Review: 'Disobedience: the University as a Site of Political Potential

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Abstract
The radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and related student insurgency, is still largely uncharted territory when it comes to Australian history. There is a small body of scholarly research comprising theses, book chapter, journal articles, and an equally small number of relevant books. To my knowledge only one book, by Mick Armstrong (2001), attempts to survey and grapple with the entire period, its politics and complexities; in 114 pages, this is a brief but useful contribution.

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Review: Disobedience: the University as a Site of Political Potential

By Rowan Cahill

The radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and related student insurgency, is still largely uncharted territory when it comes to Australian history. There is a small body of scholarly research comprising theses, book chapters, journal articles, and an equally small number of relevant books. To my knowledge, only one book, by Mick Armstrong (2001), attempts to survey and grapple with the entire period, its politics and complexities; in 114 pages, this is a brief but useful contribution.

That said, there is, to date, no major book-length study. For the most part the ‘authority’ is the Gerster and Bassett popular/scholarly account Seizures of Youth (1991). This reduces the period to imitative politics copied from U.S. roots in youthful angst and growing pains, and essentially a fad. Earlier, discussion by Donald Horne in Time of Hope (1980) characterised the period in terms of permissive self-indulgence and romanticism. Both accounts have significantly influenced general understandings of the period, rendering it in terms of psychologism and emasculating its politics and challenges.

It is refreshing, therefore, to welcome the publication of Disobedience: the University as a Site of Political Potential by the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA). This book, actually an exhibition catalogue, is jointly the work of artist Emily Floyd, and historian Ken Mansell. Floyd’s contribution relates to her sculpture titled “This place will always be open 2012”, the inaugural Ian Potter Sculpture Court Commission by MUMA. Coloured photographs on the cover and front pages of the book document this large outdoor artwork.

The bulk of the book is devoted to “The Yeast is Red”, the 1994 Master’s thesis by Mansell dealing with, and discussing, the politics and culture of radical Monash University students during the 1960s and 1970s; their off-campus centre “The Bakery”, provides the spatial base for the study. A participant in some of the history recorded/discussed, Mansell includes “diary” style recollections of the time in his text, thus enlivening and giving immediacy to his scholarship. Overall, Mansell’s account is an example of spatial discourse. It provides the background and context for Floyd’s artwork—the idea/l of the university as a political and cultural site, and generator of ideas and activism.

Mansell’s focus on one site of 1960s/70s radicalism is not insular; he also explains and examines national and international contexts, influences, and effects. However, the one-site focus enables Mansell to establish and demonstrate two points which, in historiographic terms, I consider more important than the account itself. Mansell criticises those commentators and historians, essentially conservatives, who “trash” the sixties, a trashing enabled by the paucity to date of detailed examination of the period. Such examination, which is the point of Mansell’s Monash focus, requires a state-by-state, site-by-site, examination of radicalism. While there was a national surge of radicalism at the time, it was, in local terms, diverse in its origins, manifestations, tactics, and the issues focussed on. This point is also evident in the work of education historian Alan Barcan in his two book-length studies of twentieth century student radicalism at Sydney University (2002, 2011).

Further, as Mansell points out, the radicalism of the period was very much a print-based radicalism, producing a tsunami of leaflets, bulletins, newsletters, theoretical journals, underground newspapers, enabled initially by the gestetner, later revolutionised by offset print technology. According to Mansell, and I concur, too much commentary has relied on the mass media of the day for “research” materials, when the nature of the radicalism was such that much of the intellectual, creative, and challenging endeavour and action took place away from the glare of media attention, the media tending to target set-piece dramatics, like demonstrations, marches, protests and the like.

What Mansell does in his study is demonstrate the extent of this tsunami of ephemera in the context of one radical site, establish its importance, and show how it can be used. Twenty-one pages of endnotes, necessarily set in a smaller type face than the text of the book to accommodate the detail, attest to the richness of these sources. In effect, Mansell’s one-site study models what a book-length study of the radicalism of the period could, and should, be like. Highly recommended.

Disobedience: the University as a Site of Political Potential is available for purchase for $20 from the Monash University Museum of Art: