

Cultural Pessimism and Liberal Regeneration? Wilhelm Röpke as an Ideological In-Between in German Social Philosophy



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1 Introduction

Wilhelm Röpke is considered one of the intellectual founding fathers of the new socioeconomic order of the early Federal Republic of Germany and of the Social Market Economy. His social philosophy, however, makes him a link between postwar Germany and diverse older German intellectual traditions from the Weimar Republic and the Kaiserreich. His trilogy *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* (*The Social Crisis of Our Time*) (Röpke 1942), *Civitas Humana* (Röpke 1944), and *Internationale Ordnung* (*International Order and Economic Integration*) (Röpke 1945a) is a philosophical elaboration of a remarkable “sociological” ordoliberalism and is deeply rooted in the philosophical and political debates of his time. He combined his social philosophy with a severe critique and questioning of the history and significance of modern Germany in Europe. In that sense, his vision for the future of Germany published just after the war in 1945, *Die deutsche Frage* (*The German Question*) (Röpke 1945b), can be read as a political epilogue to his trilogy. These rhapsodic texts from the early 1940s are not very well known today when compared to his more specialized writings in economics, which have been the subject of continuous interest and research. Especially the first two volumes of the early 1940s, *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana*, have often been labeled as extremely eclectic. These texts appear completely outdated today in regard to style and approach.

In a broader perspective, however, these works deserve to be considered more seriously—and not only for Röpke scholarship and the study of ordoliberalism. In

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the history of ideas and German social and political thought, with all its ideological undercurrents, antitheses, and crossovers, these texts contain a fascinating missing link. Many highly original expressions of the cultural pessimism, anti-capitalism, neoliberalism, and anti-socialism of his time can be found in Röpke's works. At least at first glance, he may even be perceived as belonging to the diffuse group of the "Conservative Revolution," although without the outspoken nationalism of most of its members. His critical views of German history are also of particular originality. He developed one of the first German critiques of the classical tradition of the "Primat der Außenpolitik" (primacy of foreign affairs), and his views on the challenges for the defeated Reich after the horrors of the National Socialist regime and WWII bear striking similarities to the reformulated ideology of the postwar Christian Democrats and the decentralized federalism of the Federal Republic. Röpke should be seen as an ideological in-between in the social and political thought of his time, and that is something different from mere eclecticism.

Analyzing Röpke's social philosophy, the two first volumes of Röpke's trilogy, *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana*, can be seen separately from the last volume with its more specific focus on international relations. Discussing the first two works, six more or less related themes should be put in perspective. Firstly, we analyze the character of these works' textual form, considering genre conventions: are these texts examples of essays typical for his time? Secondly, we compare Röpke's cultural pessimism with the ideas of his time: is he similar to or influenced by Oswald Spengler, José Ortega y Gasset, or Johan Huizinga? To what extent was Röpke's cultural pessimism an original contribution to the debate of his time? Thirdly, the ideological component of his work brings us again to the continuing quest of Röpke scholarship: should Röpke be seen as a (neo-)liberal or a (neo-)conservative (Solchany 2015, pp. 409–435)? Fourthly, these questions are closely linked with the content of Röpke's social philosophy. Was his utopian view of Switzerland the central counterpoint in his thinking of society and community and the dialectical opposite of his critique of modern German civilization after 1870? And lastly, the commonalities of Röpke's social philosophy in *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana* with the postwar ideology of the German Christian Democratic party must be interpreted as well. Is there any ideological continuity with Röpke's works of the early 1940s?

2 The Textual Format and Style of Röpke's Trilogy

The first two volumes of the trilogy were written in the years 1941–1944 during Röpke's difficult exile in Geneva and published by Eugen Rentsch. Due to the official politics of neutrality, Swiss censorship did not allow any explicitly political remarks by foreigners like Röpke on National Socialism or Italian fascism or even on the events of the WWII. This explains much of the sometimes apolitical abstraction and vagueness of Röpke's arguments during the extreme war circumstances of this time. The broad reception of *The Social Crisis* in the Swiss press made Röpke a central figure in the liberal-conservative and even Catholic political

discourses of Switzerland in the 1940s and 1950s (Solchany 2015, pp. 37–63). Notwithstanding several critical reviews, Röpke’s work was interpreted by many as an original contribution to the contemporary questions of the “crisis” of modern democracy and capitalism. For modern readers of the trilogy, and especially economists, the intellectual gap often seems unsurpassable. Understanding these texts in their contemporary context using a hermeneutic approach to explain their typical textual format and ideological context can bring some new clarity.

