

# **The Politics of Ideology in Brecht's**

## ***Life of Galileo***

A paper presented

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## الملخص

### أليات الفكر السياسي في مسرحية "حياة غاليليو" لـ بريخت

يعتبر برتولد بريخت واحد من أفضل المسرحيين المحدثين. إن مساهماته الكبيرة في التقاليد المسرحية والمسرح الملحمي قد أضفت على سمعته مكانة مرموقة. كتب بريخت كثير من المسرحيات الناجحة ومنها (حياة غاليليو). تدور أحداث هذه المسرحية حول الفيلسوف وعالم الفيزياء الإيطالي غاليليو غاليلي الذي كان تأثيره واضحا في الثورة العلمية التي أنت لاحقا. تجسد هذه المسرحية الشد الامتناهي بين العلم والسلطة الدينية القوية والقناعة العلمية المتحررة للانسان. ومن هنا انتت هذه الدراسة لتبحث العلاقة الجدلية بين الدين والعلم كما جسدت شخصية غاليليو غاليلي في ضل العقيدة الفكرية المهيمنة انذاك.

لقد وقع الاختيار على هذه المسرحية بناء على ما تحتويه من معالجة رائعة وبصيرة ثاقبة لآليات الفكر السياسي ودلالاتها ذات العلاقة الوثيقة بوقتنا الحاضر. نظريا يرتكز البحث على (نظرية الفكر والفن) لـ التوسير وتطبيق هذه النظرية على مسرحية (حياة غاليليو) لبرخت. يعتبر التوسير (١٩١٨-١٩٩٠) واحد من منظري ما بعد الماركسية في العالم الغربي، وممن دعم نسخة مباشرة من الماركسية التي كانت دائما قريبة من الحزب الشيوعي. التوسير اعتبر بريخت كواحد من اعظم المسرحيين الماركسيين الثوريين في القرن العشرين ومن الذين وظفوا المسرح لمعارضة النظام الرأسمالي والفكر البرجوازي. يتكون البحث من ثلاثة اجزاء رئيسية: حيث يختبر الجزء الاول كيفية اصرار التوسير على تبني نسخة مباشرة من الماركسية الغير ملوثة بمثالية الطبقة الوسطى والنفعية وتركز على الصراع الطبقي. حيث كما هو برخت، كان التوسير يعتقد بأن النظام التبروي، الحياة الثقافية، المسرح والفن ما هي الا ميدان رئيسي واحد من النظام الثوري ضد لايدولوجية الرأسمالية المهيمنة. يتناول الجزء الثاني اراء التوسير عن بريخت ككاتب مسرحي ثوري وكيف ان المسرح الكلاسيكي كان قد ساند الايدولوجيات السائدة في المجتمع والطريقة التي ساهم بها في حل الصراعات الاجتماعية بطرق وجدانية ومثالية من خلال بطولات البطل. في حين ان الكوميديا ومسرح العبث سخرت من كل هذا دون تقديم اي امل في تغيير حقيقي. ومع ذلك فان نسخة بريخت من المسرح استندت على العلوم التاريخية من الماركسية وقدمت قراءة هدامة ومعارضة للايدولوجيات الرأسمالية وفي مسرحيات مثل (حياة غاليليو) نفت وجود بطل او حل خيالي للمشاكل الاجتماعية. يناقش القسم الثالث في البحث الطريقة التي كان فيها غاليليو، في الحقيقة، انموذجا للانتهازي البرجوازي الحديث الذي يستشعر بوجود عالم حديث وبأماكن غير محدودة: كان غاليليو يعلم بأن اكتشافاته العلمية الجديدة تشكل تهديدا حقيقيا للنظام الاقطاعي القديم بما في ذلك الكنيسة الكاثوليكية والطبقة الارستقراطية وخصوصا اذا ما بدأ من هم ادنى رتبة منهم، في السلم الاجتماعي، بطرح أسئلة واستفسارات، لا اجابة لها، حول المجتمع والايدولوجيات السائدة. وفي النهاية عندما هدد بالتعذيب والموت، تنصل وتكرر غاليليو عن ارائه واذعن الى حكم وقناعات السلطات التقليدية بدلا من المخاطرة والاستشهاد او حتى محاولة قيادة حركة ثورية. لقد صور بريخت غاليليو مغرورا للغاية، باحثا عن ملذاته الشخصية ومتجنبا للالم. رغبته الانانية البحتة هذه ادت بالنهاية الى تزويد اعداء الانسانية بسلاح وتقنيات جديدة لاستعباد وابادة الجماهير. لقد استوعب الناس الدرس جيدا: بما ان الشمس لا تدور حول الارض اذا لم تعد هنالك حاجة للانسان في المستقبل من ان يجعل سواه كعبة له يطوف حولها.

