

# **Pacifism and Violence**



**Christopher  
Caudwell**

## PACIFISM AND VIOLENCE: A STUDY IN BOURGEOIS ETHICS

BY CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL

This is an abridgment of a chapter from Christopher Caudwell's well-known work, *Studies in a Dying Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1938). Both the abridging and the introduction were done by Tom Christoffel, who reviewed the Kerner Commission Report in MR, October 1968 and is currently co-editing *Radical Perspectives on Social Change*, a book of readings.

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Christopher Caudwell (Christopher St. John Sprigg) died on February 12, 1937, while attempting to hold a hill above the Jarama River for the Spanish Republicans. He was twenty-nine years old.

Caudwell fought in Spain because, for him, "what I feel about the importance of democratic freedom," had to be matched with action. During his short lifetime this same impulse for action provoked a remarkable spurt of intellectual creativity which produced one serious novel, five books on aviation, seven detective stories, numerous short stories and poems, and his three major efforts: *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*, *The Crisis in Physics*, and *Studies in a Dying Culture*. After his death several collections of his scattered works were published, including *Further Studies in a Dying Culture*.

*Studies in a Dying Culture* is a collection of essays dealing with seemingly diverse topics: George Bernard Shaw, T. E. Lawrence, D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, Pacifism and Violence, Love, Freud, and Liberty. But all are united by the theme of

human liberty and by Caudwell's thoughtful Marxist critique of bourgeois culture and ideology. To many a contemporary genteel ear, Caudwell's formulations may have a harsh and unpleasantly dogmatic ring. The fact is, his crisp Anglo-Saxon directness can provide a useful antidote to the opaque, Central European Hegelianizings of Marcuse, Lukacs, and Adorno, now held in such esteem by numerous "New Left theorists."

Within Marxist circles a certain aura and mystique have clung to Caudwell's name since his death. "Caudwell"—the name evokes the works which might have been had the man chosen not to leave the study for the anti-fascist battlefields. His choice, and its consequences, lend an added power to the works he did complete.

The pacifism Caudwell subjects to criticism in the following essay is not identical with the various forms of New Left pacifism in America today. Nevertheless, the main lines of his critique assume a special relevance in the context of the transition which pacifist theory and practice are presently experiencing.

—Tom Christoffel

Pacifism, always latent in the bourgeois creed, has now crystallized out as almost the only emotionally charged belief left in Protestant Christianity or in its analogue, bourgeois "idealism."

I call it a distinctively bourgeois doctrine, because I mean by pacifism, not the love of peace as a good to be secured by a definite form of action, but the belief that any form of social constraint of others or any violent action is in itself wrong, and that violence such as war must be *passively* resisted because to use violence to end violence would be logically self-contradictory. I oppose pacifism in this sense to the Communist belief that the only way to secure peace is by a revolutionary change in the social system, and that ruling classes resist revolution violently and must therefore be overthrown by force.

Bourgeois pacifism is distinctive and should not be confused, for example, with Eastern pacifism, any more than modern European warfare should be confused with feudal warfare. It is not merely that the social manifestations of it are

different—this would necessarily arise from the different social organs of the two cultures. But the content also is different. The historic example of bourgeois pacifism is not Gandhi but Fox. The Society of Friends expresses the spirit of bourgeois pacifism. It is individual resistance.

To understand how bourgeois pacifism arises, we must understand how bourgeois violence arises. It arises, just as does feudal or despotic violence, from the characteristic economy of the system. As was first explained by Marx, the characteristics of bourgeois economy are that the bourgeois, held down and crippled productively by the feudal system, comes to see freedom and productive growth in lack of social organization, in every man's administering his own affairs for his own benefit to the best of his ability and desire, and this is expressed in the absolute character of bourgeois property together with its complete alienability. His struggle to achieve this right did secure his greater freedom and productive power as compared with his position in the feudal system. The circumstances of the struggle and its outcome gave rise to the bourgeois dream—freedom as the absolute elimination of social relations.