What is the structure of the opening volume, *The Social Crisis*? The reader is confronted with a free-floating philosophical text with the explicit purpose of giving “orientation” in the “mental chaos” of the time,¹ offering a diagnosis, explanation, and understanding of the moral crisis, followed by a threefold cultural, societal, and economic “therapy”: this programmatic perspective is reflected in the chapter structure of the volume.² The first part gives a highly speculative interpretation of the negative developments of collectivistic state capitalism in connection with the errant direction of modern liberalism. In the second part, Röpke sketches his “Third Way” after a thorough attack on modern socialism. A new agenda of de-proletarianization and decentralization of industrial economic life is underlined by a utopian perspective on the economic systems of farmers and artisans. With *Civitas Humana*, Röpke aimed to focus on the necessary constitutional, societal, and economic reforms and to conceive a fundamental therapy for his diagnosis outlined in *The Social Crisis*. Röpke forecasts a “Renaissance of liberalism,”³ a real pursuit of individual freedom, and a moral program that transcends merely economic liberalism. *Civitas Humana* gives concrete thematic elaborations of this ordoliberal program, and in the three last chapters—on the state, the society, and the economy—Röpke reformulates this “sociological” liberalism.⁴ This volume’s content and rhapsodic style connect it closely to the first volume. Though there are repetitions, *Civitas Humana* also tries to answer some critics of *The Social Crisis*.⁵ Röpke’s ideological attack on modern science, the Enlightenment, and social planning are remarkably sharp.

This intellectual position has also notable consequences for his way of reasoning. In the preface to *Civitas Humana*, he clearly states that his way of writing

¹“There is nothing pontifical about this offer of guidance. It purports nothing more than that as many as possible should be spared the years of mental struggle and the diverse errors through which the author himself had to pass before he attained to the degree of understanding which he believes himself to possess today” (Röpke 1942, p. 7).

²“We adhere to the natural division into diagnosis and therapy, interpretation and action” (Röpke 1942, p. 16).

³“The renaissance of liberalism springs from an elementary longing for freedom and for the resuscitation of human individuality. It is a liberalism which should not be regarded as primarily economic” (Röpke 1944, p. 50).

⁴“Politico-cultural liberalism [...] is the primary, and economic liberalism the secondary consideration. This primary liberalism might be described as sociological” (Röpke 1944, p. 51).

⁵“Let us hope the present book will be understood in this sense. It continues the efforts which started in the earlier book” (Röpke 1944, p. 29).

may be in conflict with the rigor of the social sciences and that he is looking for a method of synthesis and integration (Röpke 1944, pp. 23–25). The result is a free “philosophical” style, never very precise, and in a continuing intellectual dialogue with contrasting ideological positions. This leads to a more emotional than analytical style, as the arguments do not follow a strict rhetorical path of reasoning. The “literary” style can be understood as an intellectual form of “Emphase,” the German term for an emotional, sometimes even hyperbolic way of expressing thoughts and feelings. Röpke is of course a sound thinker in economics and not at all an expressionistic irrationalist. However, the cultural pessimism of *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana* is set in very gloomy, even apocalyptic colors. Furthermore, and problematically, the narrative unfolds in a lengthy, meandering way, and the first two volumes alone comprise more than 800 pages. In many ways, the trilogy can be characterized as an example of a typical contemporary textual form: the intellectual-philosophical essay. Thomas Mann invented the concept of the “intellectual novel” in his critique (Mann 1922/1982, p. 147) of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (Spengler 1918, 1922). The term defines a form of intellectual essay with a particularly literary composition, a philosophical perspective, and a structure of sometimes bewildering complexity. The argumentation is rhapsodic in the sense of following the author’s free associations and intellectual quotations. Three contemporary examples of the “intellectual novel” whose cultural critiques have much in common with Röpke’s *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana* are Mann’s rhapsodic *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (Mann 1918/1983), written during WWI and published in 1918, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944), and *The Road to Serfdom* by Friedrich A. von Hayek (1944). The last two books are contemporaneous to Röpke’s trilogy and are nowadays paradigmatic works of the 1940s, much more famous than Röpke’s almost forgotten works.

