Chapter 1

The Social Roots of
Psychoanalytic Culture

This book treats the new French psychoanalytic culture as "Freud's French Revolution." It is revolutionary in many ways: in its dramatic difference from what came before, the turmoil of its coming into place, in the scope of its penetration into French life. One cannot take the full measure of its influence by a simple count of analysts and their patients. It is necessary to look at how a psychoanalytic language, even a popularized one, has affected how people think about themselves, about philosophy, about politics, about the future of universities, about literature, about madness and despair, and, of course, about families and children. It is because believing in psychoanalysis touches on so many aspects of life, and calls so many assumptions into question, that psychoanalysis has some claim to being a subversive doctrine. Because it is subversive in this sense, resistance to it can come from many quarters. It is present, for example, in France's early response to Freud. From the beginning, the French opposed psychoanalysis from so many directions that it is appropriate to speak of an "antipsychoanalytic culture."

This chapter puts the contemporary French psychoanalytic cul-
ture into perspective by looking at the inhibiting antipsychoanalytic culture that preceded it, the elements of which were equally complex and interdependent. The expression "antipsychoanalytic culture" does not imply that it came into being in response to the introduction of psychoanalysis. Quite the contrary. The opposition was already in place at the time of the introduction of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the twentieth century. In domains where psychoanalytic ideas might have found a clientele, there were secure establishments that saw little need for anything new. And apart from being new, psychoanalysis was particularly threatening.

French psychiatrists tended to look at the sufferings of their patients as the result of either organic lesions or moral degeneration. In either case, the boundary between the "healthy" doctor and the "sick" patient was clear. Freud's theory makes it hard to draw such lines by insisting that if psychiatrists knew themselves better, they would find more points in common with their patients than they might have thought. In Henri Bergson and Pierre Janet, French philosophy and psychology each had a national hero with strong claims to have already treated the themes that Freud was raising. They also claimed to have treated them in better taste (e.g., without Freud's "excessive" reference to sex) and to have treated them without having to call in a foreign theorist. Moreover, French philosophy and psychology were involved in drawing and consolidating the line between them, and in deciding which aspects of the mind each would take as its province. Psychoanalysis did not respect such lines. It went beyond traditional psychology and claimed the right to intrude into problems that philosophers considered their professional preserve: the reality of free will, the reliability of intuition, and the autonomy of consciousness.

Thus the hostility of professional establishments in medicine, psychology, and philosophy and the offended sensibilities of chauvinists and moralists helped to build a French antipsychoanalytic culture. But the culture also gained its strength from a quieter yet more pervasive kind of opposition. Psychoanalysis was profoundly discordant with a firmly in place system of social relations and values which, by giving people confidence that meaning and support could be found in the social order, encouraged ways of thinking about the individual that referred to outer rather than inner realities. This chapter examines how this social system worked, how it found expression in the pervasive cultural hostility toward psychoanalysis, and finally how it broke down, setting the social groundwork for the development of a psychoanalytic culture.

The effort requires an overview of nearly a century of cultural, social, and psychiatric history. Of necessity, its presentation will be schematic and general. But its purpose is modest: to provide a few reference points for thinking about what kinds of social conditions facilitate or militate against the development of a widespread interest in psychoanalysis as a theory and as a therapy.

A first reference point is the radically different initial response to psychoanalysis in France and America: psychoanalysis captured the American imagination a full fifty years before it stirred up a comparable level of interest in France. Comparing what was happening in these two societies at the time of the introduction of psychoanalysis at the turn of the century teaches a great deal about the social roots of psychoanalytic culture. Psychoanalysis was welcomed in America, particularly in urban America, which had to come to terms with rootlessness, with geographic and social mobility from within, and with immigration from without. In the American nation of immigrants, psychoanalytic absorption in the history of the individual helped to compensate for the absence of a collective past. Many Americans shared an insecurity about their parvenu status that encouraged continual self-examination and the strong desire for self-improvement. In addition, America's lack of a coherent national culture helped psychoanalysis achieve a greater social role. The Americans had no strong national psychiatric tradition and no national university structure that could institutionalize a single accepted way of thinking about philosophy and psychology. And American middle-class affluence could support a relatively expensive self-improvement industry.

Historian Nathan Hale has presented the thesis that psychoanalysis became important in America during the crystallizations of two crises: there was a crisis of "civilized" morality in social life and a crisis of the "somatic style" in the treatment of nervous and mental disorders. "Civilized" morality, with its insistence that progress depended on the control of sexuality and that "mind" should govern sensual nature,
operated as a coherent system of related economic, social, and religious norms. It defined correct behavior and correct models of the "manly man and the womanly woman" and served as a powerful ideal of conduct. But, according to Hale, by the time that Freud visited America in 1909, religious and cultural conservatives complained of a crumbling of moral codes. A new mass society bent on business and pleasure. Subjects that respectable families would never have mentioned a decade before now were being publicly talked about. Some were shocked at the academic nudes displayed in fashionable magazines. Darwinism, relativism and pragmatism were "blasting the Rock of Ages" and destroying a reverence for moral truths once believed to be eternal. A few Americans asked whether their country were progressing or degenerating. 

By the early twentieth century, models of the human mind which had provided the psychological underpinnings for "civilized" morality had been challenged. "The faculties of Will, Conscience, and the concept of the unified and responsible Self were no longer adequate descriptions of what was known about human personality." And the economic and cultural factors that had fostered late nineteenth-century "civilized" morality were also changing.

New attitudes toward sexuality and religion developed simultaneously with urbanization and increased affluence. America was moving from an economy of deficit and saving to one of surplus and abundance. Particularly in the rapidly growing cities, which presented the immigrant from Europe or the American countryside with widely varied patterns of behavior,

A new kind of character had to emerge, no longer dedicated to austerity and sacrifice but to leisure and rational enjoyment. The sharp moral codes of the small town—close-knit neighbors, churches, "society"—were replaced by relative anonymity and isolation.

G. Stanley Hall, Freud's host for his 1909 visit to America, informed Freud that he had come at a good "psychological moment." In the present context, it is more to the point that Freud came to America at a good "sociological moment" as well.

When individuals feel enmeshed in a network of stable social relationships with family, ancestry, and religion, they can use these relationships to make sense of experience, and when they are in pain or distress, these relationships become natural reference points for trying to understand what is happening and sources of support for finding a way out of trouble. But with mobility of place, profession, and status, and a new instability of values, old ways of looking at the world no longer apply. Individuals are thrown back on themselves and may be more receptive to theories such as psychoanalysis which search for meaning in dreams, wishes, fears, and confusions. In a stable society, people feel that they understand how things work. The rational and conscious are deemed trustworthy. When life is in greater flux, daily experience continually suggests the presence of processes hidden from awareness. Society appears more opaque, and the idea of an unconscious acquires greater reality. In this situation, psychoanalytic theory and therapy become more "culturally appropriate." Sociologist Philip Rieff has called this change in the character of the community "deconversion" and has described how the shift to a social environment where each individual must create his own meaning creates the possibility for the "psychoanalytic moment." In Rieff's terms, Freud had come to America during a period of deconversion—that is, a time when "civilized" morality and the traditional forces of community and cohesion which had kept it in place were all in jeopardy.

From this point of view we can appreciate why, at the turn of the century, some aspects of the new psychoanalytic theory made sense to Americans. The violent and sexually charged unconscious which it was discovering "bore an uncanny resemblance to the precise opposite of the values of 'civilized morality'" just at the time when they were coming under social attack. But what makes sense in one society might make nonsense in another. And in France, the psychoanalytic perspective on the world seemed profoundly out of step with social realities. At about the same time that the American middle-class was trying to make its peace with new self-doubts and insecurities, French bourgeois society was more secure than ever about its sense of itself as the model and matrix for French society as a whole. The French bourgeoisie had triumphed over the workers in the insurrection of the Paris commune in 1871 and had set up the Third French Republic, a sturdy political creature whose seventy-year tenure has been referred to as "the Republican
synthesis" because of the close fit of the political system with social norms and values and with a well-articulated vision of the world. Ancestors were known by their names and by their habits, the past was secure, and the future was rooted in it. This, at least, for the bourgeoisie. So, at a time when American society was increasingly receptive to new ways of looking at the world that focused on the self, the French bourgeoisie was concerned with reinforcing its own experience of France as a self-contained, organic, interdependent, well-cemented society. The bourgeois school and family instilled "character": a sense of privacy, morality, civic duty, and historical continuity. French schools taught children to feel a sense of solidarity with the French community, civilization, and race. Many French primary school texts carried a frontispiece in which the Gauls, Charlemagne, the medieval and modern kings, the Napoleons, and the great leaders of the Republican governments were pictured holding hands in a great chain whose final link was the student to whom the book presumably belonged. A favorite image of France was as a beehive where each individual family was a cell, each helping to construct a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. The individual was encouraged to feel roots in social space and time. Psychoanalysis threatened this reassuring sense of continuity by insisting that civilization (even French civilization) is the origin of our discontents and that the past can live within us as an insidious rather than benign presence.

