

Chapter 11

Bohm and Politics

Up to a quarter of the letters written to Miriam between 1951 and 1954 are on the subject of politics. Here, I am taking politics in both a narrow sense of current affairs and issues relating to the Stalinist Communist Parties, especially in the USSR, but also in a more general sense that refers to how Bohm thought that science and philosophy could impact on people's ideas and play an important role in a socialist transformation of society. As usual, Bohm tends to write in an unstructured manner, so the classification can only be an approximate one.

Although there is no distinct division of this material such as there is in the material on Probability and Statistical Mechanics in Chap. 9, there is still something of a distinction to be made between the period before and the one after the visit of George Yevick and Jean-Pierre Vigier in July/August 1953. Before that time, there is not so much material referring to politics in the narrower sense¹ and a tendency to discuss socially-related science and philosophy.² After Yevick and Vigiers' visit, however, the letters mainly concentrate on political commentary in the narrower sense,³ with a fair amount of criticism, some of it rather unpleasant and patronizing, of Miriam's politics of the "anti-communist" left. One could speculate that this change in the later period follows Miriam's decision to end her personal relationship with Bohm, but the change also coincides with a decline in support for the USSR in left politics, especially after Stalin's death and as more revelations about the regime

¹The exceptions are discussions in (20, **58**, pp. 204–205), (22, **70**, pp. 248–250), (125, **89**, pp. 203–205), (26, **97**, p. 320), (26, **98**, pp. 321–323), (27, **102**, p. 336) and (27, **103**, pp. 340–342); there are some discussions on Brazil in (23, **78**, pp. 264–266), (23, **82**, pp. 274–275) and (27, **99**, pp. 325–326).

²(20, **57**, pp. 202–203), (20, **59**, pp. 206–208), (20, **60**, p. 211), (20, **63**, p. 219), (21, **65**, pp. 229–230), (21, **66**, pp. 230–236), (22, **68**, pp. 244–245), (23, **79**, pp. 270–271), (26, **92**, pp. 307–308), (26, **94**, p. 311), (26, **96**, pp. 316–317), (27, **99**, pp. 327–329) and (27, **101**, pp. 331–333).

³These are (28, **106**, p. 351), (28, **107**, pp. 352–353), (28, **108**, p. 354), (28, **109**, pp. 355–359), (28, **110**, pp. 360–362), (29, **111**, pp. 363–369, 371 and 373), (29, **112**, pp. 374–375), (30, **115**, pp. 388–391), (31, **118**, p. 404) and on Brazil (30, **114**, p. 378).

were coming out. All this certainly seemed to make Bohm increasingly desperate to defend his Stalinist views.⁴ The final letter to Miriam in the archives contains both a Stalinist political assessment of the world and a discussion of the role that a philosophy of science could have in changing attitudes. Bohm refers to this letter⁵ as “more or less a statement of my principles and aims, as they stand at present.”

Reading through these letters leaves us with no doubt regarding Bohm’s political convictions. Admitting “grave defects” and “a servile careerist point of view in many people” in the USSR, as well as many similar provisos, Bohm supports the Stalinist version of “Socialism”. Since there is a “constant threat of military invasion” and all the people cannot “be trusted to resist the temptation of a promise of an immediate improvement in conditions”,⁶ the Moscow dictatorship appears as essential in carrying out socialist ideals. The response to Isaac Deutscher shows that Bohm supports Stalin’s leadership, and “the whole theory of Communism is that the rise in the [economic] level resulting from the “dictatorship of the proletariat” will eventually make this dictatorship unnecessary.”⁷ In his philosophical work, Bohm bases himself on the legacy of the Marxist classics rather than following the debased philosophy put forward by Stalin in the 1930s. As we have pointed out, he makes a disparaging reference to the “mechanical” approach taken in the USSR.⁸ Nevertheless, in politics, Bohm seems woefully ignorant of the conceptual framework of Marxism, and shows no real sign of making a serious Marxist analysis of current politics and economics. He accepts without comment the alleged “socialist” nature of the USSR which, in an underdeveloped country, was inconceivable in the Marxist tradition. The Bolshevik leaders Lenin and Trotsky never conceived of the possibility of socialism in Russia without revolutionary transformations in more advanced countries like Germany. Bohm’s experiences in and around the Communist Party, however, seem to have resulted in his uncritical acceptance of Stalinist ideology and propaganda.

Parenthetically, the point should be made that I am accepting the historical evidence for a very significant rupture between the politics of the Bolshevik party led by Lenin and Trotsky, that took power in Russia in 1917, and Stalin’s “revolution from above”, which began in the USSR in the late 1920s. This follows, for example, the historical work of Stephen F. Cohen and Robert C. Tucker (Tucker 1990; Cohen 1975). There are, of course, historians of a “Cold War” persuasion, who consider that Stalinism was the outcome of Marx and Lenin or, perhaps, “Marxism-Leninism in action”.⁹ There were other historians, some of a more left wing persuasion, like Isaac Deutscher, writing before the evidence used by Tucker and Cohen became

⁴As well as increasing in number, the letters on politics in the narrower sense tend to get longer, with letter **111** the longest of all.

⁵(32, **123**, pp. 427–434).

⁶Quotes from (28, **107**, pp. 352–354).

⁷(28, **110**, p. 361).

⁸(26, **97**, p. 320).

⁹See Tucker (1999), where this view is put forward by Leszek Kolakowski and countered by other historians.

available, who saw more continuity between the 1920s and 30s, with the possibility of an eventual removal of Stalinist dictatorship.¹⁰

One can understand why, in the 1940s, thousands of left wing intellectuals throughout the world were attracted, as Bohm was, to the USSR. It had played a tremendous role in defeating the Nazis in World War Two, making far greater sacrifices than the European and American Allies with 27 million dead. Capitalism had resulted in fascism, slump and war, and hardly seemed to be offering stability in the post-war period. Bohm fears a renewal of war, resulting from the Korean conflict, and he thinks McCarthyism could lead to fascism in the United States. But by the 1950s, more and more questions were being asked about Stalin's regime and many were quitting the Communist Party.¹¹ Miriam sent Bohm critical books to read on the subject, and he seems to have leapt to the defence of the USSR in an increasingly extreme manner. It has to be said that, as well as using the arguments of the Stalinists, he is sinking to a low level in using their kind of propaganda techniques. What else can one make of the comment:

Now that I realize that you do not feel it necessary to maintain logical consistency, I shall be more at ease when you repeat ideas that might have come from Koestler or Orwell. Perhaps you wish to take advantage of your being a woman, (especially feminine, since you are now in the process of producing a child) to excuse your inconsistency?¹²

This is quite astonishing when one compares it with the supportive comments he sent Miriam only a few months earlier. It should be pointed out that Arthur Koestler and George Orwell are part of the demonology of Stalinism. It would be easy to conclude that this was due to their initial support, and then to their later criticism of the USSR.¹³ *Darkness at Noon*, published by Koestler in 1940, was a major attack on the USSR; *Animal Farm* was published by Orwell in 1945.¹⁴ These books on their own would have been enough in order to get their considerable literary talents rubbished by Communist Party members. The reality goes much deeper, though. In both cases, these writers provided reliable inside information on how the Stalinist dictatorship functioned. In Koestler's case, this came from his own experiences, but also particularly through his friend, Alexander Weissberg.¹⁵ Koestler wrote the preface to Weissberg's book, *The Accused*, which gives a devastating account of the Stalinist show trials and gulags. Weissberg was an Austrian physicist who went to

¹⁰See Tucker (1999). Deutscher's position is explained in the article on Trotskyism by Robert H. McNeal, pp. 48–51.

¹¹John Gates, one of the 11 American communist leaders jailed in 1949, explains in his book Gates (1958) how, when still in jail, he began asking questions about the Soviet regime after Stalin's death in 1953. According to Gates party membership fell from 75,000 in 1946 to 10,000 in 1957.

¹²(29, 111, pp. 363–364).

¹³To be more precise, Koestler was a Communist Party member in 1931–38. Orwell, as expressed in his *Road to Wigan Pier*, was always more critical.

¹⁴It should, perhaps, be noted that *Animal Farm* was regarded by some as ambiguous in relation to the USSR, but Stalinists always regarded it as hostile and Orwell himself regarded it as a satire on the USSR. Bowker (2003), p. 358.

¹⁵For more details on Koestler and Weissberg see Scammell (2009).

the USSR in 1931, thinking he would contribute to the building of socialism. He was arrested in 1937 with the typical false charges made in the Great Purges, spent three years in Soviet prisons, and was then handed over to the Nazis as part of a deal made in the Soviet-Nazi pact. The book describes in detail the torture and methods used by the GPU in order to extract false confessions. Weissberg shows how victims were forced to incriminate relatives and friends, creating mistrust that divided all possible opposition among those who were not sent to the gulags. In his book, he makes a rough statistical analysis of the extent of the Great Purges, estimating that some 9 million individuals were arrested by the GPU. It was Miriam who sent Bohm a copy of Weissberg's book¹⁶ and it is astonishing that Bohm merely responds by saying that a great deal of the book must be true. Perhaps he knew that Einstein had campaigned on Weissberg's behalf, writing letters calling for his release, copies of which are included in the book. Orwell was damned for writing about his experiences in the Spanish civil war in his book *Homage to Catalonia*, which reveals how the Communists suppressed and murdered Trotskyists and Anarchists, preventing the socialist opposition to the republicans from developing.¹⁷

Bohm's lashing out at Edmund Wilson's *To The Finland Station* and Deutscher's *Russia, What Next?*, important books by writers of some standing, can hardly be regarded as a serious assessment of these works.¹⁸ His attitude reflected the fact that both Wilson and Deutscher were ideological targets for the world's Communist Parties. Wilson was a member of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, which also set up the Dewey Commission, convened under the famous philosopher John Dewey in order to examine the Stalinists' case against Leon Trotsky, then in exile in Mexico. They exonerated him of all charges of working with foreign powers against the USSR. Deutscher had actually been a leader of the Trotskyist Left Opposition in the Communist Party of Poland. He was expelled and went to London in 1939, eventually becoming a historian. Bohm's first mention of Deutscher is not critical, so it may be that he asked for information from party members before making his intemperate attack. It should be pointed out that Deutscher's alleged "hypocrisy" in invoking "oriental traits" would have to be ascribed to two other writers who referred to the special features of "orientalism" or "asiatism" in Russia, namely Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Again, the reason for Bohm's attack on "asiatism" lies deeper in Stalinist demonology. Stalin had banned all mention of asiatism in the 1930s. Even mentioning the asiatic mode of production, which appears in Marx's writings, was forbidden.

Bohm's general perspective on "socialism" can be pieced together from the letters. It consisted in applying Stalinist methods, perhaps not as severe as those in the USSR, in all countries separately. The reason is that "complete democracy would not work", as "the people as a whole, educated in the old system, do not really understand the need for reaching the goal of a radical transformation of society". It would be necessary "after a socialist govt takes power to make the people work harder than ever for 10

¹⁶(28, 108, p. 354).

¹⁷Bowker (2003), Chap. 11, The Spanish Betrayal.

¹⁸(28, 110, pp. 360–362).

or 20 years.”¹⁹ In this sense, Bohm urged Miriam to note that “middle class leftists” are just protesting “against the way in which the present social system interferes with their individual lives”, that they would like “to do as they please in return for 4 hours a day of work”, and that they are “nice people who only want to be left alone to their little plots of land, careers, or what have you, to raise their little children, etc.”²⁰ Since they represent this “vague desire of the middle class for a better life”,²¹ Socialist parties will decay as “they are just not able to take the stern and difficult measures needed to solve the problems that they face.” Therefore, “the Communists will be the ones to take over, because they are the only ones who have the steadiness of purpose and clarity of goal needed to keep them moving in the same direction over 10 or 20 years, in spite of the temptation to sell out.”²²

We have already referred to how dialectics can be used to support an argument with a degree of sophistry. We can now see an example of this in one of the letters he addressed to Miriam. In order to convince her of the deeply unattractive vision he is offering, Bohm employs precisely that false dialectic:

When you look more deeply at the processes that are taking place, you discover that there are usually opposing trends or currents. In the long run, these currents will carry you in either one direction or another. . . . And I believe that the currents of today are such that in the long run, you will either be for socialism or against socialism, because these are the only two possible attitudes that can be maintained in the face of today's problems. And if you oppose socialism in Russia you will find yourself inevitably dragged to the side of capitalism, whether you like it or not.²³

It is, of course, the “currents of the “middle class” liberal and “anti-communist left” people that Miriam is mixing with and that are carrying her towards capitalism. Bohm refers to influence of the “Weisskopf crowd”, grouped around physicist Victor Weisskopf.²⁴ He makes a vicious personal attack on the man he sees as a prototype of those who are leading Miriam astray²⁵ Weisskopf is “a sort of namby-pamby, not to be taken seriously”, with “no courage whatever”, adopting “opinions which he thinks are relatively safe while still permitting him to pose as a liberal.” It is difficult to believe that Bohm did not know more about Weisskopf and his personal history. He was, in fact, a friend of both Arthur Koestler and Alexander Weissberg, as a student in Berlin in the early 1930s, before fleeing Nazi Germany to the US later. Weisskopf even visited Weissberg at the institute he had set up in Kharkov, Ukraine. As he later recalled, in the winter of 1932–3, when millions of peasants were dying in the famine, he had argued with Weissberg and Koestler, both party members (Weisskopf was not a communist), that the famine was the result of Stalin’s policies and not an “act of

¹⁹(29, **111**, p. 365).

²⁰(26, **98**, p. 322).

²¹(30, **115**, p. 391).

²²(32, **123**, p. 429).

²³(29, **111**, p. 369).

²⁴(28, **109**, pp. 357–358).

²⁵Though later Bohm changes his mind on this (28, **110**, pp. 361–362).

God”, as they maintained.²⁶ Presumably, Weisskopf was well placed to explain to Miriam the disasters of Stalinism, and may even have recommended Weissberg’s *The Accused* for Bohm’s reading.²⁷

Bohm also follows the Moscow line in relation to the European politics of the period. Stalin’s signing of a non-aggression pact with the Nazis in August 1939 and then refusing to believe in the existence of the Operation Barbarossa invasion by the Nazis of the Soviet Union until it was well under way, displayed gross and culpable stupidity.²⁸ After the war, Stalin made a 180 degree turn, regarding (West) Germany as a potential Nazi threat, and Communist parties waged a campaign against German rearmament. As the Cold War escalated, with the US involved in the Korean war from 1950, America wanted to deploy German troops in a NATO European alliance directed against the USSR. German rearmament was essential in order to create a force big enough to match that of the USSR. Bohm’s reference to the “disgraceful” action of the French socialists forming “alliances with the Nazis”²⁹ refers to a recent vote in the French parliament, supported by only part of the socialists, for a European Defence Community (EDC). France had put this forward as an alternative to NATO. No German national army would be created, German troops would join the EDC only, and the popular idea of European unity would be promoted. However, French politics became increasingly fraught,³⁰ with four governments between 1952 and 1954, not only because of European issues, but also because of the war France was fighting in Indo-China and eventually lost at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The French communists strongly opposed European unity and the EDC in the anti-Nazi campaign referred to by Bohm.³¹ They defended French national autonomy, along with the Gaullists, and advocated an alliance with the USSR rather than the US, outside the “Germany-US orbit”, as Bohm puts it. Following the French defeat in Indo-China and the division of Vietnam at the Geneva conference, the US entered the war, backing the South Vietnamese regime in 1955. The French parliament dropped the EDC in 1954, but this was hardly the victory for the Communists that Bohm hoped for.³² There was to be no alliance with the USSR. The US gained what they wanted. France remained within NATO (until de Gaulle withdrew in 1966) and Germany was incorporated into NATO in 1955.

²⁶Scammell (2009), Chap. 9.

²⁷Another personal attack is made by Bohm on physicist and cosmologist George Gamow in a letter to Miriam, back in 1951 (20, 60, pp. 210–211). No doubt, a valid scientific point is being made about the unjustified extrapolation of the mathematics of the general theory of relativity in order to deduce the existence of a “beginning of time”, which the Pope can make so much of. But unfortunately, this none too subtle propaganda against religion also informed a Stalinist attack against George Gamow, calling him a “traitor to science”. Gamow defected from the Soviet Union in the extreme oppression of the early 1930s, which put him on the Stalinist blacklist.

²⁸See Beevor (2012), Chap. 12, Barbarossa.

²⁹(22, 70, p. 248).

³⁰See Willis (1965) for more details.

³¹(28, 106, p. 351) and (28, 109, pp. 355–356).

³²(30, 115, p. 391).

Bohm also takes the Stalinist line on Britain. The British Communist Party, small but influential, tried to pressurize the left of the Labour party into a pro-Soviet, anti-NATO stance. Thus, Bohm denounces the Labourites for supporting German rearmament.³³ What prompted the denunciation of the leader of the Labour left-wing, Aneurin Bevan, for “pious neutrality”? Bohm had mentioned the Slansky case³⁴ to Miriam without understanding its significance. This was a show trial in 1952, in which Joseph Slansky, leader of the Czech Communist party, along with other leaders, who were mainly Jewish, were framed for a “Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist” conspiracy. Most of them, including Slansky, were executed. Stalin was issuing a warning to the Communist leaders of the world not to defy Moscow’s line, as Tito had done in Yugoslavia.³⁵ Bevan had given some support to Tito and even visited Yugoslavia in 1951. As a result, he was condemned by the Stalinists for “neutralism” and for not supporting Moscow.³⁶

In case it should be thought that we are painting too black a picture of Bohm’s Stalinism in this period, it could be pointed out, in his defence, that he never went public with the political views he expressed in the letters to Miriam. He seems to have had no involvement in politics and states that his “own temperament is against either the exercise or the acceptance of dictatorial authority.”³⁷ More than this, one should consider his genuine attempt to expose the nature of Stalinism to Melba in his very important letters of 1956,³⁸ following what must have been a traumatic breakdown of his own increasingly futile attempts to defend the Communist Party ideology. At the end of 1954, he is still telling Miriam, in his “statement of principles and aims”, that: “They are trying to build socialism under conditions, not only of powerful bourgeois opposition, but also of lack of understanding on the part of the peasantry and of a large fraction of the working class.”³⁹ However, there is a spectacular reversal of all his previous political views in the 1956 letters. This, of course, follows the Khrushchev revelations, but is also the consequence of other material becoming available, such as “Not by Bread Alone” and the report on the treatment of Jews in Russia by British Communists. The suppression of the Hungarian uprising also took place around this time. While in Israel, Bohm could also have access to a first-hand testimony of what life was like in a Communist regime. As Bohm notes:

I have it on the word of a man (who is still a convinced Communist), who spent 10 years in one of these camps that the use of slave labor was a regular factor entering into the five year plans. The cost of this period in twisted lives, insanity, destruction of independently thinking people in the Communist movement, etc. is beyond accounting.⁴⁰

³³(29, **111**, pp. 367–368) and (30, **115**, pp. 389–390).

³⁴(25, **89**, p. 296).

³⁵It was also a purge of the Jews from the Stalinist bureaucracies, itself a symptom of Stalin’s growing anti-Semitism.

³⁶See Jenkins (2012) for more detail.

³⁷(29, **111**, p. 364).

³⁸(19, **54**, pp. 183–193) and (19, **55**, pp. 193–197).

³⁹(32, **123**, p. 429).

⁴⁰(19, **55**, p. 194).

We should also not forget that Bohm gained much emotional stability from his relationship with Saral. This probably enabled him to assess the wealth of material coming out of the USSR objectively. Melba, who had made considerable sacrifices for the Communist cause, seems to have wanted to “soldier on”, playing down the significance of the revelations. Bohm clearly feels the responsibility to make clear to Melba that this cannot be done, given that the extent of the crimes of Stalinism is far too great.⁴¹ Bohm goes systematically through a catalogue of indictments: the criticism of leaders was almost impossible, tantamount to signing a death warrant under Stalinism; people had been led to believe in superhuman leaders but in reality, they were subhuman in cruelty and stupidity; members had joined the Communist Party feeling the necessity for a fuller, more satisfying life, and had expected Communist leaders to have more dedication and selflessness—in fact the latter had proved to be far worse, they framed people, beat them up, tortured them, murdered them or sent them to slave labor camps, and they even did this to their own “comrades”. Reading through all this, we remember that Bohm had only recently argued that whilst there were mistakes and excesses, the overall goal had, nevertheless, to be carried through. Bohm had once gullibly accepted the “stupid” conclusion that Stalin had come to, namely “that with the successful establishment of socialism, the struggle of the enemies within the country would intensify”, and that this translated into the “implicit assumption that the country was full of potential spies and saboteurs”. In a complete change of stance, Bohm now recognized that Stalin had a “psychotically suspicious temperament”, was increasingly “unbalanced” and had used all the alleged threats on the country in order to eliminate his opponents. The key statement, explaining, if not completely justifying Bohm’s own mistakes, is the following:

The use of conscious and systematic falsification was I think the biggest crime, and the most unforgivable, committed by the Stalinists. And they are still doing their best to prevent the truth from being known, even at this late date.⁴²

We will skip Bohm’s deliberations, now very much dated, on the possible future for socialism in that period, and turn to the other aspect in the letters to Miriam, which relates to politics and the impact that Bohm thought his science and philosophy could have on society. The material is nebulous but builds on Bohm’s conviction that his scientific and philosophical ideas could help to inspire support for socialism. He sees the problems of capitalist society principally as “ideological ones”. This is referenced either in philosophical terms, such as with positivism and mechanical materialism, which extend to social thinking, as we have already pointed to in the chapter on philosophy, or, perhaps, in the many recurrent comments on what he sees as alienation and the problem of consumerism in American society, for example: “The fluorescent lamps and television screens have somehow come to symbolize for me the transformation of the U.S. into another country, because in their cold glaring

⁴¹Unfortunately, we do not know what he told Miriam, after all his Stalinist diatribes in the letters of 1953–4. Hopefully, more letters will become available.

⁴²(19, 55, pp. 195–196).

light, the emptiness of life is somehow emphasized; i.e., one has superficial polish, cleanliness, and brilliance, but it is totally empty and meaningless.”⁴³

Bohm hopes that his philosophy of the “infinity of levels”, perhaps backed by a scientific breakthrough, could have an impact on social thought, for example:

A clear, sharp, optimistic, materialistic point of view, promising infinite possibilities of development, and the possibility of growth of a common human purpose having objective existence within the human race, as a developing thing, would have far more appeal, particularly if it could be backed by some striking success in dealing with nature.⁴⁴

In later letters,⁴⁵ Bohm even goes so far as to suggest that his philosophy of levels could help provide a “spiritual” approach to life. It could encourage “religious” feelings that were no longer directed at the supernatural, for “everyone wants to feel connected with something that goes beyond his immediate personal life.”

The hope that his philosophical ideas will be a factor aiding the development of socialism is present throughout the letters to Miriam. In the final “statement of principles and aims” letter to Miriam he writes:

Meanwhile I think that I can make some contribution by trying to clarify our thinking a little bit. . . . I feel convinced that it will have an important long-run effect to show that while the world is governed by rationally understandable causal relationships, these relationships do not imply the impossibility of qualitative changes, but rather, they imply instead the necessity of such changes under appropriate conditions. . . . I believe that an incorrect philosophical attitude to the world is at the root of our difficulties.⁴⁶

It is interesting to note that, even after 1956, Bohm still wishes to stress an “ideological” and philosophical approach in dealing with the problems facing socialists:

Up till now, theory has been too mechanical in its stress on economic factors, and its denial of autonomous causal action to what is, in Marxist terms called the “superstructure” of ideas, traditions, culture, myths, superstitions, religion, science, et al. as well as in the emotional make-up of the people. But we have seen how such factors almost wrecked socialism in Russia . . .⁴⁷

It should be pointed out that this kind of social criticism, perhaps expressed in a more sophisticated language than Bohm’s, became quite widespread in the post second world war period. It came from such diverse sources as the Frankfurt School, the New Left, and so on, all of them often subsumed under the term of “Western Marxism”. Many, as Bohm does here, saw this as a philosophical alternative to the debasement of Marxism that had emerged under Stalin’s rule. However, Bohm does not pursue this “Western Marxist” approach to socialist politics after 1956 and I have not considered it necessary to expand on it any further. As I indicated in Chap. 6 in my opinion it does not have the same validity as his philosophy of physics developed in *Causality and Chance*, which he did often refer back to in later life.

⁴³(23, 79, p. 271).

⁴⁴(20, 59, p. 207).

⁴⁵(27, 99, pp. 327–329) and (27, 101, pp. 331–333).

⁴⁶(32, 123, pp. 430 and 432).

⁴⁷(19, 54, p. 189).

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