What do these three in many ways so different works of Mann, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Hayek nevertheless have in common with Röpke? Form and content are related in a special way: their cultural critique is shaped by a polemic reasoning, an extremely normative interpretation of social reality, and a rhetorical distortion of the argument. These texts are written as lengthy monographs⁶ and are completely different from the sharp essayistic form popular today in short newspaper editorials and internet blogs. The three examples share with Röpke an extreme form of cultural consciousness, a cultural urgency regarding their position at the crossroads of time, a sense of anxiety, and a sense of being “in-between times” (“zwischen den Zeiten”).⁷ These are all clearly ideological texts, deliberately imprecise and distorting in their polemic cultural pessimism.

⁶To put it more bluntly, these texts are far too long as essays for the modern reader. An extreme example is the boundless length of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. To note a contemporary example of the “intellectual novel,” Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* was also much more readable as an article than the lengthy monograph he wrote after the initial success.

⁷An expression Oswald Spengler used for his own cultural position.

In Thomas Mann's exuberant *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (Mann 1918/1983), the defense of the "organic" German culture—"Kultur"—was presented in contrast to the "mechanistic" French and English civilization—"Zivilisation." It was the latest formulation of the so-called "Ideas of 1914" (Mommsen 1992, pp. 407–421; Bruendel 2003). In its defense of German cultural concepts, and in its rejection of the political ideals of the French Revolution and "French" democracy, rationalism, and civilization, this work was also Mann's last contribution to the "Conservative Revolution" (Mohler 2005; Breuer 2005) before he became a half-hearted defender of the democracy of the Weimar Republic after 1922.

A clear echo of the anti-French sentiment of the "Ideas of 1914" and the "Conservative Revolution" so present in Mann's *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* cannot be ignored in the first part of *Civitas Humana*. There are, according to Röpke, two negative aspects of French civilization in modern civilization, rationalism⁸ and Saint-Simonism,⁹ which work as mental and social poisons in modern society. The historical origin of all evil can be found, according to Röpke, in French state absolutism and centralism. Röpke diagnoses the pathology of France:

Thus the task of explaining the aberrations of rationalism historically narrows to a large extent to comprehending the social and intellectual history of France [...] that owing to the poisoning effects of absolutism and centralism, France manifested highly pathological traits which have continuously burdened French history to the present day. Let us remember the centralization of the French nation, so destructive of all healthy and regional organization which the French Revolution, the Empire, and all successors to the Third Republic indeed continued and emphasized. (Röpke 1944, pp. 114–115)

In his political analysis, Röpke is not that different from the Thomas Mann of 1918, an astonishing fact for a text written at the end of WWII.

Mann's definition of the "intellectual novel" (Mann 1922/1982, p. 147) describes an essayistic fusion of the critical and the aesthetic. The extreme cultural critique of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was also written in a distinct literary form strikingly similar to Röpke.¹⁰ In *Civitas Humana*, he wrote about the "hell of civilization" caused by the complete instrumentalization and functionalization of humanity: Röpke used here the very strong word "hell of

⁸"It can hardly be denied that the problem of the aberrations of rationalism is to a certain extent a specifically French one" (Röpke 1944, p. 116).

⁹"And so we observe those collectivist social engineers [...] who quite openly commit themselves to the perspective of 'society as a machine', and who would thus seriously desire to realize the nightmare of a veritable hell of civilization brought about by the complete instrumentation and functionalization of humanity" (Röpke 1944, p. 137).

