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# ‘The triumph of green hearts over sere’: reflections on student radicalism at Sydney University in the 1910s and the 1960s’

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# ‘The triumph of green hearts over sere’: reflections on student radicalism at Sydney University in the 1910s and the 1960s’

## **Abstract**

At the end of the paper I sketch an argument for considering these two periods together, but I want to begin on a personal note. For some time I’ve been writing about left intellectuals in the early twentieth century, one of whom is Gordon Childe, and in the course of researching his undergraduate years at Sydney University between 1911 and 1913 I made a couple of interesting discoveries about student radicalism. I discovered the existence of a University Socialist Society in 1910 and 1911, a fact that nullified Alan Barcan’s claim in his book, *Radical Students*, that political clubs did not appear in Australian universities until after the First World War. Incidentally, this society also fails to get a mention in the University’s official histories. I discovered also that in 1911 the undergraduates threatened to strike, and that a group of students, while acting as ‘volunteers’ to break a gas strike in 1913, were beaten up by a gang of working class youths. Neither of these facts appears in Cliff Turney’s chapter in volume one of *Australia’s First – A History of the University of Sydney*.

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## **‘The triumph of green hearts over sere’: reflections on student radicalism at Sydney University in the 1910s and the 1960s’**

*Terry Irving*

*[This is a paper I was asked to present to the History of University Life seminar at the University of Sydney on 23 October 2013. It contains some contemporary references that do not apply outside the occasion.]*

### **Why have I chosen these two periods?**

At the end of the paper I sketch an argument for considering these two periods together, but I want to begin on a personal note. For some time I’ve been writing about left intellectuals in the early twentieth century, one of whom is Gordon Childe, and in the course of researching his undergraduate years at Sydney University between 1911 and 1913 I made a couple of interesting discoveries about student radicalism. I discovered the existence of a University Socialist Society in 1910 and 1911, a fact that nullified Alan Barcan’s claim in his book, *Radical Students*, that political clubs did not appear in Australian universities until after the First World War. Incidentally, this society also fails to get a mention in the University’s official histories. I discovered also that in 1911 the undergraduates threatened to strike, and that a group of students, while acting as ‘volunteers’ to break a gas strike in 1913, were beaten up by a gang of working class youths. Neither of these facts appears in Cliff Turney’s chapter in volume one of *Australia’s First – A History of the University of Sydney*.

As for the 1960s, the convener of this seminar, Alan Atkinson has indicated to me that this audience would be interested in the Free University. They say if you can remember the 1960s, then you weren’t there. Well, I *was* there and I am having difficulty recalling why I was one of the founders of that well-studied experiment. Was it that I could not raise the fare to San Francisco for the 1967 ‘Summer of Love’? Was it because, after a period of political quietism while writing a thesis I needed to re-activate my ASIO file, put aside but not forgotten by the spooks after I left the Communist Party a few years before? (Seriously: my ASIO file *does* include entries referring to the Free U.) Then I realized that memory was not my only resource for this paper, as I could rely on the archives of the Free U, which are now taking up a good metre of shelf space in my storeroom, for I am the poor sod whose task it was to rescue them. So, I’ve immersed myself in those yellowing records over the past few weeks, and I’ve even brought along a few today for ‘show and tell’.

### **The University Socialist Society rises above partisan politics**

In April 1910, thirty graduates and undergraduates met on the eve of the federal elections with the intention of establishing the University Socialist Society. The conservatives downtown were shocked. The next day, while the voters shifted to the left, and Andrew Fisher looked forward to leading his second Labor government, the *Sydney Morning Herald* called the formation of a socialist club at the University, ‘The Last Straw’.

