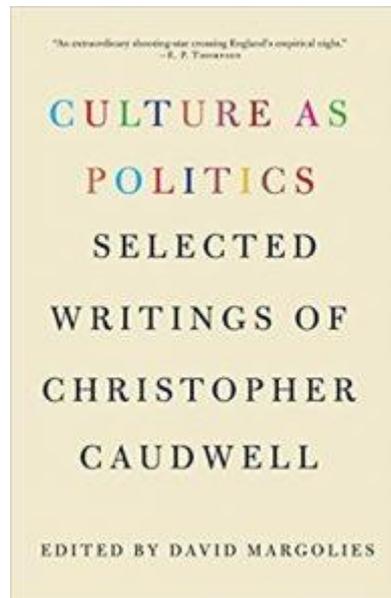


# **Review of *Culture as Politics: Selected Writings of Christopher Caudwell***

**edited by David Margolies**

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## **Helena Sheehan**

Christopher Caudwell was a brief and breathtakingly brilliant presence in the world. Born Christopher St John Sprigg in London in 1907, he published prolifically and died fighting in the Spanish civil war in 1937, before he even reached the age of 30.

He left school at the age of 15 and began his working life as a cub reporter at the *Yorkshire Observer*, where his father was literary editor, and then as editor of *British Malaya*. Upon returning to London, he ran an aeronautics publishing company with his brother, edited one of its technical journals and designed gears for motorcars. In addition, he wrote reams of poetry, plays, short stories, detective novels, and aeronautics textbooks. He even edited a volume of ghost stories.

On top of all this, he read voluminously in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, politics, linguistics, mathematics, economics, physics, biology, neurology, literature and literary criticism and much more besides. He did so, not as a dilettante, but as one striving to come to terms with the knowledge of the centuries and to comprehend what it meant for himself and his own age. Despite his lack of a university education, he became a person of very considerable learning.

In 1934, at the age of 27, Caudwell became interested in Marxism and began to study it with extraordinary intensity, discovering quickly that it provided the key to the synthesis he was seeking. In the summer of 1935, he wrote his first Marxist book, originally called *Verse and Mathematics*, but set off and accepted for publication by Macmillan as *Illusion and Reality*.

Upon the completion of this book, he moved to the east end of London and joined the Poplar branch of the Communist Party. He threw himself into all the routine party tasks, fly-posting, street-corner speaking,

selling *The Daily Worker*, as well as joining battle with blackshirts, bravely facing consequent batterings and even arrest.

During this period of intense activism, he also wrote feverishly, producing a body of theoretical manuscripts posthumously published as *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture*, *The Crisis in Physics*, *Heredity and Development*, *Romance and Realism* and *Poems*. Previous selections from his work have been published as *The Concept of Freedom* and *Scenes and Actions*. Verso has recently brought out a new edition of *The Crisis in Physics*.

This new collection called *Culture as Politics* is a welcome addition to the history of Caudwell publication. It is edited by David Margolies, who wrote *The Function of Literature: A Study of Christopher Caudwell's Aesthetics*, the first book on Caudwell, who played a key role in bringing the work of Caudwell to his own generation, the so-called sixties generation. In bringing out this collection, he is continuing his sustained work on Caudwell and bringing his work to the attention of yet another generation.

He has selected passages from *Illusion and Reality*, *Studies in a Dying Culture* and *Heredity and Development*. Although they might not have been the same selections as someone else might have made, they have been chosen carefully and do provide a good introduction to the work of Caudwell that will hopefully lead readers to seek out more from Caudwell's whole body of work.

Margolies also provides introductions to each section, which locates these selections within the context of Caudwell's whole body of work as well as the circumstances of his life. Margolies has a thorough knowledge of Caudwell's work, both published and unpublished, and is currently the executor of the Caudwell literary estate. Among many interesting features of his commentary is his identification of proto-Marxist dimensions in Caudwell's pre-Marxist fiction.

For Caudwell, culture (in the broadest sense of the word, including science, technology, philosophy, etc) was shaped by the socio-economic conditions of its time. His work was infused with the explanatory force of historical materialism. He saw the dynamic not as a passive one, but as an active interaction in which culture in turn played a role in shaping the socio-economic milieu. He developed his ideas with a sweeping sense of history and his distinctive interpretation of past eras, such as ancient Greece and modern Britain, are really striking. The breadth of his knowledge and depth of his thinking are still remarkable and memorable.

