Social Theory
Since Freud
Traversing social imaginaries
Anthony Elliott
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Introduction
Imagination in the service of the new

Those who speak of ‘imaginary’, understanding by this the ‘specular’, the reflection of the ‘fictive’, do no more than repeat, usually without realizing it, the affirmation which has for all time chained them to the underground of the famous cave: it is necessary that this world be an image of something.

(Cornelius Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society)

The unconscious is not structured as a language.

(Jean Laplanche, Seduction, Translation and The Drive)

The one who seemed to hypothesize language as a control lever of therapy ultimately gave language the least possibility to express itself there, as if the extralinguistic rebounded and sent transference and countertransference, patients and analysts, back to prelinguistic psychical representations or acting without representation.

(Julia Kristeva, The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt)

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a remarkable resurgence of psychoanalytically-inspired social and cultural theory on both sides of the Atlantic, largely under the impact of the linguistic or discursive turn in the social sciences and humanities. Central to this revival of interest in psychoanalytic theory was the reinterpretation of Freud developed by France’s leading psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. For many, the theoretical advantages of Lacan’s Freud concerned, perhaps above all, his inflation of the role of language in the constitution of the psyche, an inflation which appeared to fit hand in glove with the ‘linguistic turn’ of the social sciences (and which allegedly permitted French psychoanalysis to cut around a range of tricky issues arising from biology and the body). At any rate, and notwithstanding that the heyday of Lacanianism had pretty much come and gone in French psychoanalytic circles by the time of Lacan’s death in 1981, this linguistification of Freud proved especially conducive to some progressive political circles concerned with critiquing – among other topics – the crisis of paternal authority, controversies over gender categories as well as the rise of identity-politics. Indeed, for some considerable period of time, it seemed that theory just wasn’t Theory unless the name of Lacan was referenced.
2. Introduction: imagination in the service of the new

The 'turn to Lacan' proved particularly compelling to various thinkers in the academy, from feminists to film theorists, who brought French psychoanalytic concepts to bear on topics like cross-dressing and spectatorship, queer politics and cyborgs.

This politicization of psychoanalysis through the spectacles of Lacanianism was, for some critics at least, deeply ironic. For one of the foremost achievements of Freud's uncovering of the 'unconscious imagination' was his innovative application of clinical concepts to the spheres of culture, literature, politics and art, that which he termed 'applied psychoanalysis', a kind of model of pure psychoanalytic criticism which right to this day (and notwithstanding the efforts of psychoanalysts to flatten and depoliticize the operational categories of Freudianism) serves to underscore the social and political ramifications of repressed desire and the radical imagination. In addition to Freud's speculations on culture and politics, there have been many and various social scientists, philosophers and cultural critics who have developed the founder's ideas, extending and applying them. Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Erik Erikson, Philip Rieff, Talcott Parsons and Jurgen Habermas: all of these thinkers, in differing ways, drew from Freud to underscore the intertwining of the erotic and symbolic, the unconscious and sociality, repression and daily life. And so it was that, in terms of the academy at least, astonishing, and painfully insufficient, the radical political edge of psychoanalysis came to be celebrated only after Freud had been respectfully translated into French, and perhaps more to the point translated (largely by Lacan) into the dense, and at times difficult, conceptual terrain of structuralism and post-structuralist linguistics.

And yet the political irony runs deeper than this. For at an earlier historical juncture, specifically during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the very same Lacan had figured as a source of inspiration for theoretical and political debate on the left. Many of the new cultural ideas of that time had their roots in Lacan's proto-structuralist disclosure of the place of subjectivity in the structure of language, particularly as set out in his papers and seminars dating from the 1950s and 1960s. The political attraction of Lacan's structuralist rewriting of Freud, according to Fredric Jameson (1988: 82), was that it was 'not locked into the classical opposition between the individual and the collective, but rather able to think these discontinuities in a radically different way'. Translation of the Lacanian psychoanalytic model into social theory was perhaps nowhere more methodologically detailed, and politically fine-tuned, than in the work of Louis Althusser, who set out a vigorously anti-humanist account of ideology. Such work had various beneficial effects, and inspired a range of theoretico-political projects (see Frosh, 1999; Elliott, 2002). And yet the negativism accorded to culture under this Lacanian aesthetic, while perhaps offering a degree of solace to those political radicals attempting to grasp the failures of various political struggles of the period, was profoundly jaded. At its bleakest, the Lacanian Symbolic was deployed to underscore the inevitability of social order and political domination as a fundamental structure of human
desire — such that the more capitalism unleashed a tediously uniform culture across the world, the more women and men aggressively turned their longings, aspirations and desires back upon themselves in a repressive act of heightened self-subjection. Fortunately, and at the same time, culture itself entered into a direct confrontation with such theoretical proclamations, primarily through unleashing a global challenge to the notion that we had entered a world comprising a singular, soulless cultural mentality. Difference and diversity were central to this newer cultural dynamic, one inaugurated by and conducive to a multi-billion-dollar communications sector and popular culture industry. From a theoretical standpoint, it seemed fairly clear that the anti-humanist, hyper-structuralist reading of Lacan’s Freud was palpably unable to come to grips with such a world of accelerated communications and technology, of intensive globalization, and of new cultural departures (most notably post-feminism and postmodernism). An anti-humanist, structuralist theorization of the inevitability of self-subjection, not to mention the sideling of possibilities for resistance, subversion and transgression, was, in short, radically out of kilter with the monumental social changes unleashed by the forces of globalization.

Which brings us back to the 1980s and early 1990s — the very highpoint of the politicization of psychoanalysis — and the issue of what guaranteed the ongoing ascendency of Lacan’s reading of Freud over other theoretical models during this time. Social theorists and cultural analysts of various political orientations found that the untroubled days of hyper-structuralism had run their course by about the late 1970s, at which time many went in search of new theoretical maps for engaging with the dawning postmodern era. Some turned to Derrida, some to Lyotard, and many became devotees of Foucault. For those steeped in the language of psychoanalysis, however, it became necessary to trade Lacan’s early analyses of the symbolic determination of the subject for his late meditations on sexual fantasy, as a kind of papering over of the traumatic kernel of desire itself. This marked, in effect, the arrival of Lacan Mark II, of a postmodern Lacan. In one sense, this shift from a hyper-structuralist to a postmodern reading of Lacan brought social theory and cultural studies closer to the action of that dramatic speed-up of communications, culture and capitalism which was unfolding throughout the West. Against the backdrop of the ruthless colonizing commercial activities of transnational corporations and the dominance of image, information and ideas within a media-driven culture, a postmodern Lacanianism insisting on the emptiness of desire seemed just what was demanded for the purposes of radical political critique. Such personal detachment and political disenchantedment was given powerful expression by a group of authors who, for want of a better label, might be termed the ‘Lacanian mafia’: Slavoj Žižek, Renata Salec, Joan Copjec, Richard Boothby and others. All of these authors, in quite different ways, offered slick, stylized theories of the fate of subjectivity that postmodern culture seemed unable to refuse, namely a linking of various Lacanian motifs (the impossibility of desire, the lack haunting subjectivity, the traumatism of the signifier) with the very idea of a
global age that had inaugurated a supposedly post-political condition. The appeal of this postmodern or post-structuralist version of Lacan, roughly speaking, was that it seemed not only more in tune with contemporary cultural developments, but also offered a range of key theoretical concepts (from objet petit a to the notorious mathemes) that engaged multi-dimensional social realities in a fashion that other theoretical currents seemed unable to comprehend.

Where there was theoretical exchange and cross-disciplinary dialogue, one of the most controversial was that staged between Lacanianism and historicism, particularly as represented in the writings of Foucault. We can find just such a postmodern cross of Lacan and Foucault in Joan Copjec's Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historians, which is worth briefly considering here for what it indicates about the status of imagination in contemporary critical studies. In a world racked with contingency and ambivalence, Copjec argues, it is a mistake to think that what is on the surface is merely the level of the superficial. On the contrary, postmodern culture glitters at the edge of its surfaces – in media images, computational signs, globalized codes. According to Copjec, this is why Foucault was right to reject the 'repressive hypothesis' put forward by Freud (and other sexual radicals) that culture is inherently oppressive. Rejecting the conventional understanding of power as an external force that exerts itself upon society, Foucault came to appreciate that power is also an instrument in the production of sexuality and of pleasure. From this angle, sexuality is understood as an effect of cultural discourses and technologies aimed at regulating bodily management and of constructing 'sex' as the secret core of the self. Contemporary examples might include discourses of political correctness, or developments in human reproductive technologies, as indicating the extent to which sexual life has become thoroughly permeated by knowledge–power systems. Sexuality and sexual difference are thus an outcrop of historically variable discourses in which individuals find themselves located. Yet transformations at the level of human sexuality involve much more than alterations in discourse – however important that is. It is here that Copjec breaks with Foucault, rejecting the view that political resistance arises at the very limit of power/knowledge networks. Drawing from Lacan and his late seminars on the tactile stuff of desire – bodily fluids, human organs, fetishized objects – Copjec argues 'while sex is, for psychoanalysis, never simply a natural fact, it is also never reducible to any discursive construction, to sense, finally'. Sex, therefore, is not the limit of sexuality. There is always a kind of leftover from, or failure of, desire. Invoking Lacan, this leftover is conceptualized by Copjec as lack, a traumatic absence arising from the loss of maternal love.

Unlike some of her wilfully apolitical, sloganizing associates in the Lacanian mafia, Copjec's writing is sociologically engaged, attempting to raise questions of the imaginary horizons of life in a world where imagination itself often seems formulaic and degraded. In applying her psychoanalytic insights to film, media studies, the commodity form as well as feminism and sexual difference, Copjec's purpose is to highlight the degree to which the imaginary relation of the subject to social relations and cultural processes has been poorly theorized. She argues,
in particular, that cultural theorists have consistently misread Lacan: there is in Lacan's teachings a depth as regards the imaginary constitution of the subject that shows up the meagerness of accounts that continue to speak of 'decentred subjects' and 'subject effects'. Or so she claims.

Of what, exactly, does this renewed, more fruitful, encounter between Lacanianism and culture consist? Here Copejce's answers are particularly defective, contrasting as she does the standard Lacanian emphasis on the subject as a discursive effect with a revised Lacanian/postmodern/feminist account of identity formation that, in the end, still situates subjectification as subjectification. She is especially deft, it must be said, when it comes to dismantling the standard Lacanian account of the subject's narcissistic relation to otherness and sociality. For example, she points out that while Lacan's classic essay on the mirror stage theorizes the child's narcissistic apprehension of experience, it is in fact in Lacan's late writings and seminars that the French master details the lures of the imaginary – particularly in relation to the concept of the gaze. And yet if only such textual sophistication made a tangible contribution to rethinking imagination! For pretty much the same fate afflicts the conceptualization of the imaginary in Copejce's revised Lacanianism as it did in the more orthodox appropriations of French psychoanalysis that she criticizes. Lack, misrecognition, gap, absence, superegoic law: a single word to sum up all of these might be neagtivism. The informing idea that it is from the mirror-like gaze of the other that the traumatic, impenetrable constitution of the subject arises can only retain a semblance of sense if we continue to evade the problem of human creation, of the subject's imaginary construction of a world for itself, not to mention the issue of the content of Lacanian theory and its epistemological claims (see Castoriadis, 1984). Certainly saying, as Copejce (1994: 32) does, that 'the speaking subject cannot ever be totally trapped in the imaginary' doesn't get us very far, and only pushes the issue of the productivities of radical imagination further back.

What, then, have been the intellectual consequences of Lacanianism? The theoretical hegemony of Lacanianism within the academy is now over. There are several reasons for this, one of which concerns the rise of object-relational and Kleinian theory in the social sciences and humanities – of which more shortly. Yet even for those, and there are indeed many, who have traded their beloved Parisian Freud for, say, a postmodern reading of Klein or a post-theory celebration of Winnicott, there remains still missing – for the most part – a conceptual appreciation of the philosophical (and for that matter political) gains and losses of Lacan's version of psychoanalysis. Many of the ideas of Lacan – especially his rewriting of Oedipus in structuralist mode – remain of incomparable value. Those to whom Lacanianism suggests either the failure of Theory or the abuse of Freudianism are, it seems, often likely to trivialize the whole project of a radical political psychoanalysis; they are also likely to downgrade the political importance of Lacan's achievement of establishing repressed desire and sexuality as legitimate objects of debate in both the academy and public political life. That said, there are numerous respects in
which the losses of social theory’s engagement with Lacanianism outweigh the gains, and these are worth briefly mentioning.

A number of social theorists have taken issue with the philosophical premises of Lacanian psychoanalysis, including amongst others Paul Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray and Gananath Obeyesekere. Such theorists have tended to put the Freudian objection against Lacanianism that the unconscious is resistant to ordered syntax. At its crudest, or at least this is so in some versions of this argument, Lacan actually suppressed the deeply subversive implications of Freud’s uncovering of unconscious imagination by structuralizing desire, and thus reduced the repressed unconscious to a free play of signifiers. In a previous book, *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition*, I argued that Lacan’s linguistic or post-structuralist reinterpretation of the Freudian unconscious has, in fact, been formulated in diverse ways, with some versions stressing the primacy of the Symbolic order and inflating the role of language in psychical life, while other versions have emphasized the illusions and snare of the Imaginary order and thus have granted a kind of primacy to fantasy over and above the emotional contours governing reflective subjecthood. Not all Lacanian theory is of this either/or kind, though it is accurate to say that the most influential advocates of French psychoanalysis tend to emphasize either a more fluid or deterministic reading of Lacan’s concepts. As I see it, and notwithstanding the more interesting and innovative interpretations of this intellectual tradition, there are good reasons to reject the philosophical premises of Lacanian psychoanalysis. As I have argued at length previously (Elliott 1999, 2002, 2003), there are two core premises of Lacan’s Freud which should be rejected: first, that ‘lack’ transcendentally pierces and frames in advance the production of desire; second, that the conscious/unconscious dualism is best approached as a linguistic relation. I shall not be concerned with an overall appraisal of the philosophical premises of Lacanianism here; however much of what I do argue in this book concerning the future direction of dialogue between social theory and psychoanalysis is informed by my previous writings. Certainly, the present argument that social theory requires a new approach to the creativity of action, one in which radical imagination and the unconscious moves to the fore, arises directly out of my previous critiques of Lacanian social thought, as set out in both *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition* and *Subject to Ourselves*. This book focuses accordingly in detail on thinkers such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Julia Kristeva and Jean Laplanche whose work on imagination is, in my view, central to rethinking the crucial debate between social theory and psychoanalysis.