In traditional French bourgeois society, the call to values of collectivity coexisted with a sense of privacy that was built around maintaining rigid boundaries between self and others. French sociologist Michel Crozier has gone so far as to characterize all of French social life, from the corporation to the family, as "bureaucratic." And he sees this bureaucratic style as the expression of a shared "horror of face-to-face confrontations." People seemed willing to live with cumbersome bureaucratic mechanisms for getting even the smallest things done in order to protect their privacy. Even within the family, there was much formality and distance; in many French bourgeois homes, it was not uncommon for children to address their parents in the formal vous form.

By the time of the introduction of psychoanalysis around the turn of the century, bourgeois-dominated French society presented itself as in a state of equilibrium so well balanced that it often seemed more like a stalemate. Indeed, the French bourgeoisie liked to think of itself as le juste milieu, the balanced middle-of-the-road in political, personal, cultural, and economic matters. Although France had industrialized, the bourgeois social hierarchy was still based on traditional patterns of status, deference, and family ties. Although the state was secular, for many people the Catholic Church was a national presence that served to cement political and spiritual life. And although the French bourgeoisie ran corporations as well as the more traditional small businesses, they adopted many of the characteristics of the old aristocracy, in particular, a disdain for the aggressive "entrepreneurizing" associated with modern capitalism. They called it grimpage, "climbing," and thought it in extremely poor taste. Indeed, in the French bourgeois society described here, what was and what was not "in good taste" was extremely clear; people did not have to struggle with an ambiguous sense of the rules of the game as was beginning to happen in America.

It is not surprising that people with a clear sense of what was right and wrong, of what was appropriate and what was inappropriate, were not interested in theories that suggested the relativity of all values. The French were offended by Freud's psychoanalytic "moral neutrality" just as they were by Max Weber's sociological "value neutrality." Both theorists saw the world with a relativism that went against the French cultural grain. In its stability and security in what it stood for, French bourgeois society was not ready for psychoanalysis. But Freud challenged more than "civilized" morality. He also challenged the "somatic style" in neurology and psychiatry, a style that was particularly well rooted in French medicine. The somatic style attributed breakdowns in mental functioning to physical causes, most specifically to brain lesions. Neurologists hoped to relate the symptoms of patients to specified pathological conditions. This mechanistic view of mental disorder had been encouraged by the discoveries of German and British investigators in the 1870s in the localization of brain functions. The cerebral cortex seemed a mosaic of overlapping areas, each defining a specific function. In the later nineteenth century, in France and America, the norms of the "civilized" moral order such as judgment, reason, and control were each associated with psychological categories such as
Will and Conscience and given a somatic base. They were believed to be located in the frontal lobes of the cortex along with the other "superior" functions and to inhibit the action of the "lower" centers where the primitive drives and instincts, including the sexual passions, were located. But by the time of Freud's visit in 1909, this coherent social-psychological-physiological system was in crisis in America. The problems of classifying mental disease on physiological grounds had become increasingly apparent, as had the fact that neither gross lesions nor metabolic dysfunctions seemed to be present in the most important varieties of insanity.

Nathan Hale recounts that in America "the somatic style and 'civilized' morality exhibited roughly the same historical pattern. They became dominant in the 1870s, rigid in the 1880s, and were in a period of crisis by 1909." In France, however, the Gallic version of "civilized" morality was not in crisis at the turn of the century and neither was the traditional style of French psychiatric theory and practice that was moral and rational as well as somatic. The terrain that psychoanalysis might have occupied as a theory of irrational processes was already taken by Bergsonianism and the terrain that it might have occupied as a therapeutic model was dominated by a psychiatry that seemed more consonant with French social life and social values.