But such a program, if carried into effect, would mean the end of society and the breakdown of economic production. Each man would struggle for himself, and if he saw another man with something he wanted, he would seize it, for by assumption no such social relations as cooperation exist. The saving and foresight which make economic production possible would cease to exist. Man would become a brute.

But in fact the bourgeois had no desire for such a world. He lived by merchandising and banking, by *capital* as opposed to the land which was the basis of feudal exploitation. Therefore, he meant by the "absence of social restraint" the absence of any restraint on his ownership, alienation, or acquisition at will of the capital by which he lived. Private property is a social "restraint," for others not owning it are "restrained" from helping themselves to it by force or cunning, as they could in a "state of nature"; but the bourgeois never included the ownership of capital as one of the social restraints that should be abolished, for the simple reason that it was not to him a

restraint at all. It never therefore entered his head to regard it as such, and he saw nothing inconsistent in calling for the abolition of privilege, monopoly, and so forth, while hanging on to his capital.

Moreover, he had a cogent argument which, when he became more self-conscious, he could use. A social restraint is a social relation, that is, a relation between men. The relation between master and slave is a social relation and therefore a restraint on the liberty of one man by the other. In the same way the relation between lord and serf is a relation between man and a restraint on human liberty; but the relation between a man and his property is a relation between man and a thing, and is therefore no restraint on the liberty of other men.

This argument was of course fallacious, for there can be no universal relations of this kind as the fabric of society, there can only be relations between men disguised as relations between things. The bourgeois defense of private property only applies if I go out into the woods and pick up a stick to walk with, or fashion an ornamental object for my adornment; it applies to the possession of socially unimportant trifles or things for immediate consumption. As soon as bourgeois possession extends to the capital of the community, consisting of the products of the community set aside to produce goods in the future (in early bourgeois civilization, grain, clothes, seed, and raw materials to supply the laborers of tomorrow, and in addition machinery and plant for the same purpose today), this relation to a thing becomes a relation among men, for it is now the labor of the community which the bourgeois controls. This social relation is only made possible by—it *depends on*—the bourgeois ownership of capital. Thus, just as in slave-owning or serf-owning civilization there is a relation between men which is a relation between a dominating and a dominated class, or between exploiters and exploited, so there is in bourgeois culture; but whereas in earlier civilizations this relation between men is conscious and clear, in bourgeois culture it is disguised as a system free from obligatory dominating relations between men and containing only innocent relations between men and a thing.

Therefore, in throwing off all social restraint, the bourgeois seemed to himself justified in retaining this one restraint of private property, for it did not seem to him a restraint at all, but an inalienable right of man, the fundamental natural right. Unfortunately for this theory, there are no natural rights, only situations found in nature, and private property protected for one man by others is not one of them. Bourgeois private property could only be protected by coercion—the *have-nots* had to be coerced by the *haves*, after all, just as in feudal society. Thus a dominating relation as violent as in slave-owning civilizations came into being, expressed in the police, the laws, the standing army, and the legal apparatus of the bourgeois state. The whole bourgeois state revolves round the coercive protection of private property, alienable and acquirable by trading for private profit, and regarded as a natural right, but a right which, strangely enough, can only be protected by coercion, because it involves of its essence a right to dispose of and extract profit from the labor-power of others, and so administer their lives.

Thus, after all, the bourgeois dream of liberty cannot be realized. Social restraints must come into being to protect this one thing that makes him a bourgeois. This "freedom" to own private property seems to him inexplicably to involve more and more social restraints, laws, tariffs, and factory acts; and this "society" in which only relations to a thing are permitted becomes more and more a society in which relations between men are elaborate and cruel. The more he aims for bourgeois freedom, the more he gets bourgeois restraint, for bourgeois freedom is an illusion.

The whole bourgeois economy is built on the violent domination of men by men through the private possession of social capital. As long as the bourgeois economy remains a positive constructive force, that violence is hidden. Society does not contain a powerful internal pressure until productive forces have outgrown the system of productive relations.

