often dangerous task of challenging Queensland’s highly conservative political culture, were drawn to bemusement, if not outright anger, at the disengaged rural fantasies of other participants. As one embittered radical related to Jiggens, ‘these wilted flower-children aren’t going to build utopia…they’re not interested in political or economic change or social reform…all they want is mushroom dampers every morning,’

48 Hyde, *All Along the Watchtower*, 164-5.
washed down with a little acid or some hash’. With these lessons learned, activists associated with HARPO would go on to establish Brisbane radio station 4ZZZ-FM, which through its mixture of Rock music with radical journalism and politics not only challenged Bjelke-Petersen’s grip on power during the 1970s and 1980s, but works to challenge narcissistic constructions of sixties radicals in today’s popular memorialisation.

…and the global from the local
The Aquarius Festival, with its obvious borrowing from events like Woodstock and San Francisco’s ‘Be Ins’, poses a pertinent question: was Australia’s sixties really an Australian phenomenon, or was it a direct import from a global deterritorialised counterculture? This is, after all, how the sixties are usually represented – with Melbourne Maoist leader Barry York describing the ‘near-obsession [on the part] of most commentators with the ‘derived’ nature of Australian student movements’, especially the examples of SDS and Americanised radical culture alongside the May events in Paris. This trend is something notable in forms of protest, which as Gerster and Bassett relate, took the form of ‘demonstrations, vigils, strikes, folk concerts, marches, sit-downs or teach-ins, almost all based on forms of protest developed in the United States’. Consequently, not only were Australian student radicals divorced from their own national context, but their reliance on a cacophony of international influences saw them unable to locate their radicalism in a particular spatial dimension, let alone create a productive dialogue between global ideas or events and local realities.

The national context was however one of great importance. As Phillip and Roger Bell explain in their work, Implicated, ‘close parallels’ between the American and Australian examples ‘do not necessarily imply direct imitation’, with the authors highlighting the importance of local factors in the absorption of American radical ideas and sensibilities. How this absorption took place is described

52 Jiggens, Rehearsals, 24.
54 Gerster and Bassett, Seizures of Youth, 35.
in an ASIO report, one of many commenting on Moratorium activity, where it is noted that overseas speakers had been invited to take part in a national anti-war conference in 1971. The report’s author warned that radical groups associated with the event ‘have close and developing links with radical and revolutionary organizations overseas’. This was, however, far from a process of direct imitation, but more accurately follows what Sean Scalmer has termed translation, the ‘sustained experimentation’ and discussion of protest or political techniques in new temporal localities, and eventually their ‘local adaption’.56 Thus, ASIO’s agents expressed their concern that allowing such overseas notables to visit ‘would facilitate this process as well as contribut[e] towards the development of new alliances and forms of revolutionary activity which, in their view, would be more relevant in the Australian environment’.57

So, while American protest models were popular in Australia, they were never absorbed wholesale, but rather as a mediation between the local and the global, as is made clear on the matter of conscription. Forced military service in Australia, whereby youths not considered mature enough to vote or consume alcohol could be conscripted to fight in Indochina, invoked memories of Australia’s earlier struggles against conscription as well as helped to elucidate anti-draft activism, which in its form (and the term itself) borrowed heavily from America. As York relates, the ‘commentariat’s’ deterritorialisation of Australia’s sixties ‘blind[s] them to the centrally important political catalyst within Australia…the National Service Act (including a clause obligating the ‘principal officers of educational institutions’ to supply information about their students) which, upon its introduction in 1966 ‘marked a turning-point in campus-activism’.58 Andrew Blunden, one of the first conscripts to burn his registration papers, notes how that pivotal year, ‘the 50th anniversary of the 1916 anti-conscription fight’, gave activists the chance to speak at commemorative meetings, and to engage with older Australians who

56 Scalmer, Dissent Events, 29. Though a sociological work, Scalmer’s book provides a number of theoretical innovations in mapping the circulation and flow of activist ideas across borders.
58 York, Student Revolt, 8.
had memories of that divisive period. Draft resistance became a key part of the anti-war movement, with locally attuned publications emerging to guide prospective resisters in how and what to do, and underground networks established to allow for the hiding of objectors from the authorities.

If conscription allowed for the localised growth of a large radical movement, then Australia’s position as ‘one of the most heavily censored western societies’ provided additional encouragement. Activist reactions to this particularly vociferous regime, headed by men in their eighties, took the form of publications like Richard Neville’s *Oz* as well as the retailing of banned books, posters and magazines in radical bookshops. John Percy recalls in his memoir that items including the pamphlet *How not to join the Army*—an American publication which provided advice call-up avoidance ranging from faked injuries to making a pass at commanding officers—and ‘pornographic’ Beardsley prints resulted in multiple, highly publicised, police raids on Resistance’s Third World Bookshop, managed by Bob Gould. In Brisbane, repression could be even more severe. The Red and Black Bookshop, set up by student group Society for Democratic Action, was constantly under threat of raids, with police making regular ‘visits’ and seizing posters, including

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60 Manuals included the locally produced Downdraft: A Draft Resister’s Manual (Highett, Vic.: Draft Resisters Union, 1971), while the complex and dangerous process of hiding resisters, sometimes by ferrying them out of the country, is noted in Hyde, *All along the watchtower*, 66-71.
62 As Neville noted in his memoirs, ‘Our own prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies, was seventy, the NSW state premier, Mr Heffron, was seventy-three, the chairman of the literary censorship board was eighty-one and his equivalent on the appeals board was eighty-four. The chancellor of Sydney University was in his nineties. A few tycoons were so ancient they refused to list their names in *Who’s Who*. In *Nation*, the writer Geoffrey Dutton contrasted this grim gerontocracy with the vibrant image of our country overseas, bounding from triumphs in the tennis court to bulldozing another million acres or two of virgin bush. In reality, “youth in Australia controls nothing but the teenage gramophone record business”, and not even that.’ Neville, *Hippie Hippie Shake*, 32-3.
one advocating the arrest of Jesus Christ as a political agitator. These are just a few examples of the many overreactions by state and federal police which helped to frame Australia’s sixties, from the restrictions on street protests which ignited Brisbane’s 1967 civil liberties campaign to the often petty harassment of activist communities by state Special Branches.