Psychiatry, like literature, is a medium onto which social values can be projected as themes and preoccupations. In its moral, rational, and even chauvinistic view of the world, the French psychiatry in place at the time of the introduction of psychoanalysis expressed the social values of the Third Republic. French writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took family, nation, religion, community, and regionality as major touchstones for their work. So did French psychiatrists. Like French social theorists and novelists, French psychiatrists presented being "rooted" in the harmony and security of life in the rural provinces as a near prerequisite for mental health. Even as France was industrializing, her psychiatrists insisted on an irreconcilable conflict between modern industrial society and the nature of the human spirit. And although Descartes' neurophysiology of emotional states had long been discredited, nineteenth- and twentieth-century French psychiatrists seemed to agree with him that an innate intellectual core was the basis for a shared human nature. Cure was often represented as the triumph of intellect through "reasoning" a patient back to his senses.

This major, "rational-intellectual" tradition in French psychiatry had always coexisted with a minor tradition which focused on cure by passage through an altered state of consciousness, such as a hypnotic trance, and through the manipulation of a powerful relationship to a healer. This minor tradition existed as an underground current that would surface from time to time to trouble the habitually calmer waters of traditional French psychiatry. In the mid-eighteenth century, there had been such an eruption in Mesmerism. In the late nineteenth century, there was another. French psychiatrists became interested in hysteria and hypnosis, and Jean Martin Charcot turned the Paris hospital of the Salpêtrière into an international center for their study. However, it emerged that Charcot had induced by suggestion much of the hysteria that he then claimed to cure by hypnosis, and by the time of his death in 1893, his work had been discredited. French psychiatry turned its back on the study of hysteria and hypnosis as it had done after the heyday of Mesmerism. It was the chilliest possible atmosphere for the introduction of psychoanalysis.

And indeed, when Freud's work was introduced, French psychiatrists saw it as dogmatic, arbitrary, barbaric, immoral, exaggerated, and speculative. They also dismissed its radically "psychological" explanations for the etiology of illness. Although the French had access to and had even produced some of the studies that had led to disillusionment with the somatic style in America, French neurology remained sturdy and confident, firmly rooted in the national university and hospital system. Neurologists dominated psychiatry; until 1968, psychiatry was not even a separate discipline in France.

In making their criticism of the "unscientific" Freud, French psychiatrists tended to compare him to Pierre Janet. Janet was the "complete" French psychological theorist, concerned with the rational, the moral, and the organically real. His theory of the origin of neurosis was rational (he believed that neurotic symptoms could be explained by their inability to deal with complex realities) and moral (strength is equated with successful control over impulses, a failure of this is moral...
weakness). He divided psychic life into ranked classes with "rational" acts on top and "socio-personal" acts at the bottom of the hierarchy. Even his therapeutic strategies confirmed the biases of the French psychiatric community. He combined moral treatment with "Cartesian" intervention: isolation from family to calm patients, rest to restore the powers of their will, work to strengthen the lower levels of their psychic organization, firm persuasion to convince them of their errors in judgment, and education to develop their rational potential to the fullest. 18 Janet presided over the Fourteenth International Congress of Psychology in Paris in 1900, the year that Freud published The Interpretation of Dreams. The International Congress reflected Janet’s distaste for the issues that Freud was raising: it concerned itself entirely with the psychology of consciousness, perception, and sensation.

