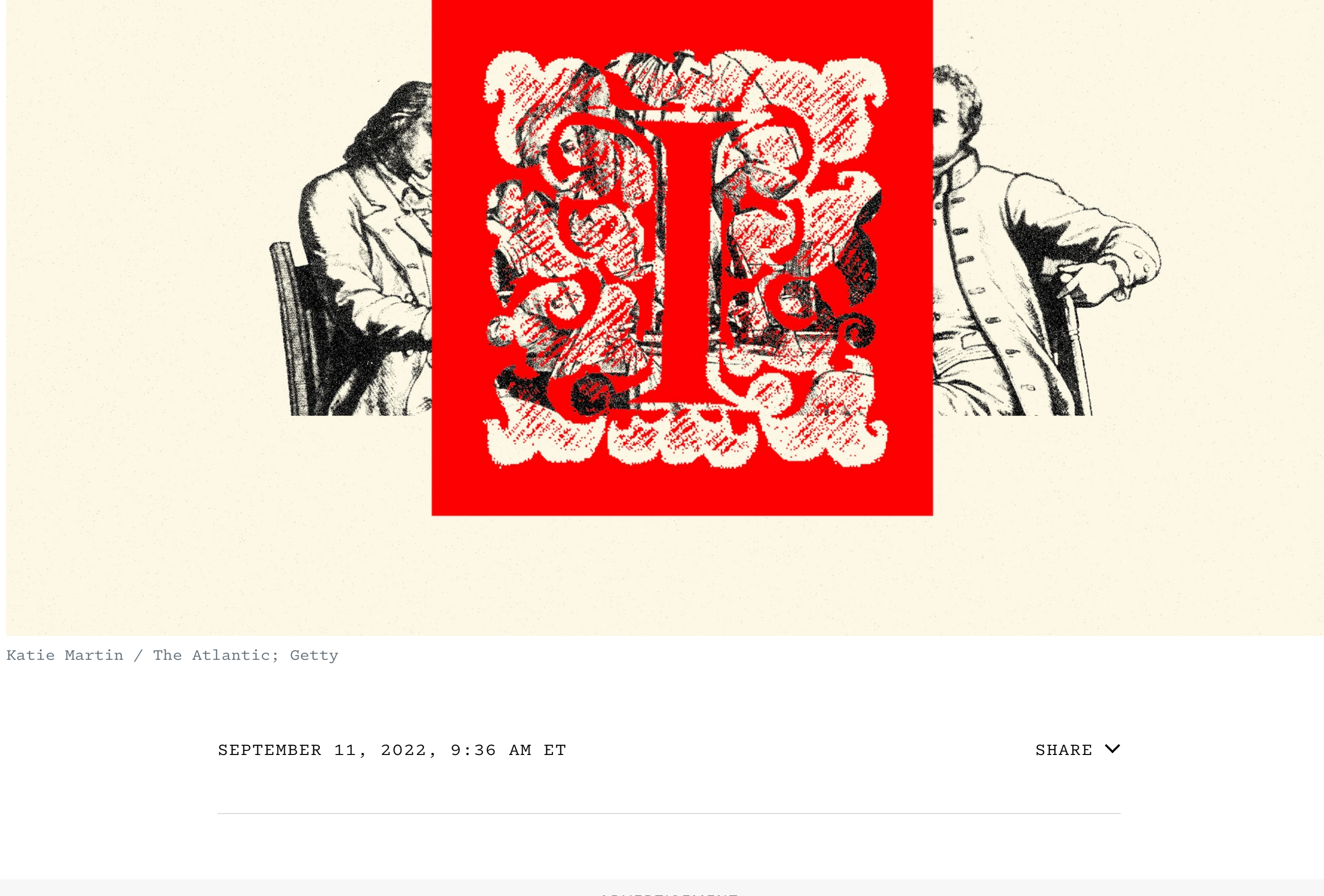


BOOKS

# Where Our Sense of Self Comes From

How did a group of rebellious German playwrights, poets, and writers in the late 18th century revolutionize the way we think of ourselves and the world?

By Andrea Wulf




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**W**E ACCEPT AS SELF-EVIDENT that each of us is free to think and form our own opinions, that we have autonomous selves. Western societies and institutions are founded on this spirit of individual freedom and self-determination. But it is becoming clear that this very core of Western democratic culture is being undermined—be it by Russia’s cyber interference in elections or the widespread dissemination of fake news on social media. Many people assumed that they were at least in control of decisions over their own bodies, until the Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade* in June. Next up might be the reversal of the legalization of same-sex marriage and even a return to the criminalization of consensual gay sex.

All of these assaults on autonomy make it even more important to understand the beginnings of the modern self, the origins of that hard-won freedom. I spent the past several years looking for where this idea—taken for granted today, but once quite radical—first emerged and was surprised to discover that it was in a quiet university town called Jena, some 150 miles southwest of Berlin. It was there that, in the 1790s, a small group of rebellious playwrights, poets, and writers revolutionized the way we think of ourselves and the world.

