

PRAISE OR CONDEMNATION OF GALILEO? 

It would be a great weakness in this work if those physicists were right who said to me—in a tone of approval—that Galileo's recantation of his teachings was, despite one or two 'waverings,' portrayed as being sensible, on the principle that this recantation enabled him to carry on with his scientific work and to hand it down to posterity. The fact is that Galileo enriched astronomy and physics by simultaneously robbing these sciences of a greater part of their social importance. By discrediting the Bible and the church, these sciences stood for a while at the barricades on behalf of all progress. It is true that a forward movement took place in the following centuries, and these sciences were involved in it, but it was a slow movement, not a revolution; the scandal, so to speak, degenerated into a dispute between experts. The church, and with it all the forces of reaction, was able to bring off an organised retreat and more or less reassert its power. As far as these particular sciences were concerned, they never again regained their high position in society, neither did they ever again come into such close contact with the people.

Galileo's crime can be regarded as the 'original sin' of modern natural sciences. From the new astronomy, which deeply interested a new class—the bourgeoisie—since it gave an impetus to the revolutionary social current of the time, he made a sharply defined special science which—admittedly through its very 'purity', i.e., its indifference to modes of production—was able to develop comparatively undisturbed.

The atom bomb is, both as a technical and as a social phenomenon, the classical end-product of his contribution to science and his failure to contribute to society.

Thus the 'hero' of this work is not Galileo but the people, as Walter Benjamin has said. This seems to me to be rather too briefly expressed. I hope this work shows how society extorts from its individuals what it needs from them. The urge to research, a social phenomenon no less delightful or compulsive than the urge to reproduce, steers Galileo into that most dangerous territory, drives him into agonising conflict with his violent desires for other pleasures. He raises his telescope to the stars and delivers himself to the rack. In the end he indulges his science like a vice, secretly, and probably with pangs of conscience. Confronted with such a situation, one can scarcely wish only to praise or only to condemn Galileo.

[Dated 1947. From Werner Hecht (ed.), *ibid.*, pp. 12f.]