people seem to feel that traditional moral, political, and religious philosophies no longer offer sufficient guidance, and the use of a psychoanalytic framework for thinking about public and personal problems has contributed to a new sense of privacy in which rigid boundaries between public and private have been softened.

In the midst of all this change, the French, who have always been used to a highly structured sense of the “rules of the game,” were left with few social prescriptions. Family traditions and rituals were no longer secure, once coveted diplomas and titles no longer fulfilled their promise of prestige or even employment, religious faith and institutions were in crisis. When individuals sought anchoring points for their lives or help in dealing with distress, it was hard to find them in the experience of a community, in a set of established institutions, or in a faith. They had to look within and to personal relationships. In this personal sphere, psychoanalysis in both France and America offered itself as a way of addressing new insecurities. It also responded to the lack of norms by offering new experts for social problems that traditional formulae (religious ones, for example) no longer seem able to handle. In sum, psychoanalysis emerged in France as it did in America as the “therapy of deconversion.”

Sociologist Peter Berger, who has sketched the outline of the correspondences between psychoanalysis and the social opacity and loss of community that characterize twentieth-century America, has reflected that, in America, “if Freud had not existed, he would have had to be invented.” One might say that in recent years the French have invented their own Freud. The next chapter, however, makes it clear that although France and America both developed a psychoanalytic culture, each “invented” a different Freud, one who matched the national texture of its social, intellectual, and political life.

Chapter 2

“Reinventing” Freud in France

UNDERSTANDING the emergence of the French psychoanalytic culture must recognize three kinds of developments. First, there were the social changes which seriously challenged a longstanding French belief that people could look to the collectivity and its traditions for some sense of who they were and where they were going. Second, there was the development of a psychoanalytic theory with the right cultural credentials. And finally, there was a breakthrough into a more popular psychoanalytic culture. Chapter one looked at the breakdown in traditional functioning at the social base which allowed psychoanalysis to take root. This chapter looks at the second and third of these strands of development, at the Lacanian “French indigenous” psychoanalytic paradigm that came to dominate the French scene and at the catalytic role of the May–June 1968 events. The 1968 events translated existential Marxist ideas into a kind of social action which raised questions about the world to which psychoanalysis seemed to offer some answers. The May events themselves were explosive and ephemeral, but among other effects they may have had, they were midwife to something more long lasting: they facilitated the breakthrough of the French psychoanalytic movement into a new, widespread psychoanalytic culture, and helped to shape it in the process.
The discussion of the American appreciation of Freud introduced the idea that a developing psychoanalytic culture can be shaped by its surroundings. In fact, when Freud expressed his first surprise that the Americans were enthusiastically accepting the psychoanalytic “plague,” he was underestimating the degree to which psychoanalysis can adapt to its environment. Psychoanalysis has become culturally specific in several ways. First, cultures can “pick and choose” among its elements, bracketing those that seem most threatening or least useful. For example, the Americans might have been ready to accept a kind of therapy that focused heavily on early childhood memories, but not ready to accept fully the idea of infantile sexuality; they might have been ready to accept the existence of an unconscious, but unready to accept the power that Freud attributed to it.

Second, psychoanalysis can be a screen onto which a culture projects its preoccupations and values. Early twentieth-century American social theorists, such as Dewey, Mead, Peirce, and James, shared an optimistic and therapeutic outlook on the world. These thinkers of the “American Enlightenment” set the stage for the Americanization of psychoanalysis which was dominated by a celebration of an autonomous ego that could change if it tried. Freud believed that since neurosis was the result of deep-seated psychological and social determinants, cures could only be protracted and partial. Freud’s pessimistic tone suggested that psychoanalysis could help people to endure the paradox and tragedy of human life, but “endurance” was no substitute for the sense of wholeness that Americans felt they had lost with urbanization and the end of the frontier and that they hoped to recapture through a therapeutic culture. Freud’s American interpreters shifted the emphasis to a new therapeutic optimism. Their response to Freudian pessimism was to shrug off the suggestion that the individual is not master of his or her own house, free to act and choose no matter what the problems or environment. Although the Americans welcomed Freud to their shores, Freud’s theory could not stretch far enough to meet American demands for therapeutic optimism and voluntarism. In the end, he was “not enough,” and Americans strained to produce more optimistic, instrumental, and voluntaristic revisions of his work.

Third, psychoanalysis is shaped by social institutions. In the story of what happened to psychoanalysis in the United States, the fact that the “American Freud” was nearly monopolized by physicians, a social group under the greatest possible pressure to emphasize the useful, took the general American preference for the pragmatic and raised it to a higher power. In France, the psychiatric resistance to psychoanalysis allowed it a long period of incubation in the world of artists and writers before a significant breakthrough into medicine, a pattern which reinforced the French tendency to take ideas and invest them with philosophical and ideological significance instead of turning them outward toward problem-solving.