But when bourgeois economy is riven by its own contradictions, when private profit is seen to be public harm, when poverty and unemployment grow in the midst of the means of plenty, bourgeois violence becomes more open. These contradic-

tions drive the bourgeois states to imperialistic wars, in which violence reigns without a qualifying factor. Internally, violence instead of "reason" alone suffices to maintain the bourgeois system. Since the capitalistic system is openly proving its inefficiency, people are no longer content with a form of government, parliamentary democracy, in which economic production is run by the bourgeois class, leaving the people as a whole only the power to settle, within narrow limits, through parliament, the apportionment of a merely administrative budget. They see this to be a sham, and see no reason to tolerate the sham. There is a growing demand for socialism, and the capitalist class where this grows pressing, resorts to open violence. They use the revolt against ineffectual democracy to establish a dictatorship, and this dictatorship, which seizes power with the cry "Down with Capitalism," in fact establishes capitalism still more violently, as in fascist Italy and Germany. The brutal oppression and cynical violence of fascism is the summit of bourgeois decline. The violence at the heart of the bourgeois illusion emerges inside as well as outside the state.

The justification of bourgeois violence is an important part of bourgeois ethics. The coercive control of social labor by a limited class is justified as a relation to a thing. Even as late as Hegel, this justification is given quite naively and simply. Just as I go out and break off a stick of wood from the primitive jungle and convert it to my purpose, so the bourgeois is supposed to convert the thing "capital" to his use. Domination over men is wicked; domination over things is legitimate.

Bourgeois ethics include the more difficult task of justification of the violence of bourgeois war. The Christian-bourgeois ethic has been equal even to this. Consonant to the bourgeois illusion, all interference with the liberty of another is wicked and immoral. If one is attacked in one's liberty, one is therefore compelled to defend outraged morality and attack in turn. All bourgeois wars are therefore justified by both parties as wars of defense. Bourgeois liberty includes the right to exercise all bourgeois occupations—alienating, trading, and acquiring for profit—and since these involve establishing dominating relations over others, it is not surprising that the bourgeois often

finds himself attacked in his liberty. It is impossible for the bourgeois to exercise his full liberty without infringing the liberty of another. It is impossible therefore to be thoroughly bourgeois and not give occasion for "just" wars.

Meanwhile bourgeois discomforts generate an opposition to bourgeois violence. At each stage of bourgeois development men could be found who were impregnated with the bourgeois illusion that man is free and happy only when without social restraints, and who yet found in bourgeois economy multiplying coercions and restraints. We saw why these exist; the bourgeois economy requires coercion and restraint for its very life. The big bourgeois dominates the *petit bourgeois*, just as both dominate the proletariat. But these early bourgeois rebels could not see this. They demanded a return to the bourgeois dream—"equal rights for all," "freedom from social restraints," the "natural rights" of men. They thought that this would free them from the big bourgeoisie, and give them equal competition once again.

Thus originated the cleavage between conservatives and liberals, between the big bourgeois in possession and the little bourgeois wishing to be in possession. The one sees that his position depends on maintaining things as they are; the other sees his as depending on more bourgeois freedom, more votes for all, more freedom for private property to be alienated, acquired, and owned, more free competition, less privilege.

The liberal is the active force. But so far from being revolutionary, as he thinks, he is evolutionary. In striving for bourgeois freedom and fair competition he produces by this very action an increase in the social restraints he hates. He builds up the big bourgeoisie in trying to support the little, although he may make himself a big bourgeois in the process. He increases unfairness by trying to secure fairness. Free trade gives birth to tariffs, imperialism, and monopoly, because it is hastening the development of bourgeois economy, and these things are the necessary end of bourgeois development. He calls into being the things he loathes because, as long as he is in the grip of the bourgeois illusion that freedom consists in absence of social planning, he must put himself, by loosening

social ties, more powerfully in the grip of coercive social forces.

This "revolutionary" liberal, this hater of coercion and violence, this lover of free competition, this friend of liberty and human rights, is therefore the very man damned by history not merely to be powerless to stop these things, but to be forced by his own efforts to produce coercion and violence and unfair competition and slavery. He does not merely refrain from opposing bourgeois violence, he generates it, by helping on the development of bourgeois economy.