¹⁰An exception is Bonefeld (2014) who makes a comparison with the negative dialectics of Adorno and Horkheimer.

civilization” (Röpke 1944, p. 137). The famous quote by Adorno and Horkheimer was written in the same years, the last years of WWII:

Enlightenment can be seen in its broadest sense as progressive thinking, which all times aimed at taking the fear from the people so that they could emerge as masters. But the completely enlightened earth brings man-made disaster everywhere. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2007, p. 9)¹¹

The Enlightenment’s program was the “disenchantment of the world” (“Entzauberung der Welt”), quoting Max Weber. Their critique of the capitalist mass society culminated in coining the term “culture industry.” Modern media like films and radio were the instruments of manipulation of mass society into docility. Adorno was neo-Marxist in his stress on culture and in his disregarding economic analysis. His rejection of mass culture came very close to a conservative cultural pessimism. More shocking for the readers in the 1940s was Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s interpretation of the “scientific racism” of anti-Semitism as another product of the radical Enlightenment. For this comparison it is important to notice how National Socialism was categorized similarly by Adorno and Horkheimer and by Röpke as the culmination of a rationalistic and collectivistic state obsession.

Friedrich A. von Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* was written during the same years as Röpke’s *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana*. This paradigmatic work was revolutionary by challenging the common interpretation of National Socialism as a “capitalist reaction” to the communist threat in Europe. In one of the first formulations of the totalitarian thesis, socialism and National Socialism were, according to Hayek, two forms of the same deadly danger to individual freedom. Comparable to Röpke’s social philosophy and Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s cultural critique, Hayek’s economic-political perspective shows the same apocalyptic fear of the dominance of planning and control. Is *The Road to Serfdom* an “intellectual novel” according to Mann’s definition? Compared to Röpke and Adorno, there is less dialogue with the intellectual tradition, but the style of *The Road of Serfdom* is noteworthy. Of the three texts, it is certainly the most political and the most effective in using a sharp ideological language. Hayek’s argument rejecting any form of state economic planning and his prophetic critique of the Social Democrat welfare state avant la lettre are well known. Hayek’s condemnation of modern Germany (after 1871) enables a further comparison with Röpke. One of the really ominous sentences of *The Road to Serfdom* has to be seen in this light: “By the time Hitler came to power, liberalism was dead in Germany. And it was socialism that had killed it” (Hayek 1944, p. 36). In this effective distortion, Hayek tells the same story as Röpke, who needed many more words! The economic interventions and policies of the modern German state after 1871 had destroyed true liberalism, the result being state collectivism, a truly German state socialism,¹² long before Hitler’s Third Reich.

¹¹Written in 1943–1944, the first edition was published in 1947 by the Dutch publisher Querido in Amsterdam.

¹²Note that this is an expression not used by Röpke or Hayek.

3 Cultural Pessimism: Oswald Spengler and Johan Huizinga

Röpke's warnings against the dominance of reason as well as against scientism and positivism culminated in his rejection of the modern, centralized state, as he condemned both unlimited laissez-faire capitalism and the various forms of modern socialism. Overpopulation, proletarianization, mass society, and mass urbanization were outcomes of modernity paid for by the loss of the natural order in harmony with the family, farmers, small communities, and artisans. All these laments were not original: Röpke's "cultural despair" was part of an enduring discourse. *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana* were manifestations within a broader wave of cultural pessimism which started in the late nineteenth century. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, published just after WWI (Spengler 1918, 1922), is the most brilliant and expressionistic formulation of this modern cultural critique. Spengler's plea for a Prussian state socialism for the coming "German future" could not be more diametrically opposed to Röpke's political and social arguments 20 years later, however. Röpke's cultural pessimism is, on the other hand, very much in tune with the cultural pessimism of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's work *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (Huizinga 1935). We can see the same arguments and similar expressions:

The gods of our time, mechanization and organization, have brought life and death. They have wired up the whole world [. . .] established contact throughout, created everywhere the possibility of cooperation, concentration of strength and mutual understanding. At the same time they have trapped the spirit, fettered it, stifled it. They have led man from individualism to collectivism, the negation of the deepest personal values, the slavery of the spirit. Will the future be one of ever greater mechanization of society solely governed by the demands of utility and power? (Huizinga 1935, p. 7)

