

Chapter 10

Bohm and Feminism

There are a number of letters that are devoted, in part, to Bohm's views on the "woman question" or feminism, in today's parlance.¹ All these letters are to Miriam, and all are written in 1953, except for a short section in the long letter **111** of 1954. Though largely "abstract", as Miriam points out, they are presumably concerned, at least to some extent, with assessing their relationship before her possible visit to Brazil, and then with responding to her decision not to come and to start a family in the US instead. Bohm could possibly have developed some interest in the question of feminism when he was at Berkeley, though there is no evidence of this in the letters. As Sean Mullet points out, both Bohm and Lomanitz dated a graduate psychology student named Bettye Goldstein in 1942–3² Under the name Betty Friedan, she later wrote the ground-breaking *The Feminine Mystique*. At Berkeley, Goldstein was interested in left-wing politics, a commitment that she shared with Bohm, according to her biography.³ She was a gifted and assertive student, working on Freudian-type theories, but did not seem to be especially interested in feminism. As her biographer puts it: "whether what she later called the feminine mystique was actually affecting her in 1942–43 is open to question."⁴ The problems which Friedan later identified were certainly present for many women. They faced hostility from male colleagues and struggled to combine family with a career.

Bohm was not unaware of how these questions affected Miriam. We noted in the previous chapter that Bohm had clearly been angry at the way Miriam had been treated by her mathematical advisors. He is also sympathetic to her difficulties in combining a career with having children.⁵

¹(27, **99**, p. 329), (27, **102**, pp. 336–340), (27, **103**, p. 342), (28, **105**, pp. 347–350), (28, **107**, p. 352), (28, **108**, p. 354), (28, **109**, p. 355) and (29, **111**, p. 370–371).

²Mullet (2008), pp. 45–46.

³Horowitz (1998), Chap. 5.

⁴Horowitz (1998), p. 99.

⁵(23, **77**, p. 263).

Despite showing his support for Miriam's situation, however, Bohm seems to have little sympathy for feminist views in the replies he makes to her. He criticizes⁶ Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*⁷ for making a separate issue of women being controlled by men, wanting instead to make domination of both sexes by "bourgeois" society the key question. It is unclear how Bohm got his theory⁸ that we all have a desire to find something or someone above ourselves to which we can be devoted. It is, surely, a crude and simplistic theory. Apparently, he thinks that it applies "symbolically" in sexual intercourse. His idea that we should rather submit ourselves to the "future of humanity as a whole, in its struggle with nature, and with disruptive trends within humanity itself" seems to tie in with his Stalinist politics, which we review in the next chapter, as does his view of sex helping to "deviate humanity from its natural goal". In any case, submitting to a "common end" is clearly an avoidance of the issue of the sexual oppression, which does exist in society and which is reflected in Miriam's emotions around what she identifies as her own "insidious tendency to submission".

In the next paragraph, Bohm seems to be contradicting himself in admitting that "'femininity' is a response conditioned by society." He takes the view, perhaps common in that period, when the "nurture versus nature" debate was prominent, that pain in childbirth and menstruation are social in origin and can be reduced by conditioning. This may have been connected with the "psychoprophylactic method" of childbirth, promoted in the Soviet Union at that time and taken up by the pro-Soviet French obstetrician Fernand Lamaze. It is now referred to as the "Lamaze method" in America, apparently without any knowledge of its Soviet origins.⁹ I could find no discussion of menstrual pain in de Beauvoir, though she certainly sees feelings of "uncleanness" as a social construct.¹⁰

Bohm does seem to have quite progressive views on women combining a career with bringing up children, particularly if we consider that it was quite common during that period to insist on women giving up work. At the same time, his conception of the father as playing an equal role with the mother in raising children was unusual for that period. Demands for nursery care and collective restaurants were a normal part of socialist campaigning propaganda. As for Bohm's idea of the need to "enhance, intensify, and symbolise in the sex act" the desire for domination or submission, and so on, I will not elaborate any further except to note that it could, perhaps, relate to his own psychological issues.

In his comments,¹¹ Bohm opposes the current stereotypes of women and men and thinks he agrees with Miriam who "cannot really accept the current role of women in society." He would like a woman with "some independent personality of their own" and not just passively reflecting the will and desire of a man, a point on which he

⁶In (27, 99, p. 329).

⁷de Beauvoir (1988).

⁸In (27, 102, pp. 336–340).

⁹Michaels (2007).

¹⁰de Beauvoir (1988), pp. 340–341.

¹¹(28, 105, pp. 347–349).

agrees with de Beauvoir. He also considers that Miriam's struggle to raise the baby may cost "some of your achievements in math, but doesn't have to mean the loss of all possibility of work." Bohm admits his failings in relationships,¹² he "shall have to try to care more for the next one", and thanks Miriam for sending him the Kinsey report,¹³ which he hopes will help him better understand women. The reports were, of course, landmarks in making known, by applying scientific statistical studies, the many aspects of human sexuality that had been covered over by bigotry and conservative obscurantism.

Bohm offers his advice¹⁴ on bringing up a child, assumed to be a male. Miriam should try to arouse "a spirit of courage and love for the possibilities in human beings as individuals, and in humanity as a whole", her son should be ready to face risks and not "become rotten and corrupt inside, as so many of our modern liberals are." Finally,¹⁵ Bohm once again rejects Miriam's advice on finding a woman in Brazil. He doesn't want to have sex with a woman "who does not already attract me in other ways" and disapproves of George treating women as sex objects, although he admits that with George, this was only a "superficial veneer".

References

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¹²(28, 108, p. 354).

¹³Presumably, the 1951 female report. The male one came out in 1948.

¹⁴(28, 109, p. 355).

¹⁵(29, 111, pp. 370–371).