Insofar as he is a genuine pacifist and not merely a completely muddled man hesitating between the paths of revolution and non-cooperation, his thesis is this: "I hate violence and war and social oppression, and all these things are due to social relations. I must therefore abstain from social relations. Belligerent and revolutionary alike are hateful to me."

But to abstain from social relations is to abstain from life. As long as he draws or earns an income, he participates in bourgeois economy and upholds the violence which sustains it. He is in sleeping partnership with the big bourgeoisie, and that is the essence of bourgeois economy. If two other countries are at war, he is powerless to intervene and stop them, for that means social cooperation—social cooperation issuing in coercion, like a man separating quarrelling friends—and that action is by his definition barred to him. If the big bourgeoisie of his own country decide to go to war and mobilize the coercive forces, physical and moral, of the state, he can do nothing real, for the only real answer is cooperation with the proletariat to resist the coercive action of the big bourgeoisie and oust them from power. If fascism develops, he cannot suppress it in the bud before it has built up an army to intimidate the proletariat, for he believes in "free speech." He can only watch the workers being bludgeoned and beheaded by the forces he allowed to develop.

His position rests firmly on the bourgeois fallacy. He thinks that man as an individual has power. He does not see that even in the unlikely event of everyone's taking his viewpoint and saying, "I will passively resist," his purpose will still not be achieved. For men cannot in fact cease to cooperate, because

## PACIFISM AND VIOLENCE

society's work must be carried on—grain must be reaped, clothes spun, electricity generated, or man will perish from the earth. Only his position as a member of a parasitic class could have given him any other illusion. A worker sees that his very life depends on economic cooperation and that this cooperation of itself imposes social relations which in bourgeois economy must be bourgeois, that is, must in greater or less measure give into the hands of the big bourgeoisie the violent issues of life and death. Passive resistance is not a real program, but an apology for supporting the old program. A man either participates in bourgeois economy, or he revolts and tries to establish another economy. Another apparent road is to break up society and return to the jungle, the solution of *anarchy*. But that is no solution at all. The only real alternative to bourgeois economy is proletarian economy, i.e., socialism, and therefore one either participates in bourgeois economy or is a proletarian revolutionary. The fact that one participates passively in bourgeois economy, that one does not oneself wield the bludgeon or fire the cannon, so far from being a defense really make one's position more disgusting, just as a fence is more unpleasant than a burglar, and a pimp than a prostitute. One lets others do the dirty work and merely participates in the benefit. The bourgeois pacifist occupies perhaps the most ignoble place of a man in any civilization. He is the Christian Protestant whose ethics have been made ridiculous by the development of the culture that evolved them; but this does not prevent his deriving complacency from observing them. He sits on the head of the worker and while the big bourgeois kicks him, advises him to lie quiet.

Pacifism, for all its specious moral aspect, is, like Protestant Christianity, the creed of ultra-individualism and selfishness. This selfishness is seen in all the defenses the bourgeois pacifist makes of his creed.

The first defense is that it is wrong. It is a "sin" to slay or resort to violence. Christ forbids it. The pacifist who resorts to violence imbrues his soul with heinous guilt. In this conception nothing appears as important but the pacifist's own soul. It is this precious soul of his that he is worrying about, like the good bourgeoisie about her honor which is such an important social

asset. Society can go to the devil if his soul is intact. So imbued is he with bourgeois notions of sin, that it never occurs to him that a preoccupation with one's own soul and one's own salvation is selfish. It may be that a man is right to save his own skin before all; that the pacifist above all must prevent the contamination of his precious soul by the moral sin of violence. But what is this but the translation into spiritual terms of the good old bourgeois rule of *laissez-faire* and bourgeoisdom—may the devil take the hindmost? It is a spiritual *laissez-faire*. It is a belief that the interests of society—God's purpose—are best served by not performing any action, however beneficial to others, if it would imperil one's own "soul." This is crystallized in the maxim, "One may not do ill that good may come of it."