Ross opines that it is not only this national perspective which is lost in the deterritorialising of sixties activism, but also concrete international developments:

The ersatz internationalism of the picture of the 1960s—a “Planetary Generation of Libertarian Revolt” [is] built as well upon the forgetting of the one international dimension that indeed united insurrections in Japan, France, the United States, Germany, and elsewhere, namely, the critique of American imperialism and that nation’s war in Vietnam.

Indeed, the war in Indochina, and Australia’s complicity, can be seen as the thread connecting all the cases analysed thus far. It was the one great unifier, bringing together black and white activists, the young and old, political radicals and cultural bohemians, and its importance cannot be overstated. Not only did it fire the passions of hundreds of thousands in vocal opposition, it also laid the foundations for the ‘New Social Movements’ of the 1970s, with women’s and Indigenous activists locating their struggles as tied to that of the Vietnamese against colonial subjugation. One of the earliest pamphlets of Australia’s Women’s Liberation Movement, distributed at a 1969 anti-war rally, declared that ‘[t]he same powerful class of business tycoons who profit from women’s cheap labour [and] who pressure women to pay them high prices for cheaply made goods…is leading the war in Vietnam’. Similar frames of reference fired radical Indigenous activists, who imagined themselves as part of the global third world revolution that the war in South-East Asia exemplified:

64 Details of this can be found in Connie Healy, ‘Radical Bookshops’, in Raymond Evans and Carole Ferrier, Radical Brisbane: an unruly history (Melbourne: Vulgar Press, 2004), 198-205.
66 Women's Liberation Group, Only the chains have changed (Sydney, WLG, 1969), 1.
I know that Vietnam is not our war. I know further that it is dirty politics that puts us there and continues to leave us there. The same dirty politics that suppresses the Aborigine, the same filthy politics that kept him suppressed for two hundred years, the same politics that will decry Black Power and its advocates.  

Ignoring Vietnam in favour of ‘the prefiguration of an ‘emancipatory’ counterculture, a metaphysics of desire and liberation’, is then emblematic of the colossal forgetting which can be seen as characterising popular memorialisation of the loosely defined decade.

Conclusion, or how not to remember a rebellious decade

The sixties are one of the most contested historical periods of modern times. As Frederic Jameson postulates, it seems that ‘nostalgic commemorations of the glories of the 60s or abject public confession of the decade’s many failures and missed opportunities are two errors that cannot be avoided by some middle path that threads its way in between’. These divergent approaches, equally erroneous, coexist in popular memorialisation of the sixties in Australia—with a stripped down, cultural and youthful narrative of events publicly celebrated, while the decade’s political aspects are either wilfully ignored or written off as irrelevant, sycophantic narcissism. This mythologisation is then an ideological operation par excellence. It succeeds not only in playing down the importance of sixties radicalism—confining it to a safe, cultural rebellion—but works to convince moderns that our current world of lifestyle capitalism and the unbridled compulsion to ‘enjoy’ is its logical apogee. Through the lowering of what can be said about the sixties to a few tropes and phrases, the decade’s events, struggles and outcomes are stripped of

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69 Frederic Jameson, ‘Periodising the 60s’, in *The 60s Without Apology*, eds. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 178.
70 Ideology here carries its Marxist meaning, the ‘representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’: the means through which dominant ideas are represented not only as correct, but in fact eternal. Quoted in Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971 [1969]), 127.
their broader context and constructed as a laughable parody of themselves. As Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek states, ‘the lesson of ’68 is then “goodbye Mr Socialism,” and the true revolution that of digital capitalism—itself the logical consequence, indeed the “truth,” of the ’68 revolt’.  

It is vital for historians to challenge such ahistorical excursions down memory lane. The role of the historian as public (or perhaps, to use Gramsci’s term, organic) intellectual seems to be vital here, for while much work has been done in the United States and Europe to unearth the everyday realities of sixties movements, scholarship in Australia is lacklustre and incomplete, to say the least. A properly historical account must bring together both the memories of former activists as well as the contemporary sources and documents ‘written in the white heat of the moment’, as Ross poetically describes them, not merely as some antiquarian fancy, but as a firmly restorative exercise. Memoirs, which can be self-serving and aimed at solidifying one’s radical “cred” (Richard Neville springs to mind), act as a means of presenting a personal version of history and bashing one’s former political opponents (with Percy’s work emblematic of this), or both, are indeed problematic. However, they can still provide us with a different narrative to that of popular opinion, thus rescuing the sixties from the condescension of posterity and enlivening it as a firmly political, universal event—one which united young and old, cultural and political, as well as national and international concerns within a paradigm of dynamic social change and revolt.

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71 Slavoj Žižek, _First as Tragedy, Then as Farce_ (London: Verso, 2009), 55.  
72 Ross, _May ’68 and its afterlives_, 8.