In its susceptibility to cultural influence, psychoanalysis is not unique. Most intellectual movements undergo some form of cultural adaptation to different national settings. But psychoanalysis is not just an intellectual position; its extension as a therapeutic strategy makes it especially sensitive to its environment. In order to be effective, therapies must be relevant to a culture’s prevailing modes of making sense of experience. In this, therapeutic strategies are similar to religious beliefs. One would not expect the national versions of psychoanalysis to be any less varied than the national versions of Calvinism. An American patient, nursed on the Horatio Alger story and on dramatic tales of biological or spiritual ancestors battling it out at the frontier, can respond to a picture of the psyche which emphasizes the struggles of the ego with the demands of a difficult reality. A French patient who has been doing explication du texte and memorizing literary aphorisms since grade school might be more receptive to a psychoanalysis which presents itself as a form of textual analysis on the unconscious. This chapter keeps the cultural specificity of psychoanalytic cultures in the foreground as it looks at how Freud was “reinvented” for the French.

Historian H. Stuart Hughes has remarked that the French resisted psychoanalysis until they had produced Jacques Lacan, an “indigenous heretic” whose structuralism and linguistic emphasis were resonant with the French Cartesian tradition. Lacan’s structuralist theories emphasize the possibility of discovering universal laws about man and society through our experience of ourselves. Lacan denigrates “humanis-
The French Freud

...tic" philosophy and psychology that treat man as an actor who wills his action and instead sees man as a submitting object of processes that transcend him. Lacan's affirmation of the centrality of language to thought and his emphasis on logical and mathematical formalization is meant to lay the groundwork for a unification of knowledge. Lacan has underscored these Cartesian qualities in Freud where they were apparent and has read others back into Freud where they were at best implicit.

The French tradition in psychology has always been poetic, and there had been much objection to Freud's didactic style, which the French felt did great injustice to the protean symbols with which he dealt. The French preferred authors like the philosopher Gaston Bachelard who treated such symbols more "aesthetically." Lacan's style, which is closer to Mallarmé's than to Freud's, satisfies the French taste for a poetic psychology. And his work is so elusive, so intentionally hard to pin down, that no one could accuse him of not letting protean symbols emerge in all their richness and ambiguity.

The Lacanian paradigm is structuralist, emphasizing individuals' constraints rather than their freedoms; it is poetic, linguistic, and theoretical rather than pragmatic and tends to open out to a political discourse which raises questions beyond the psychoanalytic. French intellectual life is among the most ideological and politicized in the world, and Lacan's strong political valence helps to mark it as "French indigenous." Lacan's anti-institutional biases, his critique of "adaptationist" ego psychology, and his emphasis on the way in which society enters the individual as the individual enters the world of symbolic speech have facilitated a new dialogue between Marxism and psychoanalysis in France. In its structuralist, linguistic, poetic, and political emphases, Lacan's is truly a "French Freud." A closer look at Lacan's psychoanalytic thought deepens our understanding of these dimensions.

It is useful to begin a discussion of Lacan, the theorist, with a distinction between two styles of theorizing, both of which can be found in Freud's work. The distinction is between a search for meaning and a search for mechanism. In Freud's early work much of the discussion is about how to find a new level of meaning in what people do, say, and dream by a method not unlike textual analysis. Psychic phenomena are discussed in terms of processes that constantly remind the reader that the phenomena themselves are linguistic: for example, one analyzes the dream as a rebus. In Freud's later work, different concerns are dominant. He focuses on the mechanisms of negotiation between internal entities—id, ego, and superego—which now join censors, instincts, and drives to act in hidden but highly structured processes which are presumed to underlie behavior.

To many, this later, "psychological" theory seemed more concrete, more scientific, more attractive. To Jacques Lacan, it opened the door to compromising the Freudian pursuit of meaning with an unfortunate preoccupation with mechanism. To his mind it represented a dilution of psychoanalytic thought, and he has devoted much of his career to the relentless criticism of such tendencies.

For example, in the 1950s Lacan turned sharp critical fire on the fashion of that time to look for bridges from psychoanalysis to behaviorist psychology. When the International Journal of Psychoanalysis published an article by the American psychoanalyst Jules Masserman, who argued that experiments which conditioned autonomic responses to word commands (and imagined word commands) were important to psychoanalysis, Lacan was outraged. He accused the editors of the journal of "following a tradition borrowed from employment agencies; they never neglect anything that might provide our discipline with 'good references.'" Lacan himself was clearly not impressed with behaviorism's credentials for the job:

Think of it, here we have a man who has reproduced neurosis experimentally in a dog tied down to a table and by what ingenious methods: a bell, the plate of meat it announces, and the plate of potatoes that arrives instead; you can imagine the rest. He will certainly not be one, at least so he assures us, to let himself be taken in by the "ample ruminations" as he puts it, that philosophers have devoted to the problem of language. Not him, he's going to grab it from your throat.6

For Lacan, what is essential in psychoanalysis is the relation of the unconscious to language and symbolic behavior; in these areas, models of stimulus and response have nothing to contribute. Lacan's hypenation of "experimentally" leaves little doubt that he intended such reverberations as the suggestion that experimental methods in psychoanalytic domains leave the essential behind (ex-mental) or go around it (peri-
mental). Lacan insists that Masserman was mistaken in his claim that when the thought of a word is used as a stimulus in a conditioning experiment, the word is serving as an "idea-symbol." Lacan describes this mistake as a failure to distinguish between using a word as a mere sign and using it as a symbol. A sign conveys a simple message complete in itself. A symbol evokes an open-ended system of meaning. For Lacan, the confusion of sign and symbol by a psychoanalyst is deeply troubling because it compromises Freud's "Promethean discovery" of the unconscious, its laws and the effects of symbols. "To ignore this symbolic order is to condemn the discovery to oblivion and the experience to ruin."