Some pacifists, however, make a different defense. They are not concerned with their own souls. They are only thinking of others. Pacifism is the only way to stop violence and oppression. Violence breeds violence; oppression breeds oppression. How far is this argument well grounded and not merely a rationalization of the bourgeois illusion?

No pacifist has yet explained the causal chain by which non-resistance ends violence. It is true that it does so in this obvious way, that if no resistance is made to violent commands, no violence is necessary to enforce them. Thus if A does everything B asks him, it will not be necessary for B to use violence. But a dominating relation of this kind is in essence violent, although violence is not overtly shown. Subjection is subjection, and rapacity rapacity, even if the weakness of the victim, or the fear inspired by the victor, makes the process non-forcible. Non-resistance will not prevent it, any more than the lack of claws on the part of prey prevents carnivores battenning on them. On the contrary, the carnivore selects as his victim animals of the kind. The remedy is the elimination of carnivores, that is, the extinction of classes that live by preying on others.

Another assumption is that man, being what he is, the sight of his defenseless victims will arouse his pity. Now this assumption is not in itself ridiculous, but it needs examination. Is it a historical fact that the defenselessness of his victims has ever aroused man's pity? History records millions of opposite

cases, of Tamburlane and his atrocities. Attila and his Huns (checked only by violence), Mohammedan incursions, primitive slayings, the Danes and their monastic massacres. Can anyone in good faith advance the proposition that non-resistance defeats violence? How could slave-owning states exist, if peaceful submission touched the hearts of the conquerors? How could man bear to slaughter perpetually the dumb unresisting races of sheep, swine, and oxen?

Moreover, the argument makes the usual bourgeois error of eternalizing its categories, the belief that there is a kind of abstract Robinson Crusoe man of whose actions definite predictions can be made. But how can one seriously subsume under one category Tamburlane, Socrates, a Chinese mandarin, a modern Londoner, an Aztec priest, a Paleolithic hunter, and a Roman galley-slave? There is no abstract man, but men in different networks of social relations, with similar hereditics but molded into different proclivities by education and the constant pressure of social being.

Today, it is man in bourgeois social relations with whom we are concerned. Of what effect would it be if we no longer resisted violence, if England, for example, at the beginning of the Great War, had passively permitted Germany to occupy Belgium, and accept without resistance all that Germany wished to do?

There is this much truth in the pacifist argument: that a country in a state of bourgeois social relations cannot act like a nomad horde. Bourgeoisdom has discovered that Tamburlane exploitation does not pay so well as bourgeois exploitation. It is of no use to a bourgeois to sweep over a country, to lift all the wine and fair women and gold thereof and sweep out again. The fair women grow old and ugly, the wine is drunk, and the gold avails for nothing but ornaments. That would be Dead Sea fruit in the mouth of bourgeois culture, which lives on an endless diet of profit and a perpetual domination.

Bourgeois culture has discovered that what pays is bourgeois violence. This is more subtle and less overt than Tamburlane violence. Roman violence, which consisted in bringing home not only fair women and gold, but slaves also, and making them

work in the household, farms, and mines, occupied a mid-position. Bourgeois culture has discovered that those social relations are most profitable to the bourgeois which do not include rapine and personal slavery, but, on the contrary forbid it. Therefore the bourgeois, wherever he has conquered non-bourgeois territory, such as Australia, America, Africa, or India, has imposed bourgeois, not Tamburlane, social relations. In the name of liberty, self-determination, and democracy, or sometimes without these names, they enforce the bourgeois essence, private property, and the ownership of the means of production for profit, and its necessary prerequisite, the free laborer forced to dispose of his labor, for a wage, in the market. This priceless bourgeois discovery has produced material wealth beyond the dreams of a Tamburlane or a Croesus.

Thus, even if the pacifist dream was realized, bourgeois violence would go on. But in fact it would not be realized. How could a bourgeois coercive state submit to having its source of profits violently taken away by another bourgeois state, and not use all the sources of violence at its disposal to stop it? Would it not rather disrupt the whole internal fabric of its state than permit such a thing? Fascism and Nazism, bloodily treading the road to bankruptcy, are evidence of this. Bourgeois economy, because it is unplanned, will cut its own throat rather than reform, and pacifism is only the expression of this last-ditch stand of bourgeois culture, which will at the best rather do nothing than do the thing that will end the social relations on which it is based.