Moving beyond such received ideas in psychoanalytic studies, the guiding impetus that informs the present study is that one can reasonably claim that Lacanianism is in error in making language and the unconscious imagination indissociable, as though drive and desire lacked any representational contours prior to Lacan’s ‘law’ of symbolization. In fact, some of the most interesting developments in contemporary psychoanalysis persuasively show that the status of the psychic representative prior to representation, and certainly prior to the
psyche's Oedipal enmeshment within language and symbolization, may be regarded as having a kind of unconscious (or what Castoriadis has termed the human Nonconscious) all of its own. This argument is complex and will be developed in detail in Chapter 3. But, for our present purposes, it is worth noting that such clinical and theoretical insights derive largely from one of the main alternatives to Lacanian-inspired cultural studies, namely the various relational and intersubjective accounts of subject-formation offered in object-relations theory and Kleinian psychoanalysis. Rejecting the Lacanian emphasis on the determination of linguistics or discursive codes in the construction of subjectivity, a range of psychoanalytically-inspired social theorists and cultural critics have argued that the intrasubjective and intersubjective constitution of desire is far more complex, differentiated and nuanced than is dramatized in French psychoanalytic theories. In some approaches, it is the intersubjective constitution and reproduction of psychic life which is especially significant, with theorists referring to 'the shadow of the Other' (Jessica Benjamin), 'the analytic Third' (Thomas Ogden), the relational force of 'thinking in fragments' (Jane Flax), or the transformational 'power of feelings' (Nancy Chodorow).

Theories of imagination

Not all imaginative acts are pleasurable, and not all forms of activity are necessarily creative. One may derive pleasure from painting or playing the piano, but it is likely that there are some not so pleasant associations connected with such activities too: for example, getting stuck in one's attempt to visualize or represent something anew in the act of painting is likely to generate displeasure, and the repetitive aspect of practice has caused many budding musicians to give the game away. Yet from a psychoanalytic angle – which is inevitably concerned with the question of unconscious pleasure, or its derivatives – the crux of the matter lies elsewhere. From a psychoanalytic point of view, activities cannot be exhaustively assessed on the basis of one's conscious state of pleasure, since there are necessarily unconscious preoccupations and representations to take into account also. More significantly, such unconscious desires and affinities – if you like, the representational dream-work of the self – can regularly be at odds with one's conscious ideals. In one sense, therefore, it may be the case that the self derives unconscious pleasure from the momentary discontent of getting stuck, or losing one's way, in the artistic process known as creation. Indeed, such 'jamming' of conscious preconceptions and preoccupations can be crucial to the emergence of genuine creativity.

These may not be especially radical insights, but for those who have come to psychoanalysis from the disciplines of, say, literary criticism, philosophy or cultural studies, my comments may give pause for thought, since implicit in what I have said about pleasure and the unconscious is a different take on the relationship between imagination and creativity. In what follows I want to elaborate a conception of imagination which is always in the service of the new, of the past recreated, of repetitive social practices always revised, of traditions
and canons of culture re-elaborated, and of social things renewed. I do so in the knowledge that there could be nothing more fanciful than to have the last word on imagination, if only because (as I argue throughout this book) the imaginary gives the slip to all attempts at conceptual closure or fixed interpretations. Moreover, it would be cute to pretend that a defence of the imagination is, in our current time, especially politically pressing or historically urgent: like ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom’, the word ‘imagination’ is something everyone seems to favour automatically as a personal and social good. And yet, as we know, the imaginary has long been something of a dirty word in psychoanalysis, at once derivative and distorted, as that which entraps the subject in chronic misrecognition of self, others and world. In the Lacanian gospel, which as noted has been one of the most authoritative readings of Freud in the social sciences and humanities, we are stuck with a repetitive imagination, an imaginary anchored in the haunted specular. From such a viewpoint, to speak of the imaginary as creative, as where creation comes from, can only be seen as a Utopian or infantine longing to put a stop to the unconscious. In terms of the imaginary fabrications of psyche and society, however, the situation, I maintain, is quite the contrary.

In formulating an alternative account of the creative power of imagination I have throughout this book drawn upon ideas from quite divergent sources. To take up other theoretical speculations on the experience of subjectivity, imagination and cultural production, as a first approximation, I want to begin with the way in which the imaginary is at one with the sense of innovation and of impending change, whether in the psyche itself or in the affective structuration of social things. I shall begin with three recent psychoanalytical formulations: three theoretical constructs concerning the imaginary, which I shall in turn seek to unloosen for what these narratives have to offer for a theory of creation. These three theoretical formulations are associated with studies by Cornelius Castoriadis, Julia Kristeva and Jean Laplanche, who have all written the most interesting and influential contemporary works on psychoanalysis and the imagination. In what follows, the work of these psychoanalysts will be introduced in order to provide a basis for further critical discussion of the nature of imagination, and especially of the unconscious in social relations, throughout the book.

Cornelius Castoriadis: radical and social imaginaries

The first formulation is taken from Castoriadis, who in an interview in 1991 reflected on the ‘incessant flux’ of the imagination thus:

The ‘pre-subjective’ world is a compact, blind, and dull mass; the blossoming forth of the imagination is a local explosion that digs into this mass a hole, that opens an interior space within it, a chamber that can swell enormously. And this chamber is not a room; it is a kind of cylinder, since it is, at the same time, a time. It therefore also has a fourth dimension; and
that means that it constitutes, for itself, the inner linings of the cylinder, an organised world. . . . there are olfactory objects, tactile objects that are, at the outset, much more important than visual objects. I am not fixated on the 'scopic'; one of the gross inadequacies of Lacan's conception of the imagination is his fixation of the scopic. For me, if one is speaking of stages that are worked out, the imagination par excellence is the imagination of the musical composer (which is what I wanted to be). Suddenly, figures surge forth which are not in the least visual. They are essentially auditory and kinetic — for there is also rhythm. There is a marvellous excerpt from a letter by Mozart cited by Brigitte Massin, in which Mozart describes how he composes. Like every self-respecting composer, he composes, obviously, in his head. When deaf, Beethoven heard — imagined — in his head. A true composer writes and hears chords, chordal progressions, as I, in closing my eyes, can review some scene or imagine some scene, bringing into mutual presence characters who have never really been present to each other. Mozart explains that the piece composes itself in his head, and he says the following hallucinatory thing: when the piece is finished, it is all laid out simultaneously before him in its progression. He hears in one moment the beginning, the middle, the end of the first movement of the sonata. As Galileo says of God, the proofs are arduously traverse step by step are laid out before Him instantaneously. That is an imagination. When Mozart says, I have the entire piece laid out in my head, it is not that he sees the score, it is that he hears the totality of the piece. That appears incomprehensible to us because our musical imagination is rather poor: to be able to hear simultaneously the beginning of the symphony in G minor and the minuet. Nor is there anything 'visual' in the social imaginary. The social imaginary is not the creation of images in society; it is not the fact that one paints the walls of towns. A fundamental creation of the social imaginary, the gods or rules of behaviour are neither visible nor even audible but signifiable.

(Castoriadis, 1997: 182–3)

**Castoriadis's reflections on the imaginary principally concern, one might say, the ways in which a world (at once emotional and social) somehow or other comes to be ordered and organized from groundlessness or chaos; about the creation of imagination from 'dull mass'; about creation and invention as a consequence of an 'explosion that digs into this mass a hole'. This involves for Castoriadis the creation of 'something' out of 'nothing'; an eruption of imaginary significations that shapes the psyche of individuals and the culture of society itself. The constitution of these imaginary determinations manifests the creativity that appertains to the psyche as such, and that 'opens an interior space within it'.**

Clearly a great deal could be said about the links between imagination and the auditory and kinetic in Castoriadis's reflections, with all this implies of an overvaluation of visual objects in psychoanalysis. And, more pertinent to the focus of this book, how the fetishization of the scopic in Lacanian psychoanalysis
has led to a harmful neglect of the creativity of the psyche. Freud emphasized, of course, that visual memory is fundamental to the unconscious and its expressive processes of condensation, displacement and representation – especially in that aspect of his corpus where he conceived of fantasy in terms of his model of the dream. In some versions of Freud, dreams are the linchpin for an easy fit between representation and imagination. 'As an analogue of the mind', writes Harvie Ferguson (1996: 7) in The lure of Dreams, 'the dream came to represent both reflection and imagination. Indeed, the plasticity of the dream not only brought to life a picture of the world; its succession of images also revealed the normally hidden process of representation itself'. In Freud's approach, however, the visual domain was not all. For sensory elements also figured in Freud's construction of the dream-work and, by extension, the imagination. The Freudian subject may dream visually, and only be able to report the dream in words, yet the sharpness of the visual perception is an upshot of heterogeneous domains of representation (sensations, affects, verbal and non-verbal representations).

Indeed the creativity of social imaginary significations is Castoriadis' central theme from beginning to end. The imaginary, he insists, is not a question of harmonious representation, of 'the creation of images in society', but of the productive energies of self-creation, which generate social imaginary significations and the institutions of each particular society. What is radically imaginary about the psychic process of every individual is precisely the representational pleasure of the unconscious monad, initially closed upon itself, and subsequently forced to shift from self-generating solipsistic fantasy to the shared meanings of society. To the radical imaginary of the psychic monad corresponds what Castoriadis terms the 'social imaginary', an aesthetics of imagination that holds together the primary institutions of society (language, norms, customs and law) and the forms of relation through which individuals and collectivities come to relate to such objects of investment.

Julia Kristeva: the melancholic imagination

In her sharp biography Melanie Klein, the European psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva² also writes about what makes for creative imagination:

The unconscious or preconscious fantasy is present in all psychic activities and behaviours, so much so that the fantasy is an 'active presence of fantasy scenes'. Such a fantasy is, strictly speaking, bound up with motivity, taste and food aversions, the sharpness of the perception (particularly the visual perception) of the primal scene, the image of the body, voice-song-and-speech, sporting activities, concert-show-and-film attendance, educational and intellectual activities, neurotic symptoms, and, in the end, the entire organisation of the personality. Not only is the totality of psychic life impregnated with fantasies, but in the child whom Klein listened to and analysed, the fantasy – that is, the fantasy that preceded repression – is
Kristeva's reflections are in one sense primarily concerned with the presence of fantasy and unconscious work, all to do with the imagination of sensational life. The psychic work of representation is a universal feature 'present in all psychic activities and behaviours', by no means restricted to the therapeutic relationship, nor to particular aspects of mental functioning, such as the standard psychoanalytic menu of day-dreaming or erotic imaginings. Rather, it is our ordinary experiences - from sporting activities to the practicalities of learning and education - that are saturated with this originary imagination. All psychic activity, says Kristeva, is 'impregnated with fantasies'.

What is clear in Kristeva's account of fantasy is that this imaginary domain is inextricably interwoven with the motions of pleasure and unpleasure, the most primitive impulses of desire and aggressiveness which bring a world of subjectivity into being in the first place. Freud astutely captured the theatrical dynamics of sensational life in terms of the logics of dreaming; and it is these affective processes (the dream-work) which for Kristeva dominate the mental apparatus from start to finish. Yet what might Kristeva be gaining by drawing attention to the imaginary resilience - the creative representational refashioning of the senses - of everyday life? And what, we might ask, is gained by thinking of what happens to our wishes (inseparable from figure and fantasy) in categories that emphasize the pro-linguistic: fantasy life is 'expressed in and dealt with by mental processes for removed from words: and conscious relational thinking'.

Would this not be the other side of language, which is the representational flux of the unconscious ego?

Kristeva conceptualizes what she refers to as the 'proto-fantasy' as a kind of oscillation of the imagination, with the human subject internally divided, split between infantile narcissism and the other's lack. Strictly speaking, if representation is an 'active presence of fantasy scenes', this is because desire, for Kristeva as for Lacan, is the desire of the Other. To desire the Other is a kind of fashioning, an imagining of what the other dreams, an imitating, an identification with the other's desire. Notwithstanding that it is the inscapability of imaginary misrecognition that leaves the human subject to impute an imaginary fullness to the other's desire which, in fact, pertains only to the representation (that is, the imaginary plenitude that the subject itself desires), the point is that there would be no meaning, not to say anything of the possibility for self-knowledge, without these imaginative fashionings.

Kristeva has written in great depth about the length people will go to in creating obstacles to pleasure; in doing so, she has reformulated Freud's account of Oedipal desire as a general theory of the constitution of the subject and its baroque imaginings. I examine Kristeva's theories in the opening chapter, and
critically engage with her path-breaking account of primary identification in Chapter 3. Here I want to emphasize that her reflections on the unconscious or preconscious fantasy – in the above quotation – captures something important about the imaginary making and taking of pleasure in daily life. In Kristeva’s reckoning, the psychoanalytic theory of fantasy is about the human subject’s imaginings that inform, say, perceptions of the body, imaginings about how one sounds and speaks, imaginings about one’s sporting prowess, imaginings about pop stars and celebrities, imaginings about educational advancement and intellectual recognition, imaginings about where one is headed or what may be wrong with one’s life.

More than any other psychoanalyst, perhaps more than Freud’s foundational insights, Kristeva captures the complex ways people use their imagination to make life meaningful. For Kristeva, individuals are captured by, or in thrall to, their unconscious fantasies – these radically strange, foreign social dreams. Such fantasies, in addition to constituting intercourse between unconscious dreams and practical life, are the very imaginings of imagination. I examine Kristeva’s theoretical approach in considerable detail at various points of this book partly because, in my view, she offers us an exemplary social theory of the creativity of imagination. Yet there are now a number of highly original conceptual departures that underscore the creativity of the psyche, and in one sense it is possible that not even Kristeva adequately accounts for what the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche – to whom I now turn for a final formulation on the imagination – underscores concerning the importance of creation to social thought.

Jean Laplanche: imaginary seductions

Laplanche was one of the first post-Lacanians to write of the strange transformations – the condensations, displacements and reversals – of unconscious repression, which results in the formation of an internal foreign other, of what Freud called a thing-presentation, or, if you will, the depths of imagination itself. He has been one of the few major psychoanalytic thinkers, period, to focus on the irreducible creativity of unconscious work, by which he means specifically the field of symbolizing activity. His psychoanalytic work, to a considerable degree, represents a series of reflections on the ontology of determinism within Freudianism, and I shall examine how some of his central ideas may be relevant to social theory in Chapters 2 and 3.

For the moment, it is appropriate to detail Laplanche’s account of the internal otherness – an unconscious of strange, foreign bodies – at the centre of psychic life. As he write:

What guarantees the alien-ness of the other? Can one affirm here, with Lacan, the priority of language? If for my part, I speak rather of a ‘message’, this is for at least two well-defined reasons: firstly, the message can just as easily be non-verbal as verbal; and for the baby it is principally non-verbal.
Secondly, emphasising 'language' effaces the alterity and individuality of the other in favour of transhistorical structures.

(Laplanche, 1997: 660)

There are a couple of things to note here. Laplanche, like Kristeva, rejects the linguistic imperialism of Lacanian doctrine: 'the message can just as easily be non-verbal as verbal'. So too, like Kristeva, Laplanche distances himself from a concern with 'transhistorical structures' (phylogenesis, language) in favour of the essential uniqueness and individuality of human imagination. In shifting away from Lacan and back to Freud — returning to prelinguistic psychical representatives or fantasmatic constructions made of images and split from words — Laplanche will emphasize that in the act of psychic translation the singular individual creates in the strongest sense of the term.