Lacan does not limit his critique of what he saw as mechanistic interpretations of psychoanalysis to behaviorism. For Lacan, explicit experimentalism is only an extreme case of a way of thinking which includes psychoanalytic ego psychology as well. Indeed, Lacan found the Masserman case worthy of attention precisely because he felt it represented everything produced by a certain tendency in psychoanalysis—in the name of a theory of the ego or of the technique of the analysis of defense—everything, that is, most contradictory to the Freudian experience.8

As far as Lacan was concerned, the same shift of concern from meaning to mechanism which had led analysts to the search for Pavlovian or Skinnerian principles had also led them to an exaggerated concern for the whereabouts and activities of a set of psychic structures whose existence was at best problematic. Of course, of all such structures it is the ego that has occasioned the greatest interest from psychoanalysts. In Freud's later writings, the ego emerged as that agency which is turned out toward reality, and theorists who followed him, among them and perhaps most importantly his daughter, began to focus their attention precisely because he felt it represented

everything produced by a certain tendency in psychoanalysis—in the name of a theory of the ego or of the technique of the analysis of defense—everything, that is, most contradictory to the Freudian experience.8

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lytic technique when he asserted that the ego had an aspect that was not tied up with the individual's neurotic conflicts. As perceived by the French, the concept implied a voluntarism that seemed anti-Freudian. This "unhampered" aspect of the ego seemed free to act and choose, independent of constraints, including social constraints. It almost seemed the psychic locus for a notion of the "Will" or for the seat of moral responsibility. And they felt that it was from the germ of this idea of a "conflict-free zone" that a new way of talking about psychoanalysis gradually emerged and became most powerfully rooted in the United States. This was to talk about a therapeutic alliance: the analyst's role was to become the ally of the "healthy" ego forces in their struggle to dominate instincts and drives.

Lacan's many-sided attack on this position provides an excellent introduction to the foundations of his thought. First, he attacks the ego psychologists' concept of a "healthy part" of the ego. How, asks Lacan, can they know which "part" is "healthy"? Is this not tantamount to assuming that the goal of psychoanalysis is to bring the patient to see the world as the analyst sees it? Lacan rejects this as a goal of psychoanalysis along with the associated formulation that "the purpose of analysis is achieved by an identification with the analyst's ego."9 To Lacan's way of thinking, the analyst must engage in a continual process of putting himself into question and must never let his or her sense of reality become the measure of all things for the patient. Going even further, Lacan attacks the very idea that the health of the ego can be defined objectively in terms of an adaptation to reality. In one essay, Lacan asks us to imagine that his desk were capable of speech. The desk explains how well adapted it is to reality in the shape of Lacan's papers and person. The desk sees its reality as all reality and cannot know whether it is adapted to reality or reality to it. Why should things be easier for an ego? Lacan acknowledges that the ego and not the desk is the "seat of perceptions," but this does not give it an "objective" platform from which to view the world.10

Lacan traces most of ego psychology's problems and contradictions to this idea that there is an "objective," "knowable" reality:

One understands that to prop up so obviously precarious a conception certain individuals on the other side of the Atlantic should have felt the need to introduce into it some stable value, some standard of the measure of the real: this turns out
to be the autonomous ego. This is the supposedly organized ensemble of the most disparate functions that lend their support to the subject’s feeling of inatnens. It is regarded as autonomous because it appears to be sheltered from the conflicts of the person (non-conflictual sphere).

One recognizes there a down-at-heel mirage that had already been rejected as unfeasible by most academic psychology of introspection. Yet this regression is celebrated as a return to the fold of “general psychology.”

Lacan’s own conception of the ego suggests that far from deserving a role as a trustworthy ally, it must be profoundly mistrusted because it is unable to discriminate the subject’s own desires from the desires of others. According to Lacan, the ego is not autonomous, but subordinated and alienated to the objects (people and images) with which it has identified during its development. Lacan places the genesis of the ego’s confusions at its time of origin in what he calls the “mirror phase” of human development; while other analysts were talking about setting up alliances with the ego, Lacan was insisting that the ego is the carrier of the neurosis and that allying with the ego is like consorting with the enemy.

For Lacan, the psychoanalytic approach to the ego must be “with daggers drawn”; the analyst must relate directly to the unconscious. When Lacan speaks of the psychoanalyst as the “practitioner of the symbolic function” he means that the analyst must be the practitioner of the language of the unconscious, a language of poetry and puns, word plays, and internal rhymes. In this language, there is no line between what is said and how it is said: style is indissociable from substance.