The University Socialists preferred a different metaphor. In 1910, one of their speakers published a book called *The Rising Tide – An Exposition of Australian Socialism*. The author was the geologist, Harald Jensen, whose doctorate in science with University Medal was awarded in 1908. By 1911 he was a popular member of the State Executive of the Labor Party, and a natural choice to deliver an address on ‘Work and Wages’ to the University Socialist Society, of which he was probably a member. Jensen’s book argued that Darwinian evolutionary theory justified the Labor Party’s strategy for achieving socialism through a policy of gradual reforms. According to Jensen, in *The Descent of Man* Darwin ‘distinctly maintained that in the human species the fittest consist of the bravest, the most intelligent, and the most self-sacrificing, for these are of the greatest value to the race.’ This version of social darwinism was not unusual on the left, but Jensen’s scientific credentials gave it a rare authority.

The members also heard a speaker from a Marxist organisation, the International Socialists, attack the Labor Party as ‘a mere collection of wolves in sheep’s clothing, who sigh for the flesh-pots of capitalism, and exploit the workers for the purpose of keeping the ministerial benches warm.’ According to an unsigned report in *Hermes*, this statement elicited less adverse reaction from the audience than did his criticism of compulsory military training. Labor’s politicians might be fallible, but its program – nationalist and progressive – had to be defended. So, as the world’s first majority socialist government set to work – with Jensen as a Commonwealth employee, surveying for minerals in the Northern Territory and advising Fisher to take the mines into public ownership – these middle class University Socialists thought they were catching the tide of the future.

But what part would the Labor party play in this future? The University Socialists had adopted a set of principles, and what is remarkable about ‘the creed’ (as they called it) is that it omitted to mention the Labor party. That must have been deliberate, given the party’s recent electoral advances. However, the creed also omitted to mention Labor’s rival, the Liberal Party. The palpable was more attractive than partisan politics and specific policies, it seems.

The creed opened by affirming, in religious fashion, some fundamental truths: the organic nature of society and its historical continuity. Similarly, in the second article reformers were warned that they wasted their time if they meddled with the nature of man. With these two beliefs the members signalled that they were not going to contemplate ideas about structural contradictions in society, the necessity of revolutionary ruptures, or the historical relativism of morals and human nature. Then, in a gesture towards ‘new liberalism’, the third belief was enunciated: that the good society should balance the fullest expression of individual needs with the best interests of the organic whole. The fourth showed the radical edge of new liberalism: that some class distinctions were good (those based on ‘social and moral worth’) while others needed to be eliminated (those based on birth, wealth and occupation). Then the creed enters completely new territory: the good society would be governed by the principle, which we would call communist and masculinist: from each according to his capacity and to each according to his needs. Finally the sixth article puts some economic flesh on

these principles: the members rejected private monopolies but welcomed public monopolies that contributed to the welfare of all.

Such was the 'creed' of the University Socialists, a group of young intellectuals moving from conventional Christianity to ethical socialism, via new liberalism's political philosophy of government action for social amelioration. State socialism, the revolutionary vanguard, workers' control, proletarian culture: these and other shibboleths of the Left never got a mention.

### **The undergraduates threaten to strike - and win**

This was before the 1912 Act that reformed the University. In 1911 it was ruled by a gerontocracy: the Chancellor was 75 and the average age of Fellows of Senate was 60. The Fellows were not representative either of staff and students or of the regional and economic interests of the State. Its impact on the educational culture of the State was minimal because of its cautious approach to 'extension' classes for full-time, un-matriculated workers in Sydney and country towns. It drew on a restricted constituency for its students (my estimate is less than one percent of young men and women between the ages of 20 and 24 were enrolled), and provided just a few bursaries for school leavers who could not afford its fees.

Radical intellectuals deplored the University's failure to join the democratising tendencies of the age; its disgruntled students felt unable, as *Hermes* put it in July 1911, foreshadowing the student power rhetoric of the 1960s, to 'share in the management of themselves'.