It could be said that Laplanche is out to provide a social theory of our struggle, for representation in the field of symbolizing activity — which, in a sense, has been the subject of all psychoanalytic theories since Freud unearthed the unconscious logics of the dream. For in his preoccupation with the problem of translation — by which is meant the psychic forcefield of representations, resemblances, contiguities, condensations and reversals — Laplanche’s work plays ingeniously on a subtle, but definite, relation between human subjects in the context of symbolic and social formations. For Laplanche, it is essential to grasp that the infant is, from the beginning of life, presented with what he calls 'messages' (both verbal and non-verbal) by parents, messages which the infant is ill-equipped to adequately deal with or understand on an emotional plane. It makes perhaps less difference what the soft caresses of a mother actually signify as regards the self-understandings of the adult, though part of Laplanche’s interest turns on the way parents always convey far more than they consciously intend. What matters in Laplanche’s scheme is that the infant has been addressed or called with a message, a message which is at once exciting and mystifying.

The striking feature of Laplanche’s theorization of the message as enigmatic is its sheer open-endedness. His account of the psychosexual development of the individual subject in terms of the ongoing emotional work of translation and retranslation would make no sense were it not for the recognition that, because of the small infant’s initially limited ways of trying to emotionally process proffered messages, psychic life is always, necessarily, imaginative, creative, inventive. Unlike the iron determinism of the early Lacan’s emphasis on the Symbolic subjection of the subject, it is the mystifying element of the message that for Laplanche sparks imaginative associations in the child. What is inescapable for the infant — and then subsequently for the adult — is that such mystifying messages demand continual psychic work, are in need of continual translation. Indeed, Laplanche himself has acknowledged that he came up with the concept of 'message', with all this implies of the need for translation, in order to overcome the rigid determinism of psychoanalysis in France since Lacan. I try to keep this aspect of Laplanche’s work to the forefront when examining his contributions in Chapters 2 and 3.
The argument of this book

Castoriadis, Kristeva and Laplanche are not alone among those theorists of the contemporary age who have wrestled with the question of imagination as well as individual and social transformations affecting imaginary life. Fortunately, for academic social science but also for the demands of practical social life, there have been a growing number of voices raising pressing political issues about the conditions and consequences of our imaginative interpersonal relations in a postmodern world of fragmentation and fracture. Such authoritative voices today include, to mention only a few: Judith Butler, Darcilla Cornell, Slavoj Žižek, Homi Bhabha, Christopher Bollas, Lynne Segal, Fredric Jameson, Stephen Frosh, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Nancy Chodorow, Jane Flax, Charles Speziano, Thomas Ogden and Jessica Benjamin. Each has drawn from psychoanalysis to develop a particular angle on the changing relations between self and society in the contemporary epoch. Each has focused on specific problematics of current social conditions – from feminism to postmodernism, from psychotherapy to literature – in rethinking the terms of both individual and collective imaginaries.

Yet the contributions of Castoriadis, Kristeva and Laplanche do stand out, in a most definite way, in terms of both the comprehensive and courageous fashion in which each details forms of the radical imaginary. Castoriadis conceives of individual imaginaries as ineradicable interwoven with social-historical imaginaries. Kristeva thinks of human imagination in terms of a permanent state of psychic questioning, of unconscious transformations, an endless dialectic of semiotic and symbolic restructurings. And Laplanche places the imagination squarely in relation to the demands of interpersonal bonds, the ceaseless work of imaginative, symbolizing activities. Critical social theory now faces the challenging work of sifting through the core insights of these three psychoanalytic-cultural pioneers, both for resituating subjectivity in the wake of post-structuralism and postmodernism and for reasserting the culture it is critiquing. Through extended engagement with the works of Castoriadis, Kristeva and Laplanche, this book is intended as a contribution to that task.

My own Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition, along with its more popularizing companion volume Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction, as well as my subsequent foray into the terrain of postmodernism in Subject to Ourselves, had their inspirational roots in these alternative theoretical orientations. Endebted in particular to Castoriadis's notion of the imaginary domain of human creation, as well as Kristeva's recasting of the subversive aspects of unconscious transformations, I sought in these works to address questions about both the representational production of the subject and the affective structure of social things – questions that I felt had been largely ignored, sidestepped, displaced or more generally repressed by more orthodox traditions.

This book is intended as a critical response to the paradoxes raised by the current orthodoxy in psychoanalytically-inspired social and cultural theory. I try to spell out why I think this orthodoxy is insufficient in grasping the most
crucial questions of our current global political predicament. A critical poetics of social imaginaries transcending the current orthodoxy is, I argue, an urgent concern of social theory, and to that end I draw extensively from the writings of Castoriadis, Kristeva and Laplanche to sketch the contours of how this situation might be remedied. The opening chapter sets the stage by developing a critical overview of the encounter between psychoanalysis and contemporary theory in general, as I traverse various accounts of the social imaginary. The central standpoints examined include (1) critical theory, with emphasis on the importance of psychoanalysis, social theory and philosophy for emancipatory thought; (2) post-structuralist interrogations of the production of subjectivity and identity; and, (3) various feminist readings of psychoanalysis and masculinist assumptions in western social theory. In Chapter 2, I consider some of the ways in which Freud has been situated in the social field in contemporary intellectual discourse, paying special attention to the 'culture wars' and debates over trauma and memory which shaped the 1990s. By framing this contemporary turn away from Freud in a wider psychoanalytic context, I consider some implications of the rise of 'anti-psychological psychology'.

The subsequent chapters seek to reconstruct some of the core concepts of contemporary psychoanalysis in the light of recent social theory. Chapter 3, in introducing several novel conceptual revisions, begins by examining the tensions between concepts of fantasy and representation on the one hand, and the ideas of creativity, creation and imagination on the other. Among the issues raised are questions about the constitution of representation; the debate in post-Kleinian and post-Lacanian circles over the hypothesis of a proto-fantasy, or instituting representation; and the structuration of representation with reference to primary repression and identification. The current preoccupation with the pre-Oedipal register, and especially the notion of primary repression, is critically appraised, and it is here that I introduce the theorems of rolling identification and representational wrappings of self and other. I introduce such terminological innovation, or neologisms, to refer in a general way to the study of the imaginary constitution of the subject, linking the psychic origins of the human subject to the foundational force of intersubjectivity and culture. The scope and nature of this critique of the Freudian conceptual field is then directly explored with reference to recent debates in sexuality studies, feminism and postmodernism. In the final part of the book, in a dialogue that reflects further on these terminological innovations, I attempt to articulate the theme of the social imaginary in relation to processes of language, symbolization, cultural reproduction and political domination.
Pretext
You’ll never dream the same
dream twice

A classical political dichotomy, that of the relation between the individual and society, lies at the heart of social theory and the philosophy of social science. This opposition between self and society, between private and public, is particularly evident in the writings of a range of major classical and contemporary social theorists seeking to explain the individual’s relation to social institutions, cultural processes and historical forces. In confronting the problem of the relation between self and society, what emerges from much of the existing literature is either a conceptual dynamic that emphasizes the power of the individual in her or his relations to both interpersonal relationships and social forces, or a dynamic in which the external world is taken as constitutive of individual identities, actions, practices, beliefs and values. An either/or logic rules. Personalizing things gives way to subjectivizing them, while institutionalizing them gives way to objectivism. Either way, one term of this political dichotomy is raised over and above the other term – such that this enforced binary division comes to appear inevitable. And yet each approach does retain certain strengths and limitations. The first approach, that which posits the individual as the prime object of analysis, rightly emphasizes the creativity, knowledgeability and reflectiveness of human agents, yet typically downgrades issues of social relations and institutional reproduction. The second approach, that which puts society centre stage, rightly emphasizes the variety of structuring socio-historical forces in the constitution of the subject, yet typically neglects the complexities of human subjectivity, of action and agency.

This political dichotomy, not without relevance for the discourse of psychoanalysis itself, contains a number of striking ironies. For one thing, the similarities between these supposedly contending viewpoints become plain when looked at from the vantage point of psychoanalytic theory. The fixed, absolute conception of subjectivity as purely self-legislating and
omnipotent, for example, in individuals-first approaches merely inverts the overinflated image of institutional power and cultural determination in society-first approaches. Where then to locate identity? On the side of individuals, or of society? And what if this dichotomous way of posing the issue concerning the relation between self and society is itself part of the problem—that is, a kind of symbolic violence? 'Socialisation', argues Cornelius Castoriadis, 'is constitutive of the human being. What is stupidly called in political, philosophical and economic theory the 'individual' — and which is opposed there to society — is nothing other than the society itself' (Castoriadis, 1997: 187). In other words, what individuals-first and society-first approaches call the 'individual', as a kind of shorthand for the singular human being, is for Castoriadis nothing other than the trace of the social itself—an introjection of successive strata of socialization, cultural codes and ideological perspectives, as well as social co-ordinates and pragmatic presuppositions.

Once you start thinking of the structuring of social differences and cultural prohibitions like this, psychoanalysis appears less as an alternative theory of self/society divisions, and more as a dismantling of the very conceptual divisions created by the classical political dichotomy I've been sketching. Could it be that what passes between subjectivity and the outside is kept fixed or rigid in much social theory because the social scientist fears a blurring of categories, classifications, knowledge itself? What does the dynamic unconscious actually do, in any case, to the classic political dichotomy? In Castoriadis's formulation, as noted, self and society are on the same analytic divide as regards the thinking of social differences. This essentially Freudian reading of culture stresses that if there is a fundamental deadlock or antagonism operating here it is not that between self and society, but rather between the psychic and social. It is precisely this issue of the fluidity, conflict and division of the unconscious mind, and with it that of the distribution of psychical energy in self/society interlockings, that remains unaddressed in mainstream social science perspectives. Particularly in objectivistic or deterministic versions of social thought, such as Marxism or functionalism, the actions, ideas and psychic processes of individuals are cast as susceptible to the forces of social structures, yet curiously those same structures are seen as free of the impacts of psychic process.

Perhaps nowhere more so does psychoanalysis demonstrate the blatant inconsistencies of the traditionalist self/society division than in its interrogation of the dreamy unconsciousness of sleep. It is not by accident that
Freud founded the theory of psychoanalysis upon the study of dreams, as it is in conditions of sleep that the hallucinogenic form of our unconscious thoughts shatters the hold of prohibitions issuing from the conscious mind. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud (1900, S.E. 5: 507) explains the central differences of the dreaming mind from the consciousness of waking life thus: 'It is not that [the unconscious] is more negligent, more unreasonable, more forgetful, more incomplete, say, than waking thought; it is qualitatively different from it, and so at first not comparable to it. It does not think, calculate, judge in any way at all.'

One might suppose that Freud, in insisting on the uncontrollable representational swirl of our dreaming minds, pits the repressed energies of unconscious desire against our more conscious forms of self-knowledge. If he had chosen to do so in his study of dreams, he would certainly have been drawing from a rich philosophical tradition — from Kant's proclamation that 'the madman is a waking dreamer' to Schopenhauer's summation 'the dream a brief madness and madness a long dream'. Yet Freud thought otherwise. The interweaving of parts of the mind — conscious reflection, the not-quite-consciousness of daily life and dreamy unconsciousness — is never so simple a matter as the psychic world obliterating its own trace within a social relation or instituted structure, nor is it simply a matter of the individual's mechanical socialization into society's practices, norms and prohibitions. This, then, is where Freud's challenge to social theory enters — in the unconscious no man's land of conflict, division and uncanniness; in discerning the outermost boundaries of society and history in the inner linings of the psyche, as well as the limits of childhood infantile wishes and the unconscious in the social process of institutionalization.

Differentiating self and psyche is central to Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams. Dreaming, says Freud, protects the individual's sleep: 'The dream is the guardian of sleep, not its disturber.' Yet if it is the dream which facilitates sleep of the self, the same cannot be said for the dreamer — or, more precisely, the psychic agency that dreams. 'What is repressed', writes Freud, 'does not obey the wish to sleep.' Though he didn't say it quite like this, Freud's idea is that part of the mind is always at work — dreaming is simultaneously a result of sleeping and of not-sleeping. One example of the psyche's productivity during sleep is that which Freud terms 'secondary revision', which simply put involves unconscious revision of frightening or disturbing dream images, one function of which is the facilitation of sleep. Another thing to which the unconscious of the sleeper
is most fully awake is a kind of sensory vividness, which ultimately springs from the subject's earliest childhood recollections — what Freud termed the 'lasting traces' of the prehistoric period of emotional life. It is as if in the dreamy world of sleep part of the mind is most awake, scanning, collecting and retranscribing our remembered impressions (which for Freud stretch all the way back to the first or second year of life) to facilitate a kind of unconscious dream network of elaborations, representations, paths.

But if it is so that part of the mind travels back to our earliest childhood recollections when we dream, there is also a sense in which we move forward. Castoriadis describes this as a 'surging forth' of radical imaginings, the unconscious unrestrained. Granting the unconscious infinite extension, Castoriadis says the dreamer-to-be not only carries around a complex history of memories, but that she or he is continually selecting and scrutinizing psychical objects throughout the day in order to extend paths of dream life. Such unconscious scanning of the 'day's residues' is the terrain on which past and present conduct their hallucinogenic intercourse in the self's dream life, but always with the creative energies of the subject for reforming, retranscribing and transforming to the fore. This 'surging forth' of the dreamer's energized, representational overdeterminations thus always outstrips what is already there — that is, the raw stuff of recollections and residues. This unconscious surging toward some form of presentation or elaboration is creative in the strongest sense of the term; it is the creation ex nihilo of hallucinogenic figures and forms. 'Sleep', as Proust wrote, 'is the only source of invention.' Or, as Castoriadis (following Heraclitus) says: 'You will never dream the same dream twice.'

One of the most important reasons, then, that it is no longer as plausible as it once was to think of individuals and collectivities as antithetical is that both are constituted to their roots through the domain of the social imaginary. In the broadest possible sense, the social imaginary — expressed through the constitution and reproduction of a world of representations, significations and affects — is what renders our understanding of the terms 'individual' and 'society' possible. This indeterminate creativity of imagination, the uncanny exhilarations and difficulties of living, both with ourselves and with others, has of course been a principal theme of various key intellectuals that link psychoanalysis with sociology, politics and history. What psychoanalysis has done to and with social critique has been the subject of numerous studies (see, for example, Frosh 1999; Elliott 1999, 2002). What I am more concerned to re-examine in
the opening chapter that follows is what psychoanalysis has disrupted in the dominant sociological picture of social doing and the making of society.

Psychoanalysis has sometimes been mindful of the social contexts and cultural scripts that influence, and powerfully shape, the lacing together of the social-historical and psychic worlds. But as much as Freud tried to refine what he called 'applied psychoanalysis', it remains the case that the core discovery of psychoanalytic practice and theory – the repressed unconscious – is what philosophers, social theorists and cultural analysts have time and again wrestled with. How then to make and break the links between psychoanalysis and critical social theory? In what follows I focus primarily on European social theorists and philosophers who have initiated a critical poetics of the social imaginary. The work of these authors comprise a movement of enquiry which stretches from Freud's foundational twinning of sexuality and death in the life of the unconscious mind, through the radical structuralist and post-structuralist reworkings of Lacan, Althusser, Irigaray and Kristeva, and on to more recent conceptualizations of the postmodern imaginary in the writings of Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard.
1 Social theory since Freud
Traversing social imaginaries

Freud's theory is in its very substance 'sociological'. Freud's 'biologism' is social theory in a depth dimension that has been consistently flattened out by the Neo-Freudian schools.

(Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*)

In psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations.

(Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*)

Freudian analysis is the steadfast penetration of the injured psyche. It takes so seriously the damage that it offers nothing for the immediate.

(Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*)

Social theory has the task of providing conceptions of the nature of human agency, social life and the cultural products of human action which can be placed in the services of the social sciences and humanities in general. Among other problems, social theory is concerned with language and the interpretation of meaning, the character of social institutions, the explication of social practices and processes, questions of social transformation and the like. The reproduction of social life, however, is never only a matter of impersonal 'processes' and 'structures': it is also created and lived within, in the depths of an inner world, of our most personal needs, passions and desires. Love, empathy, anxiety, shame, guilt, depression: no study of social life can be successfully carried out, or meaningfully interpreted, without reference to the human element of agency. Modernity is the age in which this human element is constituted as a systematic field of knowledge. That field of knowledge is known as psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis, a product of the culture of late nineteenth-century Europe, has had a profound influence on contemporary social thought. Psychoanalysis, as elaborated by Freud and his followers, has been enthusiastically taken up by social and political theorists, literary and cultural critics, and by feminists and postmodernists, such is its rich theoretical suggestiveness and powerful diagnosis of our contemporary cultural malaise. The importance of psychoanalysis to social theory, although a focus of much intellectual debate and
controversy, can be seen in quite specific areas, especially as concerns contemporary debates on human subjectivity, sexuality, gender hierarchy and political debates over culture. Indeed, Freudian concepts and theories have played a vital role in the construction of contemporary social theory itself. The writings of social theorists as diverse as Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Louis Althusser, Jürgen Habermas, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-François Lyotard all share a Freudian debt. Yet there can be little doubt that the motivating reason for this turn to Freud among social theorists is as much political as intellectual. In a century which has witnessed the rise of totalitarianism, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and the possibility of a ‘nuclear winter’, social theory has demanded a language which is able to grapple with modernity’s unleashing of its unprecedented powers of destruction. Psychoanalysis has provided that conceptual vocabulary.

Freud and the interpretation of the social

Freudian psychoanalysis is of signal importance to three major areas of concern in the social sciences and the humanities, and each of these covers a diversity of issues and problems. The first is the theory of human subjectivity; the second is that of social analysis; and the third concerns epistemology.

Freud compels us to question, to endeavour to reflect upon, the construction of meaning – representation, affects, desires – as pertaining to human subjectivity, intersubjectivity and cultural processes more generally. Against the ontology of determinacy which has pervaded the history of Western social thought, Freud argues that this world is not predetermined but is actively created, in and through the production of psychical representations and significations. The psyche is the launching pad from which people make meaning; and, as Freud says, the registration of meaning is split between the production of conscious and unconscious representation. Another way of putting this point is to say that meaning is always overdetermined: people make more meaning than they can psychically process at any one time. This is what Freud meant by the unconscious: he sought to underscore radical ruptures in the life of the mind of the subject which arises as a consequence of the registration and storing of psychical representatives, or affective signification.

Freud’s underwriting of the complexity of our unconscious erotic lives has been tremendously influential in contemporary social and political theory. A preoccupation with unconscious sources of human motivation is evident in social-theoretical approaches as diverse as the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the sociological departures of Talcott Parsons and the philosophical postmodernism of Jean-François Lyotard. Indeed, the theme of the decentering of the subject in structuralist and post-structuralist traditions derives much of its impetus from Lacan’s ‘return to Freud’ – specifically, his reconceptualization of the conscious/unconscious dualism as a linguistic relation. But while the general theme of the decentered subject has gained ascendency throughout the academy, much current social-theoretical debate has focused on the detour
needed to recover a sense of human agency as well as to account for multidimensional forms of human imagination. In Kristeva's discussion of the semiotic dimension of human experience, the imagination is primarily assessed in terms of the semiotic structuration of psychic space. In Ricoeur, it is a series of claims about the hermeneutics of imagination, giving of course special attention to the narratives of ideology and utopia, experience and norm. In Deleuze, it is part of an attempt to reconnect the productivities of desire to the affective force-field of postmodern culture.

This leads, second, into a consideration of the complex ways in which Freud's work has served as a theoretical framework for the analysis of contemporary culture and modern societies. The Frankfurt School, to which I shall turn in detail shortly, was for many years the key reference point here. Well before the rise of Lacanian social theory, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm articulated a conception of psychoanalysis as an account of self-divided, alienated individuals, which was understood as the subjective correlate of the capitalist economic order. While Marcuse's work became celebrated in the 1960s as offering a route to revolution, it has been Adorno's interpretation of Freud which has exercised perhaps most influence upon contemporary scholars seeking to rethink the psychic ambivalences of modernity itself (see, for example, Dewey, 1995; Žižek, 1994). In this connection, Adorno's thesis that psychoanalysis uncovers a 'de-psychologization' of the subject is now the subject of widespread discussion (Whitebook, 1995). Those who share this vision of modernity place emphasis on the rise of consumer society, the seductive imagery of mass media and the pervasiveness of narcissism.

Some versions of Freudian-inspired social theory, however, have stressed more creative and imaginative political possibilities. Against the tide of Lacanian and postmodern currents of thought, several general frameworks for understanding modernity and postmodern culture as an open-ended process have emerged (for example, Cornell, 1991, 1993; Frosh, 2002; Elliott, 2003, 2004). What is distinctive about this kind of Freudian social thought is its understanding of everyday life as a form of dreaming or fantasizing; there is an emphasis on the pluralism of imagined worlds, the complexity of the intertwining of psychical and social life, as well as alternative political possibilities. This insistence on the utopic dimension of Freudian thought is characteristic of much recent social and cultural theory; but it is also the case that various standpoints assign a high priority to issues of repression, repetition and negativity. Freud was, of course, much concerned with emotional problems generated by repetition, the actions people cannot stop repeating or the narratives people cannot stop recounting. He understood such repetitions as symptomatic of a failure to remember, the closing down of creative imagination. For Freud, the aims of analysis centred on the uncovering of the deep psychological forces of such repressed motivations; free association, the pleasures of imagination and the freedom to explore fantasy are at once method and outcome in psychoanalysis. Such concerns are also central to contemporary social and political thought, as Freud has been drawn upon with profit to map the
paths through which individuals and collectivities remember and repress the past, at once psychical and social-historical.

For many social critics, the power of imagination is inescapably situated within the project of modernity, played out at the level of identity-politics, feminism, postmodern aesthetics and the like. Notwithstanding current techniques of domination and technologies of the self, there are many who claim that the postmodern phase of modernity unleashes a radical experimentation with alternative states of mind and possible selves. At the core of this perspective there is an interpretation about the restructuring of tradition as well as transformations of personal identity and world-views which necessarily alter the conditions of social life today. (The thesis of modernity as a reflexive process of detraditionalization is proposed by Giddens, 1991 and Beck, 1992.) Broadly speaking, traditional ways of doing things are said to give way to actively debated courses of action, such that individuals confront their own personal and social choices as individuals. On this account, there is a reflexive awareness of an internal relation of subjectivity to desire, for personal identity is increasingly defined on its own experimental terms. Such an excavation of the psychological conditions of subjectivity and intersubjective relations clearly has profound implications for the nature of contemporary politics as well as the democratic organization of society (see Elliott 2004).

Finally, social thought has been revitalized through its engagement with Freud as a form of emancipatory critique. This concern is motivated by a conviction that critical social theory should offer paths for transforming self and world in the interests of autonomy. Habermas (1972) is perhaps the most important social theorist who has drawn from Freud in developing a model of emancipatory critique in social analysis. Freudian theory, in Habermas's interpretation, is directed towards freeing the patient from the repetition compulsions that dominate her or his unconscious psychical life, and thereby altering the possibilities for reflective, autonomous subjectivity. However, a reading of the emancipatory dimensions of Freudian psychoanalysis which is more in keeping with a postmodern position is one in which desire is viewed as integral to the construction of alternative selves and possible collective futures. In this reading, it is not a matter of doing away with the distorting dross of fantasy, but rather of responding to, and engaging with, the passions of the self as a means of enlarging the radical imagination and creative life.

In this opening chapter, I shall briefly summarize some of the core trajectories of psychoanalytic theory, and then examine the relevance and power of psychoanalysis in terms of social-theoretical debates in the human sciences. Throughout, I will attempt to defend the view that psychoanalytic theory has much to offer social theorists, including feminists and postmodernists, in the analysis of subjectivity, ideology, sexual politics, and in coming to terms with crises in contemporary culture.
The legacy of Freud

It is now more than a century since psychoanalysis emerged under the direction of a single man, Sigmund Freud. Freud, working from his private neurological practice, founded psychoanalysis in late nineteenth-century Vienna as both therapy and a theory of the human mind. Therapeutically, psychoanalysis is perhaps best known as the ‘talking cure’ – a slogan used to describe the magical power of language to relieve mental suffering. The rub of the talking cure is known as ‘free association’. The patient says to the analyst everything that comes to mind, no matter how trivial or unpleasant. This gives the analyst access to the patient’s imagined desires and narrative histories, which may then be interpreted and reconstructed within a clinical session. The aim of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice is to uncover the hidden passions and disruptive emotional conflicts that fuel neurosis and other forms of mental suffering, in order to relieve the patient of his or her distressing symptoms.

Theoretically, psychoanalysis is rooted in a set of dynamic models relating to the human subject’s articulations of desire. The unconscious, repression, drives, representation, trauma, narcissism, denial, displacement: these are the core dimensions of the Freudian account of selfhood. For Freud, the subject does not exist independently of sexuality, libidinal enjoyment, fantasy, or the social and patriarchal codes of cultural life. In fact, the human subject of Enlightenment reason – an identity seemingly self-identical to itself – is deconstructed by psychoanalysis as a fantasy which is itself secretly libidinal. Knowledge, for Freud as for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, is internal to the world of desire. In the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, a whole series of contemporary ideological oppositions – the intellect and emotion, commerce and pleasure, masculinity and femininity, rationality and irrationality – are potentially open to displacement.

In order to detail an accurate map of the intersections between psychoanalysis and social theory, it is necessary to outline some of the basic concepts of Freudian theory. These concepts have become so familiar that they require only a schematic commentary. (For more detailed treatments see Rieff, 1959; Ricoeur, 1970; Gay, 1988; Frosh, 1999; Elliott, 2002.) Moreover, the theoretical ambiguities and political ambivalences pervading Freud’s work will be noted only in passing, although many issues arising from these will be discussed in depth later in the book.

‘All our conscious motives are superficial phenomena: behind them stands the conflict of our drives... The great basic activity is unconscious. Our consciousness limps along afterward.’ It was Friedrich Nietzsche, not Freud, who wrote this. Similarly, Romantic poets, such as Goethe and Schiller, and nineteenth-century philosophers, such as Schopenhauer and Feuerbach, also placed the determinate effects of unconscious passion at the centre of human subjectivity. Freud was aware of these insights, and often referred to them in his own writings, although he was also sceptical about the Romantic idealization of the unconscious.
If these poets and philosophers looked at the nature of unconscious passion in terms of the aesthetic, Freud traced repressed desire in terms of human sexuality and the psyche. Freud's originality is to be found in his critical analysis of the unconscious as repressed. One of Freud's most substantial findings is that there are psychical phenomena which are not available to consciousness, but which nevertheless exert a determining influence on everyday life. In his celebrated metapsychological essay 'The unconscious' (1914a), Freud argued that the individual's self-understanding is not immediately available to itself; that consciousness is only the expression of some core of continuous selfhood. On the contrary, the human subject is for Freud a split subject, torn between consciousness of self and repressed desire. For Freud, examination of the language of his patients revealed a profound turbulence of passion behind all draftings of self-identity, a radical otherness at the heart of subjective life. In discussing human subjectivity, Freud divides the psyche into the unconscious, preconscious and conscious. The preconscious can be thought of as a vast storehouse of memories, most of which may be recalled at will. By contrast, unconscious memories and desires are cut off, or buried, from consciousness. According to Freud, the unconscious is not 'another' consciousness but a separate psychic system with its own distinct processes and mechanisms. The unconscious, Freud comments, is indifferent to reality; it knows no causality or contradiction or logic or negation; it is entirely given over to the search for pleasure and libidinal enjoyment. Moreover, the unconscious cannot be known directly, and is rather detected only through its effects, through the distortions it inflicts on consciousness.

Freud's unmasking of the human subject as an endless flow of unconscious love and loathing is pressed into a psychoanalytic deconstruction of inherited Western conceptions of ontology. Rejecting the idea that consciousness can provide a foundation for subjectivity and knowledge, Freud traces the psychic effects of our early dependence on others—usually our parents—in terms of our biologically fixed needs. The infant, Freud says, is incapable of surviving without the provision of care, warmth and nourishment from others. However—and this is fundamental in Freud—human needs always outstrip the biological, linked as needs are to the attaining of pleasure. Freud's exemplary case is the small child sucking milk from her or his mother's breast. After the infant's biological need for nourishment is satisfied, there is the emergence of a certain pleasure in sucking itself, which for Freud is a kind of prototype for the complexity of our erotic lives. As Freud (1940: 154) writes:

The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed sexual.

From this angle, sexuality is not some preordained, unitary biological force that springs into existence fully formed at birth. Sexuality is created, not pre-
packaged. For Freud, sexuality is 'polymorphously perverse': subjectivity emerges as a precarious and contingent organization of libidinal pleasures, an interestingly mobile set of identity-constructions, all carried on within the tangled frame of infantile sexuality.

Any emotional investment put into an object or other becomes for Freud a form of self-definition, and so shot through with unconscious ambivalence. In a series of path-breaking essays written on the eve of the First World War, Freud tied the constitution of the ego to mourning, melancholia, and grief. In 'On Narcissism: an introduction' (1914), Freud argued that the ego is not simply a defensive product of the self-preservative reality principle, but is rather a structured sedimentation of lost objects; such lost loves are, in turn, incorporated into the tissue of subjectivity itself. The loss of a loved person, says Freud, necessarily involves an introjection of this absent other into the ego. As Freud (1923: 28) explains the link between loss and ego-formation:

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in overcoming this hurr] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego – that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its 'character'.

Ego-identity is constituted as a fantasy substitution, through multiple, narcissistic identifications with significant other persons.