Lacan himself was at his most stylized and substantive at his seminar, a Paris ritual that lasted a quarter of a century. Once every two weeks many hundreds of people came to listen to a performance that defied categorization. Lacan described his seminar as a place where ça parle (the id speaks) and in many ways his discourse is like the flow of language of a person in analysis, dense with associations and unexpected transitions. But Lacan’s seminars were much more than free associations. In these meticulously prepared presentations, we also hear Lacan speak with the voice of the analyst, interpreting his own discourse as did the early Freud of The Interpretation of Dreams. Unlike

the early Freud, though, the line between the interpretation and the material is not always drawn. Interpretation is embedded in the discourse itself, often couched in word play and literary device. For example, Lacan speaks of people as paréretes. The term means “talking beings,” but can also be heard as meaning “by the letter,” playing on the structuralist notion of man as constituted by language. Lacan coins the phrase père-version, “father-aversion,” and plays on the idea that it is also perverse. One of Lacan’s most important theoretical tenets is that in a single act the child accepts both the name of the father (in French, le nom) and the father’s saying “no” to the child’s sexual attachment to the mother (in French, le non). So, when Lacan called his 1973-74 seminar “Les Non-Dupes Errent” (Those who are not duped are in error), he was playing on the other two ways of hearing these sounds, as “the father’s name” and as “the father’s no.”

For Lacan, this word play is not a frill, but is at the heart of what he considers the psychoanalytic enterprise. He wants his communications to speak directly to the unconscious and believes that word play, where causal links dissolve and associations abound, is the language which it understands. All psychoanalysts use language as the medium of the analytic cure and are interested in its study. But Lacan’s interest in language expresses something much more specific: Lacan believes that the study of the laws of language and the laws of the unconscious are one and the same, that the unconscious is structured as a language. And of course this means that linguistics is the cornerstone for all psychoanalytic science.

Thus Lacan is led to couch his fundamental theoretical ideas in terms of how different kinds of relationships of signification are built up. For Lacan, even the infant’s first desire for the mother signifies something beyond itself: it signifies the wish to be what the mother most desires. In French, the ambiguity between desiring someone and the desire to be the object of that person’s desire is beautifully expressed in the possessive form “de” (“of”). Désir de la mère means “desire for the mother” as well as “the mother’s desire.” (In English, we must constantly remind ourselves that desire for a person and the desire to be the object of desire are both always present, each implied in the other.)

The infant does not just want to be cared for, touched and fed, but
wants to actually complete the mother, to be what she lacks and can be presumed to want above all else: the phallus. In Lacan’s work, the phallus does not stand for the penis itself. It stands for the infant’s absolute and irreducible desire to be a part of the mother, to be what she most desires. We shall see that for Lacan it comes to stand, even more generally, for the kind of desire that can never be satisfied.

The child’s relationship with the mother is fusional, dual and immediate, dominated by the desire to lose self in other. The presence of the father (as presented by the mother to the child) excludes the possibility for fusion. The child’s desire to be its mother’s desire gives way to an identification with the father. Lacan tells us that this identification takes place through an assimilation of the father’s name, which as we have already pointed out, is a homonym in French with the father’s “no.”

In “classical” Freudian terms we have just described the repression of desire for the mother. Freud’s models of how this process takes place were sometimes psychological, sometimes hydraulic, sometimes energetic. What Lacan has done is to translate repression into linguistic terms as a process of metaphor formation. One signifier (father’s name) comes to substitute for another (desire for the mother and desire to be the object of her desire). Of course, what is being signified, the phallus, remains the same. But two important things have happened. The relationship between signifier and signified has been mediated: they are now more distanced from each other. And the old signifier (desire for the mother) and what it signifies are “pushed down” to a deeper level: they are now unconscious. The father’s name now only signifies the phallus through a chain of signification that has an invisible link, the desire for the mother. In the course of a lifetime, the individual builds up many chains of signification, always substituting new terms for old and always increasing the distance between the signifier that is most accessible and visible, and all those that are invisible and unconscious, including of course the original signifier.

This model of repression as metaphor formation illuminates Lacan’s way of talking about the psychoanalytic process as a science of interpretation. Its goal is not stated in terms of “adaptation to reality,” but as the restitution of the associative chains of signification. Since these chains have been built up by complex word plays, breaking the code requires skill with words. Lacan was being quite genuine when he summed up his advice to a young psychoanalyst as “Do crossword puzzles.”

But the formation of the parental metaphor, or, more classically, the repression of the desire for the mother through the “mechanism” of castration anxiety, is not a random link in the associative chain of signification. It is Lacan’s version of what is taking place in the resolution of the Oedipus complex. And at the heart of what is going on is the development of the child’s capacity for a new way of using signification. The child is learning how to use symbols. Lacan marks the enormous difference between the pre-Oedipal and post-Oedipal ways of signifying by naming two different orders of signification. The first order, associated with the immediate, dual relationship of child and mother, is called the “imaginary” (imaginaire) order. As when Narcissus bent over his reflection, self yearns to fuse with what is perceived as other.

The second order, in which signification is mediated by a third term, the father, is called the “symbolic” (symbolique) order. Like the world after the Tower of Babel, there is no longer a one-to-one correspondence between things and how they are called. The symbol has intervened. The word is no longer the thing.