Janet believed Freud's radical psychological theory for the origin of hysteria to be unfounded and unscientific. Although Janet possessed great psychological insight, he, like Charcot, was unable to rid himself of the belief that hysteria was a manifestation of heredity, organically based. In addition to his scientific objections to Freud, Janet questioned the morality of psychoanalysis. In Janet’s eyes, Freud was a pansexualist who equated man with beast when he spoke of man's uncontrollable passions. Janet was not alone in such moral objections. In a study of the introduction of psychoanalysis in France, Anne Parsons concluded that French psychiatrists at the turn of the century, like most other French intellectuals, deemed Freud’s theory unacceptable on value grounds rather than on scientific ones. The rejection of Freud was a "moral act." 19 Psychoanalysis, like the tango, another foreigner that had invaded at about the same time, was morally shocking and very un-French, and even those physicians who served as its early champions found it somewhat offensive. In 1923, Professor Henri Claude opened his psychiatric service at the Saint Anne Hospital to a psychoanalytic consultation by Dr. René Laforgue, but by 1924 Claude was describing psychoanalysis as "shocking to the delicacy of intimate feelings" and "unadapted to the French mentality." 20 Claude was tormented by the opinions of the analysts whom he "harbored" in his service. When, during a conference on a patient, Marie Bonaparte, herself trained by Freud, argued that the young girl’s phobia for slippery bars of soap was related to fantasies of playing with her father's testicles, Claude, enraged, roared out that his daughters would never think of such a thing. 21

The catalog of French moral objections to Freud was extensive. Psychoanalysis was on a bad footing with Catholic doctrine. It allowed the individual to blame others for his failings and abdicate responsibility for individual action. Suggesting that sexual forces lurked as motivations in family relationships threatened the strong loyalty to the French bourgeois family and its complicated system of interfamilial alliances. Freud's notion of the unconscious conflicted with the importance that the French put on the possibility of the rational control of one's life and on the conscious manipulation of one's own talents.

The French objections to Freud did not fade away in the decades that followed the introduction of psychoanalysis. Even by the 1950s and 1960s French psychiatry was decidedly antipsychoanalytic in its reliance on moral authority, rational argumentation, and the invocation of shared social principles as well as its reliance on tranquilizers, sleep cures, antidepressants, and electroshock. 22 Even as the stability of French rural society was in the process of crumbling, French psychiatry continued to express its nostalgia for a simpler, more rooted life in the provinces. French psychiatric studies spoke of the pathology inherent in urban life and warned that leaving "organic and alive" rural settings for "artificial" urban ones would have only the most deleterious effects on mental health. 23 Given the problems of French urban life, there is no reason to dismiss this position. But by taking it and expressing it in what was often a passionate rhetoric, French psychiatry served to bolster a social ideology that glorified rural life and traditional values. Psychiatric writing described the geographically mobile as carriers of psychopathology, and the psychiatric studies on les transplantés, "the transplanted," made them sound like a rare and somewhat dangerous species of plant rather than the pioneers of a new industrial society. Psychoanalytic models that spoke of the self rather than of support from community, nation, church, or etiquette were of little interest. Later chapters make it clear that in the years after World War II, a small, highly committed group of young psychiatrists, psychologists, and literary scholars were deeply involved in reworking psychoana-
lytic theory, but the climate was such that neither the general public nor the psychiatric mainstream was highly enthusiastic. "Scientific" critics objected to psychoanalysis for its lack of an organic model of mental functioning; "moral" critics objected to the analyst's neutrality that denied his patients warmth, encouragement, and a model of good moral and social values. And while one group of moral critics objected to Freud's "coldness," another group found him too "warm," and criticized Freud for coddling people who were not really sick and for encouraging hedonism. To scientific and moral criticisms were added political and religious ones. The Communist Party and Catholic Church took firm stands against psychoanalysis, which greatly influenced Communist and Catholic psychiatrists, as well as a large constituency of potential patients.

A content analysis of the French psychiatric literature from 1954 to 1966 by sociologist Carol Ryser documented this French psychiatric reticence toward psychoanalysis. The values which Ryser found to be dominant in both French general culture and in the writings of French psychiatrists were hostile to any psychological (and by extension, psychoanalytic) focus in treatment. The dominant values stressed rational control, realism, and an individualism that insists that other people stay out of one's private business. In a spirit remarkably similar to Descartes' and to that of the nineteenth-century French psychiatrist Jean-Etienne Esquirol, who spoke of madness as a "false idea," French psychiatrists through the mid-1960s described emotional disturbances as disturbances of the intellect and encouraged their rational control in terms that suggested a moral imperative. Ryser found that the psychiatric literature associated psychoanalysis with values that were relatively unimportant or negatively valued in French psychiatry and in French general culture. For example, psychoanalytic treatment was frequently portrayed as a violation of individual privacy.