We become the identities we are in Freud's view because we have inside us buried identifications with people we have previously loved (and also hated), most usually our parents. And yet the foundational loss to which we must respond, and which in effect sets in motion the unfolding of our unconscious sexual fantasies, remains that of the maternal body. The break-up or restructuralization of our primary emotional tie to the maternal body is, in fact, so significant that it becomes the founding moment not only of individuation and differentiation, but also sexual and gender difference. Loss and gender affinity are directly linked in Freud's theory to the Oedipus complex, the psyche's entry into received social meanings. For Freud, the Oedipus complex is the nodal point of sexual development, the symbolic internalization of a lost, tabooed object of desire. In the act of internalizing the loss of the pre-Oedipal mother, the infant's relationship with the father (or, more accurately, symbolic representations of paternal power) becomes crucial for the consolidation of both selfhood and gender identity. Trust in the intersubjective nature of social life begin here: the father, holding a structural position which is outside and other to this imaginary sphere, functions to break the child/mother dyad, thus referring the child to the wider culture and social network. The paternal prohibition on
desire for the mother, which is experienced as castration, at once instantiates repressed desire and refers the infant beyond itself, to an external world of social meanings. And yet the work of culture, according to Freud, is always outstripped by unconscious desire, the return of the repressed. Identity, sexuality, gender, signification: these are all radically divided between an ongoing development of conscious self-awareness and the unconscious, or repressed desire. (For further discussion on this point see Ricoeur, 1970: 211–29.)

Freud’s writings show the ego not to be master in its own home. The unconscious, repression, libido, narcissism: these are the core dimensions of Freud’s psychoanalytic dislocation of the subject. Moreover, it is because of this fragmentation of identity that the concept of identification is so crucial in psychoanalytic theory: the subject creates identity by means of identification with other persons, located in the symbolic context of society, culture and politics. The psychoanalytic dislocation of the subject emerges in various guises in contemporary social theory. In the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, it is part of an attempt to rethink the powerlessness of identity in the face of the objectifying aspects of contemporary science, technology and bureaucracy. In Habermas, it is a series of claims about the nature of distorted intersubjective and public communication as a means of theorizing repressive ideologies. In Lacan, it is a means for tracing imaginary constructions of self-concealment, as linked to the idea that language is what founds the repressed unconscious. In Lacanian and post-structuralist feminism, it is harnessed to a thoroughgoing political critique of sexual difference and gender hierarchy. In the postmodern works of Deleuze and Guattari, and of Lyotard, it is primarily a set of sociopolitical observations about psychic fragmentation and dislocation in the face of global capitalism.

Psychopathologies of rationality: the Frankfurt School

Most conversations these days in social theory and philosophy are about ‘endings’. The end of history, the death of the subject, the disintegration of metaphysics, the disappearance of community, the fragmentation of political power: all such ‘endings’ play the role of a symptomatic element which allows us to perceive a widespread sense of political pessimism, of an overwhelming irrationality, of generalized anomic and groundlessness, that permeates postmodernity. Against this backdrop, psychoanalytic social theory has been credited by some observers with going against the grain of the contemporary critical climate, rejecting the manic celebration of fragmentation and dispersion in postmodernism, and instead addressing the profound political difficulties of finding new paths for the radical imagination in order to further the project of autonomy. Indeed, psychoanalysis in recent years has been drawn upon in order to rethink the new and the different in contemporary social life. This turn to psychoanalysis has been undertaken in the name of both conceptual adequacy and political proficiency. At a conceptual level, the turn to Freud reflects a growing sense that social theory must address the libidinal, traumatic
dimensions which traverse relations between self and other, identity and non-identity, subjectivity and history. At a political level, the turn to Freud is more strategic: given the flattening of the political imagination and the rising fortunes of technocratic rationality, psychoanalysis is for many a potentially fruitful arena for radical political engagement at the current historical juncture.

Freud’s relevance to social critique remains perhaps nowhere better dramatized than in the various writings of the first generation of critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. The Frankfurt School, as it came to be called, was formed in the decade prior to the Nazi reign of terror in Germany, and not surprisingly many of its leading theorists conducted numerous studies seeking to grasp the wave of political irrationalism and totalitarianism sweeping Western Europe. In a daring theoretical move, the School brought Freudian categories to bear upon the sociological analysis of everyday life, in order to fathom the myriad ways that political power imprints itself upon the internal world of human subjects and, more specifically, to critically examine the obscene, meaningless kind of evil that Hitler had actually unleashed. Of the School’s attempts to fathom the psychopathologies of fascism, the writings of Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm particularly stand out; each of these authors, in quite different ways, drew upon Freudian categories to figure out the core dynamics and pathologies of post-liberal rationality, culture and politics, and also to trace the sociological deadlocks of modernity itself. The result was a dramatic underscoring of both the political dimensions of psychoanalysis and also the psychodynamic elements of public political life.

The philosophical backdrop to the Frankfurt School’s engagement with Freud and psychoanalysis was spelt out in particular detail by Adorno, who sketched along with co-author Max Horkheimer— In Dialectic of Enlightenment — a bleak portrait of the personal and political pathologies of instrumental rationality. Humanization of drives and passions, resulting in the transformation from blind instinct to consciousness of self, was for Adorno necessary to release the subject from its enslavement to Nature. But, in tragic irony, the unconscious forces facilitating the achievement of autonomy undergo a mind-shattering repression that leaves the subject marked by inner division, isolation and compulsion. The Janus-face of this forging of the self is clearly discerned in Adorno’s historicization of Freud’s Oedipus complex. According to Adorno, the bourgeois liberal subject repressed unconscious desire in and through oedipal prohibitions and, as a consequence, achieved a level of self-control in order to reproduce capitalist social relations. But not so in the administered world of late modernity. In post-liberal societies, changes in family life means that the father no longer functions as an agency of social repression. Instead, individuals are increasingly brought under the sway of the logic of technorationality itself, as registered in and through the rise of the culture industries. The concept of ‘repressive desublimation’ is crucial here. The shift from simple to advanced modernity comes about through the destruction of the psychological dimensions of human experience: the socialization of the unconscious
in the administered world directly loops the id and the superego at the expense of the mediating agency of the ego itself. As Adorno summarized these historical developments in identity-constitution: 'The prebourgeois world does not yet know psychology, the oversocialized knows it no longer.' Repressive desublimation functions in Frankfurt School sociology as that psychic process which links what Adorno called the ‘post-psychological individual’ to the historical emergence of fascism and totalitarian societies.

It was against this psychoanalytic backdrop that Adorno and Horkheimer theorized the self-cancelling dynamic of the civilizing process in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, proposing a structural fixity in which all forms of rationality and identity are constituted through a violent coercion of inner and outer nature; or, to put the matter in a more psychoanalytic idiom, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are always-already the direct outcrop of the heteronomous, hypnotic power of superego law. Accordingly, the search was now on within the first generation of critical theory to locate the good Other of instrumental reason. In this connection, Adorno reserved a privileged place for high art as dislocating repressive types of logic and bringing low all forms of ‘identifying’ thought. Marcuse, for a time, thought that it might be possible to recast sexual perversion, and specifically the domain of fantasy, as somehow prefigurative of a utopian social order — on the grounds that the primary processes slipped past the net of the reality/performance principle.

These and other images of Utopia arose from the School’s intriguing blend of Marxism and Freudianism. And yet the issue of critique — specifically the vantage-point from which the School launched its devastating condemnation of capitalist culture — has dogged followers of Frankfurt sociology. In *Perversion and Utopia*, the American philosopher Joel Whitebook writes of the performative contradiction in Frankfurt School sociology between asserting that identity is necessarily as rigid, spiritless and abstract as the reified object it dominates in the administered world on the one hand, and of confidently maintaining that an in-depth psycho-social critique of these processes can be undertaken on the other hand. Something is amiss here (from which world, exactly, were the Frankfurt School analysts able to critique such systematic pathologies?), and for Whitebook the answer lies in the Frankfurt School’s global portrayal of all subjective synthesis as violence or domination. Developing upon perspectives advanced by the work of those associated with the second generation of critical theory, specifically the writings of Albrecht Wellmer, Whitebook argues that Adorno mistook distortions of language in contemporary rationalism for language as such, and was therefore led to deny the social-historical gains of discursive rationality tout court. (Like Wellmer’s *The Persistence of Modernity* (1991), Whitebook’s *Perversion and Utopia* is an attempt to release the frozen potential of the first generation of Critical Theory from its aporetic confinement to the philosophy of consciousness, but in a manner that fully incorporates psychoanalysis into a theory of intersubjectivity.) Injecting Freudian psychoanalysis into Weberian social theory, Adorno is said by Whitebook to have effectively pitted unconscious rage against the non-
identical – registered in the administered world’s blind ‘compulsion for unity’, the manic articulations of which arise precisely at that historical moment in which the psychological possibilities for reflexivity are rendered superfluous. But there are considerable difficulties with the interpretation that the ‘psychological’ dimensions of liberal individualism have been replaced by the ‘post-psychological’ individual of the administered world of late capitalism. These difficulties include, among others, Adorno’s reductionistic reading of psychoanalysis as a ‘psychological theory’ (but see Žižek, 1994).

What has been of incomparable value, however, is the School’s analysis of why human subjects, apparently without resistance, submit to the dominant ideologies of late capitalism. The general explanatory model developed by the Frankfurt School to study the socio-psychological dimension of the relation between the individual and culture has received considerable attention in social theory (Jay, 1973; Benjamin, 1977; Held, 1980; Elliott, 1999). In what follows, I shall concentrate principally on the social-theoretical reconstructions of psychoanalysis offered by Fromm and Marcuse.

**Erich Fromm**

Fromm, who had been practising as an analyst since 1926 and was a member of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute, sought in his early studies to integrate Freud’s theory of the unconscious with Marxist sociology. Influenced by Wilhelm Reich’s book *Character Analysis*, which connects society to the repressed unconscious, Fromm became preoccupied with the cultural consequences of sexual repression, as well as the mediating influence of the family between the economy and the individual. According to Fromm, Freudian psychoanalysis must supplement Marxism in order to grasp how social structures influence, indeed shape, the inner dimensions of human subjectivity. Fromm’s concern with the effects of repression, however, differed substantially from the analysis worked out by Reich. In Fromm’s view, Reich had been unable to develop an adequate theory of social reproduction because he had reduced Freud’s theory of sexuality to a monadic focus on genital sexuality. Yet Freudian psychoanalysis, Fromm maintained, was fundamentally a ‘social psychology’. For Fromm, the individual must be understood in his or her relation to others.

The bourgeois nuclear family, Fromm says, is pivotal to understanding the links between individual repression, cultural reproduction and ideological domination. An agency of social reproduction, the family is described as ‘the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its ... influence on the individual’s psyche’ (Fromm, 1932: 483). Fromm contends that the family implants regression at the heart of subjectivity, sustains economic conditions as ideology, and infuses perceptions of the self as submissive, self-effacing and powerless. The central message of Fromm’s early work is that the destructive effects of late capitalism are not only centred in economic mechanisms and institutions, but involve the anchoring of domination within the inner life and psychodynamic struggles of each individual.
As the 1930s progressed, Fromm became increasingly sceptical of orthodox Freudianism. He strongly criticized Freud's notion of the death drive for its biological reductionism, and argued that it only served to legitimate at a theoretical level the destructive and aggressive tendencies of capitalism. Significantly, Fromm also became influenced by neo-Freudian analysts—such as Harry Stack Sullivan and Karen Horney—who stressed larger social and cultural factors in the constitution of selfhood. This emphasis on cultural contributions to identity-formation was underscored by Fromm in his major books, *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *The Sane Society* (1956), both of which argued the idea of an essential 'nature of man', a nature repressed and distorted by capitalist patterns of domination.

Although Fromm's early studies on the integration of individuals into capitalism were broadly accepted by other members of the Frankfurt School, his subsequent, more sociological diagnosis of an essential human nature twisted out of shape by capitalism was strongly rejected. Marcuse, for example, charged Fromm (and other neo-Freudian revisionists) with undoing the critical force of Freud's most important ideas, such as the unconscious, repression and infantile sexuality. According to Marcuse, Fromm's revisionism underwrites the smooth functioning of the ego only by displacing the dislocating nature of the unconscious. Marcuse (1956: 240–1) sums up the central point in the following way:

> Whereas Freud, focusing on the vicissitudes of the primary drives, discovered society in the most concealed layer of the genus and individual man, the revisionists, aiming at the refined, ready-made form rather than at the origin of the societal institutions and relations, fail to comprehend what these institutions and relations have done to the personality that they are supposed to fulfil.

Fromm's attempt to add sociological factors to psychoanalysis, says Marcuse, results in a false political optimism as well as a liquidation of what is truly revolutionary in Freud: the discovery of the repressed unconscious.

**Herbert Marcuse**

Marcuse, like Fromm, views psychological and political repression as deeply interwoven. For Marcuse, Freudian psychoanalysis is relevant for tracing the exercise of domination upon the inner world of the subject, for understanding how capitalism and mass culture shape personal desires, and for analysing the possibilities of human emancipation. Unlike Fromm, however, Marcuse rejects the view that sociological and historical factors must be added to Freudian theory. Instead, Marcuse seeks to unfold the liberative potential in Freud's work from the inside out, in order to reveal its radical political edge.

Marcuse's reconceptualization of psychoanalysis seeks to develop the 'political and sociological substance' of Freud's work (Marcuse, 1956: xii). His analysis
proceeds from an acceptance of some of the core claims of psychoanalysis. These include the theory of the unconscious, the conflict between the pleasure and reality principles, the life and death drives, and the view that civilization entails sexual repression. Marcuse contends, however, that Freud was wrong about the permanent cultural necessity of psychological repression. Marcuse agrees that all social reproduction demands a certain level of repression. Yet what Freud did not see, Marcuse argues, is that capitalism creates a crippling (though impermanent) burden of repression. From this angle, individuals are in fact adapting to the destructive forces of capitalist domination, forces that masquerade as the 'reality principle'.

These provocative ideas are developed by Marcuse in his classic _Eros and Civilization_ (1956) and _Five Lectures_ (1970). The key to Marcuse's interpretation of Freud is the division of repression into 'basic' and 'surplus'. Basic repression refers to that minimum level of libidinal renunciation deemed necessary for facing social life. What this means, in short, is that a certain amount of repression underlies the constitution of the 'socialized subject', a subject capable of sustaining the business of social and sexual reproduction. By contrast, surplus repression refers to the intensification of restraint created in and through asymmetrical relations of power. Marcuse points to patriarchy (especially in terms of family relationships) and to the workplace as socio-symbolic fields containing a surplus of repression. This repressive surplus, says Marcuse, operates through the 'performance principle', a culturally specific form of reality structured by the economic order of capitalism. For Marcuse, the destructive psychological effects of this principle are highly consequential. 'Performance' recasts individuals as mere 'things' or 'objects', replaces eroticism with genital sexuality, and fashions a disciplining of the human body (what Marcuse terms 'repressive desublimation') in order to prevent repressed desire from interfering with capitalist exchange values.

Marcuse presses this reinterpretation of Freud into a critical theory of the psychic costs of modernity. In Marcuse's view, the massive social and industrial transformations which have occurred in the twentieth century — changes in systems of economy and technology as well as cultural production — have produced a radical escalation in psychological repression. The more technocapitalism has advanced, he argues, the more repression has become surplus. The immense productive capacities released from technology, modernism and monopoly capitalism have been turned back upon the individual subject with a vengeance. As a consequence, the personal sphere is subject to decomposition and fragmentation. According to Marcuse, the psychoanalytic division of the individual into id, ego, and superego is no longer relevant. A weakening in patriarchal authority within the bourgeois nuclear family, accompanied by the impact of the mass media and commodified culture, has led to an authority-bound, easily manipulable subject. Subjecthood, in conditions of late capitalism, is rendered a mere functional component of the system of domination.

Notwithstanding this bleak picture of the contemporary epoch, Marcuse was optimistic about social change. In one sense, he used Freudian psychoanalysis
against itself, to trace the emancipatory potentials of modernity. He argued that the performance principle, ironically, generates the economic and social conditions necessary for a radical transformation of society. That is, the material affluence generated by capitalism opens the way for undoing surplus repression. Emancipation for Marcuse is linked to a reconciliation between culture, nature, and unconscious pleasure, what he termed ‘libidinal rationality’. The preconditions for the realization of libidinal rationality include the overcoming of the split between pleasure and reality, life and death, and a recovery of repressed needs and aspirations. Through changes in fantasy structures and the social context, Marcuse says, society can become re-eroticized.

Marcuse’s analysis of contemporary ideological pressures toward ‘surplus repression’ contains many insights, but it is also clear that there are important limitations to his approach. For one thing, he fails to point in anything but the most general way to how ideology transforms repression from ‘basic’ into ‘surplus’, and so it is far from easy to grasp the complex ways in which culture implants political domination upon the emotional economy of subjects. (For a detailed discussion of this and related psycho-political difficulties in Marcuse’s work, see Elliott, 1993). Similarly, the argument that reason or rationality can be located in repressed drives (the notion of ‘libidinal rationality’) is underdeveloped. Marcuse’s work fails to analyse in any substantive way intersubjective social relationships. Instead, his vision of political autonomy is one in which repressed drives become liberated, and thus transfigurative of social relations. From this angle, some critics have suggested that Marcuse’s conception of the relation between repressed desire and social transformation is individualistic and asocial in character (see Held, 1980; Chodorow, 1989).

Contemporary critical theory: Habermas’s reading of Freud and the theorem of distorted communication

An attempt to overcome some of the core theoretical and political limitations of the Frankfurt School, while also retaining Freudian psychoanalysis as an exemplar for critical social theory, is to be found in the writings of the contemporary German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. Influenced by Marcuse in particular, Habermas uses psychoanalytic theory to supplement and enrich critical theory as concerns the analysis of social power and ideological domination. Habermas, like Marcuse, agrees with Freud that the development of social organization and productive economic forces has required a certain amount of psychological repression. But in conditions of late modernity, says Habermas, as the constraints of economic scarcity are overcome, we begin to witness the radicalizing possibilities of the transformation (and perhaps eradication) of social repression.

Perhaps somewhat strangely, most of Habermas’s major contributions to a radical appropriation of psychoanalysis for social critique—stemming from the late 1960s especially, but also through the 1970s and into the 1980s—fail to profit from the pivotal research conducted by the first generation of
critical theorists on the psychopathologies of European rationalism and the Enlightenment. Rather than seeing the substantive claims of psychoanalysis as a political resource for critical social theory, Habermas instead develops a methodological interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis as linked to the objectives of critical theory. In one important sense, as will be highlighted in subsequent discussion, Habermas’s recontextualization of Freud has many elements in common with Lacanian psychoanalysis, though the final result is radically different. Like Lacan, Habermas conceives of psychoanalysis as a theoretical and methodological structure which traces public, intersubjective communication. Also like Lacan, Habermas argues that the unconscious is essentially linguistic in character. In contrast to Lacan, however, Habermas argues for the possibility of emancipation through the recovery of the repressed unconscious. By developing a literalist understanding of psychoanalysis as the ‘talking cure’ – that is, that the unconscious can be made conscious via speech – Habermas seeks to link the overcoming of social repression to transformations in structures of communication and public political discourse.

Ideology, says Habermas, is a structure of communication that has become systematically bent out of shape by power. Distortion marks the point at which social rationalization intrudes into everyday life, or of what Habermas terms the ‘lifeworld’ – the domains of cultural reproduction, socialization and personal identity. Like the early Frankfurt School, Habermas argues that the increasing penetration of a rationalizing, bureaucratizing logic into cultural life has degraded social relations and the autonomy of personhood. The uncontrolled growth of anonymous systems of administration and economy increasingly reach into every sphere of social life. But this besieging of the lifeworld by economic and administrative subsystems is not just a matter of social domination: on the contrary, such pathology becomes incorporated into the rigid, monotonous character of contemporary identity-patterns. Indeed, Habermas speaks of an ‘inner colonization of the lifeworld’, which suggests that desire and passion are increasingly colonized and controlled by the ideological dictates of the social system itself.

Habermas regards psychoanalysis as a discourse that traces the communicative distortions of social power and ideology upon subjectivity. In Knowledge and Human Interests (1972), he argues that unconscious repression is an effect of linguistic distortion. ‘The ego’s flight from itself’, says Habermas, ‘is an operation that is carried out in and with language. Otherwise it would not be possible to reverse the defensive process hermeneutically, via the analysis of language’ (1972: 241). In this communications reading of Freud, repression is understood as a process of excommunication. Drawing on Alfred Lorenzer’s psychoanalytic research on linguistic pathologies, Habermas claims that the unconscious is constituted through an excommunication of language from public, intersubjective relations through a process of privatization. The unconscious, on this reckoning, is conceived as that which is excluded from public, intersubjective communication. As Habermas (1972: 223) argues: The psychically most effective way to render undesired need dispositions harmless
is to exclude from public communication the interpretations to which they are attached. From this angle, Habermas contends that emancipation entails the elimination of unconscious distortions of communication in order to secure a self-reflective movement toward political autonomy.

As with the first generation of critical theorists, and especially Marcuse, Habermas's recasting of repression as a process of excommunication has significantly stimulated and influenced contemporary social theory. In contrast to the individualistic interpretation of Freud developed by Marcuse, Habermas's communications reading of psychoanalysis directly confronts the intersubjective nature of repressed desire, thus making the psychoanalytic tradition more immediately relevant to the concerns of social theory. However, a number of important objections have been made of Habermas's use of psychoanalysis. First, it appears that Habermas conflates repression with the unconscious, and thus fails to consider the importance of other unconscious processes and mechanisms such as fantasy, wish-fulfilment, projection, introjection and the like (see Giddens, 1979; Whitebook, 1989). Second, and related to this criticism, Habermas's linguistic reconceptualization of the psyche, like Lacan, erases the prelinguistic realm of unconscious passion, thereby screening from view the role of affect in the constitution and reproduction of social practices (see Elliott, 1999). Finally, by discarding these vital elements of the Freudian conceptual field, Habermas is left with an account of the unconscious which is essentially negative and constraining – which is why he argues that, at a collective level, the unconscious must be made conscious! What this overlooks, of course, are the creative dimensions of unconscious fantasy and affect; these are dimensions of psychical experience, I contend, which are fundamental to social life and critical self-reflection (see Elliott, 1999: chapter 3).

Returning to Freud: Jacques Lacan

Many psychoanalytic theorists have identified loss as central to self-constitution. From the fall from pre-Oedipal Eden, in which the small infant becomes separated from the maternal body, through alarming and painful tears of the Oedipal constellation, and onto subsequent adult disappointments, rejections and negations: loss infiltrates all emotional transactions between self and others, and so in a sense is at the root from which desire flows uncontrollably. Yet while the intricate connections between loss and selfhood have been underwritten throughout the history of psychoanalysis, perhaps the most remarkable contribution remains that elaborated by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The world of illusion which we fashion to avoid the traumatic and impenetrable mysteries of loss are for Lacan the very stuff out of which we are made. For Lacan, the individual subject is constituted in and through loss, as an excess of lack. In a radical revision of Freud, largely through a widening of the horizons of psychoanalysis to embrace structuralist linguistics and poststructuralist theories of discourse, Lacan makes lack the cause which ensures that as human subjects we are continually falling short, failing, fading and lapsing.
The writings of Lacan have been widely regarded (especially in the English-speaking world) as inexhaustibly complex, and one reason for this may be that Lacan himself believed it necessary to fashion a theoretical discourse at odds with itself in order for psychoanalysis to do justice to the rich vagaries of emotional life. Another reason concerns the immense conceptual shifts inaugurated by Lacan, shifts in the language of psychoanalysis away from the world of biology and toward the study of language and human speech, away from the deterministic forces of instincts and appetites and toward the analysis of structures and culture. In taking psychoanalysis in this largely anti-biological direction, Lacan was dazzlingly eclectic, in his writings borrowing one moment from the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the next from the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, while in his seminars putting to work the insights of the linguist Roman Jakobson and recontextualizing Hegel’s master/slave dialectic for the analysis of human desire. The work of Lacan and his followers will be returned to in the context of feminist and postmodern theories discussed later in the chapter. At this point, it is necessary to consider the main features of Lacan’s revision of Freud.

The world of sense-perception, for Lacan as for Freud, is born from immersion in a sublimely opaque realm of images, of very early experience of imaginings and images, of primitive fantasies of the body of another. It was noted earlier that Freud viewed the small infant, from the very start of life, in a symbiotic relation with the maternal body. At this preindividualistic, premimetic stage of life, the infant makes no distinction between itself and the maternal body, or between itself and the maternal body, or between itself and the maternal body. Lacan calls this realm, caught between wonderful delight and terrifying anguish, the Imaginary. The Imaginary for Lacan is a prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal register, solely visual in operation and in which desire slides around and recirculates an endless array of part-objects – breasts, lips, gaze, skin. According to Lacan, this Imaginary drafting of the world of illusion, of wholeness, is broken apart once the infant comes to identify with, and introject, things or objects beyond itself, thus shifting beyond the lures of the Imaginary. This primordial moment of separation is devastating, a loss so painful that it results in a primary repression of the pre-Oedipal connection to the maternal sphere, a repression which in one stroke founds the repressed unconscious. Once severed from primary identification with the pre-Oedipal mother, the infant is projected into the realm of language, the differences internal to signification that Lacan calls the Other, or the Symbolic order. The Symbolic in Lacan’s theory is a plane of received social meanings, logic, differentiation. Symbolization and language permit the subject to represent desire, both to itself and to others. Yet the representation of desire, says Lacan, is always marked by lack, the repressed unconscious. ‘The unconscious’ says Lacan, ‘is the discourse of the Other.’

Lacan theorizes the imaginary tribulations of self-constitution largely through a novel consideration of Freud’s theory of narcissism. In ‘The mirror
stage as formative of the function of the I (1949). Lacan contends that the infant apprehends a sense of bodily unity through the recognition of its image in a mirror. The 'mirror' provides the infant with consoling image of itself as unified and self-sufficient. As Lacan (1977:1) puts this:

unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial... he nevertheless overcomes in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstruction of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.

This reflecting mirror image is not at all, however, what it seems. Lacan says that what the mirror produces is a 'mirage of coherence', an alienating mis-recognition. In short, the mirror lies. Mirroring leads the infant to imagine itself as stable and unified, when in fact psychic space is fragmented, and the infant's physical movements uncoordinated. The reflecting mirror leads the infant into an unfettered realm of narcissism, underpinned by hate and aggression, given the unbridgeable gap between ideal and actuality. This imaginary drafting of the self, says Lacan, 'situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction' (1977:2).

The imaginary can thus be described as a kind of archaic realm of distorted mirror images, a spatial world of indistinction between self and other, from which primary narcissism and aggressivity are drawn as key building blocks in the formation of identity. But if the Imaginary order is already an alienation of desire, then the same is certainly true of the Symbolic order of language. The Symbolic, says Lacan, smashes the mirror unity of the Imaginary. For Lacan, as for Freud, this happens with the entry of the phallic father into the psychic world of the child. In disturbing the mother–child link, the Oedipal phallic breaks up the self–other unity of the Imaginary order. For Lacan, language is the fundamental medium which structures the Oedipal process. The child enters the symbolic via language, which ushers in temporal, spatial and logical differences, which are foundational to self and other, subject and object. Language for Lacan is an intersubjective order of symbolization which carries the force of cultural sanctions, of what he terms 'the Law of the Father' — for it is in and through language that the subject attempts a reconstruction of lost, imagined unities.

Rewriting the unconscious and Oedipus in terms of the symbolic dimensions of language, Lacan's theoretical point of reference is the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. It is not possible here to provide an adequate exegesis of Lacan's appropriation and reconstruction of Saussure's ideas (see Elliott, 1999); in what follows I shall only emphasize certain aspects of Lacan's use of Saussure's structural linguistics, particularly those aspects most relevant to the concerns of social theory. In Saussurian linguistics, language is explicated as a system of internal differences. In this view, signs are made up of a signifier (a sound or image) and a signified (the concept or meaning evoked). The
meaning of a word arises through its differences from other words: a pencil, for example, is not a pen. A book is not a pamphlet, not a magazine, not a newspaper. Words such do not ‘mean’ their objects. Language creates meaning only through an internal play of differences. Now Lacan accepts the key elements of Saussure’s structural linguistics, but he radicalizes the relation between the signifier and the signified. Lacan will have nothing of the Saussurian search for the signified, or concept, however ‘arbitrary’ the relation between signifiers that generates meaning may be. Instead, Lacan inverts Saussure’s interpretation of the sign, asserting that the signifier has primacy over the signified in the production of meaning. As he explicates this:

The first network, that of the signifier, is the synchronic structure of the language material in so far as in that structure each element assumes its precise function by being different from the others. The second network, that of the signified, is the diachronic set of the concretely pronounced discourses, which reacts historically on the first, just as the structure of the first governs the pathways of the second. The dominant fact here is the unity of signification, which proves never to be resolved into a pure indication of the real, but always refers back to another signification.

(Lacan, 1977: 126)

In Lacan’s psychoanalytic reading, the two orders of discourse are always separated by censorship, marked by a bar of repression. The signified, says Lacan, cannot be elucidated once and for all since it is always ‘sinking’ or ‘fading’ into the unconscious; the signified is, in effect, always just another signifier. And for Lacan the signifier is itself coextensive with the unconscious. The unconscious, says Lacan, is ‘the sum of the effects of the parole on a subject, at the level where the subject constitutes itself from the effects of the signifier’ (Lacan quoted in Ragland-Sullivan, 1986: 116).

Language, as a system of differences, constitutes the subject’s repressed desire through and through. The subject, once severed from the narcissistic fullness of the Imaginary, is inserted into linguistic and symbolic structures that both generate the unconscious and allow for its contents to traverse the intersubjective field of culture. Access to ourselves and others, however, is complicated by the fact that desire is itself an ‘effect of the signifier’, an outcrop of the spacings or differences of linguistic structures. From this angle, the unconscious is less a realm on the ‘inside’ of the individual, or ‘underneath’ language, than an intersubjective space between subjects — located in those gaps which separate word from word, meaning from meaning. ‘The exteriority of the symbolic in relation to man,’ says Lacan, ‘is the very notion of the unconscious’ (1966: 469). Or, in Lacan’s infamous slogan: ‘the unconscious is structured like a language’.
Advantages and limitations of Lacan’s theory

Lacan’s re-reading of Freud has powerfully influenced contemporary social theory. His emphasis on the centrality of symbolic structures in the constitution of the subject, as well as the disruption caused to these structures through the fracturing effects of the unconscious, has been of core importance to recent debates concerning identity and cultural forms (see, for example, Ragland-Sullivan and Bracher, 1991; Leupin, 1991). His stress on the complicated interweaving of language and desire has been original and provocative. Significantly, it has served as a useful corrective to social-theoretical accounts that portray the self as the site of rational psychological functioning. Moreover, his linguistic reconceptualization of the unconscious powerfully deconstructs theories of representation which presume that mind and world automatically fit together.

