

---

Review: In Search of the Bourgeois Self

Reviewed Work(s): The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche  
in France, 1750–1850 by Jan Goldstein

Review by: John Carson

Source: *Isis*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (September 2008), pp. 587–591

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The History of Science Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591717>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press and The History of Science Society are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Isis*

JSTOR

## ESSAY REVIEW

# In Search of the Bourgeois Self

*By John Carson\**

**Jan Goldstein.** *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850.* xiv + 414 pp., illus., index. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2005. \$45 (cloth).

Like his contemporary Herbert Spencer, the nineteenth-century French philosopher/psychologist/academic entrepreneur Victor Cousin has not fared well at the hands of modern historians. When compared to the works of such acclaimed giants as Hegel or Nietzsche or Mill, Cousin's philosophical contributions have largely been considered derivative, if not simply dismissed altogether. For a number of years, Jan Goldstein has not so much been challenging these assessments of Cousin's philosophical shortcomings as suggesting that they are far from the whole story, by vividly demonstrating the importance of Cousin for understanding nineteenth-century French culture and, most intriguingly, the making of one form of the modern bourgeois self. Now, in *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850*, she has brought together these hard-won understandings of Cousin's place in modern intellectual culture, added to them rich explorations of the intellectual and institutional underpinnings of not only Cousin's project, but also its predecessors and rivals, and situated them in the complicated social and cultural politics of revolutionary and postrevolutionary France. It is a true tour de force.

Goldstein's project is to examine the implications of the French Revolution and postrevolutionary reaction for the making of the bourgeois persona and, in particular, for the initiation of a specific kind of "self-talk" in nineteenth-century France. Engaging critically with the arguments of a number of scholars that modernity in general (Charles Taylor) or the Revolution specifically (Michel Foucault) marked a decisive rupture in the Western notion of the self, Goldstein strives to examine carefully and intensively a specific instance of the transformation from one discourse of the self to another. By attending closely to what Foucault has called "technologies of the self"—those concrete practices that inculcate and make real particular forms of subjectivity—Goldstein is able to demonstrate not only that a new kind of self-talk developed in France during the nineteenth century, but precisely how it was articulated and then disseminated to the

\* Department of History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1003.

bourgeoisie. In so doing, she lays out a compelling approach to investigating the processes of self formation and the appropriation of scientific ideas, issues of great moment for a number of constituencies within the history of science.

Goldstein's story begins with an issue much discussed in French historiography: the problem that the imagination posed for late *ancien regime* French culture. After describing how economic and social transformations were eroding the corporate identities and social locations of workers and even nobles, Goldstein argues that cultural productions, debates over economic policies, and the new sensationalist psychology inspired by Locke and developed by Condillac all were troubled by the specter of the atomized individual with an imagination unregulated by external structures of authority or discipline. Goldstein then charts what happened to these worries in response to the Revolution and the subsequent rise of the French version of bourgeois modernity. The revolutionaries, not surprisingly, were almost as anxious about the power of the imagination as their *ancien regime* forebears, fearful that the masses might backslide if their imaginations remained susceptible to past practices and beliefs. For many, Condillac's science of sensationalism beckoned as a pragmatic way to transform the "somewhat mysterious problem of imagination into a concrete problem of psychological engineering" (p. 62), as Goldstein succinctly describes it. With the turn to sensationalism, however, came a particular relation to talk about the self: while sensationalism accommodated analysis of "psychological interiority," it did not, Goldstein takes pains to show, actually sustain conversation about an integrated self, a *moi* that was more than the sum of its sensations. Even in the hands of the more physiologically oriented *idéologues* at the century's end, the *moi* remained, in Goldstein's words, "at the periphery of their psychological systems" (p. 122).