In 1967, Ryser predicted a gloomy future for psychoanalysis in France based on her analysis of the antipsychoanalytic values which dominated French society and psychiatry. She predicted the continued unpopularity of psychoanalysis in France because it was profoundly out of synchrony with deep and pervasive French values. In fact, things went in just the opposite direction. In the years immediately following her research, psychoanalysis "took off" in its popularity in France. And this "take off" was not limited to intellectual and professional circles. Looking at psychiatric and cultural values in the mid-1960s gave little hint of the explosion that was to come. For although it is true that a therapeutic model has to fit in with dominant social values, these values are not static entities. They themselves must remain relevant to social experience. And in France, that experience was changing and had been changing for a long time.

The notion of deconversion suggests that psychoanalysis has special relevance for a community in the process of rapid social change. One way of looking at the "time-lag" in the French and American enthusiasm for Freud is to suggest that this kind of process was well under way at the time when psychoanalysis took root in America over half a century ago, but that in France the extraordinary synthesis of state, society, and individual that marked France's Republican period successfully warded off most attacks to the status quo. That stability was attacked in the years before the Second World War, but the serious damage began with the war itself. The fact of French collaboration with the Nazis left little room for images of French society as an organic whole: the bourgeois politics of le juste milieu was attacked by the Right and the Left. France's "aristocratic" values in business crumbled, and the fragmentation and mobility of industrialization and urbanization forced themselves upon her. The new sweep of economic rationalism, beginning with the First Plan at the end of World War II but only fully implemented with the coming of Charles de Gaulle and the end of the Algerian war, shook what equilibrium was left in "the stalemated society." The traditional French family business gave way to new industries based on the American corporate model, and the percentage of the population working in agriculture and living in rural villages fell from fifty percent before the war to less than fifteen percent in the mid-1970s.

The accelerated urbanization of France brought drastic changes in the ecology of French villages and cities. The nostalgic weekend return to roots in the provinces grew at a cadence equaled only by the general flight from them. In cities, neighborhoods were destroyed by the mass influx of rural migrants and foreign workers, and in the country, social life was disrupted by the exodus of young people and by the invasion of
city people who used country property for weekend homes. There was marked erosion of the “village” quality of French urban and rural life. There was crisis in organized religion, in public education, and in the traditional ways of doing business. A managerial revolution led to the emergence of a new class of technocrats whose status was based on skills, performance, and profit rather than cultivated manner and family name.

The prewar response to the strains and crises of the Republican synthesis had been in terms of traditional political ideologies. The postwar response was less traditional. The existentialists wrote about the loneliness and confusion of the new, more fragmented social experience. Their response to social disintegration shifted the emphasis from the society to individual personal responsibility. They attacked the bourgeois order for denying what they felt history had made obvious: that each person must define his or her own values. The existentialists began writing before the war, but it was only in the postwar years that, in a sense, history caught up with them. Their philosophy of extreme situations and of extreme action for extraordinary individuals was resonant with the French experience of the Occupation and the Resistance. Part of existentialism’s popular appeal may have been that it provided a way to think through the issues of choice and individual responsibility that had been raised by the war years. These were, most dramatically, to resist or not to resist the Germans, to betray or not to betray those who did. But as a theory of the self, existentialism did not go very far toward breaking away from the Cartesian heritage. Its psychology tended to portray individuals as rational, conscious actors who could understand the basis for their actions. It remained firmly rooted in a philosophy of individual autonomy and rational choice.27

Existentialism offered a vision of the individual which stood between the Cartesian culture which had been and the psychoanalytic culture which was to come. But as time went on, and the war years became more distant, a rationalist philosophy of the extreme situation no longer responded sufficiently to the times. Psychoanalysis goes beyond the study of the individual in extreme situations to focus on individuals as they face the banality and the pain of the everyday. And in the more fragmented, less emotionally secure life of the postwar years, many found the everyday increasingly hard to face. New overcrowded urban complexes cut people off not only from family ties but also from the lives of neighbors. The flooding and social disorganization in old and new French urban centers were reflected in increases in violent crime, suicide, alcoholism, and drug addiction. Gradually, in the course of years, the French public began to hear about these and other problems in terms of a new “psychological” vocabulary. The difficulties of everyday life, of family life, of urban life, were discussed as problems of the psyche, the shorthand expression used in French to refer to all things psychological. This psychologization of the problems of daily life was a giant step beyond existentialism toward setting the stage for a full-blown psychoanalytic culture.