What Caudwell was doing in whatever he wrote, whether it was about literature or anthropology or psychology or biology, was reaching out to conceptualise the world and nothing less than the world. He was determined to work over the whole inheritance of human knowledge from a new point of view. Philosophy, in the sense of an integrating *weltanschauung*, was what gathered up all else. No matter what he was addressing, from poetry to politics to physics, he wanted to penetrate to the very core of it, to illuminate it within its full field of forces, to highlight it within its network of interconnections, to see it within the whole. He sought to identify the world's most basic patterns, to take the pulse of the world's most basic rhythms.

Looking to the culture of his time, he saw that there was something at the very core of the social order that inhibited this impulse to integrality, that obstructed the search for synthesis. Everywhere he turned, it was fragmentation that prevailed. He asked why. He remarked: "Either the devil has come among us having great power or there is a causal explanation for a disease common to economics, science and art?"

Despite the magnificent achievements that he saw in his time - relativity, quantum mechanics, genetics, psychology, anthropology, art, aeronautics - it was nevertheless an epoch of confusion and dissension. Why, he asked, did each new discovery come as a Midas touch that brought new disappointment? Why did this strange doom hang over bourgeois culture in such a way that progress seemed only to hasten decline?

Why was it that the search for a common truth, a common faith, brought only the proliferation of partial, myopic and contradictory views of reality? What was the explanation?

At the heart of it all, he argued, was the subject-object dichotomy, that had its basis in the social division of labour, in the separation of the class that generated theory from the class that engaged actively with nature. This dichotomy distorted all realms of thought and activity: art, science, psychology, philosophy, economics and indeed all social relations. It was a disease endemic to class society that had become more acute with its higher development. Only an integrated world view grounded in a vision of a new social order could bring to a higher synthesis what had been severed, to what had grown pathologically far apart.

As he looked around him, he concluded that many theories and many activities were rooted in the basic bourgeois illusion: that man was born free but was crippled through social organisation. In his illusory separation of individual consciousness from the natural and social matrix of its existence, the bourgeois had brought to a new level the dualism inherent in class society, generating in philosophy an ever sharper separation of individual from society, of mind from matter, of freedom from necessity, of history from nature, of emotion from rationality, making the fundamental subject-object relation increasingly insoluble. Instead, he stood in his own light, imagining that he could direct the social process without being directed by it, to determine without being determined, able to conceive only of self-determined mind in a one-way relation to its determined environment, an active subject contemplating a passive object, oblivious to the nexus of natural forces and social relations determining both.

Looking to the philosophical landscape of his time, Caudwell mapped the terrain and characterised the forces contesting the terrain. He took the pulse of the various players and detected the pounding beat of the tensions tearing at all efforts to comprehend. He knew that the history of philosophy throbbed to the rhythm of wider, deeper process, even if philosophers themselves were oblivious of it.

He traced the history of modern philosophy in terms of the development of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. The first stage, that of bourgeois revolt against feudal restriction, had sparked a great crescendo into the environment, with the voyages of exploration, astronomy, geometry, gravity, with mechanistic materialism its climactic philosophy. The next stage, as capitalism consolidated, its materialism turned into its opposite, mentalism, turning away from the object toward the subject, reproducing the dualism of subject and object from the opposite direction. The rebirth of idealism came as the philosophy of a ruling class whose distance from its environment was increasing with the growing differentiation of labour.

He analysed the opposite philosophies of mechanism and idealism, as both dichotomising the world into inert matter and creative spirit. Then came positivism, marking the passing of the bourgeoisie from a progressive class to a reactionary one. If mechanism had sacrificed subject to object and idealism had sacrificed object to subject, positivism sacrificed both. Both matter and mind became elusive and unknowable.

Philosophy became increasingly impoverished with escalating and esoteric dualisms. Philosophy, instead of being an integrating force, became a divisive one. In every way, theory was flying apart from practice. Philosophy, even philosophy of science, was becoming increasingly remote from science. Every area of knowledge was wracked by the same dualisms. Art was drifting away from experience. Theory and practice were sundered in consciousness, because they were divided in social reality.

No longer able to discern the rhythms of the historical process, the bourgeois distorted whatever he beheld. It was not possible to break through the intellectual dissolution, to connect the parts to the whole, without addressing its social matrix and he could not connect the parts to the whole without querying his whole *modus vivendi*.