The imaginary order takes its name from Lacan’s description of a “mirror phase” of development which extends from when the child is about six months old to when it is about eighteen months old. During this time, the child comes to see its body, which is still uncoordinated and not fully under its control, as whole rather than fragmented by identifying with its mirror image in much the same way that it identifies with its mother’s body and with the bodies of other children. Lacan believes that all of these unmediated one-to-one identifications are alienating. The child is actually subordinated to its image, to its mother, to others. Lacan associates imaginary significations with dual, fusional, and alienating relationships and contrasts them with very different significations which can take place in the symbolic order. Symbolic signification, of which the “father’s name” metaphor is an example, is mediated rather than fusional. It is social, not narcissistic. According to Lacan’s way of looking at things, the Oedipal crisis is a crisis of imaginary signification. It marks the child’s entrance into the world of the symbolic.
through the formation of the parental metaphor. The laws of language and society come to dwell within the child as it accepts the father's name and the father's "no."

This discussion has presented the transition from imaginary to symbolic as though an imaginary "stage" gives way to a symbolic one. But this is not the case. The entrance into the symbolic opens the way for symbolic significations, but the imaginary identifications which began during the mirror phase have become paradigmatic for processes of identification. The subject continues to identify itself with people and images in a direct, fusional mode in which self is lost in other. And it is through these identifications that the subject constructs the alienated self which Lacan calls the ego or moi. Of course this ego, built out of alienating identifications, has nothing in common with the sturdy, helpful being described by the ego psychologists. Quite to the contrary, for Lacan the ego is the bearer of neurosis and the center of all resistance to the cure of symptoms. The symbolic order always partakes of the imaginary because the primary identification of the self as a misrecognition constrains all further constructions of the self. The self is always like an other. So the imaginary construction of the ego "situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone. . . ."15

All of the objects of imaginary identification function as substitutes for the absolute object of desire, long repressed, long forgotten, what Lacan calls "the absolute desire for the Other."16 This desire can never be satisfied. Even at the end of a successful analysis the subject is faced with the impossibility of completing the chain of signification back to an accessible and irreducible reality. Knowledge and the absolute, final truth are irrevocably cut off from each other. "The symptom, ever more loaded with its content of knowledge, is cut off from its truth. And that which severs them from one another is precisely what constitutes the subject."17 Psychoanalysis cannot undo this inevitable frustration. It can only bring the individual to an understanding of how the experience of "something missing" is at the very core of being. And indeed, Lacan acknowledges this final, frustrating state of affairs when he defines a third order which is beyond the symbolic realm of language and beyond imaginary construction. This reality which we can never know is what he calls the "real" (réel). Trying to describe the real in words is itself a paradox because definitionally the real lies beyond language. It is defined within the linguistic system as something beyond and outside of it. It is the precategorical and prescientific, the reality that we must assume although we can never know it.18

Even this very brief look at Lacan's ideas should leave little doubt that they would provoke strong feelings. Later chapters discuss both his excommunication from the International Psychoanalytic Association and the devotion of his followers. It is not uncommon for a French psychoanalyst to have made loyalty to Lacan the theorist a matter of personal principle despite his or her most profound reservations about Lacan the clinician or even about Lacan the man. In my own interviews with French psychoanalysts, many who neither approved of Lacan's short sessions nor of his ideas about self-authorization in psychoanalytic training felt that his theoretical perspective had brought them back to fundamental truths which served as sources of renewal in their lives as analysts.

Lacan's turn to linguistic referents for psychoanalysis and his interest in psychoanalysis as a science of interpretation gives him an appeal far beyond the psychoanalytic community itself. It is particularly strong in the world of literary criticism where "traditional" psychoanalytic approaches have all too often degenerated into unrigorous and reductionist speculations about an author's "Oedipal" preoccupations or use of sexual symbolism. Lacan offers literary critics the possibility of something new. In his seminar on Edgar Allen Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Lacan does not use analytic categories to solve textual problems. Instead, he takes the Poe story as a pretext for using analytic questions to open up altogether new kinds of literary and psychoanalytic issues.19 The story has intrinsic appeal for Lacan: it offers "the letter" as an image of the power of the signifier. All of the actions of all of the characters in the story are determined by the presence of a letter, a signifier whose contents are unknown. Thus, like a typographic "letter," and like Freud's description of a "memory trace," the purloined letter is a unit of signification which takes on meaning by its differential opposition to other units. Lacan's seminar on Poe focuses on the generation of meaning from such oppositions and on the ability of pre-existing sym-
bolts to structure human action. Implicitly, it also raises the problem of the real. Even the “letter,” the unit of signification, is not irreducible; it can bear meaning through associations and history that go beyond its differential oppositions with other (like) units. In other essays in the *Ecrits* Lacan treats the work of Marguerite Duras, the Marquis de Sade, Jorge Luis Borges, and Molière, amongst scores of other authors, and explores many relations between psychoanalysis and literature. Lacanian perspectives on the problems of signification, on the structuring properties of desire, on the power of symbols in forging human action, and on the homologies between unconscious laws and linguistic laws, have deeply influenced the generation of French literary critics which included Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers, and have swept Continental literary circles. Indeed, the first interest in Lacan in the United States came not from the psychoanalytic community, but from students of literature.