People experienced shifts from rural/traditional to urban/industrial patterns in the life of the French economy, of work, and of the family in changed notions of individual privacy and in new insecurities about education, child-raising, religion, and sexual behavior. When individuals lose confidence in their ability to understand the world around them, when they feel split between private and public identities, and when social “recipes” no longer offer a sense of meaning, they are apt to become anxious consumers of reassurances about their “authentic” subjectivity, their hidden “inner life,” and their deepest interpersonal experiences. People seem to respond to what Max Weber described as the “world’s disenchanted” by becoming fascinated with the mysteries of their interior alchemy. In France, this turning inwards had a dramatic impact on traditional notions of the family.

With the breakdown of other communities and the dissolution of intermediate social circles, such as clubs, church groups, and local cafés, the French family is suffering under the strain of becoming too important. In villages, where male society used to center around cafés and clubs, social life has drifted from these male refuges to the family. In cities, inhabitants of the new high-rise housing projects complain of the isolation and loneliness of life within them, and have little choice but to turn toward the family as a source of psychological support. But particularly in the cities, the French family means the French nuclear family, and its resources are limited. Now, under pressure, it is searching for a new definition of itself in terms of a psychological function.
Family historian John Demos has argued that the emergence of a self-contained "hothouse family" in late nineteenth-century America set the stage for the American acceptance of Freud. Now the French too are developing a "hothouse family," turned inward toward itself. In France, people used to talk about la famille souche, the economic unit of the family as the basis of national strength, now one hears about the family as the lieu privilégié d’épanouissement, a privileged setting for personal growth and self-actualization. French parents are concerned that they don’t know how to make the switch, and their disorientation is reflected in a new interest in child psychology. When society is accepted and understood, parents’ function is to civilize the child. When society is in disarray, romantic notions of l’enfant sauvage emerge. The youth revolt of 1968 brought to the surface profound parental uncertainties about the rational and authoritarian child-rearing codes which had gone unquestioned for generations. Parents no longer felt secure, as had their parents before them, that they understood the world for which they were raising their children.

These anxieties about child-rearing were similar to those expressed by Americans who, in the years after World War II, began living in a culture which was more "child oriented" than anything the French had ever been able to understand. In France, these anxieties did not really surface until the 1960s, but when they did, uncertainty led French parents to search for new experts just as American parents had done several decades before. And as in America, they turned to psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and psychologists. In the late 1960s and early 1970s in France, there was a proliferation of psychoanalytically inspired articles, advice columns, and radio and television programs on how to raise children. The demand for the experts du psy has led to a new economic climate in which the number of psychoanalysts being trained could proliferate and in which the number of psychologists, group leaders, and psychological counselors of all sorts could similarly explode. Private institutions that could respond to the demand for expertise have blossomed as part of a new and profitable industry, heavily psychoanalytic in tone, that has sprung up around the troubled relationships between parents and their children. In the public sector, child-treatment centers that had been primarily pedagogical in focus (e.g., offering speech therapy and remedial reading classes) were transformed into centers of psychoanalytically inspired psychotherapy. Teachers began to refer students to them whom, a few years earlier, they might simply have disciplined.

In the course of the 1960s, psychological and psychoanalytic experts became more involved in education, and as they helped the family adapt to new pressures, they tried to do the same thing for the schools. The French educational system has to deal with the effects of the society’s serious racial problems and class inequalities; the schools stagger under an overload of students they do not have the resources to teach. Psychological expertise is sometimes used to legitimate a process of "tracking" students which weeds out enough of them to make the situation tolerable for the system. As time went on, the analytically trained professionals in the schools began to be seen as role models for educators. And when, in the late 1960s, the traditional French model of education, like the traditional French model of child-raising, was attacked for being too abstract, rigid, and impersonal, many teachers began to identify with "psychanalytic knowledge," more relative and relational than the "right or wrong" knowledge of academe. Some tried to recycle professionally as psychoanalysts, but this was beyond the means and desires of most who simply tried to redefine teaching as a profession du psy.