Huizinga and Röpke both criticized modern mass culture, but without any trace of a futuristic admiration for modern technology that Spengler so strongly expressed. What is more, the two authors warned strongly against the political agenda of the "Conservative Revolution." Huizinga and Röpke both disliked the political Spengler and his anti-democratic campaigns against the Weimar Republic (Lantink 1995, 2015, pp. 49–54). In a Swiss newspaper article in 1944 unnoticed by Swiss censors, Röpke accused the representatives of the "Conservative Revolution," like Spengler, of being predecessors of National Socialism (Solchany 2015, p. 125). When we look at the discourse of cultural pessimism in the work of Röpke in the early 1940s, clear differences between the judgments of the thinkers of cultural pessimism can be noted. Spengler is only mentioned twice in *The Social Crisis* and *Civitas Humana*, while Ernst Jünger is mentioned more often and also quite negatively. Ortega y Gasset and Huizinga are presented more prominently and positively, with many references made to Huizinga's *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (e.g., Röpke 1944, p. 165).

The big divide between Spengler and Röpke lay in their diametrically opposed answers to the cultural crisis of Western civilization. For Spengler, the solution for

the future was state socialism. Germany-Prussia had to be the new Rome ruled with the ideologies of Prussianism and socialism,¹³ looking not back to the country of Goethe, but forward to the country of German technology and German political dominance of Europe. There was sadly enough no way back to Spengler's own preferred past, the refined eighteenth-century "Kultur" represented by Haydn's music and French aristocratic culture. The development of modernization and of technology and mass urbanization could not be stopped. According to Spengler, all was destiny: "Schicksal." The only option left is to emphasize this direction, and here Spengler came very close to a futurist form of fascism. Prussia was no longer the symbol of conservatism, but of modernity! All of Spengler's admiration for the modern Prussian state and Prussian bureaucracy, for the German engineer and for the "Technische Hochschule," seems to be reversed in Röpke's work. One has to say in favor of Spengler that he acknowledged the great success of the second industrial revolution in the German Empire, with its great scientific innovations in chemistry, electricity, and other fields. And was not the German Prussian bureaucracy the most modern of his time? How can we distinguish the difference between Spengler and Röpke ideologically? Karl Mannheim has differentiated "ideology" and "utopia," and in his terms Spengler is ideological, pushing modernity into a German "reactionary modernity" (by way of a "Conservative Revolution") through stressing the perceived direction of civilization, while Röpke is truly utopian, willing and striving to reverse the direction of civilization. Nowadays, "retro" might be a label appropriate for Röpke.

A remarkable sign of how radical Röpke's cultural pessimism and anti-modernity really were can be found in a sentence in *Civitas Humana* in which an eclectic use of concepts is not unlike the eclectic use of concepts and terms in Mann's *Reflections*, but with a notably clear anti-Spengler mention of Prussianism. Röpke describes how French rationalism combined with German Hegelianism and modern ideologies to a dangerous mixture:

It was not long before this stream was united with other corresponding tendencies outside of France, above all with Hegelianism in Germany, and finally brought forth that fateful combination of Cartesianism, Encyclopaedie, Ecole Polytechnique, Prussianism, relativism, materialism, Marxism, utilitarianism, biologism, evolutionism and pragmatism, a veritable mixture of dynamite which was eventually to blow up the whole world. (Röpke 1944, p. 65)

4 Civil Society and Community: Röpke's "Third Way"

Regarding his social philosophy, Röpke was also an in-between in a long tradition. Concerning the connection between social thought and cultural pessimism, German sociology followed a long road from Ferdinand Tönnies via Max Weber and Karl

¹³See Spengler (1919) as the expressionist political manifesto where he first used the term "socialism" as "salonfähig" for the Right.