In this book, the focus is not on Lacan and the French literati, but on his relevance to another group. This is his appeal to people who consider themselves to be on the Left. Using the expression “people on the Left” calls for some disclaimers. Although the discussion here will include some special reference to Communist Party intellectuals, the term “the Left” is not only meant to designate the Left of official political parties. Rather, it is used to refer to a group of mostly middle-class people, somewhat intellectual in their interests and pretensions, who do not necessarily hold much in common beyond the fact that they would identify themselves as “people on the Left.” Some belong to the Communist Party, although others who consider themselves “on the Left” feel that Party members are definitionally excluded from the Left. Some identify with the small, Marxist and anarchist student groups which sparked the May days. Some identify with the existential Marxism of groups like Socialisme ou Barbarie. Some are more influenced by the opinions of the trend-setting *Le Nouvel Observateur* than by the ideas of Marx, Trotsky, or Mao. For most French people who consider themselves “on the Left,” the cultivation of anti-Americanism is a habit of long standing, and outside of the Communist Party, another common element is a strong antibureaucratic and anti-establishment bias. Lacan has appeal on all of these counts. For over a quarter of a century he remained relentlessly critical of American psychoanalysis, politics, and culture and of all psychoanalytic establishments. His attacks have frequently had a tone closer to that of a political campaigner than to what we usually associate with psychoanalytic scholarship.

Freud began a tradition of psychoanalyst as cultural critic, and Lacan often crossed the line between scientific criticism of American ego psychology and more politically charged attacks on the American values which helped to ensure its acceptance. For example, he described the American psychoanalytic community as “A team of egos, no doubt less equal than autonomous” which are “offered to the Americans to guide them towards happiness, without upsetting the autonomies, egotistical or otherwise, that pave with their non-conflictual spheres,” the *American Way of getting there.* In his 1953 essay “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” Lacan combined his attack on the United States as a nation where individuals were subjected to “human engineering” in the service of social control with an attack on the bureaucratization of the psychoanalytic establishment. He described the psychoanalytic establishment as “terrified” and defensively walled off from “the fresh air of criticism” by a formalism pushed to such ceremonial lengths that one might well wonder whether it does not bear the same similarity to obsessional neurosis that Freud so convincingly defined in the observance, if not in the genesis, of religious rites.

And in the 1970s, things were not much different: Lacan was still using “American Psychoanalysis” as a shorthand for any mechanistic approach to psychoanalysis and was referring to the International Psychoanalytic Association as the SAMCDA, his acronym for “The Society of Mutual Aid to Combat the Psychoanalytic Discourse.”

Lacan’s anti-American and antibureaucratic positions were not irrelevant to the social breakthrough of the French psychoanalytic culture in the late 1960s. At the height of the Vietnam War, anti-Americanism and the denigration of all establishments were rallying cries for the French student movement. Lacan’s connections to these issues made it easier for the psychoanalytic culture to take some of the momentum from energies generated and then frustrated by the May days and their
aftermath. But the vigor and political valence of the French psychoanalytic culture which emerged after 1968 was not a simple function of its ability to pick up on Lacan’s iconoclasm and the student movement’s anti-American and anti-institutional themes. In the years following the May-June 1968 events, French psychoanalysis came to be reconciled with two ideological currents, existentialism and Marxism, with which it had formerly had hostile relations. Jean-Paul Sartre had denounced Freud’s notion of the unconscious as an insult to human freedom; generations of Marxists had denounced psychoanalysis as a weapon of the bourgeoisie. But by the 1970s French Communists were reading favorable commentaries about psychoanalysis in Party organs, and Sartre had written a biography of Flaubert of Freudian inspiration. To understand the role of the events of 1968 in mediating these changes, it is important to understand how in the twenty years between the end of World War II and the 1968 social revolt, existentialism and Marxism forged their own marriage in a way which prepared the ground for both of them to approach psychoanalytic thought with fresh interest.

For the “classical” Marxist, individual psychological processes are epiphenomenal because events are determined by a society’s class structure and means of production. However, after World War II, the classical “economist” reading of Marx began to appear insufficient for understanding what had happened to Communism in the Soviet Union. If capital was defined only in terms of the private ownership of the means of production, the Russian system, which appeared to be a form of state capitalism, seemed a contradiction in terms. As it became increasingly apparent that the critique of capitalism had to be based on more than legal or purely economic ideas about ownership, more Marxists turned to Marx’s early writings in which the emphasis was on the concept of alienation rather than ownership. The alienation of the early Marx is a psychological state which could be present whether or not one was in the presence of a stock exchange or working in a factory. One could be alienated in Moscow as well as in Detroit, in a university as well as on an assembly line. This notion of alienation was very appealing to intellectuals because, if a revolutionary class was defined in terms of its alienation, alliances between workers, students, and intellectuals could make real political sense. It was embraced by postwar French Marxists caught up in the burgeoning existentialist movement. Under the influence of existential philosophy, Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, Gramsci’s writings, and Georg Lukacs’ humanistic Marxism, a native species of French existential Marxism was born. This marriage of political and philosophical currents was to be extremely relevant to the social outburst of May 1968 which played out many existential Marxist ideas in political practice.