Like the educational establishment and the family, the Church is another social institution in trouble which is trying to use psychologization as a strategy to achieve flexibility. By the mid-1960s in France, the Church was in serious crisis, its influence undermined by its continued opposition to abortion and contraception in the face of their popular acceptance. For over a decade, the Church had sought sources of renewal outside itself. It had looked to ecumenical movements and social action. By the late 1960s, it began to look to a "psychological" perspective on religious work. Very quickly, the psychological perspective became a frankly psychoanalytic one. A growing body of Catholic thought stresses that, despite the fact the Church had condemned psychoanalysis for half a century, psychoanalysis is compatible with Catholicism. Whereas in the early 1960s the priesthood tended to represent psychoanalysis as a sure precipitant of divorce, by the 1970s the
clergy were as likely to describe psychoanalytically inspired counseling as a possible solution for a marriage in trouble. Even more important, they were doing some of that counseling themselves. Psychoanalysts became role models for clergymen as well as for teachers and parents. Increasing numbers of clergy began psychoanalytic training, and even more became convinced that the only possible future for the priesthood was to turn it too into a profession du psy. 32

There is a French cliché: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” And there is a tradition of writing about French society that has elevated this cliché into something of a paradigm, working out the “real” continuities through apparent changes and focusing attention on the persistence of tradition in what only “seem” to be new and less traditional settings. But in the postwar years, students of French society have been obliged to note that much that had been considered “immutable” in French life has been highly subject to change when barriers to change were lifted. For example, the political instability of the Third and Fourth Republics was often attributed to the French “character.” However, from the perspective of the more stable Fifth Republic, it seems that constitutions which encouraged government by crisis rather than by compromise may have served as barriers to stability. Similarly, the “characteristic” French ambivalence toward industrialization (the maintenance of a strong rural tradition and a reservoir of aristocratic traditions in industry) faded markedly when the state no longer took artificial measures to keep families on the farms and foreign labor outside of French borders. The new enthusiasm of the Church toward psychoanalysis suggests that the end of the French resistance to Freud can be at least partially explained by the removal of barriers which had previously blocked the acceptance of psychoanalysis. In the case of psychoanalysis, the forces in the opposition were formidable, including not only the Catholic Church but such powerful, assertive institutions as the highly centralized French educational system which kept Freud out of the curriculum and the French Communist Party which virtually blacklisted it for Marxists. Today, high school students study Freud as part of their standard curriculum and are asked to write about him to pass their baccalaureate examinations. And later chapters describe in greater detail how psychoanalysis was given a new seal of approval by a “culturally liberal” French Communist Party. It is not surprising that there should have been a great breakthrough of interest in psychoanalysis when such roadblocks were removed. The social groundwork had been laid for some time and had been reflected in other intellectual movements.

In the 1940s and 1950s, existentialism had clearly expressed the idea that society could no longer be counted on for a sense of values and individual purpose. In the early 1960s in France, the art of the new novel and new cinema went even further. Their emphasis on radically individual languages and formal description often seemed intent on rejecting the existence of a society or even a shared reality that would be able to mediate our perceptions. The social changes reflected in the work of existentialists, new novelists, and new film-makers are those that, by isolating and psychologizing the experience of the individual, pave the way for the emergence of a psychoanalytic culture. Clearly, these changes were all well under way before the 1968 turning point in the emergence of Freud as a significant social presence in France. The events of 1968, with their insistence on the continuity of politics with the world of everyday personal relationships, did not themselves forge the social basis of the psychoanalytic culture, but they did serve as a watershed. They marked and demarcated the importance of changes that had already occurred. In this sense, the events had a Janus-like quality: they were analogous to attempts to re-create the illusion of community where it has disappeared; but in their form of expression that denied traditional boundaries between people, between the private and the public, and between the taboo and the permissible, they looked ahead to something new.

In the post-1968 years in France, a psychoanalytic language that refers the visible back to the invisible, the manifest back to the latent, the public back to the private, has become part of the standard discourse on the family, the school, and the Church. Previously “private” concerns such as abortion, contraception, and sex education became the focus of public debate. Their consideration brought the psychoanalysts, perceived as the experts of the private, onto the public stage, where they offered people a language for thinking and talking more openly about such issues. The language that we use to talk about a problem is inseparable from the way in which we think about it. Many French
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.”3 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.