Mannheim to Daniel Bell's final post-ideological closure at the end of the 1950s. Still standing in the tradition of Mannheim, Bell formulated in his *The End of Ideology* (Bell 1960) the most eloquent antithesis to the cultural pessimistic implications of German social thought. Whereas ideology—following the theory from Marx to Mannheim—is always rooted in social stratification and class distinctions, there was, according to Bell, a true sign that ideology had come to an end in respect to the flourishing classless society in the United States, which was not at all the atomistic, lifeless, and alienating world painted in dark colors by European cultural criticism. In a chapter “America as a Mass Society,” Bell criticized the sociological implications of classical cultural pessimism by pointing to the vibrant networks of a large city like Chicago, with its numerous organizations, associations, clubs, societies, and 82 local community newspapers.

At the beginning of this German cultural pessimistic sociology stood Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*) (Tönnies 1887). Tönnies distinguished two types of social stratifications. “Community” refers to social formations based on emotional feelings of togetherness and on mutual bonds, a spiritual imaginary community. “Society,” in contrast, refers to a more structured entity, social groupings that are sustained by practice, conventions, and instrumental aims. “Community” stands for the idealized social settings of the family and neighborhood relations in the premodern world—“society” is sustained by the formal regulations and social structure typical for modern societies. The social ties in “society” are instrumental, self-interested, and fitting for capitalist economic order. Max Weber developed new concepts of a much more complex social order, of rationalization as a social force and of bureaucratization, and connected this analysis to his concept of the “disenchantment of the world” (“Entzauberung der Welt”). Max Weber named this process “socialization” (“Vergesellschaftung”) as opposed to “communification” (“Vergemeinschaftung”) (Lichtblau 2000, pp. 423–443). In this sense, Röpke's social program, his “Third Way,”¹⁴ can be seen as a type of “communification,” restoration, and reinforcement of what he thought were more natural networks in society, like the family, the farm and the farmers, craftsmanship organizations, and smaller towns:

Decentralization, natural promotion of smaller production and settlement units, and of the sociologically healthy forms of life and work [...] strictest supervision of the market to safeguard fair play, development of new, non-proletarian forms of industry, reduction of all dimensions and conditions to the human measure. (Röpke 1942, p. 288)

How reactionary or utopian was Röpke really in his social philosophy? His position is too complex to discern only conservatism in his thoughts on society and community. Noting a peculiar resemblance to the social anarchist, or libertarian socialist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in one regard can bring a better understanding of

¹⁴“These remarks are intended to show once more the kind of measures with which the defense and re-establishment of economic liberty and the accompanying battle against selfish vested interests must be conducted in order to fulfil our counter-program of the ‘Third Way’” (Röpke 1942, p. 288).

Röpke's ideological position. Proudhon is well known for his famous work *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement* (Proudhon 1840), in which he states "What Is Property?—Property Is Theft!," which had a strong influence on Marx. In his fundamental attack against the liberal notion of "absolute property" of the nineteenth century, Proudhon is of course the extreme opposite of Röpke and his strong plea for property rights. But Proudhon's social utopia has something quite relevant in common with Röpke: in Proudhon's thought, the "sociétés d'adultes," spontaneous associations of individuals, are central to his concepts of federalism in which federal, corporatist arrangements protect the citizens of free communities from capitalist and financial feudalism. Switzerland had the same utopian quality for anarchist ideals as a country without any trace of the powerful central state—in the Swiss cantons there seemed to be a free economic order still intact in the nineteenth century with guilds as associations of craftsmen. Not only were the majority of anarchist intellectuals often in exile in Switzerland, the country was also idealized as the perfect utopia. The cantons and the guild of Swiss watchmakers in the Jura inspired anarchists like Pyotr Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin (e.g., Badillo and Jun 2013).