## Introduction

Bertolt Brecht is one of the most leading playwrights in modern drama and indeed, one of the biggest stations where the train of drama should stop for catering. His colossal contribution to the dramatic technique, theatrical convention and epic theatre tags him enormous magnitude. He wrote many successful plays chief among them is *Life of Galileo*. This play is so influential not only for the reason that it reflects on the calamity of Galileo Galilei, an Italian scientist and philosopher whose impact was so obvious on the later Scientific Revolution, but also since it incarnates the everlasting tug of war between the powerful pragmatic religious authorities and man's liberal scientific conviction. Hence, this paper comes to inspect the problematical relation between religion and science as depicted by Brecht's Galileo in the light of the dominant ideology at his time.

The play has been chosen, in this paper, as it shocks us with its fascinating and insightful manipulation of the politics of ideology and its significant connection to our present time. Theoretically, the paper will mainly hinge on Althusser's Theory of Ideology and Art which would be applied on Brecht's *Life of Galileo*.

Louis Althusser (1918-90) was one of the post-Marxist theorists in the Western world, and advocated an especially orthodox version of Marxism that was always close to the Communist Party line. He regarded Bertolt Brecht as one of the great Marxist-revolutionary

playwrights of the 20th Century, who used the theater to oppose the capitalist system and bourgeois ideology. The paper is divided into three sections and a conclusion:

In the first section, the paper will examine how Althusser insisted on a 'straight' version of Marxism, uncontaminated by middle class idealism, pragmatism or humanism and centered on class struggle. Like Brecht, he believed that the educational system, cultural life, the theater and the arts would always be one major arena of revolutionary struggle against the dominant ideology of capitalism.

The second section will consider Althusser's views on Brecht as a revolutionary playwright, and how classical types of theater merely uphold the dominant ideologies of society or resolved social conflicts in a sentimentalized and idealized way through the actions of a hero. Meanwhile comedy and Theater of the Absurd mocked all this without offering any hope of real change. Brecht's version of the theater, however, grounded in the historical science of Marxism, did offer a subversive and oppositional reading of capitalist ideologies, and in plays like *Life of Galileo*, even denied the existence of a hero or a fictionalized solution to social problems.

In the third section on Brecht's Galileo, the paper will discuss how Brecht's Galileo was in fact a prototype of an early modern bourgeois opportunist and entrepreneur, sensing a new world of limitless possibilities. He knew that his new scientific discoveries were deeply threatening to the old feudal order, including the Catholic Church and the aristocracy, particularly if the lower orders began asking questions about society and the dominant ideologies that they could not answer. Galileo's New Science had removed earth from the

center of the universe and relegated it to the periphery, where it has remained ever since. It opened up the possibility that other earths and other civilizations existed out in space and time, while seeming to negate the idea that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world. Galileo could not even locate God or heaven in his telescope, which was deeply distressing to the church authorities and even to his own friends and associates. In the end though, when threatened with torture and death, he recanted his views and deferred to the traditional authorities rather than risking martyrdom or attempting to lead some type of revolutionary movement. Brecht's Galileo was highly egotistical and self-absorbed, hedonistic and concerned with enhancing his own pleasure and avoiding pain. He manages to survive under house arrest, but also comes to loathe himself for betraying and undermining his own scientific principles, leaving the ruling elites in control of the New Science.

### 1. The Workings of Ideology: An Althusserian perspective

In "Marxism and Humanism" (1963) and "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus" (1969), Althusser described ideology as a system of myths, images and ideas playing a political and economic role in society. Far from being a set of abstract academic theories, ideology constituted "our lived relationship to historical reality, our 'world' itself" as represented in popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Althusser also insisted that Marxism (historical materialism) was a science rather than an ideology, and that it provided real knowledge about society. On the other hand, ideologies had certain functions under capitalism or any other social system that was not rationally chosen by individuals or even necessarily a conscious and rational part of their thought and personalities. Images from films, advertisements and television, for example, were part of everyday life and showed models of clothing, lifestyles, bodies and homes that became part of popular culture even though they may have had very little to do with the real world as most people experienced it. Marxist science demonstrated that "in reality, our lives are determined in every respect by the capitalist system of production relations in which we live."<sup>2</sup> For Marxists, the function of the state and the state apparatus is to maintain the ruling class in power. Althusser wrote that the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) was the coercive side of the state that used the courts, military, prisons and police to protect capitalist interests, while the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), including religion, political parties, the education system and media, existed to mold minds and personalities, manufacture consent, and manipulate and propagandize the masses. Ruling class ideologies will always dominate culture, education, politics and the media, but like Antonio Gramsci, Althusser regarded arts, culture and the educational system as arenas of class struggle in which oppositional and resistance ideologies can also be expressed.<sup>3</sup>

