

Sniffing the Zeitgeist

Winter 2019

Kopkind, Presente!

And so we complete the 20th anniversary of Kopkind's summer sessions – with new friends, aroused thoughts and reminders of the ties that bind us, in life and death.

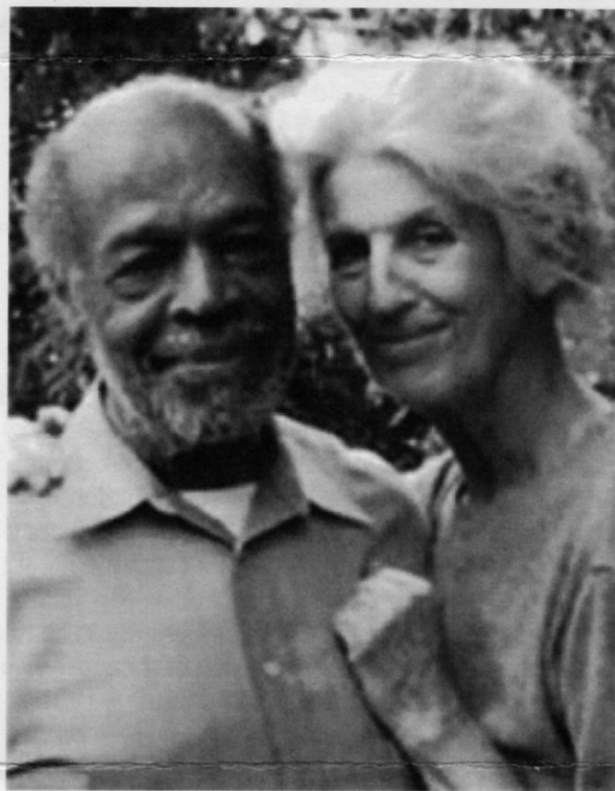
On October 31, 2019, one of the great figures of 20th century freedom struggles exited his mortal coil.

Jack O'Dell is perhaps most well noted as one of two civil rights workers whose prior association with the Communist Party so vexed the Kennedy administration in 1963 that not only a Justice Department functionary, and not only Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, but the president himself button-holed Martin Luther King, Jr., to say King had a problem. It was the Kennedys who had the problem, of course, but their problem became a threat. When King related those conversations to his inner circle, Jack, who was then organizing voter registration out of Atlanta and fundraising out of New York, said the movement was too important to risk, and he resigned from the SCLC.

You can read that story in books, but it was far from the most important story Jack told when he and his wife, Jane Power, came to Kopkind in 2004, along with co-mentors Rabab Abdulhadi and Jaime Veve. The theme of that year's camp was "Cultures of Resistance", and the object was to explore histories of "our side", particularly the interconnections between domestic liberation movements, anticolonial struggles and class politics. I had asked Jack to lead one seminar talking about social movements and socialism. One bright morning he did just that, taking us on a journey around the world. For three hours he toggled between the political and the personal, dispelling any notions that the modern black struggle could be confined within the borders of time or nation state or racial disparity alone.

Jack had been a mariner, part of the Merchant Marine, the only integrated force during World War II, and a member of the National Maritime Union, which, a rarity among unions, rejected Jim Crow. He was a young seafarer, reading dangerous, illuminating books in ships' quarters; part of an international working class, visiting international ports, observing particular conditions and assessing them within the whole of his experience, seeing everywhere "states of indignity, dispossession

and disposability"; sensing in postwar anticolonial sentiment the emergence of "a new period of world behavior" of which the civil rights movement would be a part: what he would later call, in *Freedomways* magazine, "the struggle of the unrepresented against an oligarchy of despotism". Jack sniffed the *Zeitgeist*.



Jack O'Dell and Jane Power

He was a communist, leafletting on the docks of New Orleans, active in the CIO's Operation Dixie to organize the South; following the works and trials of Paul Robeson; feeling the hot breath of the witch hunt, which infected his own union; finally deciding that mass action was more likely to end segregation before it would achieve socialism, so he quit the party and joined in civil rights organizing. When he spoke of that latter, storied phase he used first names – Martin and Bayard and Sammy (whom he called up about doing a fundraising concert, maybe at a high school in Long Island, but Sammy talked to Frank and they thought, maybe Carnegie Hall). Jack was not implying some culminat-

ing importance of the 1960s. He was talking about his life, charting political currents from the 1940s into the 1960s, helping us to understand, in those flows, some essentials about the world that was turning dramatically—striving, as C.L.R. James wrote of Melville, to “contain within his single self, at one and the same time, the whole history of the past, the most significant experiences of the world around him, and a clear vision of the future”.

It was his indispensable introduction. We would speak more that week about the future and the legacies of the past. Jack had long been involved with peace movements; with freedom struggles in Palestine, South Africa and Latin America; with alternative media (an associate editor of *Freedomways*, founded by W.E.B. DuBois, for 23 years) and political analysis (his writings collected in *Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder*, edited by Nikhil Singh). During the New Cold War of the 1980s, Jack had been vital to the formation of the Rainbow Coalition, and to the international desk of Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow campaigns for the presidential nomination. He seemed to embody, and was perhaps inspiration for, Dr. King’s final argument: that the interconnected “triple evils” of racism, economic exploitation and war demanded an interconnected resistance.