French existential Marxists were committed to the ideas that the essence of revolutionary action was self-management and local control of political power and that the socialist revolution would lead to a blossoming of the individual personality. Following Marx’s vision of a world where the barrier between mental and manual labor would break down, they believed that socialism should mean the end to alienation. These beliefs in self-management and the end of alienation became focal points of the May-June 1968 actions when students seized control of their high schools and universities, and workers took over their factories. They wanted to run all institutions as participatory democracies where self-expression would be given free rein. In their writings, the existential Marxists tried to work out the theoretical connections between self-management and the problem of alienation, but the actual experience of May gave new life to the issues. Existential Marxists had long speculated about how a revolution of self-management might unfold, but it was doing it in 1968 that brought the centrality of individual psychology into relief. Attempts at self-expression in structures of democratic self-management led to preoccupations with the self. Existential Marxism when played out in social practice seemed to pave the way for the psychoanalytic culture.

The May actions stressed that a liberated politics could only emerge from liberated interpersonal relationships and that structured, impersonal political organizations could not respond to the problems of alienation in an over-structured society. The May 1968 alternative to traditional political organization was the comité d’action. “Action committees” sprang up everywhere: in universities, factories, theater groups, high schools, hospitals. They were not intended to develop a coherent program for a new society; they were to be that new society in embryo. They presented an image of the future socialist society as a so-
ciety of continual, free, spontaneous creation. In such a society, action would not emerge from planning, but from people relating fully to each other as complete human beings rather than as fragmented social actors. One of the dominant ideas put forth during May was that the form and the relational context of politics was politics itself. Like Lacan, the May celebrants saw style and content as indissociable. People tried to act on a belief that unalienated thought and action required political structures that were designed to destroy structures. They participated in the action committees as “anti structures” and focused their attention on expected changes in their psychological states. The result was a new concern with the self and with personal relationships.

During May–June 1968, the streets of France were flooded with people talking to each other as they claimed they had never talked with each other before. They spoke of their sexuality, of their dissatisfactions with family life and formalities, of their desire for more open communication. The hierarchies and bureaucratic structures which are so much a part of French life were, for a moment, forgotten. Questions about authenticity and alienation were experienced as real, immediate, almost tangible. Even a brief experience of doing without the typical social roles gave special meaning to trying to understand how these roles stand in the way of intimacy.

In the years before 1968 in France, there had already grown up a small psychoanalytic movement animated by lively theoretical controversies, an intellectual community increasingly receptive to Freud’s ideas, and a psychiatric establishment that was less hostile to them. The pieces were in place for a new relationship to psychoanalytic ideas in France. But while psychoanalysts and intellectuals alone can make a psychoanalytic movement, they cannot themselves make a psychoanalytic culture. The popularity of existentialism during the 1940s and 1950s had been fanned by its resonance with the decisions people had to make during the war. The issue of individual commitment took on a quality of concreteness and personal urgency. Now, the widely shared experience of May called long-established patterns of life into question and prepared the ground for a new cultural interest in individual psychology. In the years after May there was great popular demand for psychoanalytic ideas, for psychoanalytically inspired advice, and even for psychoanalytic therapy.

The explosion of interest in psychoanalysis after 1968 was foreshadowed by many of the May slogans and graffiti, which expressed the desire to get close to immediate experience and emotion and to break down the boundaries between reality and fantasy, the rational and irrational. To many observers, May seemed to be a kind of surrealism-in-political-action. Freud’s first French admirers had been the surrealists, and during May, as in surrealist writings, psychoanalytic slogans were put to use as utopian rallying cries: “Take your desires for reality... A policeman dwells in each of our heads, he must be killed... Liberate psychoanalysis.” In the course of the 1968 events, many radical students moved from indifference or hostility toward psychoanalysis to a new, more ambivalent relationship. Long-standing Leftist criticism of psychoanalysis as bourgeois ideology and upper-class luxury paled before popular demands for contact with psychoanalysis. Wilhelm Reich became a Maître à penser; long nights of political debate were held in a Sorbonne lecture hall, newly rechristened L’Amphithéâtre Che- Guevara-Freud.

To many, May 1968 was experienced as a festival of speech and liberated desire and it seemed only natural to turn to psychoanalysts whom they perceived as the professionals of both. Students asked analysts to join them in their struggles. Medical students wanted help in creating a new “human relations curriculum” for medical schools, psychiatry students wanted support in their revolt against their almost entirely neurological university training, and politicized students in the social sciences and humanities were in search of new critical vantage points. Psychoanalysts were asked to leave the consulting room and to join in what was happening on the streets. These developments will be examined in greater detail in chapter seven on psychoanalysis in the university.

Political participation has always raised special problems for psychoanalysts: the orthodox have gravely emphasized psychoanalytic neutrality, but for many analysts, there was a real tension between the therapeutic imperative of presenting a neutral screen and their own sense of
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themselves as citizens. Psychoanalysts had debated the pros and cons of different kinds of political visibility in seminar rooms, salons, and journal articles for many generations. In 1968, there was pressure to act. Some analysts closed their offices, put up signs: "PSYCHOANALYST AT DEMONSTRATION." Some were hostile to the events and charged patients for analytic sessions that they missed. Others simply did nothing, watched, and waited it out.