Marxist theorists like Gramsci and Althusser were naturally most concerned with culture, ideology and social relations under urban, industrial capitalism during the 20<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Luke Ferrerter, *Louis Althusser* (Routledge, 2006), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrerter, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Ferrerter, p. 85.

Century, which did not yet exist during the time of Galileo. Indeed, the Renaissance, Protestant Reformation and Scientific Revolution all took place at the dawn of capitalism during the early modern period, when banking and manufacturing were still relatively small scale and nation states were only beginning to come into existence. All of these states were governed by absolute monarchs allied with state-supported churches, although early liberals and radicals who represented the emerging bourgeoisie were beginning to challenge these in England, Holland and other northern European nations. For them, the New Science of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton served as a progressive force with which they allied against the reactionary institutions of the old regime like the Catholic Church. Before capitalism and the modern nation state came into existence, the dominant force in culture, religion and ideology was the church. For this reason “ideological struggle in the pre-capitalist world was conducted primarily at the level of religious and theological discourse” by the educated elite.<sup>4</sup> All this took place before the bourgeoisie held political power anywhere, given that the state was controlled by monarchs, aristocrats and bishops. Althusser thought that under modern capitalism the education system had become the primary focus of class struggle, but no such mass education system existed yet in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when Galileo was threatened with death by the Inquisition, a tribunal concerned with the judgment of heresies against the Catholic faith, and church authorities.

Althusser also regarded Sigmund Freud as an original theorist, comparable to Galileo in the physical sciences and Marx in historical materialism. They paved the way for new continents of knowledge that has been developed further after their lifetimes. Like Jacques Lacan, he rejected efforts to blend Freudian theory with humanism, behaviorism, pragmatism or existentialism, all of which he regarded as bourgeois ideologies. This also occurred with Marxism. Althusser intervened in an attempt to bring it to its pure form as advocated by Marx.<sup>5</sup> In his essay “The Humanist Controversy”, he argued that the battle of science against ideology would be long lasting and possibly endless, and Marxism always had to be guarded against bourgeois ideologies. History is based on class struggle, and a permanent conflict between Marxist science and various myths and ideologies like humanism. He regarded himself as being actively and constantly engaged in “the class struggle in theory” and asserted that Marx could never have been a humanist without being regressive or even turning Marxism into some kind of middle class religion rather than the science of society.<sup>6</sup> In rejecting all Hegelian, existentialist and idealist admixtures in Marxism, Althusser was often parodied by his critics as a vulgar Marxist who was attached to the Soviet Communist Party line in politics. He denied that individuals were conscious “authors or subjects of social processes” or even that most of them were conscious at all.<sup>7</sup>

Although his theory of aesthetics was never well-developed, Althusser did not believe that all art was ideology in a purely vulgar manner. In fact, he had difficulty explaining

<sup>4</sup> Ferreter, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan* (Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (Verso, 2003), p. lii.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Althusser, “A Letter in Reply to Andre Daspre (1966)” in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (eds), *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Blackwell, 1996), p. 269.

exactly what its relationship was with ideology, except that it was very complex. Nor did he claim that art was a form of knowledge in the scientific (Marxist) sense although it offered “something which alludes to reality”.<sup>8</sup> Ideology was a part of all human activities and lived experience. Art, literature and the theater could describe these experiences, as well as class and ideological conflicts. He used the term “interpolation” to refer to the act of presenting the self to the world, as on stage or a television program, and of being recognized by others — usually to conform to the dominant ideology and societal expectations.<sup>9</sup> Althusser’s main goal was to overthrow capitalism and bourgeois ideology, and he believed that avant-garde theater was part of this overall class struggle. Modern bourgeois ideology was centered on the supposedly free individual making rational choices and decisions, although this hardly existed at all in Galileo’s era — not even as a pretense. Under capitalism, this ideology of the omnipotent individual “being free and master of itself, the center and first mover of the world” was also an illusion.<sup>10</sup> In “A Letter on Art” (1966), Althusser reaffirmed that art could break with all ideological suppositions and move in the direction of scientific (Marxist) truth.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Althusser and Brecht