There are many limitations, however, with the Lacanian account of subjectivity and social relations. The most important of these, as concerns subjecthood, is Lacan’s claim that imaginary identification with the self and others, as forged in the mirror stage, involves an inescapable sentence of alienation. While it is undeniable that Freud viewed miscognition as internally tied to ego-formation, Lacan’s version of this process involves a number of substantive problems. Consider the following: what is it that allows the individual to (mis)recognize itself from its mirror image? How, exactly, does it cash in on this conferring of selfhood? The problem with the argument that the mirror distorts is that it fails to specify the psychic capacities which make any such misrecognition possible. That is, it fails to detail how the mirror is constituted as real (see Elliott, 1992: 138–6). Related to this is the criticism that Lacan’s linguistic reconceptualization of psychoanalysis actually suppresses the radical implications of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious by structuralizing it, reducing it to a chance play of signifiers. In this respect, Lacan’s claim that the unconscious is naturally tied to language has come under fire (see Ricoeur, 1970; Castoriadis, 1984; Laplanche, 1987). Here it is asserted that the unconscious is the precondition for language and not the reverse. As concerns social theory, the problems in this respect are significant. For it is certainly arguable that, in presenting an account of desire as disembodied and prestructured linguistically, Lacan effectively strips the subject of any capacity for autonomy, reflection and transformation.

Equally serious are the criticisms that have been made of Lacan’s account of culture. Lacan’s linkage of the ‘subject of the unconscious’ with the idea of the ‘arbitrary nature of the sign’ raises the thorny problem of the replication of ideological power. In this connection, Lacan fails to explain how some ideological and political meanings predominate over others in the shaping of the personal sphere. Instead, cultural domination is equated with language as such. It is the subjection of the individual to the symbolic, to the force of the Law, which accounts for the fall of the subject. However, as Dews (1987) argues, Lacan’s equation of language with domination seriously downplays the
importance of power, ideology and social institutions in the reproduction of cultural life.

Lacanian and post-Lacanian contexts

Lacan's return to Freud has powerfully influenced debates concerning the links between self and society in the late modern age. The emphasis on problems of language and communication in Lacanianism has made this current of thought highly relevant to a variety of social-theoretical issues in the social sciences.

In his essay 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses' (1971), the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser seeks to integrate structural Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to understand the working of ideology in modern societies. Althusser traces ideology as a discourse which leads the individual subject to understand itself and others in such a way as to support the reproduction of ruling-class power. Like Lacan, Althusser argues that social forms are experienced, not so much in the public world of institutions, as in the fantasy realm of the imaginary. 'All ideology' represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion is not the existing relations of production... but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them' (1971: 38-9). From this angle, ideology provides an imaginary centering to everyday life, it confers identity on the self and Others, and makes the individual feel valued within the social, cultural network.

What are the psychic mechanisms which underpin ideology? Echoing Lacan, Althusser argues that ideology functions in and through mirroring. Like the Lacanian child in front of its mirror-image, the ideological mirror implants received social meanings at the heart of the subject's world. Yet, as in the mirror stage, the constitution of social forms necessarily involves a misrecognition, since ideology idealizes and distorts the intersubjective world of society, culture and politics. Through a 'subjection' to ideological discourses of class, race, gender, nationalism and the like, the individual comes to misrecognize itself as an autonomous, self-legislativing subject. Imaginary misrecognition occurs through a process that Althusser terms 'interpellation'. It is in and through ideology that society 'interpellates' the individual as a 'subject', at once conferring identity and subjecting the individual to that social position. This interweaving of signification and imaginary misrecognition, Althusser contends, is rooted in 'ideological state apparatuses', which include schools, trade unions and the mass media, and whose function is to ensure the subjection of individuals to different social positions in modern class-based societies. That human subjects should come to overlook the nature of their real decentered subjectivity, says Althusser, is precisely the function of ideology — thus serving to reinforce the dominant power interests of late capitalism.

The theory of ideology developed by Althusser, with its implicit use of Lacanian psychoanalysis, marks one of the major sources of stimulus in twentieth-century social thought. It sets out an array of ideas about the relations
between the personal and social domains, the imaginary and institutional life. Althusser’s argument that ideology is an indispensable imaginary medium for social reproduction is provocative and important, and it did much to discredit traditional Marxist theories of ideology as mere false consciousness. Like the unconscious for Freud, ideology for Althusser is eternal. However, it is now widely agreed that there are many problems with Althusser’s account of ideology. Most importantly, Althusser’s argument about the mirroring distortion of ideology runs into the same kind of theoretical dead-end as does Lacan’s account of the imaginary. That is, in order for an individual subject to (mis)recognize itself in and through ideological discourse, then surely she or he must already possess certain affective capacities for subjective response. From a psychoanalytic angle, the psychical capacity for identification, representation and reflection suggests that the relations between the personal and the ideological spheres are extremely complex, and are certainly anything but a simple ‘implantation’ of culturally controlled and closed social forms — as Althusser’s work suggests. The central problem in this respect is that Althusser’s theory implies an unsatisfactory notion of cultural domination, one in which subjects are rigidly inserted into the ideological process. (For detailed treatments of Althusser’s misreading of Lacanian psychoanalysis see Barrett, 1991: chapter 5; Elliott, 1992: chapter 5.)

Whatever these shortcomings, however, the Althusserian/Lacanian model remains a powerful source of influence in contemporary social theory. Indeed, Althusser’s Lacan has recently been examined with new interest that concerns the study of subjectivity, society and culture. Jameson (1990: 51–4) argues for a return to the Lacanian underpinnings of Althusser’s social theory in order to fashion what he calls a ‘cognitive mapping’ of postmodern symbolic forms. So too, Žižek (1989; 1991) recasts the Althusserian model of ‘interpellation’ in order to trace the fantasy identifications created in and through cultural forms such as media and film.

Feminist psychoanalytic criticism

In recent years, some of the most important conceptual advances in psychoanalytic social theory have come from feminist debates on sexual subjectivity and gender hierarchy. Broadly speaking, the major division in psychoanalytic feminism is between Anglo-American object relations theory on the one hand, and French Lacanian and post-Lacanian theory on the other. Through the object–relations perspective, feminist theorists analyse sexuality and gender against the backdrop of interpersonal relationships — with particular emphasis on the pre-Oedipal child–mother bond. Post-structuralist feminists indebted to Lacanian psychoanalysis, by contrast, deconstruct gender terms with reference to the structuring power of the order of the Symbolic, of language as such. In previous writings, I have explored in detail both the theoretical and political differences between these competing psychoanalytic standpoints in feminism and contemporary sexuality studies (Elliott, 2002, 2003). In what follows,
I shall concentrate for the most part upon developments in feminist theories of sexual difference that draw from, rework or transfigure Lacanian theory. The central concerns that I touch on include an exploration of the political ramifications of psychoanalysis; the psychic forces which affect women's desexualization and lack of agency in modern culture; the relationship between maternal and paternal power in infant development; and the connections between sexuality, the body and its pleasures. For in addressing these issues, feminist psychoanalytic theorists have sought to enlarge their understandings of polarized sexual identities in modern societies and to rethink the possibilities for restructuring existing forms of gender power.

Lacanian psychoanalysis is probably the most influential current in feminist social theory today (cf. Benjamin, 1988; Flax, 1990; and Elliott, 2002, for detailed treatments of the contributions of the object-relations school of psychoanalysis to feminist criticism). In Lacan's deployment of Saussurean linguistics, as noted above, meaning arises from difference. In the order of language, a signifier attains reference to a signified through the exclusion of other signifiers. In patriarchal culture, which that is excluded is the feminine: woman is denied a voice of her own. Lacan thus claims, in what is regarded by many as a clear indication of his anti-feminism, that 'The Woman does not exist.' Linking the unconscious with the essentially patriarchal organization of language and culture, Lacan defines the feminine in the negative. Woman as the Other, as something which is outside the symbolic order: this is what gives the masculine unconscious its self-presence as power and authority.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly consider some central features of the Lacanian theory of gender-differentiated subjectivity. For Lacan, as for Freud, the phallus is the marker of sexual difference par excellence. The father and his phallic role smash the incestuous unity of the mother–infant bond, and thereby refer the infant to the wider cultural, social network. In contrast to Freud, however, Lacan claims to conceptualize the phallus from any linkage with the penis. The phallus, says Lacan, is illusory, fictitious, imaginary. It exists less in the sense of biology than in a kind of fantasy realm which merges desire with power, omnipotence, wholeness. In Lacanian theory, the power that the phallus promises is directly tied to maternal, imaginary space. According to Lacan, the infant wishes to be loved exclusively by the mother. The infant painfully learns, however, that the mother's desire is invested elsewhere: in the phallus. Significantly, this discovery occurs at the same time that the infant is discovering itself in language, as a separate subject. In this connection, it is important to note that Lacan says that both sexes enter the symbolic order of language as castrated. The infant's separation from maternal space is experienced as a devastating loss. The pain of this loss is castration, from which sexual subjectivity becomes deeply interwoven with absence and loss.

Lack, therefore, cuts across gender: both boys and girls undergo castration. Yet to enter the symbolic, says Lacan, is to enter the masculine world. For Lacan, sexual identity is established through a privileging of the visible, of having or not having the phallus. As Lacan puts this: 'It can be said that the [phallic]
signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the role of sexual copulation . . . it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation' (1977: 287). Lacan thus underwrites the constitution of masculinity as phallic and femininity as non-phallic. In this scenario, the feminine is on the outside of language, culture, reason and power. Yet, since meaning arises only out of difference, Lacan infuses this argument with a subtle twist as concerns gender. Man’s self-presence as phallic authority, says Lacan, is secured only through the exclusion of the feminine. The displaced feminine makes the masculine as phallic power exist, yet it also threatens its disruption. At the limit of the symbolic order, the feminine at once maintains and subverts existing forms of gender power.

Lacan was not much interested in the social application of his theories. But this has not prevented feminists from making critical appropriations of Lacanian psychoanalysis for rethinking the social theory of gender. Interest in Lacan’s ideas for feminism was initiated in the English-speaking world by Juliet Mitchell, who in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) uses Freud and Lacan to explore the contemporary gender system. In Mitchell’s Lacanian-based feminism, an analysis of sexual politics is developed which stresses that the symbolic order of language creates sexual division. Gendered subjectivity, for Mitchell, is necessarily tied to a fundamental loss: that of maternal, imaginary space. In this connection, the phallus, as ‘transcendental signifier’, functions as an imaginary lining or construction which masks the lack of the human subject at the level of sexual division. Yet the crucial point, according to Mitchell, is that these imaginary scenarios position males and females within unequal gender relations. Man is constituted as a self-determining, autonomous agent, and woman as the lacking Other, as sexual object. Using Lacanian theory against itself, however, Mitchell also explores potentialities for gender transformation. Though the phallus may stand for entry to the symbolic order, Mitchell claims, it is an imaginary object that either sex can secure once and for all. Seen as a transactional negotiation of identity, the phallus need not be tied to male domination. Mitchell thus concludes: ‘Some other expression of the entry into culture than the implication for the unconscious of the exchange of women will have to be found in non-patriarchal society’ (1974: 415).

Though generating much interest at the time, most commentators would now agree that Mitchell’s analysis of gender contains serious theoretical and political difficulties. It seems to assume, for example, that the social reproduction of sexuality and gender is a relatively stable affair, without allowing room for the contradictions and ambiguities of split subjectivity and the unconscious. This involves important political implications. For if women are symbolically fixed in relation to masculinity as the lacking Other, via a repression of desire, then it remains far from clear as to why women would ever feel compelled to question or challenge the contemporary gender system. This point can be made in another way. The Lacanian specification of the feminine as that which is always defined negatively — lack, the Other, the dark continent — carries a number of theoretical and political ambiguities. On the one hand,
Lacan's doctrines have been a valuable theoretical resource for feminists analysing how women are rendered the excluded Other in patriarchal discourse and culture. On the other hand, the recurring problem for feminism when set within Lacanian parameters is that all dimensions of human sexuality become inscribed within the signifier and therefore trapped by the Law. Lacan's reduction of the feminine to mere oppositionness implies that woman can be defined only as mirror to the masculine subject, and thus can never escape the domination of a rigidly gendered discourse.

In opposition to Lacan, however, a number of French feminists have recently sought to articulate an alternative vision of female sexual subjectivity in French psychoanalysis. This approach to revaluing the feminine is generally referred to as post-Lacanian feminism, though it is worth briefly expanding on this label. This branch of feminist psychoanalysis is generally considered 'Lacanian' because theorists associated with it adopt a broadly structuralist interpretation of gender categories, situating woman as the excluded Other of masculinist discourse and culture. Yet this approach is also 'anti-Lacanian' since such theorists tend to oppose the view that woman can only be defined as the mirror opposite of the masculine subject, and thus never escape the domination of a rigidly gendered discourse. Broadly speaking, post-Lacanian feminists evoke a positive image of femininity, an image that underscores the multiple and plural dimensions of women's sexuality. Hélène Cixous, for example, speaks of the rhythms, flows, and sensations of the feminine libidinal economy, contrasting this with the exaggerated masculinist stress on genital sexuality. Woman, says Cixous, has the 'capacity to depropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal parts'... Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide' (1976: 95). Similarly, Luce Irigaray locates the feminine in the multiplicity of bodily sensations arising from the lips, vagina, clitoris, breasts. In contrast to the imperial phallic compulsion of male sexuality, women's capacity and need for sexual expression resides in the multiplicity and flux of feminine desire itself. As Irigaray says of woman: 'Her sexuality, always at least double, is in fact plural' (1977: 102).

Women, argues Irigaray, need to establish a different relationship to feminine sexuality, establishing a range of displacements to patriarchy through writing as a cultural practice. Speaking the feminine, for Irigaray, can potentially transform the oppressive sexed identities of patriarchy. In her more recent work, particularly *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) and *To Be Tivo* (1999), Irigaray situates the renegotiation of identities in the frame of ethics, specifically the dilemma of recognizing the Otherness of the other sex. An ethics of sexual difference, she argues, would respect the Other in her or his own right, with regard to considerations of finitude, mortality, creation and the divine.

Finally, we can find another meeting point of feminist and psychoanalytic theories in the work of Kristeva, who elaborates the idea of a specifically feminine mode of being which dislocates patriarchal language and culture. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), Kristeva contrasts the Lacanian symbolic, the Law which the father embodies, with the multiple libidinal forces of the
'semiotic'. The semiotic is a realm of prelinguistic experience – including feelings, drives and rhythms experienced by the infant in its pre-Oedipal relation to the mother. According to Kristeva, our semiotic longing for the pre-Oedipal mother, though repressed with entry to the symbolic, remains present in the unconscious and cannot be shut off from society and culture. The semiotic, Kristeva says, is present in the rhythms, slips and silences in speech; and it is subversive of the Law of the Father since it is rooted in a pre-patriarchal connection with the feminine. Yet Kristeva denies that the feminine semiotic has any intrinsic link with gender, because it stems from the pre-Oedipal phase and is thus prior to sexual difference. Thus, if the semiotic is 'feminine', it is a femininity that is always potentially available to women and men in their efforts to transform gender power. Kristeva looks to the semiotic as a means of subverting the male-dominated symbolic order. She finds a clear expression of the semiotic in the writings of avant-garde authors, such as Mallarme, Lautremont and Artaud, writing which she feels defies patriarchal language. Kristeva also locates semiotic subversion in pregnancy. The psychic experience of giving birth, Kristeva says, reproduces 'the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech' (1986: 206).

In her more recent work, especially Black Sun (1989) and New Maladies of the Soul (1995), Kristeva situates the emotional turmoil produced by contemporary culture with reference to depression, mourning and melancholia. In depression, argues Kristeva, there is an emotional disinvestment from the Symbolic, from language as such. The depressed person, overwhelmed by sadness, suffers from a paralysis of symbolic activity. In effect, language fails to substitute for what has been lost at the level of the psyche. The loss of loved ones, the loss of ideals, the loss of pasts: as the depressed person loses all interest in the surrounding world, in language itself, psychic energy shifts to a more primitive mode of functioning, to a maternal, drive-orientated form of experience. In short, depression produces a trauma of symbolic identification, a trauma which unleashes the power of semiotic energy. In the force field of the semiotic – rhythms, semantic shifts, changes in intimation – Kristeva finds a means to connect the unspoken experience of the depressed person to established meaning, thereby facilitating an emotional reorganization of the self.

The foregoing feminist theories represent one of the most important areas of contemporary psychoanalytic criticism. They help explain, more clearly than conventional Lacanian accounts, the ways in which dominant sexual ideologies penetrate everyday life, and also explore the radicalizing possibilities of a feminine transformation of gender. But assumptions are made in these theories which need to be questioned. For one thing, the male-dominated Law is opposed in these accounts either by the woman's body or the subversive relationship of women to language. However, some feminists have argued that this merely reinstates a 'female essence' prior to the construction of sexual subjectivity, and is therefore in danger of reinforcing traditional gender divisions through an unintended biologism (see Moi, 1985; Frosh, 1987; Flax, 1990; Elliott, 1992).
Related to this is the concern that these theories erase the mediating factors which link fantasy and social reality, either by displacing the psychoanalytic account of the construction of sexual difference (as in the case of Irigaray and Cixous), or by essentialism (as with Kristeva’s merging of the semiotic and motherhood). (For further discussion on these points see Benhabib and Cornell, 1987; Cornell, 1991.)

Psychoanalysis and postmodern theory

The Enlightenment reading of psychoanalysis — represented in, say, Habermas’s rendition of Freud’s epigram ‘Where I was, there Ego shall become’ as culturally prefigurative of the possibility for undistorted communication — has come in for sustained criticism in recent years. One of the sources of the suspicion of modernist psychoanalysis, with its characteristic emphasis on maximizing an individual’s freedom, derives from the Lacanian argument that the notion of the autonomous ego is itself an imaginary construct. Some authors and analysts associated with the postmodern turn of recent theorizing rework the Lacanian order of the Imaginary and apply it to culture and knowledge in general, reinterpreting warnings of the death of the subject as a kind of dawning realization that the whole category of subjectivity is itself illusory. The postmodern critique, which combines elements from the philosophical standpoint of post-structuralism with elements of anti-psychoanalysis, tries to dismantle the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious, cultural prohibitions and repressed libido, subjugation and liberation. In postmodern conditions, with its dramatic speed-up in technologies, the subject is not only decentered but desubjectivized as well. What this means, at least in its more thoroughgoing versions, is a radical deconstruction of the notion of subjectivity itself. How can psychoanalysis, after all, conceivably represent the subject as a bundle of organized dispositions, affects and appetites, when contemporary society is marked in its entirety by fluidity, plurality, variety and ambivalence?

A radical assault on fixed positions and boundaries of all imagination, the postmodern re-writing of psychoanalysis underscores the fluid and multiple trajectories of libidinal enjoyment. The indeterminacy of desire, repetition, the death drive, bodily zones and intensities: these are core elements of the postmodern celebration of the multidimensional and fragmented aspects of our contemporary imaginary.

Broadly speaking, the aim of postmodern psychoanalysis is to rethink the relationship between desire and politics in a way which opens possibilities for social transformation. In this respect, Lacanian psychoanalysis has been sharply criticized by postmodernists as having politically reactionary implications. In their celebrated postmodern treatise *Anti-Oedipus* (1977), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari contend that the Lacanian account of desire, insofar as it binds the subject to the social order, works in the service of repression. Psychoanalysis, in this sense, functions in the service of capitalism, as a kind of vortex around which the unconscious becomes bent out of shape. As Deleuze and Guattari see
it, the Lacanian underwriting of lack is almost the opposite of desire, lack being for them just a capitalist ploy by which consumerism can plug the alleged hungers of desire. They argue that psychoanalysis, both Freudian and Lacanian, functions to personalize desire, referring all unconscious productions to the incestuous sexual realm of the nuclear family. Oedipian prohibitions, on this reckoning, are just the signifiers which chain desire to normative representations—the point at which we come to desire what capitalism wants us to desire. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari seek to critique this psychoanalytic privileging of desire rooted in lack as a product of Law. They argue that desire in fact precedes representation: there is nothing at all personal to the flows of libido, which continually burst out anew. Perhaps the most striking feature here of Deleuze and Guattari’s use of psychoanalytic concepts lies in their attempt to give full chreoticle to the flows of libidinous energy: a social theory in which the absolute positivity of unconscious productions is underscored, and in which schizophrenia is taken as a potentially emancipatory model.

Deleuze was one of France’s most celebrated philosophers of the late twentieth century, and his co-author Guattari was a radical psychoanalyst, opposed to orthodox (both Freudian and Lacanian) theory. Anti-Oedipus was a courageous, poetic attempt to explode the normative power of categories like Oedipus and castration in psychoanalysis from the inside out, using psychoanalytic concepts against the colonizing conceptual logic of psychoanalysis itself. Deleuze and Guattari trace the ‘free lines’ of schizophrenic desire as affirmative force, pure positivity, a series of enabling rhythms and intensities as well as transforming possibilities. From this angle, the schizoid process is what enables libidinal pulsations to be uncoupled from systems, structures or cultural objects, which may in turn transform the production of the political network, making it no longer unfold according to the repressive functioning of Law. Rejecting the rigid and closed worlds of Oedipus and capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari wish to speak up for schizophrenia over neurosis, the flows of desire over lack, fragments over totalities, differences over uniformity. ‘Schizophrenia’, they write, ‘is desiring production at the limit of social production’ (1977: 35). Against the Oedipalizing logic of capitalist discourse, where desire is channelled into prescribed pathways, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the impersonalized flows of schizoid desire can herald a radical transformation of society.

Similar theoretical directions are taken in the early writings of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who argues that political society is itself secretly libidinal. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari argue that desire is codified and repressed in and through capitalism, Lyotard views contemporary society as an immense desiring system. As he sees it, the postmodern is a vast libidinal circuit of technologies, a culture swamped with seductive signs and images. In underscoring the indeterminacy of intensities, Lyotard effects a shift in focus away from theories of representation and structures of the psyche toward bodily intensities and erogenous surfaces. In his book Libidinal Economy (1995), Lyotard constructs the excitations of libido on the model of the Moebius strip, conceptualized as an endless series of rotations, twistings and contortions. The
upshot of this, in political terms, is a series of arguments about how best to extract libidinal pleasure and intensity from postmodern culture. ‘What would be interesting’, writes Lyotard, ‘would be to stay where we are, but at the same time to grab all opportunities to function as good conductors of intensities’ (1974: 311).

In terms of postmodernism, the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and of Lyotard, underscores the point that contemporary experience is an experience of fragmentation, dislocation, polyvalency. From this angle, the belief that social transformation may be linked to the undoing of hidden meanings or discourses (as suggested in psychoanalytic social theory from Marcuse to Habermas) appears as little more than an ideological fantasy. By contrast, truth in postmodern psychoanalysis is located in the immediacy of libidinal intensity itself. The unconscious cannot be tamed or organized; desire needs no interpretation, it simply is. Moreover, it is within the diffuse, perverse, and schizophrenic manifestations of desire that new forms of identity, otherness, fantasy and symbolism can be found.

The issues raised by postmodern psychoanalysis are important, especially when considered in the light of contemporary social transformations such as globalization and new communications technology. It is not apparent, however, that such theories generate any criteria for the critical assessment of social practices, politics, or value positions. As Dews (1987) points out, the dissimilation of libidinal intensities urged in many currents of postmodern psychoanalysis is something that can be ideologically marshalled by both progressive and reactionary political forces. Significantly, the view that desire is ipso facto rebellious and subversive is premised upon a naive naturalism, one that fails to examine the social, cultural and political forms in which unconscious passion is embedded (see Frank, 1984). Moreover, there is little consideration of the potential harm, pain and damage that psychic states of fragmentation and fluidity may comprise.
To be self-reflexive of one's actions and doings in an instituted world of social things and cultural relations is, in some sense, to be committed to an ongoing structured process of events-in-the-world. However minimal the degree of self-awareness of an individual, it could be said that a structured space is created wherever the activities of human agents are worked out; the assumed or taken-for-granted stocks of practical knowledge of an individual, when linked to other non-cognitive, perhaps unconscious, forms of experience, are fundamental to the constitution, reproduction or transformation of structured possibilities of action, as well as the making and remaking of structural constraints upon action or agency. Or, to reverse the running order of this subject/object binary, we might say that the structuring of structures is subjectively creative, is a way of cultivating dispositions, of generating forms of action. 'The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment', as Pierre Bourdieu aptly put it, 'produce habitus, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representation which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules' (Bourdieu, 1977: 72).

Our inherited sociological language of the reflexive relations between acting subjects and structured objects has in various ways, perhaps somewhat ironically, not been especially helpful for grasping the imaginative psychical and political possibilities inherent in this structuring of structured subjectivities or identities. In fact, various traditions of social thought have tended to cancel out what can be imaginative, novel, exhilarating or disturbing about reflexivity. In some intellectual contexts, what can be dismaying about reflexivity of subjective dispositions and representations – that is, an awareness of the split or divided nature of psychic experience – is, in effect, disowned through an elevation of
structures over and above the cognitive, practical and unconscious forms of knowledge of human subjects. In what I shall term the Big Brother sociological diagnosis – an outlook, I should add, that influenced various traditions of social theory for some 20 or 30 years – the activities of agents in the social field were treated as the outcome of a conjunction of psychological and social-historical determinants, in which the latter controlled the former through processes of socialization or ideological interpellation. In some approaches, such an objectivistic sociology of structures led to a wholesale liquidation of human imagination of creative action: for example, in Parsons's functionalism, in which the subject was reduced to a cultural dope, or in Althusser's Lacanian-inspired version of structuralism, in which the individual was recast as an ideological dope.

Repositioning the relation between subject and society through a psychoanalytic way of thinking offers a very different perspective. We might say that who one is in a structured world of social differences is an indeterminate consequence of structures that, in turn, have the symbolic power that they do because of the human subject's psychic openness, unconscious representations and emotional investments. The psychic world of socially and historically constituted human subjects are thus not reducible to the fantasies or representations of the individual alone, nor to the brute materiality or reality of political forces or cultural events. The presence of radical imagination and unconscious fantasy in the life of the subject is crucial, and must be theorized in relation to the interpersonal complexities of communication, the emotional processing of dialogue and the primary, if inaccessible, power of the Other.

This emphasis on the primacy of imaginative creativity, or our unconscious capacity for puzzlement and wonder, differentiates the psychoanalytic conception of cultural reproduction from other conceptions that ignore the contentious and disturbing role of the repressed unconscious in social life. Particularly instructive in this context is Laplanche's notion of enigmatic signification, by which he seeks to draw attention to the human subject's ongoing psychosexual struggle to translate, interpret and retranscribe the words, gestures and actions that other people leave us with in daily practical life. Though he doesn't quite put it like this, one of Laplanche's key ideas is that other people implant themselves upon our psychic lives in the form of enigmatic questions or provocative enigmas; we all, as subjects of social structures, spend enormous amounts of emotional energy trying to figure out, and come to terms with, the presence of the Other inside us. In a sense, the particular ways in which
we puzzle over enigmatic messages coming from the Other help define who we are as subjects.

Most of us, at some point in our lives, have experienced the sense of emotional confusion that arises from feeling trapped within conversational misunderstandings. Whether the conversation is one with a friend, colleague, bankteller or governmental official, this sense of feeling trapped is, in various ways, a result of knowing that, while someone is addressing us, the specifics of the communication seem to have swerved away, or veered off, from the intended addressee. Laplanche, drawing on the Lacanian distinction between a signifier of (a specific meaning) and a signifier to (a designified communication), argues that enigmatic messages involve a designification of signifiers. We might conceptualize this as a kind of drainage of what a signifier signifies. On this view, for example, what John is saying to Geoff about his discontent at work might seem very confusing or incoherent to the latter, even though Geoff fully realizes that the communication is directed to him and to him alone. Puzzling over communication in general and the message in particular is for Laplanche at the heart of the problems of human subjectivity and interpersonal relationships.

In short, Laplanche's stress on enigmatic signification and on otherness in the formation of human subjectivity offers a useful corrective to the orthodox vision of the individual as passively reactive to a social world largely outside of her or his control. In contrast to the Big Brother sociological diagnosis, in which external events and impacts happen to the individual, Laplanche's metapsychology underscores the psychodynamic processes internal to the individual (involving the translation and retranslation of the Other's perplexing sexual messages) as forces of both human autonomy and heteronomy. With Laplanche's necessarily inventive, meaning-making, imaginative unconscious, the human subject's project is at once to connect to the Other outside and the Other inside. With the insights of Laplanche's trenchant reformulation of Freudian psychoanalysis, we can critically pursue the issue of why so much recent social theory and cultural criticism has been so objectivistic, so reductionistic, and imagined that the production of subjectivity arises as the mere unproblematic determination of external circumstances. With Laplanche we can at least discuss the idea that ambivalence – at once individual and social – is interwoven with closures and reopenings of the psyche to enigmatic signifiers: that is, to perplexing decentring messages.
There are two key themes that I explore and chart in the chapter that follows. The first theme is that of the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and cultural responses to Freud, particularly the ways in which Freudian ideas have been taken up, contextualized and made banal in the social field in which they are used. To do this, I critically examine recent Freud-bashing in terms of contemporary controversies about traumatic experiences and sexual abuse in childhood. The second theme concerns that of enigmatic messages of the social field and associated traumatizing consequences – of which the recent cultural trend to explain ‘external trauma’ away as the sole cause of private distress or personal crisis is one signal example.