With his program of the "Third Way" in *The Social Crisis*, Röpke claimed a position between Scylla and Charybdis, between the ugly outcomes of laissez-faire capitalism and collectivist socialism which both led to a dehumanizing of society and economy. The concept of the "Third Way" is a confusing, sometimes misleading concept, but nevertheless a striking phenomenon of the political language of the twentieth century. Mussolini coined the term in the early 1920s as a propaganda tool for the economics and politics of his fascist regime, claiming to represent an alternative between capitalism and communism. The complete failure of Mussolini's program of Italian corporatism in the 1920s and 1930s discredited the concept. Another unhappy example of a "Third Way" can be found in the Peronism of Argentina in the 1950s. Reconciling right-wing economic and left-wing social policies was the program of Tony Blair's "Third Way." "New Labour" embraced the free market economy along with a partial preservation of the welfare state. When comparing these examples with Röpke, they are all different, but share one striking quality: the (still) very strong position of the central state.

Röpke takes a classical liberal position in defending a state-free zone of civil society. Perhaps there is at this point an ideological connection to the concept of "subsidiarity" in the Catholic social teaching of the period (Ycre 2003, pp. 163–174). In the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius IX reevaluated the social teaching of the famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 40 years earlier. In this reformulation, the contrast between the two evils of a collectivistic communism and an unrestrained capitalism is the stepping-stone for positioning the social teaching of the Church. Like in *Rerum Novarum*, private property is part of the natural order of society, a right that should be defended. Institutions like the family, the church, and (Catholic) social organizations must be protected from state intervention. The basic principles of the encyclical are solidarity and subsidiarity. This view of a natural order of society and the importance of private property as a natural right had much in common with Röpke's organic social philosophy. The difference

between *Quadragesimo Anno* and Röpke's "Third Way" is nevertheless obvious: the Catholic social teaching was a conservative defense of the existing order with a clear corporatist agenda, while Röpke's "Third Way" unfolded a political, social, and economic program¹⁵ that was not corporatist at all. Notwithstanding Röpke's conservative stress on the traditional values of family, farmers, and craftsmen, his prescription for a cure was entirely liberal: everything had to work in defense of a real middle class and true individual economic freedom. This necessitated the preservation and reinforcement of property rights, the protection of property, and even more so of the fundamental importance of the individual's desire to possess property:

First such a policy requires the restitution of property as the most important prerequisite, so that men again desire to really possess property. (Röpke 1944, p. 279)

5 The German Question and the Postwar Ideology of Christian Democracy

In 1945, the British historian A. J. P. Taylor published one of the most outspoken historical condemnations of Germany and the causes of the world wars of the twentieth century: *The Course of German History* (Taylor 1945). It was the sharpest formulation of the ideological exceptionalist "Sonderweg," claiming there was no normality in German history and that the Third Reich was the outcome of a long illiberal tradition. Röpke's *The German Question* (Röpke 1945b), also published in 1945 shortly after the end of the war, was not more gentle regarding the issue of historical collective guilt. According to Röpke, the pathology of German history started with the political impacts of Lutheranism. German unification under Prussia and Bismarck paved the way for the "pathology" of German history (Röpke 1945b, p. 158). Its product was collectivistic German capitalism with its disturbing monopolistic effects.¹⁶

Federalism, decentralization, international economic cooperation, and institutionalization were political answers proposed to overcome the deadlock of German (Prussian) history and anticipated the construction of the Federal Republic of Germany. Key in Röpke's philosophy was Switzerland, described as a social utopia, the happy intermediate between all extremes with its decentralization of politics, economy, and society. We must understand his vision of Switzerland as the perfect

¹⁵"If there be such a thing as a social 'right', it is the 'right to property', and nothing is more illustrative of the muddle of our time than the circumstance that hitherto no government and no party have inscribed these words on their banner" (Röpke 1944, p. 284).

¹⁶"Finally, the Prussification of Germany was greatly furthered by the manner in which the evolution into a modern industrial State took place in Germany. [...] This German 'capitalism' was not one of the Marxist pattern, but the historically unique and, we may fairly say, dismally distorted form in which the modern industrial system developed on German soil in a Greater Prussian Empire" (Röpke 1945b, pp. 226–227).

contrast to the modern Germany he knew well, with its longing for the strong state, “Realpolitik” and the “Großstadt.” Just after the war, Röpke’s dislike of Bismarck, and negative view of the role of Prussia in German history became fashionable. Even the old Friedrich Meinecke wrote after the war about the aberrations, “Irrwege,” taken in German national history. Röpke’s plea for decentralization and federalism was very suitable as a proposal for a new orientation for the West German state.