Brecht was one of Althusser’s primary examples of a revolutionary Marxist playwright, using the theater to challenge bogus capitalist ideology, particularly in *Life of Galileo*. In addition, they both argued that the theater in capitalist society was simply another commodity for consumption, along with movies, television and radio, but subversive and oppositional tendencies were also possible. Classical theater was authoritarian and never questioned the dominant ideological assumptions of society but rather confirmed them. In dramatic (and melodramatic) theater, the death or sacrifice of the hero resolved all conflicts and contradictions in society in a “fictional, ideal manner”.<sup>12</sup> In comedy and the theater of the Absurd of Ionesco, dominant ideological assumptions are overturned and even shown to be ridiculous, right up to the destruction of the theater and the audience. Yet for Ionesco, absurdity was “a state of nature, the original and essential human condition”, and couldn’t be changed by revolution or Marxist political action.<sup>13</sup>

For Althusser, Thomas Beckett and Brecht represented a fourth kind of theater that he called dialectical and realistic, presenting history without heroes or easy idealized resolutions of conflicts. In these plays, human beings are not really in control of their circumstances or social surroundings, and may not even comprehend the forces that actually shape their lives. In “On Brecht and Marx” (1968), Althusser again proclaimed Brecht as a theatrical revolutionary on the same level that Marx was a political and philosophical revolutionary in that “both recognize the objective, historical existence of the field for which they seek to

<sup>8</sup> Althusser, Letter to Daspre, p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Dunn and Alan Singer (eds), *Literary Aesthetics: A Reader* (Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Dunn and Singer, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Montag, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Montag, p. 33.

intervene.”<sup>14</sup> Like all great art and literary work, they were furthest from the dominant ideological assumptions of the time and attempt to “shatter myths and smash the idols to which we bow down.”<sup>15</sup> Great works of art are therefore progressive rather than reactionary or bourgeois. Althusser and Brecht described ideology as partially theatrical and the audience in a dialectical relationship with the play. They were not supposed to be mere passive observers seeking entertainment and escape, but to actively question the social, political and economic conditions portrayed on stage. Since ideology was a “manifestation of state power in which everyone plays a part he or she had no input in creating” they might be able to understand characters in the play who are in a similar situation.<sup>16</sup> In Brecht’s plays, the actors were also involved in a collective effort with the director and playwright in bringing the drama to the stage, and *Galileo* was revised repeatedly in 1938-45 before finally being presented in the United States by the great British actor-director Charles Laughton. Brecht’s plays did not even have heroes in the classical sense, nor did they have neat resolutions or conclusions.

### 3. Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*

Bertolt Brecht was one of the leading playwrights of the Weimar Republic, Germany parliamentary Republic established in 1919 to supersede the imperial regime of the government, but went into exile immediately after the Nazis came to power in 1933 and spent most of the war years in the United States. He returned to Europe in 1947 after being called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (also known by its acronym HUAC), anti-communist investigation committee of the United States House of Representatives, and settled in East Germany two years later. There he encountered a Stalinist regime “which brooked even less opposition than the Catholic Church had done in medieval and Renaissance times.”<sup>17</sup> In private, he opposed the Soviet suppression of the working class rebellion in 1953, but remained in East Berlin until his death from a heart attack three years later. In the end, like Louis Althusser, he had chosen the side of ‘actually existing socialism’ (i.e. the Soviet Union) in the Cold War, despite certain personal misgivings about the true nature of that system. He even accepted the Stalin Peace Prize in Moscow a year before his death. Brecht wrote *Life of Galileo* while he was in Denmark, his voluntary exile, away from Nazi Germany persecution. He did not intend it to be as openly Communist or Marxist like his work in the 1920s and early-1930s. He made less use of choruses to preach to the audience compared to his earlier plays and downplayed the overtly Marxist elements, since the play was originally written during the era of Popular Front, a

<sup>14</sup> Montag, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Montag, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> Graley Herren, “The Performance of Ideology and Dialectics in Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*” in Hellmut H. Rennert

(ed.) *Essays of Twentieth-Century German Drama and Theater: An American Reception, 1977-1999* (Peter Lang

Publishing, 2004), p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald D. Gray, *Brecht the Dramatist* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 110.

broad [coalition](#) of different political groupings often made up of [leftists](#) and [centrists](#) fight against fascism. And Communists were under instructions to make common alliances with liberal and social democratic parties.

For two decades, Bertolt Brecht tussled to write three different versions of *Life of Galileo*. In the 1938-39 version of the play, Galileo was not absolutely hostile to the ruling elites in the Church and the aristocracy, although Brecht did show them to be corrupt and cynical, and expressed “sharp compassion with the miseries of the poor.”<sup>18</sup> Galileo as a character was clever rather than heroic, “refusing to become a martyr by submitting to torture, but cunningly continuing his scientific work which the Church condemned.”<sup>19</sup> In his 1945-47 version with Charles Laughton, written with Hiroshima, Nagasaki and other recent catastrophes in mind, Brecht’s vision became more pessimistic and his views of science more negative. In this play, Galileo as an old man admits that he feared being tortured and burned at the stake by the Inquisition and no plan at all except to save his own life. All the Church authorities had to do was show him the instruments of torture and he acquiesced, although he also thought himself “unworthy to shake the hand of a fellow scientist, feeling he has betrayed the cause of science.”<sup>20</sup> Brecht expressed some concern that this type of timid and deferential Galileo was not exactly the right type of message to send to audiences given the events of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly to Germans who already had far too much experience acquiescing to unjust authority.

### 3.1 Marxism in Relation to Brecht’s Galileo.

Brecht’s Galileo is a character defined by myths and illusions right from the start. The audience learns that he did not even invent the telescope but only copied it from a traveler returning from Amsterdam. In fact, no one knows who really invented this new device or even if this was the work of a single individual or many working over a long period. Galileo acts like a proto-capitalist and sells the new invention as his own, and is also portrayed as “greedy, a glutton and an epicure” who can hardly think at all unless he is at least half-drunk.<sup>21</sup> Charles Laughton portrayed him as a man of gargantuan hedonism whose “appetite for knowledge has to be shown as part of his appetite for all things.”<sup>22</sup> Far from being a hero in the classical or dramatic sense, Brecht’s Galileo is repugnant on many levels, and also turns out to be a coward, who renounces the New Science out of fear of being tortured and burned by the Inquisition. Cunning, unscrupulous and cowardly, Galileo is a man who gulps down food and wine and has “an insatiable desire for more life, more experience, and more pleasure.”<sup>23</sup> He lacks a center or any kind of fixed moral and political principles, and is a kind of early modern consumer motivated by thoroughly bourgeois self-interest. In the end,

<sup>18</sup> Gray, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Gray, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> Gray, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> Montag, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Gray, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> Gray, p. 112.



he betrays even his own scientific principles of rigid honesty just to save his own life, and therefore undermines himself.

In the first scene as the play opens in Padua in 1609, Galileo is washing himself with his shirt off, in an age when most people hardly bathed at all, but even in this respect he is the harbinger of the modern era. He tells the young Andrea that although even the kings and princes are certain that the earth is the center of the universe; he will prove them all wrong. They were living in an age of discovery when ships no longer clung to the shore but “sped straight across the seas”. No longer would the people be satisfied with answers found in old books but would demand answers for themselves. Since he needs money for his research and the university is stingy with his salary, Galileo proves that he can also be a bourgeois entrepreneur, selling the new telescopes that he heard were already being produced in Holland. In the second scene, he sells these to the government of Venice with the false claim that they were the result of “seventeen years of patient research.” Galileo is not embarrassed when a ship from Holland unloads thousands of telescopes, even though he has promised the Venetians “exclusive rights” to the invention, and merely says that the one he made for them is twice as good as the Dutch version. Besides, as he tells the curator of university museum in Scene Three, “I needed the money”, although the curator notes that “you have destroyed my faith in a lot of things.” Many others make similar comments to Galileo throughout the play, including his prospective son-in-law, although Galileo is so self-absorbed that he seems oblivious to all this until the end. He is far more interested in the mountains and craters on the moon, which no one in history had ever seen before, and imagined that thousands of other earths existed somewhere in space. Here again, he is actually surprised when the leaders of the Catholic Church move quickly to cut off all such questions and speculation, for which they simply had no answers.

Galileo manages to destroy the faith of his friend Sagredo in Scene Three, who asks him repeatedly where God is in his new cosmology and warning that he will be burned at the stake if he does not have the proper answers. He has already found that Jupiter has moons that no one has ever seen before, and is more inclined to believe that Martians and moon men exist rather than God, which would also be the view of Brecht and Althusser. To Sagredo’s persistent questions about where God and heaven are, Galileo gives the strictly modern answer “I believe in reason”. He also writes a highly servile and deferential letter to the Medici ruler of Florence—a nine-year old boy at that time — promising to name the moons of Jupiter after his family. Once more in this instance, Galileo shows himself to be highly amoral and mercenary about self-promotion to anyone with power and wealth, explaining only that “I need my comforts”. Upon his arrival in Florence, however, he discovers that two Scholastic professors are already there, and have accused him of fraud by painting the moons of Jupiter on the lenses of the telescope. This upsets the boy ruler of Florence greatly, who wonders what happened to ‘his’ moons, while the two professors refuse to even look through the telescope despite repeated pleas by Galileo. They have already read in the works of Aristotle that the ideas of Copernicus, a Polish astronomer and mathematician who first formulate a comprehensive [heliocentric cosmology](#), are impossible and can ‘prove’ it

mathematically and theoretically, and have no interests in experiments or theoretical verification. Even more than the leaders of the Catholic Church, they represent for Brecht and Althusser the ancient and feudal mentality that had contempt for new technology and experiment science as little better than servile labor.

When even the Papal astronomer confirms Galileo's discoveries in 1616 (Scene Four), the church leaders are unpleasantly surprised. They had literally been laughing at him up to that moment because his ideas about the movement of the earth seemed to defy common sense, not to mention the Bible. In the Old Testament, after all, the sun was described as moving around the earth, and for Galileo to question scripture was heresy — punishable by death. One cardinal is so upset by this news that he appears to have heart attack, given that Galileo had now transferred humanity to the "outskirts" of the universe with the earth as just one "non-descript star" among many. Why, the cardinal asks, would God even want to send his son to such an insignificant place that was not even at the center of Creation? Another cardinal, more suave than his colleague, comments that all Galileo wants to do is "prove that God made a few mistakes in astronomy" and that he would have to reinterpret what the Bible says. Of course, once Galileo demanded the right to interpret or ignore scripture, the entire basis of the church's ideological power would crumble, just as it already had in many countries where the Protestant Reformation had taken hold. Galileo starts to become uncomfortable when the cardinals mention that he resembles another man they burned at the stake not so long before, and even more so when they tell him that the Holy Office had condemned his views as "foolish, absurd and heretical". His choice was now to recant or face torture and execution, which was all the more surprising to him because the cardinals had just been informed that all his theories were true. None of that mattered, since he was dealing with powerful institutions that were not interested in truth but defending their own ideologies and control over society. Their main concern was to hold back the floodtide of modernity that threatened to wash them all away and to keep the lower orders under control, although they would also make selective use of the New Science for their own purposes.

### 3.2 Galileo: The Bourgeois Anti-hero

Like all new technology, the telescope is not necessarily progressive in and of itself since it can also be used by generals and authoritarian rulers to gain a military advantage over their enemies. In Scene Two, the Venetians are very pleased that now "the enemy fleet will be visible to us a full two hours before we are visible to them"<sup>24</sup>, unless of course they also have the new telescopes. Needless to say, their first thought about the proper use of the new invention is not to discover more about the stars, and the church authorities make no objection to its military use. Nor is historical progress automatic simply because of the discovery of new knowledge and information about the world and the entire universe, the type of knowledge that the Catholic Church greatly feared since it raised all kinds of

<sup>24</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *Life of Galileo*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.2008, p. 8.

questions for which it had no answers. At the end of the play, Galileo's young assistant Andrea is about to smuggle his manuscript out of Italy. He notices some boys preparing to stone an old woman to death because they think she is a witch. He attempts to prevent this and prove to them that witches do not exist. Still his efforts are wasted, for as soon as he is aboard the ship, the boys immediately return to kill the old woman. For Brecht "truth has very little force against superstition and ideology", and Althusser agreed that the world is full of "myths and opiates" in politics, religion and morality.<sup>25</sup> Brecht and Althusser learned this lesson the hard way, since they were eyewitnesses to the rise of Nazism in Germany and The Second World War, which ended in the use of scientific methods of genocide and the destruction of two Japanese cities by atomic bombs.

Just before departing in Scene Fourteen, an adult Andrea proclaims that the New Science will abolish the need for heaven for it will make the earth a paradise. This was not only a dream of Marxists, but liberals and progressives in general, so highly under the influence of Enlightenment thought, but the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century cast a long shadow over it: two world wars, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, led to a revival of skepticism about progress through science. Now an elderly man under house arrest, Galileo admits his own cowardice in the face of the Inquisition and that "I was afraid of physical pain"<sup>26</sup>, but he has reproached himself ever since for failing to take a more courageous stand. For Andrea, scientists only have to be concerned about "contributions to knowledge"<sup>27</sup> with no concern about their moral of physical weaknesses, but this is not enough for Galileo. Due to his actions, science had been cut off from the common people, although the ruling elites understood its value very well and were using it for their own ends. In spite of the fact that Galileo's theories were true, the church and the aristocracy did not desire social and political changes, nor even did they want the masses to have the basic information necessary to question their authority or the dominant ideologies they were propounding. This is why Galileo believed he was living in a "gutter", for the rulers of the world were free to abuse the New Science for their own corrupt and oppressive ends, while keeping the lower classes in ignorance and superstition. He foresaw a future of "universal horror" and destruction, with the earth becoming a hell rather than a heaven, and in this he reflects the view of Bertolt Brecht that if he and other scientists had taken a different course at the outset, the calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century might have been prevented.

### 3.3 Dramatic Technique in *Life of Galileo*

Brecht was a great man of theatre and devised plays that both enlivened and relaxed audiences into breaking the illusion of story. His characters brought a means of expression that he used to reach people in a manner that promoted detachment by opposing sound and image. Brecht's dramatic technique as applied to *Life of Galileo* is a part of a theory of

<sup>25</sup> Montag, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *Life of Galileo*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.2008, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 79

theatre known as 'Epic Theatre'. Epic theatre is an anti illusionist theatre opposite of the concept of Aristotelian's 'Theatre of Illusion'<sup>28</sup>. It is in understanding 'Epic Theatre' that one can figure out his dramatic technique.

He had many ways to apply his technique. One way would be his use of long pauses. This causes the audience to reflect and think about what was happening in the play. An example of this is in *Life of Galileo*: "GALILEO: How will you get through the winter without jacket? (Pause. Galileo arranges the lenses on the sheet with the sketch)"<sup>29</sup>. Long pauses also put the audience back into reality to notice anything else besides the actors on stage. They might notice the set or the reactions from other audience members promoting further contemplation.

Another technique is harsh lighting and empty stages. Having bare stages accompanied by harsh light allow the audience to focus on the words being spoken, and not necessarily on the nice decorations and other aesthetics of the stage. Elaborate costumes and soft lighting, although beautify a play, may detract from the goal of absorbing the words of the play. Harsh lighting also gives audiences a chance to see the realism of the actors. They can see the worries, anxieties, nervousness in their faces and other tired expressions. It allows for a more organic and thought provoking experience<sup>30</sup>.

Brecht sought to awaken people from the fiction that he writes. He did this as well through placards announcing the change of scenes so as to bring the audience back from the story. He felt that getting too engrossed in a story detracts from the point of writing a play in the first place, and that to express an idea or a concept. Brecht felt the need to express his political as well as mundane views through his work and wanted others to interpret it from his work.

As enunciated earlier, Brecht also introduced in his characters the concept of anti-hero. *Life of Galileo* has a direct mentioning of this as Galileo discusses with Andrea the need for a hero: "Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero.' No, Andrea: 'Unhappy is the land that needs a hero'"<sup>31</sup>. His reasoning behind the anti-hero was his desire to create alienation or distance within the audience to the play. An article by Millman addresses this as indicated on The American Conservative Web site: "Brecht's notion of the epic theatre was founded on the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, usually translated as alienation or distancing effect. This was Brecht's rebuke to Aristotle's theory of drama, founded on the concept of catharsis,

<sup>28</sup> Montag, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *Life of Galileo*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.2008, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Millman, Noah. Brecht's Galileo: Hero or Anti-Hero? The American Conservative.<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/anti-hero-of-science/>

<sup>31</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *Life of Galileo*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.2008, p. 58.

an emotional purging that takes place through identification with a character when he comes to a full understanding of the tragic inevitability of his fate.”<sup>32</sup> For Brecht, it was always about countering the illusion of traditional dramatic theatre.

