Wilhelm Röpke's Utopia and Swiss Reality: From Neoliberalism to Neoconservatism

Andrea Franc

1 Introduction[1]

Wilhelm Röpke lived in Switzerland for the greater part of his adult and academically active life, from 1937 to his death in 1966 (Solchany 2015; Hennecke 2005). However, he never managed to obtain citizenship and never really participated in domestic politics. For Röpke, Switzerland remained a place of exile and a distant utopia he used in most of his works to support his theory with a historical example. Despite or maybe because of that distance, he became mentor to a Swiss neoliberal network discernible from around 1942 onward (Franc 2016a). This network consisted mostly of Zurich-based young journalists and academics. Only two of them would later become internationally known, the notorious first secretary of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), Albert Hunold (Phillips-Fein 2009; Hartwell 1995), and the monetarist Karl Brunner (Ritzmann 2002–2014; Brunner 1992). But many of the other members of the network were already or would become important public intellectuals on the national level in Switzerland (Jost 1998, pp. 196–197).

During the war, Röpke's social philosophy and his economic theory overlapped and were integrated in the so-called Swiss spiritual defense ("Geistige Landesverteidigung") (Mooser 1997). From the 1930s onward, Switzerland had started to develop a new form of cultural organic nationalism (Zimmer 2004). This nationalism, referred to during the war as spiritual defense, called upon the self-reliant hardworking people on family farms and in family businesses. It used the concepts of Swiss federalism and the semi-direct democratic system, as well as of a historical, organic liberalism inherent to the Swiss nation. According to the spiritual

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defense, liberalism did not have to be imposed in Switzerland, but had evolved in its history, culture, and habits. At the latest when Röpke published his *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* in 1942, he won over Swiss hearts (Solchany 2015, pp. 37–48; Ruetz 2006). So during the war, Röpke's persona, his texts, and his lectures were of the utmost importance in enforcing the Swiss spiritual defense.

However, when by the early 1960s Röpke and Albert Hunold left the MPS, none of the numerous other Swiss members followed them. This fact hints at a change in Röpke's impact on the Swiss neoliberal network during his time in Switzerland. In 1964, soon after Röpke's and Hunold's exit from the MPS, the latter invited Röpke for a lecture cycle on Africa he organized at the Swiss Institute of International Studies in Zurich. Röpke was surprised to find the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, after two decades of absolute reverence, suddenly siding with the student protesters who tried to prevent his lecture in support of the apartheid regime in South Africa (Slobodian 2014). Furthermore, his youngest disciple Gerhard Winterberger would become one of the most influential functionaries in Swiss economic policy in the two decades following Röpke's death in 1966. Winterberger would blatantly abuse his teacher's name to support the massive agricultural protectionism Switzerland introduced in the 1970s and 1980s (Franc 2016b).

2 Wilhelm Röpke's Utopia

Wilhelm Röpke distinguished himself from the many other exiled intellectuals who had come to Switzerland after 1933. While most, among them Ludwig von Mises and Thomas Mann, had moved on to the United States by the summer of 1940, Röpke stayed behind. His position was dangerous and difficult, but also most decisive for the neoliberal movement in Switzerland. His host at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, William Rappard, called for Swiss neutrality and cautious expression. Their relationship was strained (Monnier 1995, p. 517). Correspondence with Friedrich A. von Hayek in London and his friend Alexander Rüstow in Istanbul was slow and difficult (Hennecke 2005, p. 140). Incapable of restraining his urge to express himself, Röpke started to publish abundantly in various Swiss media. He had written his first article for the large Swiss liberal newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) in 1934 from Istanbul and by the beginning of the 1940s published regularly and at length in the NZZ (Maissen and Stamm 2005, p. 152). His exchanges with the editor-in-chief Willy Bretscher as well as other editors such as Hans Barth and Carlo Mötteli were so intensive that not only could Röpke be seen as part of the editing team of the NZZ during WWII, but he even enforced and steered the (neo-)liberal course of the newspaper from around 1942 onward (Hennecke 2005, p. 129). It was not until the 1950s that Röpke would slowly start trusting the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) and publish articles there (Hennecke 2005, p. 187).

Even though the NZZ, a daily newspaper, granted Röpke the freedom to publish articles of several pages in length, his potential was by far not tapped. In the summer of 1941, Röpke received a letter from Eugen Rentsch, a small Swiss publisher situated in the village of Erlenbach close to Zurich (Eugen-Rentsch-Verlag 1960, p. 40). Rentsch had read Röpke in the NZZ and wrote him that he would be interested in publishing a longer version of his articles in the form of a book. Rentsch's letter came to Röpke as a gift from heaven. He was about to complete his book *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* and had just received a negative answer from another publisher. The book was published by Eugen Rentsch in Erlenbach in 1942 and became an instant success in Switzerland, as well as in Germany and Austria where it was passed on secretly (Hennecke 2005, p. 139).

Nevertheless, Röpke's integration into domestic Swiss debates remained limited. For one, his request for naturalization was denied and he would remain a German citizen and merely a guest in Switzerland. Also, the contributions he published in the Swiss media and with Eugen Rentsch concerned general and international topics. When referring to Switzerland, Röpke stayed on the surface of his stylized and romantic model of a "country without industrial giants" (Röpke 1959, p. 486) which fits best the utopia of family farms and small businesses described in his trilogy (Röpke 1942, 1944, 1945).

Röpke's *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* of 1942 was not only one of the earliest books of the neoliberal canon but was also a celebration of the Swiss political and economic system. This fact was acknowledged in the American Economic Review, one of the most prestigious economics journals:

> The well-organized society, the main features of which are outlined in Röpke's program of action, corresponds approximately to the political and economic system developed in Switzerland with its strong, independent and well educated peasantry, its stock of highly trained artisans and small merchants, its decentralized industry. This pattern is used for analyzing some important aspects of welfare policies, regulation of competition (including the fight against monopoly capitalism), and international organizations of trade. (Pribram 1944, p. 172)

Röpke not only strengthened the image of Swiss uniqueness domestically as a matter of spiritual defense during the war. He was also of utmost importance for Swiss business, which could not have had a better ambassador to the Allied forces.

3 Swiss Reality and Spiritual Defense

The NZZ, the publisher Eugen Rentsch, and later the Schweizer Monatshefte provided the publishing platform which made Wilhelm Röpke a well-known and well-respected public intellectual in Switzerland. Subtly, the Swiss weaved Röpke into their spiritual defense (Solchany 2015, pp. 37–48). Eugen Rentsch, for instance, had not been in any way a publisher of economic or liberal literature. Rather, he was an expert in the writings of Jeremias Gotthelf (1797–1854), a Protestant minister who had left a vast literary heritage of novels describing Swiss rural life. Rentsch was dedicated to editing Gotthelf's complete works, a task he started in 1911 and was finally completed by his son in 1966 (Eugen-Rentsch-Verlag 1960, pp. 59–83; Gotthelf 1922–1977). The rediscovery and reediting of Gotthelf’s work was an important contribution to the strengthening of Swiss cultural nationalism. His writings consolidated the figure of the poor, hardworking but self-reliant peasant in the self-conception of the Swiss nation. Gotthelf’s figure of the peasant would provide Switzerland with a national unification symbol which combined the voluntaristic and the organic, soil, and blood-related aspect of Swiss nationalism. Also, the figure of the taciturn, hardworking peasant up in the mountains served well as a symbol of Swiss neutrality in the midst of the European power struggle. The figure of the Swiss peasant also provided common ground with the social philosophy of Wilhelm Röpke, who in his numerous writings would paint his ideal society of family farms and small businesses.