Röpke can be seen as an ideological in-between during the formation of the postwar liberal-conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Close readings of the documents and the discussions of the “Ahlener Programm” of 1947 and the “Düsseldorfer Leitsätze” of 1949 in comparison show strong similarities to Röpke’s social philosophy. The “Ahlener Programm” was an early attempt to form a new Christian Democratic ideology reminiscent of similar programs of the old Zentrumspartei. This “Ahlener Programm” was much more left-wing, and the term “Christian Socialism” was only left out as Adenauer by all means did not want it. A look at this text shows a clear notion of the “Third Way” which comes from the same discourse of finding a way in-between. Two years later, in the “Düsseldorfer Leitsätze,” the CDU’s socioeconomic program for the 1949 elections, economic freedom was formulated as a central value in a coordinated market economy. One could say that the most important aspect of Röpke’s social philosophy and social politics is the reinforcement of property: in the “Düsseldorfer Leitsätze,” the “promotion of ownership” was a central item on the political agenda of the CDU. Thus, in the postwar period, the liberal-conservative CDU had a striking ideological affinity with Röpke’s economic and social philosophy.

6 Conclusion

Last but not least, was Röpke a conservative liberal or a liberal conservative? Perhaps Michael Freeden’s theory of ideology can help. Freeden explains that the complex structure of ideologies entails four different aspects: proximity, permeability, proportionality, and priority (Freeden 2003, pp. 60–66). There is a clear proximity to conservative values in Röpke’s social philosophy, but there are no clear boundaries, as there is always some sort of permeability. We cannot find a central concept of conservatism in Röpke’s texts either, namely, the admiration of authority or of power per se. More important are proportionality and priority. Regarding priority, Röpke’s key concept is freedom. His emphasis on checks and balances against the central state and his advocacy for an international order and individual private property are liberal. In the “horseshoe spectrum” of ideologies, liberalism and anarchism share the same focus on freedom. In some respects, Röpke is a right-wing anarchist, a reversed Proudhon, with the same objections to a powerful central state and federalistic solutions.

In 1966, Hans-Peter Schwarz called Röpke the most important “intellectual father” of the Federal Republic of Germany (Schwarz 1966, p. 393). In the decades after 1968, in the culturally and politically transformed Federal Republic, this

liberal-conservative ideological origin was no longer such an important perspective in public opinion. However, in the twenty-first century, there is a new interest in the early Bonn Republic. The liberal-conservative fundamentals and “Bürgerlichkeit” after 1945 are now objects of interest and research (e.g., Hacke 2008; Budde et al. 2010), and a new historical interest in Röpke is part of this new perspective (Mooser 2005, pp. 134–163).

Was he really an “intellectual father”? Only perhaps in a dialectical way, as Röpke was not a nationalist but rather an anti-nationalist. He asked for the spiritual “Entthronung” (“dethronement”) of Bismarck in 1945 (Röpke 1945b, p. 207)! This was certainly too radical a position for postwar Germany, but otherwise his focus on federalism and decentralized politics and his disapproval of Prussianism fitted perfectly well in the new political horizon of the Federal Republic. In several ways, Röpke was an ideological in-between. There is a kind of “family resemblance” in Röpke’s social philosophy with the “Conservative Revolution,” but without the German nationalist perspective. He was a cultural pessimist, but without the nationalistic tendencies of his ideological antipode Spengler. He was, like Spengler, an “active pessimist,”¹⁷ but his program for the future was diametrically opposite to Spengler’s: instead of a Prussian state socialism, he wanted an ordoliberal program with political, economic, and social decentralization. Spengler even coined a name for this future: the “Swissification of nations” (“Verschweizerung der Nationen”) (Spengler 1933/2016, p. 129).

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¹⁷“We have always committed ourselves not to a passive, but rather to an *active pessimism*” (Röpke 1944, p. 32, emphasis in the original).

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