Enter Victor Cousin. A star product of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Cousin stands out in Goldstein's account as the key figure in the construction of the French version of the bourgeois self. Well connected socially and politically, ideologically a constitutional monarchist but not an ultraroyalist, Cousin worried that sensationalism and the Revolution had undermined moral values and social order. In response, Goldstein argues, he fashioned his eclectic psychology, seeking to combat these evils, particularly the fragmented sensationalist self, by positing the existence of "a durable, unified self—one that, animated by an active spiritual principle, would bear moral responsibility": his *moi* (p. 157). Unlike Locke's mind as *tabula rasa*, Cousin's *moi* existed prior to any sensations; it was also a real substance, one open to empirical observation through introspective analysis practiced according to the "psychological method." For Goldstein, this method is the key to understanding how eclecticism came to shape the bourgeois self. Although never precisely defined, the method centered on a heroic and rigorous process of "interior observation" designed to reveal the unified *moi* that lay at the heart of conventional morality and bourgeois order. To underscore the particularity of this mode of self formation, Goldstein contrasts it with the very different Freudian project of uncovering the unconscious self's varied passions, as well as the era's fascination with romantic or bohemian individuality. Eclecticism, she demonstrates, had a much different agenda: to provide the moral certitude that all individuals possessed a unified, volitional self that underwrote traditional notions of the "the true, the beautiful, and the good" and to produce a form of cultivation that would distinguish the intellectual elite able to discern this *moi* from the masses who could not.

Philosophical systems alone, of course, do not new forms of subjectivity make. Thus Goldstein investigates what set Cousin's eclecticism apart and made it central to the self-understanding of bourgeois French males. The answer, she demonstrates, was Cousin's extraordinary influence over the French education system. During the July Monarchy, Cousin's philosophy became virtually a mandatory part of the secondary school (*lycée*) curriculum (restricted largely to sons of the bourgeoisie) and dominated training in philosophy at all levels. In this guise, Cousin's *moi* became "a marker of social status," a way "to distinguish the socially dominant from the marginal" (p. 192). By according close attention to the institutionalization of eclecticism in the form of school curricula, reference works, pedagogical texts, teacher training, and Cousin's "regiment" of followers and proselytizers, Goldstein is able to show how his philosophical psychology became pervasive during the July Monarchy and was then able to persist even into the next century as the virtually "official philosophy" of the French nation.

Not that dissent was eliminated. Goldstein is careful to explore the tensions that existed within Cousin's system itself and among his followers around issues of class, gender, and intellectual difference. As Goldstein makes clear, theoretically Cousin left open both more democratic and more elitist readings of his philosophy; practically, however, elitism and convention won out at every turn. This is demonstrated vividly in her analyses of the exchanges between Cousin and one of his most savvy and tenacious interlocutors, Caroline Angebert, and of the stillborn attempt by another follower, Amédée Jacques, to extend the benefits of eclecticism and education to the working class. In pursuit of alternative constructions of the self, Goldstein also investigates two well-established rival programs: the various Catholic approaches to piety and the "interior life"; and phrenology, the physiological psychology popular among the dispossessed. Each program, Goldstein suggests, advanced its own models of the self, though they were models she shows to be decidedly and importantly different from Cousin's active, unified *moi*. In the nineteenth century, Goldstein concludes, only Cousin's philosophy was thus truly able to ground a kind of self-talk both amenable to and sustaining of the new French bourgeoisie.

This sketch scarcely does justice to the richness and detail of Goldstein's account. One of her great strengths as a historian is her ability to imagine the kind of evidence necessary to sustain her claims, search out the telling examples even in arcane sources, and then situate them in a dense context suggesting the multiple interweavings of philosophy, politics, and social position. Her analysis of the correspondence between Cousin and Angebert is one such instance; equally impressive are her exhumation of examination papers to investigate how students incorporated eclecticism into their own self-talk and her deft use of literary pieces to suggest the extent to which the problem of self resonated in French culture. Going well beyond the standard texts by Condillac or Cousin, Goldstein has painstakingly sought out works by their disciples and critics, examined institutional records and personal correspondence, analyzed debates over economic policy and pedagogical practice, and tracked down seemingly marginal figures and ephemeral publications, all to the end of pinning down how seemingly esoteric ideas became part of everyday lived realities.

Goldstein's skill as an intellectual historian merits particular mention. She had already demonstrated, in *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century*, a masterly ability to prosecute a kind of social and cultural history of ideas, where psychiatric concepts and therapeutics were explored within a matrix of institutions and professional identities, along with the complexities of France's rapidly

changing political context.<sup>1</sup> Those same skills continue to be manifest in *The Post-Revolutionary Self*, supplemented with perhaps even greater attention to subtle analyses of the ideas themselves and to the diversity of sites where such ideas are shown concretely influencing individual lives, social institutions, and the political culture. Even such voluminously researched figures as Condillac are portrayed in a new light through Goldstein's focus on the specifics of how revolutionary and postrevolutionary selves were made, including her careful attention to the mechanics of dissemination and appropriation. In this way Goldstein is able to sustain perhaps her boldest claim, which is not that selves are historically and culturally specific but, rather, that mental science could have anything substantive to do with how members of the bourgeoisie understood themselves and their worlds.

Goldstein's almost perverse insistence on this centrality of mental philosophy to the making of the various French conceptions of the self at times encourages her to argue for a more constitutive role for these systems than may be absolutely warranted. Certainly her evidence for the institutionalization of both philosophies via pedagogy and her numerous examples of public figures citing Condillac or Cousin make even her strongest claims plausible. But it is also true that belief in the power of experience to shape the citizenry's sense of self (sensationalism) or in a unified self upholding conventional morality and social order (eclecticism) did not derive solely from philosophical speculation. One of the features of both psychologies that Goldstein underemphasizes was that Condillac and Cousin built upon, as well as elaborated and challenged, common understandings of how the mind operates. Disentangling where mundane wisdom stopped and mental science began is no easy task—and probably beside the point. For what Goldstein does show unequivocally is that the languages and concerns of philosophy and psychology were part of the cultural mix and were powerful ways, at the least, of legitimating particular projects for the making of revolutionary and postrevolutionary selves in France.

My strongest disappointment with *The Post-Revolutionary Self* was that the narrative does not so much conclude as stop. To be sure, Goldstein provides an epilogue that sketches the story of Cousin and eclecticism through the second half of the nineteenth century. And she unquestionably prepares the reader to understand how, once thoroughly institutionalized, eclecticism might prove a rather tenacious constituent of French intellectual culture. Nonetheless, tracing what happened to this *moi* in the seemingly less favorable environment of the Third Republic might have made a more compelling end point for her narrative. Goldstein rightly insists that the new forms of self being articulated at the turn of the century were not “unheralded or unprecedented” but, rather, elaborations on and contestations with Cousin's *moi*. That is one of *The Post-Revolutionary Self*'s many important contributions. However, a more extended analysis of how the Cousinean *moi* was transformed in confrontation with the rise of an avowedly antielective “scientific” psychology and more republican forms of governance might have provided a stronger sense of closure. Perhaps in a sequel.

Reading Cousin—like reading Spencer and, indeed, many other nineteenth-century philosophers—is not for the faint of heart. That Goldstein was willing to take up this challenge and wade through Cousin's rather unwieldy and at points unreadable corpus is by itself reason to celebrate her achievement. But the real payoff is not just a trenchant analysis of what Cousin argued and how it became a dominant intellectual current in

<sup>1</sup> Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

nineteenth-century France, as valuable as these contributions are. More important yet is her demonstration of the historicity of the unitary self and her attention to the everyday technologies that made it real and pervasive. To her great credit, Goldstein's is not the story of all bourgeois selves, or of all encounters with modernity, but of a very specific one, where the particularities of the political culture, institutional topography, and even the entrepreneurial genius of her central character made one version of the bourgeois self become an everyday reality for millions of Frenchmen. For those not invested in the details of French history or psychology, that may be the book's real payoff. It demonstrates, rather than merely postulates, that the bourgeois self has a history—indeed, many histories—and suggests how to recover those histories, by attending to the places and practices where science, politics, and institutions entangled around the problem of constituting identity. It also reveals clearly some of the concrete means by which scientific “truths” can become part of the very fabric of a culture. Smart, theoretically sophisticated, historically nuanced, and beautifully written, *The Post-Revolutionary Self* will surely stand for many decades as a signal story of the intertwining of politics, culture, institutions, and science in the making of the modern self.