I call them the “Jena Set,” and they are the subject of my new book, *Magnificent Rebels*. Among them were some of Germany’s most brilliant minds—the poets Novalis and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; the playwright Friedrich Schiller; the philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel; the young scientist Alexander von Humboldt; the combative Schlegel brothers; the formidable Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling. These thinkers began to seriously consider a number of existential questions: How do we have control over our own lives? Can we trust the knowledge produced by our minds? And perhaps most importantly, what does it mean to be free?

**W**HAT HAPPENED IN JENA in the 1790s that brought these questions to the fore? And why Jena? Why Germany? At the end of the 18th century, Germany wasn’t yet a unified nation; rather, it was a patchwork of more than 1,500 states—constituting the Holy Roman Empire—ranging from tiny principalities to powerful dynasties such as the Hohenzollern in Prussia and the Habsburgs in Austria. One unintended advantage of such fragmentation was that censorship was far more difficult to enforce than it was in large, centrally ruled nations such as France and England. Every German state, no matter how small, had its own set of regulations and laws. Germany was small, splintered, and inward-looking. And Germans seemed particularly enamored of the written word. The publishing trade was four to five times larger than that in England. Germans were voracious readers—and books, newspapers, pamphlets, and articles spread new ideas across the population.

Jena was only a small town of 4,500 inhabitants, but it was home to an important university. Because of complicated inheritance rules, the institution was nominally controlled by at least four Saxon dukes. In reality, no one was truly in charge. As a result, a broad scope of subjects could be taught. “The professors in Jena are almost entirely independent,” Schiller wrote. There was no university like it in Europe. Drawn by this openness, thinkers who had been in trouble with the authorities in their home states came to Jena. The last decade of the 18th century seemed to find more famous poets, writers, and philosophers living in Jena’s small confines, in proportion to its population, than in any town before or since—the makings of an intellectual hothouse.

Picture the largest auditorium in Jena in the summer of 1794. It was noisy with the sound of several hundred students fighting for seats. They spilled out into the corridors, clambered onto benches in the back; some even climbed onto ladders at the windows to listen to their new professor, Fichte. The air was stale and hot. Fichte stood at the lectern in riding boots with spurs, holding his whip. More bull than racehorse, he was of average height but muscular, with a forceful presence. There was nothing gentle about him. He thundered, insulted, and shouted. He stomped rather than walked, every step an affirmation of his very existence. He ate his snuff tobacco rather than inhaling it.

Philosophy was not just the domain of philosophy students, he insisted, but of society at large. “I am a priest of truth,” Fichte shouted from his lectern. Confident and self-assured, he wanted nothing less than to teach the world how to think. There were no God-given or absolute truths, Fichte said; the only certainty was that the world was experienced by the self—by the *Ich*, as the Germans say. The *Ich*, he explained, “posits its own being”—in other words, the self brings itself into existence. Not only that, but through this powerful initial act, it also conjures up the so-called non-*Ich*—the external world that includes nature, animals, other people, and so on. Fichte didn’t say that the self creates (or controls) the world but rather that it creates our knowledge of the world.

In the mid-17th century, the French philosopher René Descartes shifted emphasis to the self, when he famously asserted, “*Cogito, ergo sum*”—“I think, therefore I am.” But he had been troubled by how the immaterial mind could be joined to a material body. His philosophy was one of dualism, of a division between mind and matter. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant had also given the mind a more important role. He asserted that we are essentially citizens of two worlds, occupying both the “thing-as-it-appears-to-us” and the external world (the “thing-in-itself”). Kant explained that we will never truly understand the thing-in-itself, because we’ll always comprehend the external world through our senses and the categories of our mind, such as time, space, and causality. They are like tinted spectacles through which we understand the external world.

Fichte’s starting point for everything was the self, but not Kant’s twofold view of the thing-in-itself and the thing-as-it-appears-to-us. He criticized Kant for not having overcome Descartes’ dualism, in which the external world exists independently of the mind. Not only did Fichte overcome this divided world (when he asserted that our knowledge of the external world was produced by our self) but his *Ich* was powerful: If the *Ich* brings itself into existence, it must be free. The *Ich*, not God or monarchs, was the first principle of everything. At a time when most German rulers demanded complete subordination from their subjects, Fichte gave the self the most exciting of all powers: free will.

This was an idea lit by the fire of the French Revolution—an event so pivotal that no one in Europe was unaffected. When the French revolutionaries declared all men equal, they promised a new social order founded on freedom and the power of ideas. Philosophy left the ivory tower and provoked ordinary people to action. Words and ideas could change the world more fundamentally than could weapons and monarchs. “Things are becoming reality,” the poet Novalis wrote in 1794, “which, ten years ago, would have gone straight to the philosophical madhouse.”

Fichte’s idea of the *Ich* as the first principle of everything was as revolutionary as any of the political changes witnessed in France. “My system is, from beginning to end, an analysis of the concept of freedom,” Fichte declared—and this radically new concept of a free self carried the potential for a different life. A person “should be what he is,” Fichte told his students in Jena, “because he wants to be it and is right to want to be it.” His own life was proof of the power of his philosophy. Born the son of a poor ribbon weaver in a small village in Saxony, Fichte became the most famous German philosopher of his time, after Kant. He used his mind—his will—to abandon a seemingly predestined path.

Fichte electrified his students and his contemporaries—they called him the “Bonaparte of Philosophy.” More than half of Jena’s 800 students came to his lectures, and many declared him their idol. For the 24-year-old poet Friedrich Hölderlin, the philosopher was the “soul of Jena.” For Hegel, he was a “Titan fighting for humanity.” Schiller and Goethe went to Fichte’s lectures, and Schelling believed Fichte’s ideas to be a “revolution brought about by philosophy.”

But there were also critical voices. Fathers feared Fichte’s influence on their impressionable sons; other observers worried about what they called the “lawless capriciousness of the current zeitgeist.” This new addiction to the *Ich*, they said, would inevitably lead to egotistical self-absorption. Meanwhile, the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder accused Fichte of “disgustingly playing with himself—a masturbation of pure-impure reason.” But whatever people said, it soon became obvious that students and thinkers were not philosophizing anymore, but “fichticizing.” The self had become the starting point of everything.

**J**ENA AND ITS MOST FAMOUS residents—Fichte, Goethe, and Schiller—seemed to exert a magnetic pull. Soon, a new generation of young thinkers arrived in the small university town, including Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, two brothers who fought the literary establishment. Turning against the polished refinement and rigid metric patterns of earlier 18th-century poetry, they were the first to use the term *romantic* in its new literary meaning. “We have to believe in the *power of words*,” Friedrich Schlegel declared. Within the next few years, they founded their own magazine and launched Romanticism onto the international stage. Their lives became the laboratories for Fichte’s *Ich*-philosophy: They defied social conventions, and the emphasis on individual experience became their guiding light.

Friedrich Schlegel lived with his lover, the divorced writer Dorothea Veit, in his brother’s house in Jena. He called himself a “Dictator-Critic,” a literary critic with a pen as sharp as the French guillotines. He took the obsession with the self to another level when he wrote *Lucinde*, an erotic autobiographical novel in which he invited readers into his bedroom to watch him and Dorothea make love.

Meanwhile, August Wilhelm Schlegel and his wife, Caroline, had come to the highly unusual arrangement of an open marriage—“an alliance that between ourselves we never regarded as anything but utterly free,” she explained. Before marrying August Wilhelm, Caroline had been imprisoned for being a sympathizer of the French Revolution and had found herself pregnant by a young French soldier, possibly after a one-night stand at a ball. But why, she asked, should her life be destroyed by “one little foolishness” that would have meant nothing had she been a man? She was educated, beautiful, witty, and self-confident. She assumed the role of editor for the Schlegel brothers’ literary magazine, wrote reviews under her husband’s name, translated with him 16 Shakespeare plays (which still make up the standard edition in Germany today), and gave the Jena Set a place where they could think, talk, laugh, and write. And though she didn’t contribute theoretical treatises or essays, she lived and breathed this new *Ich*-philosophy. She was the embodiment of the empowered free self.

The Jena Set felt invincible. They were embroiled in endless fights with the literary establishments and later with each other. They walked a fine line between free will and selfishness, self-determination and narcissism—a balancing act that seems all too familiar today. Maybe it’s not that surprising to find inflated egos, infighting, and self-absorption in a group of strong-willed men and women who believed in the supreme rule of the self. Freedom brings with it both responsibilities and dangers. The friends in Jena struggled with that, just as we do today. From the moment this seismic shift toward an empowered self rippled out of Jena, people have had to deal with the perils. But Fichte himself never intended his ideas to be a celebration of narcissism. On the contrary, he always insisted that our freedom is tightly bound to our moral obligations. “Only those are *free*,” he told students during his first lecture series, in 1794, “who will try to make everyone around them free.” Freedom always brings its twin: moral duty. How can we live a fulfilled life in which we follow our dreams while also being a morally good person? How do we reconcile personal liberty with the demands of society? Are we too selfish? Are we treading on someone else’s liberty?

The self, for better or worse, has remained center stage ever since Fichte put it there. The French revolutionaries changed the political landscape of Europe, but Fichte and the friends in Jena incited a revolution of the mind. We may have forgotten Fichte, and we might not talk about his self-determined *Ich* any more, but we have internalized it. We are this *Ich*. We’re still empowered by the Jena Set’s daring leap, by the absolute importance they placed on personal freedom. And at a time when we find our democracies hollowed out and threatened by liars, despots, and reactionary politicians, it is up to us to determine how much we want to fight for this legacy.

**Magnificent Rebels - The First Romantics And The Invention Of The Self**

ANDREA WULF, KNOPF

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