Have we the courage to realize forcibly our views? What guarantee have we of their truth? The only real guarantee is action. We have the courage to enforce our beliefs upon physical matter, to build up the material substratum of society in houses, roads, bridges, and ships, despite the risk to human life, because our theories, generated by action, are tested in action. Let the bridge fall, the ship sink, the house collapse if we are wrong. We have investigated the causality of nature; let it be proved upon ourselves if we are wrong.

Exactly the same applies to social relations. Bridges have collapsed before now, cultures have moldered in decay, vast

civilizations have foundered, but they did not decay uselessly. From each mistake we have learned something, and the Tam-burlane society, the slave-owning society, the feudal society, proved upon the test of action have failed. Yet it has only been partial failure; with each we learned a little more, just as the most recent bridge embodies lessons learned from the collapse of the first. Always the lesson was the same, it was the violence, the dominating relation between master and slave, lord and serf, bourgeois and proletarian, which was the weakness in the bridge.

But the pacifist, like all bourgeois theoreticians, is obsessed with the lazy lust of the absolute. "Give me," they all cry, "absolute truth, absolute justice, some rule-of-thumb standard by which I can evade the strenuous task of finding the features of reality by intimate contact with it in action. Give me some logical talisman, some philosopher's stone, by which I can test all acts in theory and say, this is right. Give me some principle such as: *Violence is wrong*, so that I can simply refrain from all violent action and know that I am right." But the only absolute they find is the standard of bourgeois economy. "Abstain from social action." Standards are made, not found.

Man cannot live without acting. Even to cease to act, to let things go their own way, is a form of acting, as when I drop a stone that perhaps starts an avalanche. And since man is always acting, he is always exerting force, always altering or maintaining the position of things, always revolutionary or conservative. Existence is the exercise of force on the physical environment and on other men. The web of physical and social relations that binds men into one universe ensures that nothing we do is without its effect on others, whether we vote or cease to vote, whether we help the police or let them go their way, whether we let two combatants fight or separate them forcibly or assist one against the other, whether we let a man starve to death or move heaven and earth to assist him. Man can never rest on the absolute; all acts involve consequences, and it is man's task to find out these consequences and act accordingly. He can never choose between action and inaction; he can only choose between life and death. He can never absolve himself

with the ancient plea, "My intentions were good," or "I meant it for the best," or "I have broken no commandment." Even savages have a more vital conception than this, with whom an act is judged by its consequences, even as a bridge is judged by its stability. Therefore it is man's task to find out the consequences of acts: which means discovering the laws of social relations, the impulses, causes, and effects of history.

Thus it is beside the point to ask the pacifist whether he would have defended Greece from the Persian or his sister from a would-be ravisher. Modern society imposes a different and more concrete issue. Under which banner of violence will he impose himself? The violence of bourgeois relations, or the violence not only to resist them but to end them? Bourgeois social relations are revealing, more and more insistently, the violence of exploitation and dispossession on which they are founded; more and more they harrow man with brutality and oppression. By abstaining from action the pacifist enrolls himself under this banner, the banner of things as they are and getting worse, the banner of the increasing violence and coercion exerted by the *haves* on the *have-nots*. He calls increasingly into being the violences of poverty, deprivation, artificial slumps, artistic and scientific decay, fascism, and war.

Or he can enroll himself under the revolutionary banner of things as they will be. In doing so he accepts the stern necessity that he who is to replace a truth or an institution or a system of social relations, must substitute a better, that he who is to pull down a bridge, however inefficient, must put instead a better bridge. Bourgeois social relations were better perhaps than slave-owning; what can the revolutionary find better than them? And, having found them, how is he to bring them about? For one must not only plan the bridge, one must see how it is to be built, by violence, by force, by blasting the living rock and tugging and sweating at the stones that make it.

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The issue is socialism versus capitalism. I am for socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society—we are on the eve of a universal change.

—Eugene V. Debs

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