The root cause of student disaffection was this desire for self-government. *Hermes* is full of examples. It reported in December 1910 that evening students faced peculiar difficulties (for example, anomalies relating to course equivalences), which the Evening Students Association was 'strenuously' trying to remove through discussions with the Government, having decided unanimously that it would be futile to approach the Senate. In 1911 the lead article in *Hermes* complained of a 'want of sympathy, if not actual hostility, which the governing body ... has consistently showed towards the undergraduates'. The students were especially aggrieved by 'the iniquitous anomalies of the curriculum' that Senate had been 'cajoled into passing and retaining'. The leaders of the Undergraduates Association as a result were 'most emphatically asserting their right to representation on the Senate'. Now, with University reform 'in the air', *Hermes* was hoping for change, 'the triumph of green hearts over sere'.

Meanwhile, outside the University, in all manner of workplaces, young workers were also challenging authority. We know there was a strike wave in Australia in the years leading up to the First World War, part of what *The Sydney Morning Herald* called in 1911 'The World's Unrest'. There were major set-piece confrontations between organized labour and employers in Broken Hill, Lithgow, Brisbane, the coal mining districts in New South Wales, as well as in Sydney. In 1913, when a group of about 30 student 'scabs' were beaten up outside the

*Herald* building by a mob of youths from the slums around the Kent Street gas works, this was during an 8 week industrial war.

What we don't appreciate is how much of this industrial activity was undertaken in defiance of labour leaders, or was the spontaneous rebellion of workers who were not unionized. I estimate that in 1913 as many non-unionists as unionists were disputing with employers. This atmosphere of insubordination was not confined to masculine blue-collar proletarians; soon other parts of the community were becoming stroppy. These atypical strikers included medical doctors, matrons, nurses, caddies at golf clubs, telephone exchange 'girls', the 'boys' who worked for local governments, musicians, and school teachers.

Moreover, in this defiant atmosphere, the meaning of the term, 'strike', was very elastic. Any form of protest involving a challenge to social custom or economic power was called a strike. When Methodist local preachers in rural Victoria were in dispute with their Church they were said to be on strike. In working class Wollongong bus customers who protested a fare rise by walking were called strikers. Bookmakers in Bathurst, negotiating with the Racing Club, were said to be on strike. In Auckland, players in a touring Sydney rugby league team threatened 'to strike' over the suspension of a team-mate, and in Wollongong the volunteer gunners in the local Artillery Corps, who resigned rather than attend repeated training sessions, were called strikers.

So, when students at the University in 1911 decided to threaten the Senate and the Professorial Board with a boycott of classes, this was of course 'a strike', one that we won't properly understand unless we contextualize it as part of a moment of radical democracy in the wider community. This was how it happened.

Since the 1890s (an earlier turbulent decade) the undergraduates had celebrated the annual Commemoration of Benefactors by a procession of satirical and jokey floats from the University to the Town Hall, where the official ceremony was held. It was an expression of saturnalia, when the world turned upside down for a moment as students laughed at their professors and the public saw politicians exposed to ridicule. Unruliness however was infectious. As we have seen, the newspapers were full of reports of 'outrages' against authority overseas, and Australia was in the midst of a strike wave.

In 1910 student rowdiness prevented the Chancellor finishing his speech at the official ceremony. Early in 1911 the city establishment was shocked that striking workers had made inflammatory speeches in Martin Place, the banking and commercial centre of the city. Something had to be done, to stop the spread of this infection and to avoid another humiliation of the Chancellor, and it was: in April 1911 the Senate not only banned the Commem procession but cancelled the official Town Hall ceremony. The Martin Place outrage was probably in the minds of the Fellows of Senate, because we know that Charles Wade, the former Liberal-Reform Premier of New South Wales reminded the students of it a few weeks later.

The reaction of the students was dramatic: for the first time in the University's history they directly challenged the structure of authority on campus. It began at

the next University Union debate where a motion was carried deploring the decision, the mover saying that the Senate 'was a body of hide-bound conservatives, whose ideas were not in keeping with progress, civilisation, or common sense.' Another speaker likened the Senate's decision to a Russian ukase. But the Senate stood firm, as the Tsar did at the start of the 1905 revolution. The Students' Association then defied the Senate by staging a replica of the official ceremony, in the Town Hall as usual, where Charles Wade addressed them, and they carried it off so successfully that the leader writer in *The Sydney Morning Herald* applauded them.