Jack O’Dell was 96 when he died; 81 when he and Jane came to Kopkind, still scanning the horizon for signs. After a Kopkind alum, Pamela Bridgewater, gave a guest seminar on “the lost chapter of slave breeding”, linking the history of black women’s reproduction to Southern economies, and laying out a 13th Amendment argument for women’s bodily freedom, Jack told her, “I learned something today”, stressing each word; “thank you, my sister.” In parting at the end of the week, he told me that being at Kopkind had been one of the most valuable things he’d ever done. I was thrown off: *Surely*—but he stopped me. *I’ve had to think about some things in a new way* is how I recall what he said.

It was a moment... Sail on, brother. Sail on.

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This was our 20th summer, and though we are serious when we say that we feed the future, that does inevitably involve a looking back: at the most basic level because who wouldn’t want to know where Kopkind campers go from here? This spring a former participant in Film Camp, Kopkind’s collaboration with the Center for Independent Documentary, won the Peabody Award for a documentary that she workshopped here. Tracy Heather Strain labored for 14 years on *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes/Seeing Heart*. A luminous film, the first full documentary on the life of the playwright, it was broadcast as part of PBS’s *American Masters* series

in 2018. It was a work in progress when Tracy brought it to Film Camp in 2014. Like everyone who comes, she had questions, problems, concerns about the work. Like everyone, she was vulnerable, generous in the give and take: a remarkable collective undertaking by filmmakers all eager to help one another create something wonderful, guided each year by Susi Walsh of CID and John Scagliotti; and to have a space to breathe.

The title of Tracy’s film is taken from a line in Lorraine Hansberry’s diaries: “One cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know or react to the miseries which afflict this world.” Like Jack, Lorraine was a member of the Communist Party in the 1940s and ’50s, passionate about injustice and stirred by global anticolonial movements. Involved in the life and work, the ideas and emotions and conflicts of people, she worked as a reporter at *Freedom*, the black radical newspaper started by Robeson and Louis Burnham, before making theater the place for her political interventions. She was also a lesbian. This summer, at the Queer Liberation March in New York marking the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, her image was among those of other dead gay heroes, many designed to look like stained glass icons, bobbing high above the throng, as their sign-bearers sang, “When the Saints Come Marching in”.



2019 Film Camp (K38), L to R: Bob Nesson, MacPherson Christopher, Daniel Lovering, Amy Jenkins, Ann Bennett, Katja Esson, Jon Crawford, Alex Leff, Betsy Kalin, Susi Walsh, John Scagliotti with L’il Bro, Sam Berliner

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As this year of anniversaries closes out, and as contemporary political pundits rerun their fraudulent argument, *Class or Identity?*, it’s worth recalling what else was emerging in that “new period of world behavior” which Jack O’Dell sensed as he sailed the world. John Scagliotti, whose films have explored the hidden things of gay history, wrote a terrific essay for *The Nation* in June that

will only gain relevance as the political season proceeds. You can tack this excerpt to your refrigerators. I'll explain the picture below in a minute.



Recalling that for him, “history came from the territory of desire”, John begins with a story about his pre-Stonewall forays to a bar in Boston, encountering “older guys giving me the eye, and then the lowdown about their same-sex adventures. World War II time, it didn’t matter, they’d get together and do the deed. After that war, the bars exploded as homosexuals by the droves moved to the port cities where the ships had dropped them off. *Hello Sailor!* Some of them made home movies, as I’d discover, of picnics and dances and cocktails in the backyard. Oh sure, I heard about police entrapments and ruined careers, bashings, commitment to the mental wards and suicide, but somehow that was not important then. I had had my face smashed into the pavement often enough as a kid in Texas to know about cruelty. What excited me was learning that in spite of oppression, gay people *lived*. They took risks, made love and partied—and painted masterpieces, wrote secret love poems and bashed a few straights back in the process. They made their own history, which, as it turns out, is also the history of the world....

“Why are folks so afraid of identity politics, especially on the left? ... Dismissing ‘identity’ is like

dismissing human personality, along with every experience—individual, group, class, regional, sexual—that forms it. Dismissing a politics forged out of oppressed identity is like dismissing justice. And pooh-poohing the most profound aspect of people’s lives—who they are, whom they love, whether they even *can* live and love—isn’t smart politics, if you ask me....

“Politics is always about power. Along with every other group that historically has been ‘damned and despised,’ Jesse Jackson’s phrase from Rainbow Coalition days, lgbt people need some. Getting what you need is one form of power. Challenging others to question what they always took for granted as quite normal and unchanging is another. ‘Once you find yourself in another civilization, you’re forced to examine your own,’ James Baldwin once told an interviewer. He was speaking about the benefit of having lived in Paris and Istanbul, but it can also apply to seeing your own country once you’ve recognized the reality of others within it, those who have been unknown, with histories that have been obscured. Once people who are supposedly beyond identity (and what a silly concept that is) have to contend with identity politics, they have to contend with everything they don’t know, or have chosen to ignore, about themselves and the forces that have shaped their history. They have to examine ‘civilization’ without illusion. Identity politics is our means to exert power collectively, and a starting point to freedom.”

John was part of the ’60s antiwar movement. For him, as for the people who started the Gay Liberation Front after Stonewall (consciously named to echo the National Liberation Front in Vietnam), sexual freedom was like a rainbow stripe, inseparable from every other element of human freedom, and the worldwide struggle to achieve it.

Which brings me to the photograph. “Saint Hibiscus” was with “Saint Lorraine” and “Saint James Baldwin” and “Saint Harry Hay” et al. among the placards borne aloft in the Queer Liberation March. Hibiscus was a legendary San Francisco drag queen, a founder of the outrageous performing troupe The Cockettes, and later the founder of the Angels of Light theater company in New York and a glam-punk band, Hibiscus and the Screaming Violets. Before all that, though, Hibiscus was George Harris, an 18-year-old free-expression-loving bohemian, who faced a line of MPs at the 1967 march on the Pentagon and put flowers in the muzzles of their guns. Perhaps the most iconic image of the peace movement, its fusion with Hibiscus in full regalia emblemized the breadth of political concerns of those of us who were in the streets. For me, marching with Laura Flanders and her partner, Elizabeth Streb, the picture also brought the wonder of surprise. I learned something that day.

Laura returned as a mentor this year for the political camp with media makers and activists (and, darn it!, once again she missed the group photo). We commemorated Stonewall's 50th at our public Movie Night with a screening of *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* and a vibrant discussion with Kenyon Farrow. Baldwin was not a communist like "Sweet Lorraine", as he called his dear pal, but it might be fair to regard him, for all his individualism, as a commonist—concerned with the common stuff of humanity, and seeing in the black freedom struggle the principles to which working-class revolutionaries had been dedicated for centuries.

Commonism is an odd word. It grows more familiar the more Peter Linebaugh, the great historian of the Commons, uses it. Peter was with us for a public talk at Everyone's Books on his astonishing new *Red Round Globe Hot Burning*. The book traces a radical internationalist "continuity of ideas" about love, liberty, loyalty (meaning solidarity). To underscore the point, he enacted the gallows speech of an Irish revolutionary from 1803, enlisting the rest of us to let out *huzzahs*, as did the real-time spectators when the condemned man said:

Citizens, I hope and trust, notwithstanding my fate,
... that the principles of freedom, of humanity, and
of justice will finally triumph over falsehood,
tyranny and delusion, and every principle inimical to
the interests of the human race.

We were not exactly acting. Everyone in the camp was engaged, two centuries on, in advancing those principles.

Our theme was "Democratizing the Economy". And whether, like Laura, people had been reporting on solidarity economics and the myriad experiments with that concept; or, like Ed Whitfield, our other mentor, they were actively fostering collective projects, everyone was clear that "interests of the human race" are imperiled and something has to change.

Something is changing. With every poll that shows people souring on capitalism and intrigued by socialism, something is changing. What that will mean, whether some transition can begin, or whether we'll all be washed away or blown away or stranded on parched land in cages before we force an alternative, is uncertain. What is plain is that people are again questioning "what they always took for granted as quite normal".

"Capitalism inverts the relationship between what is sacred and what is instrumental", Ed began one seminar. "What is instrumental is just a tool. What is sacred are our human relations, the layers of life on earth. Capitalism grinds up the sacred in order to enhance the tool, and it holds the tool—the market, money—sacred." But people understand tools. Tools have a particular use. "A hammer is not a good tool to jack up a car. A market is not a good tool to supply

health care. A market is not a good tool to allocate food.... Now, using that tool to let people die, to let them starve, is legal, today. But everyone knows you discard tools when they're no longer useful."



K37 plus, L to R (on slab): Kopkind/Nation Fellow Jaisal Noor, Jennifer Berkshire (K1), John, Peter Linebaugh, Robbie Raymond, Josh Wilson, Ed Whitfield; (on grass) Libbie Cohn, me, India Walton, Lenina Nadal, Kara Lynch, Nadia Mohamed

Around the table were people who've been organizing urban land trusts, building the first nationwide democratically controlled loan fund, encouraging public imagination about alternatives to the extractive economy, developing a local news media co-op, working on cooperative urban development, producing community art collaborations, and investigating popular efforts to think beyond the exploitation system. As we were meeting, hundreds of people involved in digital commoning were gathering in California to share ideas. As our week progressed, Ed got us thinking about solidarity economics and reparations. The economist Bob Pollin visited to discuss the Green New Deal and its potential vis-a-vis democratically controlled, cooperative systems.

There are many more questions than there are answers now. Laura gave a brisk, bleak assessment of the communications business: what it costs us, how it commodifies us, how "the means of making meaning is monopolized by corporations entirely unaccountable to us or the state." But then she spoke of mapping public assets in any community, and raised a host of questions that people are dealing with today about democratic decision making. "If we are both the question and the way of answering the question, we have a lot of power."

Most of all, we are in the flow of history.

From Kopkind, we wish you good cheer, and an earthy spirit in the year to come!
JoAnn Wypijewski