On May 23, 1968, Paris's Le Monde published a manifesto in support of the students signed by seventy psychoanalysts. The manifesto emphasized that the May actions were politically motivated. The analysts who signed the manifesto were particularly interested in making this point because they knew only too well that many of their colleagues were already using analogies with the Oedipal drama to explain the events in terms of collective psychopathology.

There was strong reaction to the manifesto within the psychoanalytic world. The French psychoanalytic societies were torn by conflict over what the events were about and how analysts should participate in them. Analysts challenged the hierarchies of the psychoanalytic societies at the same time that they struggled with their positions in the social movement as a whole. French analysts of all persuasions were confronted with questions about psychoanalysis and politics and about the role of the analyst as social critic and revolutionary activist. Finding a role was no simple matter. There was first of all the traditional problem of "neutrality." Would political participation compromise the analytic position? Second, even those analysts who wanted to participate found themselves faced with a student movement that was highly ambivalent about the psychoanalytic presence. Attitudes toward psychoanalysis were in transition; the situation looked totally confusing. Analysts were alternatively denounced as legitimators of the status quo, cited in revolutionary slogans, criticized as "superpsychiatric policemen," and asked to speak on sexual and political liberation.

Lacanian analysis played a large role in the May movement: they identified with the students, and the students identified with them. In 1968, bridges between Lacan and the Left were strengthened by Lacanian connections with Marxist circles at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

"Reinventing" Freud in France

This association dated back to the early days of Lacan's seminar and had become closer and more visible in 1963 when Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser invited Lacan to bring his seminar to the Ecole Normale. The link to Althusser's circle had greatly increased the recruitment of politically involved people to Lacan's Freudian School and began to break down the long resistance of French Marxists toward psychoanalysis via a detour through Lacan's Ecrits. Lacan had certainly not been giving garden variety political speeches in his seminars at the Ecole Normale, but by June 1968, his thought was sufficiently associated with radical student groups that the dean of the Ecole asked him to leave on the grounds that his seminar was "politically disruptive." University administrators saw Lacan as a political threat and university students saw his anti-American and anti-institutional politics as an inspiration.

To a student movement in the throes of challenging the hierarchy of the French university system, the Lacanians—who had attacked the Americans, broken rules, and attacked hierarchy in the psychoanalytic world—seemed the natural allies of such struggles. Lacanian experiments in antipsychiatry seemed to anticipate the spirit of May, and students turned to Lacanian analyses of group and institutional process for ideas on how to run action committees. A political form inspired by the voluntarist tradition of worker self-management put itself at the tutelage of a structuralist psychoanalytic science. The action committees became a place for "bridge building" between existential Marxism and psychoanalysis, but there were many others, both during May and after.

Many people who had been caught up in the May actions turned to Lacan in the years after the events for help in theorizing many aspects of their aspiration to have made a revolution of speech and desire. They were able to turn to Lacan for help in thinking through the relationship of individual and society. This chapter has characterized Lacan's French "reinvention" of Freud by situating it in relation to some important currents in French social and political life. The next chapter shows how Lacan's theory (and in particular his theorization of the transaction between imaginary and symbolic, the transaction that marks man's
entrance into society and that marks society's entrance into man), opened out to new connections between psychoanalysis and political ideas.

The surrealists had hoped to use psychoanalysis as a form of utopian thought. They tried to plumb psychoanalysis for images of a future that could draw upon a world of dreams and desire. Much to Freud's dismay, they took the existence of a powerful, primitive unconscious as an aesthetic measure of contemporary society. The flattened experience that characterizes modern life stood accused by the images of freedom that the surrealists read into Freud's thought. In May 1968, and in its aftermath, utopian political currents reenacted this scenario, this time with the ideas of Lacan, Reich, and Marcuse as well as Freud. In Lacan's own biography, things had come full circle. In the mid-1930s, at about the same time that Lacan was beginning his study of the problem of paranoia, Salvador Dali was deep in research on a similar theme. From Dali's work came a characterization of the paranoid style as the appropriate stance for man in modern society. Lacan and Dali each claimed to have been greatly influenced by the other; Lacan joined the prewar circle of surrealist writers and artists in Paris. And so, if now in 1968 psychoanalysis was to be turned into a form of social criticism and in this sense to be returned to the surrealists, who but Lacan could accept the gift?

In the May–June 1968 events, the struggle and the search was less for new governmental forms than for oneself. French bureaucratic society had called forth its antithesis: an antistructural movement which created the context for a radical exploration of the self and a new, more encompassing mode of human relations. May seemed like a time out of time, a mythic moment which could be related directly to other such moments in French political history. Just as the Paris Commune had identified itself with the revolutionaries of 1789, even to the point of adapting the revolutionary calendar as its own, so the 1968 events looked to the Commune, another spontaneous uprising which aimed for the reconquest of urban centers, the dismantling of hierarchy, and the transformation of people into the "masters of their lives and of history, not only in political decisions, but in daily life." If the May movement was romantic in its use of the symbols of the Commune— the barricades, the red and black flags, the general strike—its new mythology was even more romantic: that of a return to Eden.

From the perspective of May 1968, life in Paris did seem a return to a simpler, less differentiated society. One participant put it this way: