CHAPTER FOUR
TOWARD A GENDERED HUMANISM

From early in his career Fromm was a consistent critic of patriarchy and a supporter of women’s emancipation, but his position is based on a controversial assumption that there are distinctively male and female psychic structures. He was fully aware that the attribution of natural character differences between men and women had been used historically by men to justify the exclusion of women from public life and their subjugation. However, despite this historical abuse Fromm was convinced that gendered character differences could be discerned, and that, in asserting the merits of the female psychic structure, the conservative power of patriarchy could be undermined. His outlook has interesting similarities with modern “maternalist” feminism, though, in particular Carol Gilligan’s defense of a female ethics of care, and also with the French theorists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva.

Fromm’s interest in the idea of distinctive female and male psychic structures developed during his membership of the Institute for Social Research in the 1930s, and it continued to have a profound influence on the development of his mature social psychology. His principal source of inspiration was Mother Right, the work of the Swiss jurist and anthropologist Johann Jacob Bachofen (1815–1887), who argued that matriarchy—societies in which women were in positions of authority—preceded patriarchy as a stage in human development. Fromm was not the first socialist to appropriate the positive evaluation of matriarchy made by Bachofen, as both August Bebel and Friedrich Engels had done so with considerable popular success. However, Fromm’s thesis that gender difference is reflected in psychic structures and that “matricentric” psychic structures are more amenable to socialism is theoretically bolder and potentially more controversial. I use the term “maternalism” to denote this positive attribution of female qualities arising from maternal functions. Modern anthropological research does not support the views postulated by Bachofen and Engels that a matriarchal stage in human development existed, at least in the sense of societies in which women dominated men, but there is plenty of evidence to support the existence of societies which practised lineage through the female line (matriline) and in which women experienced parity of esteem.

In order to explore this neglected aspect of Fromm’s work, this chapter examines three pieces on matriarchy written by Fromm in his Frankfurt School years and assess their significance in the development of his social thought. His first contribution was a review of Robert Briffault’s book The Mothers in the Institute’s journal, the
Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, in 1934,6 followed in the next edition later that year by a full length article on “The Theory of Mother Right and its Relevance for Social Psychology,” which focuses on the implications of Bachofen’s work.7 The third piece, “The Male Creation,” was only recently discovered by Fromm’s literary executor, Rainer Funk, but the presence of some sharp criticism of Freud indicates that it was probably written later than the other two.8 In the first section, the central arguments of these pieces will be outlined, clarifying points where necessary with reference to some of his later papers. The second section will discuss the wider implications of these arguments for the evolution of Fromm’s thought. In particular, it will be argued that the work was an important stage in Fromm’s rejection of Freud’s theory of instincts, which was to lead to his departure from the Frankfurt School in 1939 and his public disputation with Marcuse in 1955.9 It will also be suggested that the work on maternalism was important in the development of his theory of human nature and the ethics that flowed from it. The third section compares Fromm’s views with those of the psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the controversial issues raised by the question of gendered character differences.

Maternalism and Socialism

In the review of The Mothers, Fromm praises Briffault for developing the insights originally set down by the Swiss jurist and anthropologist Johann Jacob Bachofen (1815–1887) and the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) in the 1860s and 1870s. They had argued that not only did matriarchal societies precede patriarchies but that they contained elements of love and cooperation which were in many ways superior. He praises Briffault for arguing that the social instincts originate in the maternal instincts, but what is important is that his conception of “masculine” and “feminine” does not rely on unchanging natural difference but on the material ways in which men and women have interacted in the evolution of humankind:

Masculine and feminine are for Briffault definitive psychological categories, but unlike the Romantics, he does not derive them from the “nature” of the two sexes but from the difference in the way they function in practical life. With this shift he rescues the issue of sexual difference from the darkness with which natural philosophy had cloaked it and examines it in the light of scientific research.10

The distinction that Fromm fastens onto here is vital, for he is well aware that the historical exclusion of women from public life had been justified on arbitrary naturalistic grounds. Men had used their notion of the innate nature of women to justify their unsuitability for a range of endeavors, which were considered to be the exclusive province of men. It is therefore not surprising that mainstream feminism has resisted all attempts to speak of specifically feminine qualities. However, Fromm does not consider that the dangers inherent in attributing gender-based orientations should prevent the investigation into the psychological differences which may have developed as a result of the different relationship that men and women have had to