The spiritual defense of the prewar and war years brought Swiss intellectuals together in a search for a cultural and more organic nationalism. The founders of the monthly magazine Schweizer Monatshefte were among the early initiators of the spiritual defense. From 1921 onward they published articles on Swiss German dialects, customs, and authors like Jeremias Gotthelf, articles which described the everyday life of peasants and often used Swiss dialect in their German prose. The spiritual defense reinforced the feeble Swiss self-conception as a voluntaristic nation with cultural, historical, and organic arguments. Röpke contributed to the image of Switzerland as a nation of hardworking free peasants and craftsmen living reclusive and taciturn lives in the mountains (Winterberger 1965, p. 517). The neoliberal argument, particularly stressed by Friedrich A. von Hayek, that a functioning economic system had to grow and develop organically, building on the myriads of decisions by individuals, fell on fertile soil in Switzerland. Publishers like Eugen Rentsch and the authors of Schweizer Monatshefte had prepared the ground through their focus on Swiss peasant culture. The spiritual defense managed to craft the topos of peasant stubbornness of the nineteenth century into an organic and therefore intelligent individuality, the prerequisite for neoliberalism (Winterberger 1960, p. 458).

Having Röpke on board, Eugen Rentsch became the most important publisher of German neoliberal literature (Eugen-Rentsch-Verlag 1960, pp. 26–28). The books were smuggled into Germany and Austria, and after the war, Rentsch kept publishing neoliberal authors while the German publishing houses, destroyed in the war, were rebuilt. Rentsch published all of Röpke’s books from 1942 onward. In 1945, as soon as Röpke’s wife Eva had finished the translation, he published Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* in German. He would also publish the books of Röpke’s Zurich-based friends and MPS members Hans Barth, Richard Ottinger, and Carlo Mötteli, as well as the works of Röpke’s friend Alexander Rüstow. But that would be after the war.

During the war, a “liberal turn” (Sprecher 2013, p. 77) in the Swiss intelligentsia is discernible around 1942. This is when Röpke’s *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* appeared, when Röpke started publishing in the hitherto anti-liberal Schweizer Monatshefte, and when Röpke got acquainted with Albert Hunold who would from then on become his right hand in building the administrative framework necessary for the formation of an international neoliberal movement. However, during the war years Röpke’s Swiss friends were mainly concerned with strengthening the spiritual defense, that is, nationalism, in Switzerland. During the early war years around 1940, Switzerland was torn apart internally and only by around 1942 did it rally around a unifying idea of its nation (Jost 1998, p. 145). But then it was still surrounded by National Socialist territory and under pressure from the Allied forces. In October 1943, the Allies set up a "black list" listing Swiss companies which they presumed were doing business with National Socialist Germany (Inglin 1991, pp. 172–181). Throughout WWII, Swiss business was under pressure from the Allies as much as from Germany.

While Röpke and his Swiss friends were busy depicting Switzerland as a small federalist nation literally minding its own *small* business, Hans Sulzer took action. Sulzer, an old friend of William Rappard, was one of the owners of the Sulzer family motor company and worked as a diplomat for Swiss business interests during the war. In 1943 he, together with a group of Swiss businessmen, established and financed the Swiss Institute of International Studies in Zurich (Longchamp and Steiner 2009, p. 77). The institute was academically attached to the University and the ETH, the Federal Polytechnic School, but financed by private business. The relationship between Switzerland and the Allied forces, particularly the United States, had hit rock bottom with the issuing of the "black list" in 1943, and the goal of the institute was to revive and propagate a positive Swiss foreign policy. After years of negotiation, the "black list" was an almost personal affront to Sulzer. Among the firms on the "black list" was Hans Sulzer's own family's motor company (Nerlich 2002–2014). But it was above all an affront to his small neutral Swiss nation which had never asked to become involved in yet another struggle between the surrounding European powers in the first place. Sulzer had tried to uphold ordinary private business: the Swiss called it the "courant normal," or daily business, of a small nation not at war in the midst of WWII going on around it. Sulzer had been using the neoliberal terminology of free trade, free currency, and the importance of private business for years in negotiations. To Sulzer, neoliberalism and free market terminology had a different ring to it. To Sulzer, the terminology meant a neutrality of business matters and the right not to choose sides. It seems that Röpke was not fully aware of how Swiss businessmen appropriated neoliberal terminology to suit their business interests with the Reich. But to Hans Sulzer, the survival of his nation and his personal identity as a business magnate and representative of the Swiss business community was at stake. Clearly, the Swiss-American relationship had to be rekindled and improved for business reasons. But there was more to the Swiss support of the neoliberal movement than simple business interests in the United States (Longchamp and Steiner 2009). The Swiss self-conception as a nation of free business or, rather, of a voluntaristic nation of self-reliant and self-governing peasants and businessmen was at stake internationally as much as domestically. In order to resume and continue the "courant normal," the Swiss group and their friends had to win over the Swiss people as much as the Allied forces. Röpke's texts in the Swiss media and his numerous lectures in Zurich strengthened the Swiss spiritual defense and at the same time rallied people to the neoliberal agenda. Switzerland, Röpke continued to preach, was the ideal country in his neoliberal view. To the Swiss, this meant that an eminent German scholar supported and valued their independence in the face of the imminent Reich across the border as well as Allied “black list” threats. Röpke’s neoliberalism translated into Swiss nationalism in the ears of his audience.

The neoliberal movement would not only suit Swiss business interests but actually reinstate the moral legitimacy of the “courant normal” of the war and put the Swiss way of life on a pedestal. *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* as well as numerous other texts by Röpke confirmed and enforced Swiss nationalism in the way it had evolved since the early 1930s. All there was left to do for the Swiss group was to support the neoliberal movement in the person of Röpke and translate it onto the ordinary domestic level.

4 Serving the Neoconservatives

The Swiss Institute of International Studies in Zurich would become the stronghold of the Swiss spiritual defense in the guise of Swiss support for international neoliberalism. In 1950, Sulzer and his business circles financed an additional department in the Institute of Economics, and Röpke’s right hand Albert Hunold found employment as head of that section. In the 1950s, Eugen Rentsch would publish a series of anthologies edited by Hunold for the Swiss Institute of International Studies in Zurich. The 15 volumes of anthologies “Sozialwissenschaftliche Studien” published by Rentsch between 1951 and 1971 comprised articles of the most prominent members of the MPS, as well as other internationally known intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt. Interestingly, however, Hunold also included neoconservatives such as the American authors Russell Kirk and Eric Voegelin. This illustrates how the intellectual group around Röpke in Switzerland functioned on its own and outside of the MPS.

Suffice to say that Röpke’s insistence on inviting the prominent American neoconservative author Russell Kirk to the 10th MPS anniversary meeting in 1957 in the Swiss resort St. Moritz prompted Hayek’s famous address “Why I am not a conservative” (Hayek 1960; Plickert 2008, pp. 309–311). Röpke stayed fond of Kirk despite Hayek’s disapproval. Kirk and Voegelin would contribute to the series “Sozialwissenschaftliche Studien” in 1957 (Hunold et al. 1957) and 1959 (Hunold 1959), respectively. Also, Eugen Rentsch would publish the German translation of Kirk’s main work *The Conservative Mind* in 1959 (Kirk and Meyer 1959). However, the conflict between Röpke and Hayek over Kirk is only one visible dot of the blurred line between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Hayek was right to worry about an association with neoconservatism, as Swiss MPS members actually promoted a highly neoconservative agenda on the Swiss domestic level. Indeed, the Swiss MPS members appear as neoconservative free-riders on neoliberalism. They were perceived and respected by the public as neoliberals, but in fact promoted neoconservative policy-making (Franc 2016b).

During the war, the spiritual defense with the help of Röpke had created the image of Swiss uniqueness, the status quo of which had to be preserved at all costs. This approach made sense in the face of the threat of being invaded. But in the postwar years, it translated into an attitude that reform of any kind was deemed unnecessary as Switzerland was supposed to be an organic liberal system anyway (Kappeler 2011, p. 73). However, this (neo-)conservative approach of preserving the status quo only developed slowly within the Swiss group as is visible in the sketch of a study group of 1943.[2] The authors, Albert Hunold, Carlo Mötteli, and Karl Brunner, clearly referred to Röpke. They actually intended to exclude members of interest groups and declared that their first priority was to investigate the Swiss agricultural organization. The texts of the early Swiss neoliberals therefore diverge fundamentally from the texts of the postwar years. In the 1950s and 1960s, Röpke's disciple Gerhard Winterberger in particular would in numerous publications defend agricultural protectionism as much as Swiss interest groups (Winterberger 1960, 1965). References to Röpke were nevertheless a continuum in all texts, despite their divergences.

5 Conclusion

Röpke definitely gave an international, academic, and official blessing to the spiritual defense. Without his work the idea of Swiss uniqueness would have been much less strongly advocated and adopted domestically. Röpke's often vague and theoretical thinking provided the academic background for a mind-set which seems to have strongly determined Swiss history not only during the war but for the entire second half of the twentieth century and into the present times. There are several features on which Swiss self-conception evolved during the decades after Röpke's death and for which Röpke provided the intellectual background. First of all, there is Röpke's caution against the unification of Europe, his emphasis on federalism, and an early small-scale philosophy which would in the 1970s be rediscovered by the left under the slogan "Small is Beautiful." The Swiss refusal to join the European unification project is backed by Röpke's influence. Of all MPS members, it was Röpke who was most in favor of forms of protecting family farms and therefore domestic agriculture. Sadly, Röpke may be intellectually placed at the origin of Swiss agricultural protectionism of the second half of the twentieth century, which has been the highest per capita worldwide for decades now. Also, compared to the other MPS members, Röpke was maybe the most conservative in cultural and social matters. Nevertheless Röpke seemed completely unaware that his Swiss friends—often MPS members themselves!—sometimes entirely deviated from the neoliberal agenda as represented by Röpke and promoted highly neoconservative domestic policies. Next to agricultural protectionism and military conscription, the most obvious deviation from the neoliberal agenda was the defense of the typical Swiss “liberal corporatism” and the corresponding refusal to promote an antitrust law (Amonn 1959). Swiss MPS members openly admitted that the Swiss economy was entangled by countless influential interest groups and was highly cartelized due to a weak antitrust law. Still, Swiss MPS members simply brushed away such stains on the neoliberal fact sheet by referring to Swiss uniqueness (Winterberger 1961).

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[2] Hoover Institution Archives, Mont Pelerin Society Records, Meetings File, 1945–1990, Box 5, Folder 10: Zur Frage der Gründung einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Studiengemeinschaft, Zürich, 08.12.1943, by K. Brunner, A. Hunold, C. Mötteli.

Gerhard Winterberger would be the one among Röpke’s Swiss friends and students who would hold probably the most powerful and influential post in the making of Swiss economic policy: he would act as the director of the Swiss Business Federation from 1970 to 1987 (Franc 2002–2014). Three of his numerous articles in the Schweizer Monatshefte stand out which outline the political agenda that would be debated in Switzerland until today. In 1960 he appealed to Swiss uniqueness as a reason not to join the European unification process in “Schweizerische Eigenart und europäische Integration” (Winterberger 1960), then in 1965 he defended agricultural protectionism in “Umstrittene Agrarpolitik im Industriestaat” (Winterberger 1965), and much later, after his retirement, in 1989, he defended his lifetime dedication to special interest groups in “Legitime Interessenpolitik” (Winterberger 1989). The non-joining of the European project, the world’s highest per capita subsidies for farmers, and the disentangling of the highly cartelized domestic economy would be the three important pillars of Swiss policy debate until this day. And until this day, Röpke’s texts on Switzerland mark the blurred line between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. From Winterberger Röpke was, so to speak, passed on to probably the most prominent figure of Swiss politics of the last decades, the entrepreneur and politician Christoph Blocher. Blocher’s party, the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), was the only Swiss party consequently defending Swiss non-integration into the European unification. The party is the “farmers’ party” and heavily relies on the corporate identity of rural Switzerland. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Röpke’s passing, only Christoph Blocher, at the time federal council, held a commemorative speech. Like Winterberger before him, Blocher depicted Röpke as a “neoliberal” and implicitly defines himself as such: “I consider Wilhelm Röpke to be an important inspiration to solve economic problems of our time. He was what we today look down upon as ‘neoliberal’. He saw in Switzerland an exception, like everything which has somehow worked out in history” (Blocher 2006). Depicting Switzerland as an exception (“Sonderfall”) and as the ideal neoliberal nation has been Röpke’s legacy to Switzerland.

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