At about 10.00 a.m. on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1911, an old man was seen making an undignified rush down Hunter Street to the police station, with the derisive cheers of his tormentors following him. It was the Chancellor, Sir Normand MacLaurin, whose house on the ridge at 155 Macquarie Street was under siege by students. They sang:

What's the matter with our Commem today?  
 O, why has the mighty Sir Normand stayed away?  
 O, no one can speak for six hours or more,  
 Except our eloquent Chancellor.

For over an hour contingents of hooting students had arrived at number 155:

Then loads of wood and coal. Then the postman bought an extraordinary big mail. Then the telephone worked overtime. Streams of taxis passed and repassed, firing salutes as they got broadside on. At last Sir Normand MacLaurin felt that the joke had gone far enough. He determined to run the gauntlet, and bring reinforcements.

The police mobilized, cordoned off Macquarie Street and the demonstration was over.

But not the repercussions. Within a few days both the Professorial Board and the Senate met to consider how to punish the students responsible for the Chancellor's 'molestation', as Professor Tom Anderson Stuart called it. At the Board meeting he proposed that those responsible should be 'rusticated' for two years, i.e., suspended from their degree candidature. The Profs wisely rejected this, resolving instead to summons the committee of the Students' Association for an explanation on the following Friday. The Senate issued a similar summons. On Wednesday, at a meeting attended by one thousand students, called together by the Students' Association, the response was clear and militant: if any students were rusticated, the entire student body would strike for as long as the rustication continued. They voted to meet again on Friday to hear the decisions arrived at by the Board and the Senate. The *Sydney Morning Herald* predicted an angry demonstration if the University authorities decided to punish any students.

The city elite, through the *Herald*, counselled the Senate and the Professorial Board to 'take a mild and reasonable view', saying that the Students' Association ought not be held responsible for 'the temporary overflow of youthful spirits' outside the Chancellor's residence. Besides, any drastic reaction by the

authorities would leave a legacy of bitterness which might be dangerous in unsettled times. The advice was taken. On Saturday the *Herald* was able to report that the Commem affair had been 'smoothed over'. The Chancellor asked the Professors not to take any action in so far as anything affecting him was concerned, and the Chair of the Students' Association apologised to the Board for the songs lampooning the Chancellor. Next year the Senate allowed the Commem procession.

The students had won, and for much the same reasons as workers did when they prevailed in industrial disputes. The more adventurous among them had taken direct action; the greater part of them had supported the direct action by showing their determination at a subsequent mass meeting, and then they had escalated the dispute by threatening a mass strike if their grievance was not resolved.

### **The Free U has a history**

If the tide was coming in for the socialists of the 1910s, for the Australian radicals of the late 1960s it was a tidal wave, forced upwards into protest by the resistance of shortsighted, powerful men. The Free U was set up in late 1967, before this wave broke, and this is an important clue to understanding its birth and death. I shall be discussing the Free U not as an attempt to reform the University or radicalize knowledge but as a moment in the history of the student movement.

It was the failure of an episode of radical mobilization that had led to the setting up of the Free U. In 1966 radicals on campus opposed to the Viet Nam war and conscription formed a committee to campaign for a Labor victory in the federal elections, and when voters returned the conservative coalition with increased seats we were downcast. Then came the Humphreys Affair. It revived our spirits but punched us in the guts, because even when sit-ins and noisy demonstrations backed up our petitions and mass meetings, the Vice-Chancellor, his senior officers and the professoriate made no concessions. Library fines had been quadrupled without student or staff consultation, leaflets had been confiscated by University police, and the right of students to protest – a right 'as integral to academic custom as the freedom to publish work in an academic discipline' (these were Bob – now Raewyn - Connell's words in *Honi Soit* at the time) – was denied with savage retribution. The Students' Representative Council and the Staff Association worked together to prevent the worst of the savagery – the suspension of Max Humphreys from his candidature for a year – but it was clear, as the Staff Association wrote, that the Humphreys affair showed the undemocratic character of the University.

So, in the aftermath of the affair, there seemed little chance that the university authorities would open up its governance to students and non-professorial staff, or that university teachers would be allowed to take into account the experiences of students, thus acknowledging students as a valued part of 'the community of scholars'. In August 1967, when Rowan Cahill and I wrote to Raewyn Connell, Bob Scribner and a few others about setting up a Free University the mood among campus radicals was grim, and the student protest movement was at its nadir, as Ken Mansell's research shows.



So, we were elated by the strong response to our publicity in *Honi Soit* announcing our decision to go ahead. About fifty persons attended a series of meetings in the Gosper Room, and soon committees were clarifying ideals, suggesting courses, raising money, negotiating with the new Vice-Chancellor and publicizing the Free U. Who were they? By the time of the formal opening of the premises in Calder Street, there were 170 names on our enrolment forms. There was a 'faculty' of 19 convenors, mostly newly appointed tutors and lecturers, or post-graduate students aspiring to an academic career. We also attracted brief appearances for seminars and lectures from older and more established critical thinkers, including Norman Webb, Dick Thomson, Michael van Langenberg, Geoff Sorrell, Sol Encel, Peter Sculthorpe, Duncan Chappell, Peter Wertheim, Bill Ginnane, Eric Aarons and Alan Roberts. During the first year we held a successful three-day conference on poverty, a joint conference at Bundanoon with the Sydney Libertarians, and provided facilities for about twenty courses.

At the end of 1968 we left Calder Street for two larger premises, the old pub on the corner of Abercrombie and Shepherd streets, and the old manse of the Presbyterian Church on Oxford Street, Paddington. But there were signs of trouble ahead. In March 1969, only 97 members had paid in part or in full their enrolment fee of \$10.00, and when a census of course participants was taken in the week from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> of March less than half had attended courses in 1968. We were finding it difficult to achieve continuity of focus and activity, although there was a committed core of about twenty to thirty. Membership was churning, regular participation was declining, the original organizers were running out of steam, and the existence of two campuses showed not growing strength but a disorienting diffuseness in the activities of the Free U.

In fact, by January 1969 the Free U had evolved into something that the founders had not expected. We had thought of it as a proper university, working at the same intellectual level as existing universities, but with a number of distinguishing features. As our manifesto, 'The Lost Ideal', expressed them: Free U would study issues and subjects frozen out of the regular curriculum; it would break down the division between students and staff; it would be based on co-operation not competition; and it would experiment with teaching methods.

At the same time it was clear to us that we were driven by something besides educational experimentation and at first we called it a desire for community. The idea was nebulous. Of course it had an educational reference, as in the phrase, 'the community of scholars', but really we were reaching for a way to describe, in George Orwell's words when he encountered the revolution in Barcelona, the 'strange and moving experience' of doing something new, of thumbing our nose at authority, of having an intense feeling of collective joy, and of working as a group. Our official Constitution described Free U as a 'community of interested people involved in all the forms of its existence'. In 'Inside the Free U' Raewyn Connell wrote about the strong common feeling that was an essential part of making Free U work, and in an April 1968 article in *Outlook* I over-egged the cake by describing the creation of this community as Free U's greatest achievement.

As it turned out, these experiences were simply part of the euphoric moment of genesis. Free U never became a community; it was too diverse in composition and purpose for that. And it was changing.

The main impetus for the change came from outside. During 1968, inspired by events in London, Paris and Prague the New Left in Australia embarked on more dramatic forms of mobilization. At the same time, government agencies and corporations were exploiting the attraction of the counter-culture to young people who would otherwise been caught up in generational revolt. Inside the Free U we soon felt the effects. There were two lines of criticism: first, suggestions that we should have closer links with the student movement and left organizations, and second, calls for 'creative live-ins' and courses on personal relations. While Raewyn Connell continued to emphasize that radical thinking at Free U should centre on education, in practice our thinking was increasingly framed by the discourses of the wider radical movement and the youth culture.

And yet honesty demanded that we could not ignore our own failures. Reflecting on the experiences of our first year, we decided that many problems arose because we could not nurture a common feeling of commitment and understanding so long as our program had to consist of a small number of courses with small enrolments meeting on different days of the week. There was just not enough inter-action. This meant, as Margaret Jolly wrote in the *Free U – A Journal of the Free University*, not only that we could never get a clear picture of the experiences and findings of courses but also that we were weakened in our capacity to use inter-action to encourage the spirit of student ownership of courses. The unfortunate truth was that there was still too much student passivity in some courses. The other side of the coin, as she pointed out, was an elitism in Free U, in particular a cult of personality around Connell and Irving. And so inevitably there was disengagement in the mass and a waning of enthusiasm in the elite.

By the end of 1968 we knew that the unconventional courses and the ideal of education through participation would not sustain the Free U for another year. On Sunday nights a core group of about 25 would gather to eat together and make decisions, but their energies were soon sapped by the continual need to address the tasks of administering the joint: record-keeping, networking, publicizing, typing and duplicating, to say nothing of cleaning and fund-raising. The rent on the premises at Calder Street had to be paid, but the terrace house was too small to permit of sub-tenanting or running a coffee shop. So inevitably our thoughts turned to bigger premises. Sub-letting to a few participants seemed the easiest way to cover overheads, and the presence of live-in students also promised a way to 'provide continuity of action and direction', as well as a constituency for the full-time courses that seemed so necessary for sustained involvement in social action in the surrounding suburbs, or for 'experimental work in human relations' (a.k.a. social action on each other). And so the decision was taken to rent the old pub and the old manse.

By the time planning began for the 1968-9 Summer Session the effects of these pressures and problems were being felt in both the curriculum and the form of our classes. The activist ethos of the student movement, that had seemed so

depleted when we set up Free U, and that we had hoped to side step by making an educational revolution along side other contingents of New Left activists, was now back in our thinking with a vengeance. A leaflet for the Summer Session 1968-9 announced that Free U would be co-operating with student groups at Sydney University and UNSW 'in preparation for next year's student action'. It went on: 'Many Free University members have argued that there has been too much talk and not enough action: hence the Research and Action Projects. The summer session will push further some of the issues raised in the student movement this year – the failure of democracy in Australia; student power in the universities; the possibility of grass-roots social action; Vietnam and Australia's role in Asia'. Among the projects suggested were: community organizing in Redfern; working with Aboriginal bodies to produce research and community building; and strategies and proposals for reforming the mass university. These projects would build on courses in 1968 on poverty, aboriginal history, and students in the mass university, but it was clear that they were taking the Free U more in the direction of a social movement organisation than an educational counter-institution.

In fact the first *Free U Newsletter* for 1969 began with an essay that seemed like a new manifesto. It began, 'The Free University of Redfern and Paddington has no bosses and has no workers, has no staff and has no students, has no Administration and alas no bureaucracy. It does have a lot of people who through courses and activities are attempting to understand themselves and their society.' And then followed five 'concepts of a Free University' that had emerged over the previous 12 months of operation of Free U. This was startling: we had begun with one concept but now we had *five*. What were they? The first was familiar: the community of scholars, described as 'groups of scholars all directly involved in the learning process'. Ditto, the second concept, which was described as our initial approach, 'the radical educational experiment', of learning in an unstructured situation that had given Free U its form. Now however it was antiquated. Now it needed to become wider, moving out from the course as traditionally understood to encompass human relations experiments and research and action projects. Third (and closely related to the second) was 'the attraction of individual courses ... that could not be studied elsewhere'. Some examples were given: drugs, mass media, class and power, Vietnam. Through these unconventional topics students were introduced to the general experience of participating in the Free U. Fair enough, but then came concepts four and five. Number four was 'radical politics', described as 'the unity of theory and action: between the nihilist bomb-thrower and armchair strategist lies the research and action project'. Number five was 'existential humanism', described as a belief that places the freedom of the individual at the centre of creativity and purpose.

As I see it today, numbers four and five took Free U into territory not envisaged by its founders, and number five was particularly difficult to accept. It shifted the focus from the structure to the agent. It was saying, unless we change the way individuals communicate and interact with each other we won't be able to create a free educational community, let alone a new society. Up at the manse, the live-in Free Uers were entranced by this one-sided emphasis, the popularity of their

human relations course built on exercises in sensory awareness and the formation of encounter groups.

By March 1969 it was evident that Free U was in crisis, squeezed between the student movement and the counter-culture. What was to be done? One response, in the words of David Taylor in *Free U Journal*, was to pin our salvation on developing 'a warm and creative and tolerant and stimulating culture, and developing friendships'. Nice sentiment, but not very insightful. It was a response that ignored the need for purposive action around which such a culture might develop; and by the time David made this suggestion the idea of our purpose was confused. So Raewyn Connell tried to bring us back to what Free U *did*, and how it might find a way to *act* in the future. Her strategy for doing this was to limit the distracting influence of the student power movement on us, by looking for stronger allies. While acknowledging that Free U was a product of the student movement, sharing its interest in 'collective democracy' and its culture of spontaneity and humour, it was different in a major way from the student movement. Our experiment did not attempt to 'produce effects by direct action' on other institutions. Rather, Free U attempted 'to create change by setting up a working model of what the institution should be'. Free U was one of the revolutionary movement's 'pilot projects for the new society'. As such, its continued existence depended on moving beyond 'student consciousness' into 'something deeper and more formidable', and developing 'programs of action which students share with others.'

This advice was right in principle. Alas we lacked the resources and connections to put it into practice. In mid 1969 the leases on the manse and the pub were given up.

In retrospect, it is just as well that Free U was not alive a year later, for it would have been disrupted, perhaps fatally, by the emergence of the women's movement. In truth, Free U was a very blokey institution – as an institution. There were plenty of young women around: in 1968 40 percent of the enrollees were young women, and they did most of the typing and administrative work. But in 1968 there was only one course with a female convenor and in 1969 there were only three. As one of those 1969 courses was convened by Ann Curthoys, who became a prominent member of the Sydney Women's Liberation Group in 1970, it is pretty clear in retrospect that Free U would have been a legitimate and deserving target for the struggle against sexism in left-wing organizations.

The (male) radical founders of Free U could only imagine an alternative form of university education because we could take advantage of a brief lull in the pulsing political contention of the sixties. By 1969 that short period of relative calm was over, succeeded by confrontations on the streets, on building sites, and in universities. At the same time, radical women were learning how to do their own consciousness-raising, and the counter-culture was drawing many young people away from collective struggle into self-centred conformism at best or drugs at worst. Faced with the challenges of direct action, second wave feminism, and personal liberation, when radical energies were being diverted to other channels, the Free U disappeared.

But its ideals – to build a knowledge that can help people to act, through self-managed education and people teaching each other - have not. The Occupy Movement of 2011, when young people once again learnt that ‘they had to go back – to listening and thinking and being vivid together – before they could go forward’ was, as JoAnn Wypijewski said in *CounterPunch* recently, ‘a school to study power’. In Sydney, the Occupy Free School held its classes in Martin Place; in Melbourne the Free University, meeting in inner city cafés and bars, is now three years old. The ideals of free education might as ancient as Socrates but today they are needed more than ever as university administrators and privately-owned curriculum providers conspire to foist Massive Open Online Courses on tomorrow’s students. Indeed, wherever people are organizing to free themselves from the tyranny of corporate neo-liberalism and its global economic and ecological crises there comes a moment when they realize the need to liberate knowledge as well.

### **Conclusion**

The subtitle of my paper today may well have been, ‘Before and after the Old Left’, not just because Barcan’s book, which covers the intervening decades, has as its subtitle ‘The Old Left at Sydney University’ (for he has written a shorter sequel about the New Left) but because by identifying radicalism with the Old Left we are inclined to miss some things and exaggerate others.

The Old Left comprised the Labor Party and its union affiliates, the Communist Party, and that long left tradition of using the state to bring about socialism. It coincided with a period in the history of parliamentary democracy when representative government depended on mass parties to mobilize and express the opposing interests of society. In that period it was characteristic of students to form political clubs, in alliance with or in imitation of the parties that anchored the ship of state, and if they were radical students to favour the parties that promised to bring the working class on board. That period has passed, and political philosophy is once again able to critique the state, and radical history is able to detect actors who were not male industrial workers, including democrats whose battleground was not the state but the community, the workplace, the school or the university.

### **A Note on Sources**

I shall be depositing shortly in the University of Sydney Archives the records of the Free University, consisting of correspondence, publications, enrolments and census forms, photographs, and material produced by its courses and conferences, together with published and unpublished material concerned with it at the time or later. Unfortunately the best thesis on the Free U, Geoffrey Manion’s ‘The Free University of Sydney’ (B.A. Honours, 1979) was destroyed in a thoughtless act of administrative vandalism by the University of Sydney Library to save space. Ken Mansell however has sent me his unpublished account of the New Left in Sydney, containing his detailed account of the Humphreys Affair and the Free U, drawing on Manions’s thesis, which I will also add to the Free U deposit. *Honi Soit* on 27 April 1967 carried Raewyn (Bob) Connell’s ‘The

Berkeley Complex' and a chronology of the Humphreys Affair. The Free U manifesto, 'The Lost Ideal' (by Rowan Cahill, Bob Connell, Brian Freeman, Terry Irving, Bob Scribner) can be accessed here:

<http://www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/bib/PR0000502.htm>

Chapter 9 by W.F. Connell in *Australia's First – A History of the University of Sydney, Volume 2, 1940-1990* edited by Connell, G.E. Sherington, B.H. Fletcher, C. Turney and U. Bygott (1995) contains a balanced account of the Free U and its part in the radicalization of thinking and democratization of governance in the University. There are also thoughtful discussions of Free U in Chapter 3 ('Knowledge and Revolution, 1967-75') of Hannah Forsyth's Ph.D. thesis, 'The Ownership of Knowledge in Higher Education in Australia 1939-1996' (University of Sydney, 2012), and in Megan Jones Ph.D. thesis, 'Remembering Academic Feminism' (University of Sydney, 2002). Alan Barcan's *From New Left to Factional Left – Fifty Years of Student Activism at Sydney University* (2011) contains a short, second-hand and trivializing discussion. Barcan's *Radical Students – The Old Left at Sydney University* (2002) similarly focuses on personalities, but it provides a valuable survey of organizations and publications. It begins only in the 1920s. The years up to World War 2 are treated in *Australia's First – A History of the University of Sydney, Volume 1, 1850-1939* (1991), edited by Clifford Turney, Ursula Bygott and Peter Chippendale.

The story of the University Socialist Society can be followed in the University magazine, *Hermes*, in May 1910, December 1910 and July 1911, and there is an account of the inaugural meeting in *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 13 April 1910. Jensen's book, *The Rising Tide* was published in Sydney by *The Worker Trustees*, (1909).

Undergraduate disaffection with the University Senate can be followed in *Hermes* December 1910, May 1911, and *SMH* 18 May 1911. The date of *SMH* leader on world unrest is 9 September 1911. For the turbulence during the gas strike, and the attack on student scabs, see *SMH* 5, 6, 7, and 8 March 1913.

The Commem affair and threatened student strike can be followed in *SMH* 2 May 1910, 22 April 1911, 15 May 1911, 18 May 1911 and 20 May 1911.

Writings on radical democracy and the critique of the state that I draw on are: Sheldon S. Wolin, 'Fugitive Democracy', *Constellations*, Vol 1, no. 1, 1994, 11-25; C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London, 1996; Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State – Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, Polity Press, 2011, especially the appendix on Claude Lefort and 'savage democracy'.

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