

The centenary of Christopher Caudwell and the philosophical landscape of the century

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painting of Caudwell by [Caoimhghin O Croidheain](#) commissioned by Helena Sheehan

Christopher Caudwell / Christopher St John Sprigg (1907-1937)

There was a [conference marking the centenary of Christopher Caudwell](#) in London on 20 October 2007 sponsored by [Marx Memorial Library](#).
Here is the paper I gave at it.

It would be so much easier to celebrate the centenary of Christopher Caudwell if he had been with us for more of the past 100 years. He was such a brief, brave, brilliant presence in our history. He was like a shooting star that burst through the sky, burnt with fierce intensity, then collided to destruction. Yet in that short time, he left such an illuminating glow, such a haunting aftereffect, as to provoke us intellectually, move

us deeply and bring us to speak of him still, 100 years after he was born and 70 years after he died. Many of us only came into the world after he was already gone from it.

It is not possible to think of him without mourning all that we lost on that day in Jarama in 1937 as his brain stopped processing the world, as his blood drained into the earth of Spain. It is not possible to celebrate his life in the way that we would if he had a normal life span, in the way that we would if not for his early, violent and tragic death. We so miss all that he might have done, all that he might have written, all that he might have been. It is also not possible to assess crucial texts that he left as if they were finished works that he was ready to present to the world in the form that they have come to us. We can only grieve for what we have lost and make the most of what we have gained.

When I first encountered him, I was the same age as he was when he wrote the texts for which he is most remembered. As did he, I had come out of catholicism, groped around reading anything and everything, considering other perspectives and moving towards an alternative all-encompassing world view. I had evolved a world view that was naturalistic, processive, contextualist and a political position that was left. I had just taken a further step and become a marxist. I had joined a communist party and thrown myself into its many activities, while insisting on doing my own thinking, resisting cliches and conformities that did not bear the force of my own convictions.

I wanted to make this intellectual tradition thoroughly my own, to study its history, its theories, its debates, its dramas, its dramatis personae. Moreover I wanted to subject other intellectual traditions to new scrutiny. I wanted to look again at everything I had already seen, to study anew everything that I had already studied, particularly the history of philosophy in the context of the history of world. Also I wanted to act in the world, to stand with others who wanted to hold the world to account and to refashion it by new standards of rationality and morality.

When I read Caudwell, I recognised such a sensibility let loose upon a grandiosity of project, energy of engagement and generosity of passion that took my breath away. He wrote with a driving vision in an interaction with the world that was wider, deeper, warmer than anyone else I was reading. His rationality and emotion seemed to fuse, in such a way that the sharpness of an argument brought the heightening of passion and the heightening of passion made the argument sharper still. He so embodied my striving for synthesis, my passion for purposeful connection to the world. He inspired me (breathed into me in the literal meaning) to lasting effect.

I only fully realised how important he was for me when I went to write about him. The [section on Caudwell](#) in my book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History* expanded into something far longer than I had anticipated and conceptualised his importance in the history that I was writing in a way that surprised others and even me.

When I finished that, I still did not feel that I was finished with him. I went on the trail of him then, thoroughly, obsessively, to turn over every trace that was left of him 43 years after his death, 27 years ago. With the help of those who has previously been on his trail, such as David Margolies and Jean Duparc and his sister and executor Rosemary Sprigg, I spoke to his friends, comrades and colleagues who were still alive at that time, walked the streets of Poplar, poured over his unpublished manuscripts and letters that arrived from the archive in Texas and read at the microfilm reader in the library of Trinity College Dublin, sometimes with tears streaming down my face.

I had a strong sense of him then, a feeling of intellectual exhilaration as well as excruciating grief. The book that I intended to write from all that was overtaken by events requiring me to do other things. These other things, however, teaching and writing in philosophy, intellectual history, science studies, cultural studies, were always tinged with what I took of him.

It has always been my view that philosophy was at the core of his project. The best interpreters of Caudwell, even those who focused on aesthetics and literary criticism, which his where he has received most attention, have done so within this wider focus. Those with whom I take issue are those who saw him only as relevant

to literary theory, those who reduced him to a source of random insights, those denounced him as failing to conform to an orthodoxy of the time, those who relegated him to a relic of the time and of no contemporary relevance, those who picked over his texts and felt that every positive point had to be balanced by a negative, and finally those who dismissed him as having little or nothing to offer.

I have never felt it worthwhile to pick over his texts and to highlight his faults. I do not disagree with many of the criticisms made of him and I certainly cannot stand over his every formulation or assertion. He was still young and in a hurry, but it turned out that he didn't have much time after all. I am glad that he covered so much ground, however sketchily, however imperfectly. His achievement was not only prolific, but prodigious and profound. To get the rhythm of it, the shape of it, was what mattered, as far as I was concerned.

What he 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 force, to highlight it within its the 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, 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, he 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 quering 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 myticism. 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, I saw all these debates in diverse areas as running along parallel lines and expressing 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.

How I would like to know 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 20th party congress, the new left, 3rd 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 intellectual 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 our coming here today, he lives on. I hope that it may still be so in another 100 years.

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