Consciousness tended to gather at one pole and activity at the other, causing distortion of both. This played out, not only in the distance between the pursuit of knowledge and other aspects of the labour process, but even within areas of knowledge. Even the sciences were subject to this rupture, bringing a morass of contradictions, both within and between sciences, with much scientific practice becoming more empirical, narrow, fractured and with theory becoming more remote, diffuse, disconnected. Experiment was generating a growing body of empirical knowledge that could not be fit into a theoretical framework. Without such a framework, scientists fell back on eclecticism, reductionism or mysticism. This process has escalated since his time.

Caudwell's epistemological position was a critical realism grounded in socio-historical interactionism. Knowledge is generated in a social process, in an interaction between subject and object, which come into being simultaneously. They are mutually constituting and therefore inseparable. We can never know a thing apart from our knowing of it. Breaking with the illusion of the detached observer, he saw knowledge as an active relation, the product of social labour past and present.

The weight of his attention in his various studies in a dying culture was to the mentality of the bourgeois, the dominant ideology of his time and ours. He was, as EP Thompson noted, a superb anatomist of ideologies. He also looked to alternative ideological positions, to outsiders to the dominant world view, primarily the proletariat, but also women and oppressed races and nationalities. His anticipation of feminist consciousness and the dynamics of moving from oppression to liberation through various stages of exclusion, inclusion, critique, rebellion, was most advanced for a male Marxist of his era. As to the proletariat, his view of their active engagement with nature, capacity for critical consciousness and revolutionary transformation may seem idealised now, but it is not hard to see how it seemed to him then. Such optimism does not come so easily to us now.

We live in another time. The dying culture has not died. Indeed, in its way it thrives on a scale beyond anything he could have imagined. Yet his critique of it stands. Its decadence is manifest everywhere, overpowering whatever else struggles for life.

Looking at the philosophical landscape since he vacated the terrain, the battle of ideas for some decades intensified. Universities in the 1960s, 1970s, even into the 1980s, were full of conflicting ideas, contending paradigms, debates that went to the theoretical foundations of all disciplines. Along the same lines as his studies, all these debates in diverse areas ran along parallel lines and expressed deeper lines of cleavage. What has happened since is that this has died down, but without any of the problems raised by these debates being solved.

Theory has flown yet farther from practice in that now theory itself is repressed. The global system functions in such a way that it needs a higher level of education, but education aligned to the precise needs of the market and not oriented to conceptualising the system, let alone contesting it. Theory and theoretical debate is not thriving in this milieu. Unreflective particularity prevails. Where there is theory, it is much debased, mired in every sort of confused dualism, lazy eclecticism, ungrounded and mystified holism. The search for synthesis is more subverted than ever.

It is impossible not to wonder what Caudwell would have written about all this, about all that has unfolded since he died. What insights might he have had into the trajectory from positivism through neo-positivism to post-positivism, into existentialism, phenomenology and postmodernism, into the accelerating commodification of culture and knowledge? What studies might he have produced of film, television and cyberculture? What might he have done during the turmoil in the communist movement in 1956, 1968, 1989? What would he have made of the Moscow trials, the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress, the new left, third world liberation movements, new social movements, *Marxism Today*, perestroika, the end of the USSR?

We cannot be sure. Various commentators have had their say. When I was first reading Caudwell, I bought the 1971 edition of *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture* with an introduction by Sol Yurick, who speculated that he might have become either a bitter cold warrior or a numbed apparatchik. In the margins I wrote: no and no.

His life would have been very different if he had returned. He would have become a major party and public intellectual. His thinking would have been challenged, not least by his own reflections on the world as it unfolded. Whether he would have left the party at some stage, I do not know, but I do believe firmly that, whatever he did, he would have lived by the views and values that he evolved in the last years of his life. Of course, any of us who have ever thought that we got him think that he would have thought what we think. Still, I believe that I am right about this at least.

I have lived now many years longer than he had the opportunity to live. I have looked at the world he never saw with eyes that saw in the way that they did shaped by the way that he saw. It has been no substitute for what the world lost when it lost him, but it has carried him on in the world. He wrote of the half-life of the dead in what they leave behind when they die. In reading him today, he lives on. I commend Pluto, Verso and Monthly Review for publishing these new editions and bringing Caudwell to the attention of new audiences.

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