Dramatic theatre presents events, traditionally, from the hero's viewpoint allowing for a distortion of judgment and as happening now keeping audiences from detaching themselves from the story. Brecht's dramatic technique sought to disrupt that. As explained previously, he used a myriad of way to keep audiences in the present within the theatre not within the story. He wanted the events of the play to be interpreted as when one reads a book, in the past with commentary added to encourage reflection thus creating epic theatre.

As pointed out in the Universalteacher.org Web site, “Epic theatre is historical: the audience is continually reminded that epic theatre gives a report of events.”<sup>33</sup> Encouraging the audience to remain detached and separate from the narrative, strange things must be put in place to establish and preserve distancing. V-effekt as defined previously was Brecht's way of doing this. He provides an example of V-effekt through the situation of a child whose mother remarries, thus seeing her as a wife not just a mother. An example from *Life of Galileo* is the long and profound speech by the unheroic protagonist which is then followed by the pathetic observation: “Now I must eat”. (Brecht 2008, 64)

Galileo as shown through Brecht is an anti-hero through his cowardice behavior. He fears the instruments of torture that come with bravery. He fails the role of hero through his refusal and lack of courage to prove himself as a great figure. Instead he runs away from refusing to face his problems. He doesn't fulfill our expectations of what traditionally makes a hero. Aristotelian theory of theatre placed great importance on adherence to unities of time, place and action. In *Life of Galileo*, these unities are violated. The time frame within the plot covers decades. They're also shown to have taken place in places not adjacent or near each other, but rather a long stretches of vast distance.

The hero is not a person seeking a single action with commitment, but rather for many actions that do not form into a single, unifying action. The play also uses narrative form in that it takes past events and uses it as material for dramatization. It asks the audience to relate to characters in an observant, unconnected manner. The audience cannot show sympathy for the characters, but rather want to see what

<sup>32</sup> Millman.

<sup>33</sup> Moore, Andrew. Studying Bertolt Brecht.  
Universalteacher.org.<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/drama/brecht.htm> .

happened to allow a critical response. Brecht's desire to continue this went onwards through the way the music was played and used along with the actions done by the characters.

For Brecht the music and the action in his plays should make the other appear odd and off-putting as to continue the goal of distance. The result of the V-effekt is a contrast of seeing things differently in the play and then applying it to the real world. If one can see change happen in the play, then they can assimilate that to possible change in society. A play like *Life of Galileo* shows how society could be different, if attitudes deeply embedded in society are altered even if the task seems improbable to succeed. He shows this through *Mother Courage* in Galileo.

Ultimately, Brecht hoped to demonstrate and explain in *Life of Galileo* the depravity and emptiness of the bourgeois, capitalist society. His goal was to show the audience the possibility and the need for a new society to replace the old. He also believed this social change was inevitable. He wanted to bring change in a way that was long lasting and impactful.

## Conclusion

Brecht's Galileo is a moral failure, a betrayer, and not only an antihero but perhaps even the Antichrist for the modern age. His purely selfish desires and egotistical drives equip the enemies of humanity with new weapons and technologies to enslave, coerce and exterminate the masses. People absorb the lesson that because the sun no longer revolves around the earth then "nobody needs in future rotate around anybody, nobody needs to offer service or allegiance, and each individual can live entirely selfishly."<sup>34</sup> Far from creating a new heaven and earth, Galileo's science has paradoxically sown the seeds for future militarism and totalitarianism as well as capitalist exploitation and anarchy. Galileo becomes the prototype for the citizenry of this brave new world, and the play demonstrates with "great imagination the alternating self-condemnation and self-reassertion of all who leave under a stifling regime" such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> Brecht shows the Little Monk in a more sympathetic life, since he agrees that Galileo's theories are correct but worries that they will rob his parents of their religion and turn them into atheists, which is obviously a great fear for the Catholic Church as well. Their lives are already harsh and miserable after all, and are not likely to improve one they are

<sup>34</sup> Gray, p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Gray, p. 116.

“deprived of the rich comforts of religion.”<sup>36</sup> Nor are the ruling elites that control the New Science eager to use it to improve the lot of the masses, but only to make bigger their own wealth and power. Galileo was far removed from the ideal revolutionary hero that Brecht and Althusser would have preferred, and in fact comes across more like one of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian calculators, always trying to determine ways to maximize his own pleasure and avoid pain. In other words, he was the very essence of bourgeois ideology and culture that they wished to overthrow but never did.

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<sup>36</sup> Gray, p. 116.

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